

On the 190<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the San Rafael Mission

by

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A little over a month ago, on December 15, while driving from my home on Sonoma Mountain to San Rafael, where a gala was scheduled at the reconstituted San Rafael Mission, now a cathedral, celebrating the mission's 190<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I found myself thinking, not of my planned keynote address, but of a Coast Miwok boy in jail. The Catholic Church was commemorating the mission's first mass on December 14, 1817, when its adobe walls were consecrated and when 26 Coast Miwok children were baptized. The event's organizers had asked me to speak at a formal reception after the High Mass, and I consented on the condition that my tribe -- Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria -- appear not as an afterthought of the event, but as an integral part. And, in order to further that end and set the tone for the celebration, I asked that I or another member of my tribe -- and not a representative of the Catholic Church -- be the person to welcome the celebrants to the mass. My wishes were granted. I was feeling added pressure to represent my people well; I certainly needed to deliver a poignant speech on Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo history. Yet there was the boy: handsome, black hair and eyes, face smooth as an egg, just turned seventeen, and, as I had learned that morning, waiting to be tried for murder as an adult. Outside my window was a typical December late afternoon: foggy cold. The landscape was steel grey, the hills above the Petaluma River, Marin's copses of oak and bay, barns, apartment buildings, fields and marshes, and everywhere his face.

His alleged crime took place in Petaluma, one evening outside a bar, when a scuffle broke out after he asked one of the bar's patrons to buy him beer. A knife was involved. Approximately five miles south at Olompali, once a thriving and significant Coast Miwok village, now a state park, the boy's great-great-great-great-great-great grandparents were born.

They were baptized at the San Jose mission, across the San Francisco Bay and then thirty-five miles further south, and named by the padres Otilio and Otilia, matching names, which was mission policy for married Native adults. Mission records indicate that they were born, respectively, in 1780 and 1785, no doubt an estimated guess. In any event, they came of age in and around Olompali -- and the Petaluma Valley -- before European force and disease disrupted Coast Miwok lifeways. There were few, if any domestic livestock in the area; oat grass and thistle had not displaced bunch grasses and native clover. Deer and elk were plentiful; flocks of waterfowl obliterated the sun for hours at a time. Long-standing relations, understood as agreements regarding boundaries and territory, with neighboring Nations, and also with the communities of large predators, such as mountain lions and grizzlies, were honored. Whatever the circumstances, whether the Olompali husband and wife were forced by Spanish soldiers across the bay or whether they followed other Natives for whatever reason, what they found as they got closer and closer to their destination was a world increasingly foreign -- not deer and elk, but cattle, sheep, and horses; not bunch grasses, but wild oat and fenced rows of grapes and corn. And that was just the beginning.

Otilio and Otilia probably first arrived at the San Jose mission sometime after 1800. It's not known how long they stayed. Their daughter, baptized Escolastica, was born in the San Francisco mission in 1812. Escolastica married a Coast Miwok, Elzeario, whose parents, baptized Ysidro and Ysidra in the San Francisco mission, were from Alaguali, a Coast Miwok nation located in the foothills and marshlands directly east of -- and in view of -- Petaluma. And the daughter of Escolastica and Elzeario -- the boy's great-great-great-great grandmother -- was born in the San Rafael mission on May 6, 1829, and baptized the following day as Juana Evangeliste.

Juana Evangeliste, later known as Juana Bautista, became the last Coast Miwok maien or headwoman, maintaining Coast Miwok culture at Nicasio, north of San Rafael, where Coast Miwok survivors reorganized on a 500 acre rancheria granted them by the Mexican government in 1835, a year after the mission was secularized. They remained there until the mid-1850s, several years after California became a state, when they were removed by San Rafael sheriffs and marched over the hills to Tomales Bay. Tomales Bay, where several Coast Miwok live to this day, must have struck Juana Evangeliste as windy and cold, a different world from San Rafael. But for Juana Evangeliste what was home at this point? She was in Coast Miwok territory, certainly, but what of Olompali? What of Alaguali? And her grandparents, Otilio and Otilia, and Ysidro and Ysidra? What of the Nations, the many people? What of the great herds of elk and deer? The bears -- what of the redwood forests where they lived? ... Where to fish? How to live? Could she see what I was seeing driving to San Rafael, the grey trees and apartment houses, cold marshes and hills? Was that her, and not the boy, looking back at me?

