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Robert Haarman, director of the Office of Indian Ministry of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis and community minister at Gichitwaa Kateri Catholic Church in Minneapolis, addresses attendees at an Oct. 5, 2024, event at St. Catherine University in St. Paul on the harm caused by government-funded boarding schools for Native American children that forced them to assimilate to a European and Christian way of life, suppressing their language and culture in the process. Some of the schools were operated by Catholic religious orders. (OSV News/Rebecca Omastiak, The Catholic Spirit)

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With tears in her eyes, Marcy Mears recalled the kindness extended to her and her family growing up in poverty near the Red Lake Nation reservation in northern Minnesota.

"I remember one time my dad was unemployed and was sick and my mom wasn't working, and we didn't have any food," Mears said. A member of the Red Lake Nation "came and brought us a deer, venison, and kept us alive. And if not for the grace of him and sharing with us, I don't know where we would be. ... There's so many examples of how they cared for us," she told *The Catholic Spirit*, the newspaper of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

Mears said, "Part of my mission now as a professor in social work (at St. Catherine University in St. Paul) is really to draw the (American) Indian voices into classrooms, make sure that people know their history, the accurate history of the (Native American) boarding schools."

She has traveled to different reservations and meets with elders. "What they tell me, the elders, is that they don't want their voices to be lost," Mears said.

Mears was among the roughly 130 people who registered for an Oct. 5 event at St. Catherine University called "Toward Healing Minds and Hearts: Reflecting for Right Relationship and Conciliation."

Hosted by the Catholic Racial Justice Coalition, or CRJC, and Gichitwaa Kateri in Minneapolis, the event drew members of Native American communities, local Catholics, members of the local Twin Cities community, and leaders within the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis to pray, to acknowledge harm caused by Native boarding schools, to learn and to celebrate the vitality of Native cultures.

Attendees were invited "to reflect on their understanding of the issues, plural" that have resulted from Native boarding school harms, said Robert Haarman, director of the archdiocesan Office of Indian Ministry and community minister of Gichitwaa Kateri. "These issues are present in our community as mental health, substance use/abuse, inadequate housing, family issues and more."

The intention of the event was to inform "our faithful (in the archdiocese) of the difficulties faced by these communities and begin (and) continue to deliver (on) our baptismal promise to meet those in most need," Haarman said.

"We hope to provide information that may be new to some of our audience and provide resources for attendees to engage further," said Meg Payne Nelson, vice president of impact for the St. Paul-based Catholic Community Foundation of Minnesota and a representative of CCF for the CRJC.

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The CRJC currently includes representatives of eight Catholic institutions in the Twin Cities metro area — the archdiocese; Catholic Charities Twin Cities; CCF; the GHR Foundation; the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet; and the universities of St. Catherine, Winona-based St. Mary (with a campus in Minneapolis) and St. Thomas (with campuses in St. Paul and Minneapolis).

The event opened with smudging, a drum song and a blessing of the "spirit plate" — a Native American prayer to give thanks for the plants and animals that serve as food.

"Our beloved Creator, miigwech (an Anishinaabemowin word meaning thank you) we thank you. You created us. You created all these creatures who now offer their life to help us to grow, to stay healthy, and to share what we have," said Father Stan Sledz, sacramental minister of Gichitwaa Kateri, in part during the prayer. "Bless us to be a blessing to other people ... bless us always to share."

During the lunch that followed, attendees reflected on questions placed at each table, including: "What do you know about our shared histories of Native boarding schools? Why does this shared history matter to you? How might you be a part of healing in our communities?"

Ginny Helfrigh-Simmons, 80, and a member of Risen Savior Parish in Burnsville, told *The Catholic Spirit* she is "glad the church is taking real responsibility" in addressing its role in the harms caused by Native boarding schools.

Sarah Gleason, 62, and Ann Mongoven, 67, both of St. Joan of Arc in Minneapolis, said they were interested in learning how individual parishes in the archdiocese could take action.

Gleason said she hoped the event would contribute to "a shared understanding of Native boarding school history and our shared responsibility."

Mongoven emphasized the importance of listening to Indigenous people, "to hear from them what they need to heal."

Although guest speaker Samuel Torres, deputy chief executive officer of the Minneapolis-based nonprofit National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, was unable to attend the Oct. 5 event, he had previously addressed the effects of Native boarding schools at the 84th annual Tekakwitha Conference in Bloomington last year.

During those remarks, Torres said addressing the effects of Native boarding schools must be a collective effort from people of every race, faith and nation. He encouraged a framework of restorative justice to heal wounds and recommended education and dialogue to combat a "culture of forgetting."

Sharing her personal testimony Oct. 5, Valencia Littlethunder said a spiritual adviser has helped her understand historical trauma. Her mother is a Native boarding school survivor.

"This whole state is full of hurt," acknowledged Littlethunder. She said, "It's important for our Native community to come together to heal in this process."

Littlethunder said learning about her Native ancestry helps her to embrace who she is: "It's OK to be you, it's OK to be Native, it's OK to speak your language."

She acknowledged a need for a collective conciliation effort: "We all have to share this land; we all have to share this space."