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A priest among the tribes

by Joe Ferullo

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His parish is vast -- millions of acres of brushland and desert. But his flock is small -- at Sunday Mass, two people show up to worship. But for Fr. Earl Henley, his task is huge: inviting Native American tribes of California back into the church after centuries of abuse and mistrust.

Henley is the subject of a fascinating profile in today's *Los Angeles Times*, detailing his work among desert tribes as head of the Native American Ministry of the San Bernadino diocese. It is, he admits, hard work -- much harder than the decades he spent as a missionary on Papua New Guinea, out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

In the desert, there is no water -- and worshippers seem just as hard to find. Church history here includes forced labor at missions in the 1700s, through to forced removal from families and placement in church schools in the 1900s. With Vatican II, and Pope John Paul's apology to Native Americans in the late 1980s, relations began to warm -- but long-held suspicions die hard. Still, Henley is out there trying: he has brokered peace between tribal leaders and state police, and has been a helping hand as some tribes deal with the not-so-glamorous side effects of legal casino gambling on native lands: higher rates of crime, drug abuse and domestic violence.

It is, as the *Times* writes, a "lonely ministry," and Henley, now 69 years old, sometimes feels like he needs a break, some time to reassess -- but, he realizes, the need is there. Someone has to help.

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