I didn't want to speak at the gala. Again, I was concerned that the Tribe's participation would be viewed in the end as token acknowledgement of our ancestors' presence in the mission, not unlike the way a Coast Miwok basket behind glass reminds spectators in local museums of the region's indigenous culture -- the basket too often is seen as an object distinct from the living culture and history out of which it was produced. The gala's organizers, two of whom I know and respect greatly -- Betty Goerke, whose research on the Coast Miwok and Chief Marin (after whom Marin County was named and Escolastica's first cousin) was recently published in her book, Chief Marin, and fellow tribal council member, treasurer Gene Buvelot, a fine cultural historian in his own right -- prevailed upon me, again granting my wish to participate in any way

“I saw fit,” which now meant I would not only be welcoming the gala’s celebrants to the mass but Bishop Quinn and his procession to the altar, quite a symbolic turn of events all around. But that was exactly what I was struggling with: how to get past symbolic gesture, how, in other words, to acknowledge the past so as to see the present and future differently, to affect genuine change.

The church filled, pews packed shoulder to shoulder. Over three hundred people. Incense wafted in the air. Candles flickered on the altar. The expectant crowd was silent. I don’t believe assigning blame is constructive; I don’t believe attempts to even the score accomplish anything further than maintaining, and thus reaffirming, a situation or condition that shouldn’t have happened in the first place, never more so than in the history shared by Indians and non-Indians in the church at that moment. On the altar, I said as much. With my elevated view of the crowd from the podium -- and of the bishop, accompanied by several priests and other attendants, at the back of the church -- I talked about change -- about changing the story from one born of arrogance and dislocation to one born of kindness and coming home, for all of us, Indian and non-Indian alike. “Welcome ... Let us start.”

Bishop Quinn, 83 years old and slightly bent in his green vestments, staff in hand, led the procession to the altar. Amid singing, the mass began. Seated conspicuously in a front pew, I glanced down furtively at the notes in my lap. Whatever dissatisfaction -- and insecurity -- I felt before about my keynote address for the reception seemed to have grown. I felt a greater urgency. My facts and figures felt dry at best, statistics on the demise of Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo people and environmental degradation in the wake of European invasion, stuff that sounded more and more as if I would be hurling blame, maintaining a paradigm of polarization. Reconciliation and generosity? Hardly. Where the new story? How could real

lives -- real history -- come alive in words? A task no less difficult, it seemed, than seeing in that basket behind glass an entire world: the life of the basket's weaver, the sandy loam beds where she dug sedge roots, the quail in the brush, a woodpecker tapping overhead on a live oak branch, the history of the weaver's family. Could a basket speak?

Bishop Quinn, stepping off the altar, doused those of us in the front pews with holy water. I noticed that along with his gold cross chain he wore a string of "Indian beads." Symbols, symbols, symbols ... Fellow council member Joanne Campbell read the Lord's Prayer in Coast Miwok. A well-dressed Marin matron, seated across from me, looked particularly confused at that point. Perhaps she had wandered in late expecting the regularly scheduled Saturday evening mass. She wasn't any less perplexed when Joanne Campbell and tribal council secretary Jeannette Anglin read the Coast Miwok names of the 26 children baptized in the mission 190 years and one day earlier. Most of those children died within five years; only three survived to adulthood. Ten years later, in 1827, the mission reported its highest Native population, 1,051 individuals, and, two years after that, Juana Evangeliste was born there. She must have known the three survivors.

I was still stealing glances at my notes when Bishop Quinn approached the podium to deliver his sermon. As he began to talk, I was surprised by his detailed history of the mission, including his mention that its site had been used originally as a hospital or sanatorium for the many sick Natives in the San Jose and San Francisco missions suffering from pneumonia and other European-introduced diseases. Had Otilio and Otilia, and Ysidro and Ysidra, come back to Coast Miwok territory as sick people? Did their children, Escolastica, and Elzeario, ever know their home place without grapes and corn, horses and cattle? ... Bishop Quinn didn't hold back the unpleasant truth either, including note of the often brutal treatment of Natives by the Spanish,

and that large numbers of Natives perished at the mission not only due to disease but harsh conditions. By 1839, five years after the mission was secularized, only 190 Natives were reported at the mission, and certainly many of those must have been residing part of the time at Nicasio.

“Conquer, conquer, conquer ...” Bishop Quinn lamented. “It was humankind’s endemic and eternal failing, to always know what is best for the other person, and to conquer that person if you have superior fire power.” Noting that “[Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo] were ahead of us in the environment [and that] they were way ahead of us, advanced, in women’s rights,” he questioned, “who was bringing civilization to whom?” He had my attention, and added respect, but hardly was I, or I daresay anyone else, prepared for what he said next: “The Church this evening apologizes for trying to take Indian out of the Indian. Let the Miwok be Miwok.”

An historic moment. An apology from the Catholic Church to Native people. Gasps then utter silence. I sat stunned. My notes -- now what was I going to say?

