

INDIGENOUS AND MINORITY LANGUAGES
UNDER SIEGE:

FINDING ANSWERS TO A GLOBAL THREAT

Eighth Tribal Sovereignty Symposium

January 25, 2008

THE PRESIDENT'S WELCOME ADDRESS

REV. MONSIGNOR FRANKLYN M. CASALE*

Dear Members of the Academy,

Dear Faculty,

Dear Students,

Dear Friends of St. Thomas University:

It is my distinct pleasure to welcome you back to St. Thomas University. Our Catholic mission includes the call to hear and address the needs of the underprivileged, to prefer the poor, to work for social justice and a lasting peace. To that end, we have addressed key issues of one of the most underprivileged groups not only in the U.S., but worldwide: the needs and aspirations of Native Americans and indigenous peoples around the world. Since 1994, we have offered conferences on their plight, gathering leaders as well as rank and file, representatives of government, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as scholars in the search for tailored solutions.

Colonization tried to extinguish the indigenous voice, first by brutal conquest, then by more subtle, but no less effective methods of inculcation of the dominant culture, the culture of the West. In this process of assimilation and intended termination of the Native peoples as such, boarding schools forcing English on Native students and the lures of modern civilization drove the original Native languages underground and into oblivion. With the language went

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2 *INTERCULTURAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW REVIEW* Vol. 3

the culture: it is impossible to perform the distinctive rites, such as the rites of the Cheyenne Nation, as performed here many times by Cheyenne Peace Chief Lawrence Hart, in English. And still, today, many of the sons and daughters of the Cheyenne Nation do not speak the Cheyenne tongue.

This problem is one not limited to the U.S. It is global. A Welsh proverb says, "A nation without a language is a nation without a heart." The Celtic language of the Welsh is one seriously threatened. Less than 20 percent of the population of Wales today speaks Welsh. It is "clearly in trouble."¹ Worldwide, the problem is even more urgent: it is expected that half the 6,800 human languages spoken worldwide could be extinct within 100 years.

Recent reports state that there are fewer than ten elderly speakers remaining in the Morobe province of Papua New Guinea, and just two speakers of the Aboriginal language are still alive in Northwest Western Australia. Ten surviving speakers of Achumawi remain out of a tribal population of 800 in Northwestern California. The loss of languages has accelerated recently: in the 19th century, there were more than 1,000 Indian languages in Brazil; now there are a mere 200, most of which have never been written down or recorded. In North America, the 300 or more indigenous languages spoken in the past have been halved.²

The death of languages has many causes, and we will explore some in this conference. Why is this a problem, why should we care? The death of any language diminishes the tapestry of life on Earth. Social Darwinism cannot be the answer. When the last speakers go, they take with them their history and culture. They take alternative value systems with them as well, ones that could provide useful solutions to excesses of modernity pressing humankind today.

¹ David Crystal, *Vanishing Languages: When the last speakers go, they take with them their history and culture*, CIVILIZATION (Feb/March 1997), reprinted at http://www.farsarotul.org/nl21_4.htm.

² *Id.*

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church has set these goals in 2004:³

The rights of indigenous peoples must be appropriately protected.⁴ These peoples offer an example of a life lived in harmony with the environment that they have come to know well and to preserve.⁵ Their extraordinary experience, which is an irreplaceable resource for all humanity, runs the risk of being lost together with the environment from which they originate.

To the end of expertly analyzing the problem and evaluating solutions, we have assembled scholars and decision-makers from all over the planet: Professor Kirke Kickingbird from the Kiowa Tribe who has co-founded this symposium; Professor Jon Reyhner from Northern Arizona University and Professor Douglas Kibbie from the University of Illinois who have dedicated their professional lives to the issue; Professor Allison Dussias from New England Law School, who is an expert on Native American languages and their protection under U.S. law; and the Director of the Council of Europe's Secretariat on the Protection of National Minorities, Mr. Antti Korkeakivi, who will discuss Europe's answer to the problem.

I thank the organizers of this symposium, in particular, the *Intercultural Human Rights Law Review* and its Executive Board, as well as the founder of this event, Professor Siegfried Wiessner, for their indefatigable efforts to shed the light on the plight of the

³ PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, COMPENDIUM OF THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH, Vatican City, 2 April 2004, at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html.

⁴ Cf. John Paul II, Address to the Indigenous Peoples of Guatemala (7 March 1983), 4: AAS 75 (1983), 742-743; John Paul II, Address to the Indigenous Peoples of Canada (18 September 1984), 7-8: AAS 77 (1988), 421-422; John Paul II, Address to the Indigenous Peoples of Ecuador (31 January 1985), II,1: AAS 77 (1985), 861; John Paul II, Address to the Indigenous Peoples of Australia (29 November 1986), 10: AAS 79 (1987), 976-977.

⁵ Cf. John Paul II, Address to the Indigenous Peoples of Australia (29 November 1986), 4: AAS 79 (1987), 974-975; John Paul II, Address to Native Americans (14 September 1987), 4: L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO, English edition, 21 September 1987, at 21.

4 *INTERCULTURAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW REVIEW* Vol. 3

underprivileged, to preserve their culture, and their core, *i.e.* their language.

May God shine His blessings on this day's deliberations.