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Guest Voices
EarthBeat
Native Americans lead a prayer for clean and safe air, water and land as well as the protectio

Native Americans lead a prayer for clean and safe air, water and land as well as the protection of their people Nov. 5, 2016, at Columbus Circle in New York City during a protest against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. Organizers said the march was dedicated to the Standing Rock Sioux Nation in North Dakota as an act of solidarity against what tribe leaders see as invasion on indigenous people's sovereign land. (CNS/Isabelle Baldwin)



by Terry Sloan

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Editor's note: *In the weeks preceding the inauguration of the country's second Catholic president, National Catholic Reporter asked Catholic politicians, activists and scholars to offer advice to President-elect Joe Biden in a series that takes its title from Pope Francis' encyclical* Fratelli Tutti*: "Building a Common Future."*



(NCR graphic/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

I am a Native/Indigenous American in a torn United States. It was painful to watch the dismantling of our once great country the last four years. I — we — could do nothing to stop it but attempted to minimize the damage and destruction where we could, as we were powerless, even amongst the powerful.

It was a hard-fought battle for me and my efforts to get Joe Biden elected 46th president of the United States. I am that rarity, a Catholic Native American. I met Joe Biden in a teleconference when I was participating in some of the Obama administration's initiatives for Native Americans. I was a consultant when he was working on reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act and other issues of importance to Native Americans.

His life and history set him up for this moment, when the United States of America needed a man like him. He is where he needs to be. His true nature is to have empathy, speak and hear truth, exhibit kindness, provide that listening ear, uninterrupted; and his true desire to honestly want to help his fellow human beings is needed now more than ever.

I can now breathe, relax and have faith again in our government.

But now the real work must begin, and begin quickly, because we do not have much time, and much must be done to rebuild our world. So where does one start? With so

much to ask, where do I begin?

From a Native American rights perspective, I ask that our rights be once again honored and respected. Many of our rights have been trampled on, disrespected and violated, our lands exploited, our needs and wishes ignored and or shelved.

The implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) must restart. In September 2014, at the U.N. World Conference on Indigenous Peoples, the General Assembly mandated that all member states begin implementation of the declaration.

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Although the United States did not formally sign the UNDRIP in 2007, in December 2010, President Barack Obama announced that the U.S. would lend its qualified support to the declaration. The State Department released the official U.S. position statement, which makes it clear that the U.S. regards UNDRIP's concept of "self-determination" to be limited by existing laws and policies. That is, federally recognized tribes have inherent but limited powers of self-governance.

That decision was a reversal of the position taken by President George Bush in 2007, when the U.S. voted against the UNDRIP even as 145 nations supported it. In 2015 and 2016, under Obama, the U.S. began implementation of the UNDRIP, and I attended multiple Tribal consultations on implementation. Under President Donald Trump, however, all work stopped.

As Biden begins his term in office, I would like to recommend to him that he join the rest of world and formally sign the UNDRIP in honor of Indigenous Peoples' rights. Biden can then continue the implementation of the UNDRIP that was started by Obama.

This would make significant progress toward recognizing the rights of Indigenous Peoples. The UNDRIP is a vast document that addresses many aspects of Indigenous Peoples' lives, ways and culture. It helps protect us in so many ways, including our culture, languages and religions. I think it will help further our standing, because we tend to be thought of as "Third World people," as less than human in some cases. We are treated unfairly. Violence occurs against our people, and it's an accepted reality. In this white world we live in, there are a lot of people who have privilege

and use it to their advantage.

That is why it is significant that the U.S. has begun to take steps to formally recognize the importance of inclusiveness in the leadership of the Department of Interior, with the nomination of a Native American, Congresswoman Debra Haaland, to head the department for the first time in history. This is a great step, having a Native American who is culturally sensitive and reared since childhood to respect and honor Mother Earth and her inhabitants.

Many of us hope to see from Haaland's nomination real environmental protection for our land, air and sacred water. Of utmost importance to many Native/Indigenous Peoples is our sacred water. As we all know, water is life. Protecting and caring for our sacred water must be a priority, and strict laws and regulations must be implemented to protect our drinking water aquifers, rivers, and lakes.

To prevent future contamination, oil and gas developers must not be allowed to build pipelines through lakes and or under rivers. This kind of development, such as the Dakota Access Pipeline, which is under construction, must be permanently stopped and mitigated, as the threat to drinking water for millions of Americans is real. And to protect our First Amendment rights, any laws or regulations criminalizing protests against pipeline development must be rescinded.

I would like Biden to ensure that our land remains our land. Tribal lands are actually in a trust, and are still owned by the federal government. I would like to see title to those lands transferred permanently to the tribes. But that does not release the United States from its trust responsibility to help the tribes live, with federal funding for health care, education and other services. That is a trust responsibility that the U.S. agreed to hundreds of years ago, in treaties with all the tribes that are federally recognized.

Clergy of many faiths from across the United States participate in a prayer circle Nov. 3, 2016

Clergy of many faiths from across the United States participate in a prayer circle Nov. 3, 2016, in front of a bridge in Standing Rock, North Dakota, where demonstrators confront police during a protest of the Dakota Access pipeline. (CNS/Reuters/Stephanie Keith)

I was ecstatic to see Biden sign the United States back on to the Paris Agreement on climate change. The Paris Agreement is an accord within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, addressing the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions, along with adaptation and finance. It was adopted by consensus on Dec. 12, 2015, at the COP21 climate summit in France. The agreement entered into force on Nov. 4, 2016, and has now been ratified by 190 of the 197 nations that are parties to the convention.

I attended the COP21 in support of Obama's position to fully participate in the agreement. I was also there to support the Indigenous Peoples' efforts to contribute to the development of the Paris Agreement, and I attended the Indigenous Peoples' "Resilience in a Time of Uncertainty: Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change" conference. I was honored to see that the draft of the Paris Agreement included language that was provided by Indigenous Peoples. I look forward to the United States and the world continuing this important and critical work on climate change.

Native Americans are affected by climate change differently, depending on their location. In the arid Southwestern U.S., we continue to be faced with drought, which affects our water supply, our food supply, our agriculture and even our access to livestock and animals for hunting. We need running rivers; we need our lakes and aquifers restored. Climate change is affecting these things by changing weather patterns, which in turn change the migration of animals and fish on which northern tribes depend to provide food for their families.

I would like to see a formal declaration from the government that climate change is real. Acknowledging that throughout the government is the first step. The next step is to use existing guidelines to look at differences in different regions of the country and the best steps for mitigating climate change in each, including moving toward renewable energy and electric cars, minimizing our carbon footprint and providing incentives to do these things.

We are at a critical crossroads in our human existence on Mother Earth, and we now have a chance to affect the impact that humans have, by reducing our ever-destructive footprint, minimizing and repairing any damage that we can, and restoring the ecological and environmental balance that Mother Earth's ecosystems already had in place. May God bless and support our U.S. President Joe Biden and those working to protect our sacred Mother Earth.

This story appears in the **Building a Common Future** feature series. View the full series.

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