Two hundred or more people gathered in the school auditorium adjacent the church after mass, and after mingling and inspecting displays of Coast Miwok beadwork and basketry, generously provided by Gene Buvelot and members of Miwok Archeological Preserve of Marin (MAPOM), they sat, paper plates of hors d’oeuvres in hand, and waited for my address. Various organizers of the event spoke, briefly describing their work to preserve Mission San Rafael’s history, and then I was introduced (though, of course, I had introduced myself earlier on the altar). On behalf of my people, and with their permission, I accepted Bishop Quinn’s apology. Reconciliation ... And I commended him for the detailed -- and accurate -- research he presented in his sermon. Generosity ... I launched into my talk, relating in specific, and somewhat different ways, Bishop Quinn’s history. For example, repeating that at the time of

European contact an estimated 20,000 Natives resided in Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo territories, and that today, of the 1,132 Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo individuals enrolled in the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, all are descendants of 14 survivors, and adding that 40,000 acres of the combined territories are under concrete, that, in Sonoma County alone, 60,000 acres are planted in grapes, entire hillsides stripped, even removed, and that every major waterway is polluted. Where the numerous waterfowl? Where the elk and pronghorn? What do we call the hills? What songs for the ailing oaks? What prayers for salmon? What rules for grasses and bulbs? What is the story of Mt. Tamalpais? What of Coyote's creation atop Sonoma Mountain, his dance with Chicken Hawk there? And Otilio and Otilia, Ysidro and Ysidra, Escolastica and Elzeario, Juana Evangeliste, and Maria Copa and Julia Frease, where are they now? Is General Vallejo giving orders inside his Petaluma adobe fort still? What of his nephew -- still trapped by the early Americans in that rock cave east of Santa Rosa where two years before he had trapped and killed grizzly bears? The landscape, which was a sacred text for Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo people, pages and pages of rocks and creeks, hillsides, oak groves, sacred springs, plants and animals, that told us at once who we were and how to live, that told us everywhere we looked that we were home, has been reduced, obliterated, to all but a few shards of text. People and place have suffered alike as a result. No one people -- or person -- can answer all the questions. Homelessness, more or less, now is the common denominator for all of us, Indian and non-Indian. And homelessness breeds fear and, all too often, conflict and war. What else if we are told just about everywhere we look that we are strangers? What if there are no stories in the hills, no ancestors there? Can we avoid the fate of General Vallejo's nephew, hunted where once we hunted, trapped where we trapped? We must, all of us together, each with our own lives and history, re-story the landscape so that together we are home. A new story ...



Yes, a new story, one born not of arrogance and dislocation but of kindness and coming home ... “A good mantra,” a woman said to me after my address. She wore a plaid suit and informed me she was “a former nun.” Cognizant of the effects -- and causes -- of global warming, this woman, and many others from the audience who approached me, found what I had to say relevant. The need to act locally, to know the local environment, and, with that, the importance of stories regarding who we are and how we live.

Leaving the mission, I thought of the past 190 years, attempting in a moment the impossible task of fathoming all that had happened. Had I even scratched the surface in my talk? Could we imagine a 190 year celebration of this evening’s celebration? What story would we tell to get there? Doubt and anxiety returned. A good story? A new story? I had recited facts, asked questions, maybe even stirred the audience, but where was the story?

Crossing the Petaluma River, seeing the valley lit in Petaluma’s empty orangish light, I had come full circle, was back where I had started. The night was ice cold now. The Coast Miwok boy was there. I know his family. His cousins are my cousins. His great-great-great grandmother, Maria Copa, daughter of Juana Evangeliste, sang songs for my great-great grandfather, Tom Smith, as he doctored the sick, healed disease. I pictured him on the night of the alleged murder, alone, somewhere near the Petaluma River. He stopped at a bar whose patrons are rumored to dislike Latinos, and certainly he would easily have been mistaken as a Latino. Did he know as much about the bar? Probably not, or why would he have stopped to ask for someone to buy him beer there.

I hadn’t mentioned him in my talk and there he had been looking at me from the back of the auditorium the entire time. What, or rather who, else had exacerbated my anxiety over the

keynote address, and now again, still? Could I have gotten the crowd to see him? Was that what I was supposed to do?

I glanced the width of the valley lit in that orangish light. Then I thought of the hills, Sonoma Mountain, where I was going. My mind flip-flopped all at once. My heart started. The boy was there. I'd been seeing his story all along; I'd even told parts of it that evening. Now he was letting me see the rest of it, complete ... I was there. He was there. He was walking along the river, under the orangish street lamps, but he knew the river, and the hills. Ysidro and Ysidra were up there, just as Otilio and Otilia were on the other side of the river, and he knew where animals and birds were, and General Vallejo, and Bishop Quinn too, and he could ask them for beer and they could tell him about it, or about whatever else he wanted and needed.