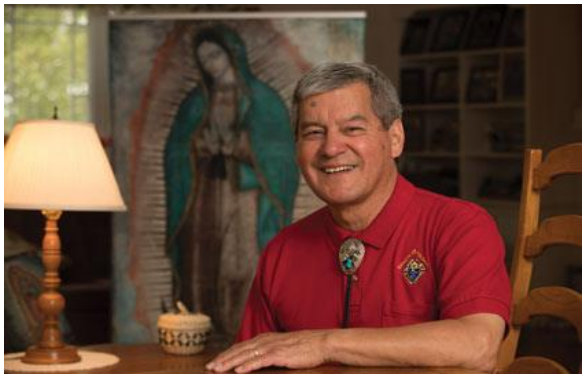
FIRST NATION KNIGHT

Columbia 9/1/2019

by Cecilia Hadley

GUIDED BY OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE, SUPREME WARDEN GRAYDON NICHOLAS UNITES EVANGELIZATION AND ADVOCACY FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES



Graydon Nicholas, supreme warden of the Knights of Columbus and a member of the Maliseet First Nation, is pictured at his home in Fredericton, New Brunswick. Photo by Keith Minchin

Graydon Nicholas has felt Our Lady's care and protection since the day he was born. Two months before he was due, Nicholas' mother fell into a river near her home on a First Nation reserve. It was the middle of winter in New Brunswick, and the shock of the cold induced early labor.

"In 1946, there was not much medical support for children who were born premature," Nicholas explained. "A lot people in the community thought I was going to die, but my mother didn't. She prayed to the Blessed Mother: 'Let him survive.'"

Her prayers were answered. Nicholas not only survived but grew up to become an accomplished lawyer, judge, government leader and now supreme warden of the Knights of Columbus.

As a member of the Maliseet First Nation, Nicholas has advocated for the indigenous communities of Atlantic Canada throughout his career. As a Catholic and a Knight, he has worked to kindle their faith and strengthen their relationship with the Church. In this, he continues to be guided by Mary, who, under her title Our Lady of Guadalupe, is patroness of the Americas, the unborn and the Knights of Columbus.

Nicholas first encountered the apparitions and message of Our Lady of Guadalupe a couple of decades ago. "I was overwhelmed with emotion and gratitude that our Lord sent his mother to begin healing, reconciliation and respect for the indigenous people within the Catholic Church," he recalled.

Raised on the Tobique First Nation Reserve, Nicholas grew up in a family with both a deep native culture and a strong Catholic faith.

"Both my mother and father were very devoted Catholics and passed our faith on to us very strongly," he said. "My mom made sure we went to Mass and said our rosary after supper every night."

His family spoke their indigenous language, Maliseet, at home. Because English was his second language, Nicholas struggled in school at first, but not for long. He went on to earn both a master's degree in social work and a law degree, and worked for many years for the Union of New Brunswick Indians. He is particularly proud of his efforts to defend tribal rights.

"We were able to convince not only the courts in New Brunswick but the Supreme Court of Canada that our treaty documents, which go back to 1725, were still valid," he recalled. "These documents enshrined rights for our people that had been dormant for a long time."

As a leader of the union, he also participated in four international conferences in Switzerland that contributed to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People.

In 1991, Nicholas became the first aboriginal person to be appointed a provincial court judge. During his 18 years on the bench, he took a special interest in rehabilitation and restorative justice. He was named lieutenant governor of New Brunswick in 2009 — the first aboriginal person to hold that position for the province.

Nicholas' devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe developed in the late 1990s when he became more involved in the relationship between First Nations and the Church. In 1998, he was asked to serve on an aboriginal council set up by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"The bishops wanted to improve relations between First Nations and the Catholic Church in the wake of the residential schools and all the wrongs that were done there," Nicholas explained.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, residential schools in Canada and the United States — many run by the Catholic Church and Protestant denominations — separated native children from their families and quashed their languages and traditions in the name of assimilation. These schools remain a bitter memory for many indigenous people.

Working on the bishops' council, Nicholas came to appreciate Our Lady of Guadalupe as a counterexample to this suppression of tradition. As St. John Paul II stated in his 1999 exhortation Ecclesia in America, Our Lady of Guadalupe is a model of "a perfectly inculturated evangelization" (11).

"When she appeared to St. Juan Diego in December 1531, our Blessed Mother appeared as a mestiza woman and spoke in his indigenous language," Nicholas explained. He added that Juan Diego was 57 years old — a respected "elder" in the community.

"Within 10 years, over 9 million indigenous people had converted to the Catholic faith," Nicholas said. "When I share this with our people, they're astounded."

For years, Nicholas has acted as Our Lady's ambassador, raising awareness of her message among Canada's First Nations. Every year since 2006, he has helped to bring a missionary image of Our Lady of Guadalupe to New Brunswick, arranging for it to visit parishes, convents, schools and pow wows throughout his home province.

"The image been very wonderfully, positively received, and has had a dramatic impact," he said. One impact was very personal — his wife, Elizabeth, experienced a healing as she prayed in front of the image in 2006.

Nicholas' first involvement with the Knights of Columbus also came in 2006, when he was invited to the New Brunswick state convention to speak about his devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe.

When he was later asked to participate in the Knights sponsored Guadalupe Festival in Phoenix in 2009, he took it as a sign she wanted him to join. A few years later, Nicholas led a decade of the rosary in his native language at the 2012 Guadalupe Celebration in California.

He was elected to the Knights of Columbus Board of Directors in 2015 and currently serves as supreme warden.

“The Knights have given me an opportunity to acquire more knowledge and personify my faith publicly, and I have nothing but gratitude for that,” he said.

Nicholas is also happy to have a role in the Order’s new initiatives to evangelize, serve and collaborate with Native American Catholics.

“The initiative to improve relations with Native Americans and First Nations is fantastic,” he said. “Now, the path is toward reconciliation; the path is toward growth; the path is toward trying to get more of our indigenous people involved.”

“I think it will take a while, but it’s a mission that is worthwhile. And I’m very grateful to be a part of it.”