

# TWO FAITHS INTERTWINE AND BLOSSOM AT A DESERT RESERVATION

There are four women—all RSCJ—working miracles daily in the grip of a Native American reservation in the cactus-and-rock edge of Riverside County, California. They form the vanguard of the Catholic Church’s mission at the wide expanse that is home for the Soboba band of Luiseño Indians and others, residents of this land centuries before the Europeans “discovered” it.

*(The word “Indian” is widely used by the Luiseños, even as part of their formal name, unaffected by standards of “political correctness.”)*

An oft-heard phrase here is “go with the flow.” That is because life in a wide open country where some freedom is still enjoyed happens on its own time. While stillness  
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At the vanguard of love: a quartet of RSCJ. Left to right, Deanna Rose Von Bargen, Marianna Torrano, Judy Roach and Mary Gen Smyth.



envelops the land here where Mother Earth is still revered for what She gives, it is a peace of recent vintage. Not so long ago, and still in the institutional memories of the elders, this spirit-filled land was the site of many generations of broken promises, broken treaties and deceitful, murderous governments and even churches. The starkest part of that history—if you are Catholic—is that it was the church’s missionaries who often were effectively, though unwittingly, the “reconnaissance” crew for the U.S. Cavalry, softening the Native peoples with a foreign religion that helped to numb their resistance to the nightmarish machine of government-sponsored onslaughts.

When the dust began to settle after generations of this continual attack on Native Americans and their culture, a decimated people stood proud as a separate nation within a nation, determined to forge a better future with what little had survived from the past. And, perhaps defying the odds, one thing that survived was a fragile Catholic faith that the ancestors had accepted freely and of which they still held at least a remnant.

It is against this tough—outsiders might say forbidding—reality of past and present, that the four sisters patiently do the things that bring hope and God’s love to a people who have received little love or even recognition from those who come from the outside of the reservation.

It is only now that both the Native people and the Catholic Church—in the form of the RSCJ, a circuit-riding priest and many others—seem ready to begin a new phase of hope fueled by real love in a collaboration that seems strong and growing.

“We are just at the beginning of evangelism here,” says Sister Marianna Torrano, RSCJ, the “dean” of the group and “founder” of the current presence of the church here.

All the pain and promise of the past have prepared Sister Torrano and her little band, and the Luiseños and others who have graciously accepted them, for this moment in their histories. It is a moment full of hope.

### **SOBOBA INDIAN RESERVATION**

This place is not for the tenderfoot, and there is not one among the quartet of RSCJ whom fate has thrown together on a mission of love and faith in a land that still holds too much despair and poverty.

Marianna Torrano, Deanna Rose Von Bargen, Mary Gen Smyth, and Judy Roach—each will forever be linked in the annals of both Soboba and RSCJ history—women who have put a unique stamp on their charism by taking it to a place where the real America was born. The four form one third of what Father Earl Henley, MSC, calls the miraculous intersection of three separate Sacred Heart groups in Soboba. Father Earl is a priest of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. His counterparts, from a separate province, are the sisters of the MSC who are involved in teaching throughout the Soboba (Suh-BO-buh) reservation and other reservations in the region. The third group, of course, is the Society of the Sacred Heart, the RSCJ. Each Sacred Heart order has its roots in France, still echoed in the *Sacré-Cœur* (SC) part of their titles. On the reservation they all are headquartered at a place called Soboba, which takes its name from the reservation.

Father Earl, who at sixty-five is the youngest of the group, said he is sustained by the same zeal that has driven him since he was a young missionary priest years ago in Papua New Guinea.

“You have to have the missionary vision. That is so important. If you don’t have the missionary vision, it doesn’t work,” he said.

He echoes Sister Torrano’s description of the nascent faith at Soboba. “We are still at basic evangelization here,” he said.



Named for Blessed Kateri Tekawitha, this community center hosts many local events in Soboba.



Mary Gen Smyth, RSCJ, in a teaching moment with one of her students.

How basic? Here is one way Father Earl describes some of the work he does at Soboba: “Baptisms, funerals—some in Latin, some in Spanish, some in birdsong maybe,” he said, the latter point referring to an important Native song form recalling a creation story that tells of the people’s genesis as birds, led to long distances by the creator to the place they were destined to inhabit.

Father Earl is a “circuit riding” priest who puts 25,000 miles a year on his Chevy pickup riding around the 6,880-acre Soboba reservation and five others in the region and bringing the Mass to parishes without a resident priest. The other reservations—like Soboba, all in Riverside County—are Morongo, Cahuilla, Pechanga, Torres-Martinez and Santa Rosa, most of which have small Catholic churches serving congregations, some of which have been in place for many generations.

Along with Father Earl, others are engaged in faith formation on the reservation through ministries matching particular skills and interests.

“I came here to teach children. I would always want to teach the Word and I don’t care how many people are there. Mary taught just one child, and he changed the world,” said Sister Roach, who spends most of her time at Soboba planning and teaching religion and related subjects mostly to children.

Sister Torrano, who came to Soboba in 1994 and has the longest tenure of the RSCJ there, said evangelism does not come easy on the reservation.

“The people are nominally Catholic. But there’s little foundation. Many of them don’t know the richness of the faith,” she said. Most of the Catholic Native Americans in the region were baptized in

their infancy or youth by various missionaries, barely remembering that baptism in later years.

Father Earl echoed the same thoughts. Many of the 850 or so Luiseños living on the sprawling reservation are Catholic but only a handful attends weekly Mass. But funerals are another story, as the deceased of the Luiseños are highly honored and funeral Masses can be several-day affairs with a mix of theologies and feasting. So important are the funerals to the faith life of the Native Americans, Father Earl said, that he once committed the liturgical error of allowing one on Holy Saturday because the date of the funeral had already been set, the wheels were in motion “and there could be no turning back.” It would have been impossible, he said, to relate the singular importance of the Easter Vigil to the Native people because it was not a part of their religious experience. But funerals were a “huge” part of that experience, he said.

Mike Madrigal, a member of the Cahuilla Tribe who serves as a lay minister through St. Joseph Catholic Church on the Soboba reservation, said the story of a sustained—if not always practiced—Catholicism among the people of Soboba and the other reservations is nothing short of miraculous.

“God has been so faithful, so present to us, in so many ways. It’s part of this miracle that the church is still here,” he said.

An example of the miracle, he said, are the many ways Native theology and Catholicism have intertwined for a unique spirituality—something he calls “interfaith.”

“This has been the reality of Native spirituality  
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A billboard made of rock marks the Luiseño administrative campus.

for many generations. We have been an interfaith people” blending a Native spirituality with Catholicism or Christianity. An example of this, he said, is the idea of Eucharist among the Catholic Native Americans.

“In our Indian spirituality and culture we have known that God is present in very real ways. We have always had sacred places. Having the Eucharist shows that God is a real presence in our lives. The elders understand this. There is a great awareness of the mystery of God, the reality of sacredness,” he said.

It is the relationship and spirituality of Madrigal and Sister Torrano that have caused the church to flourish at Soboba. The relationship is yet another miracle, Madrigal says. In the beginning, both Sister Torrano and Madrigal—who were to meet in 1994—were simultaneously engaged in two years of prayer and discernment: Sister Torrano that she would find her ministry and Madrigal that God would bring someone to Soboba to teach the faith to the children. That was when she made a chance visit to Soboba, where they found each other. Madrigal thinks of it now as a reflection on the realities of faith and need.

“God comes to us through our brokenness. We are brothers and sisters in God,” he said.

From Madrigal, Sister Torrano learned of the faith of the people, in the context of the rich Native theology and its more recent partner, Catholicism. On the Catholic side, children needed proper preparation for sacraments. Parents needed to be able to support the children’s faith formation. And the sisters delivered.

Signs of the steady growth of spirituality and the faith have continued, and now there is a Catholic school that has as its mission to teach and preserve the Native culture. (see following story.) There are spiritual programs aplenty, drawing on both Catholic and Indian spirituality traditions.

“We are a whole work in progress—a work in grace,” Sister Torrano said, adding that the miracles of mission at Soboba continue to astound her each day. “We are without means to do anything, and yet we do them,” she said.

And so the work continues, and does not abate. Most of it involves the sisters teaching various aspects of the sacraments to children, and often their parents.

This teaching usually involves “very basic things—listing the sacraments on a chalkboard,” said Deanna Rose Von Barga, RSCJ, still very new to the reservations, (about four months) but already well on her way in ministry.

Her formal mission: “collaborative ministry with Native peoples,” she said. “Everything is challenging here. I’m very organized. But you can’t do that here,” she said, laughing, adding that the idea of “going with the flow” is foreign to her experience.

In just a few short months, she is impressed with what she has seen. “We see growth, we see the seeds. Not just here (at Soboba), but throughout the other five reservations we serve.”

Teaching occupies Sister Smyth’s time as well. She has taken over some religion classes on the reservations in the region, in addition to working as an administrative aid to Father Earl. Like Sister Roach, she makes a point of saying numbers do not matter when she is teaching the Word. “I don’t mind teaching just one person about the bible,” she said.

It is the kind of dedication that Madrigal says has been essential to spiritual progress at Soboba.

“The sisters of the Sacred Heart have been just wonderful for us. We never would have gotten Father Earl to come here, would never have built a school, without Sister Marianna and her prayers and support,” he said.

“It’s part of God’s providence that we don’t understand. But we’ve come to expect miracles here.” ✦

