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## A BISHOP, AN RV AND A SECOND CAREER The Story of Bishop Francis A Quinn

By Catherine Walsh, printed in the November 1995 Issue of *St. Anthony Messenger*



Photo by Randy Pench

### **Bishop Quinn reaches into his pocket for a dog biscuit on the Tohono O'odham Reservation**

Ever since he was a young boy, Bishop Francis A Quinn has been fascinated by Native American cultures. He once contemplated becoming a missionary and admires those who minister among the first Americans. So when he began thinking about stepping down as leader of the Sacramento Diocese in California, Bishop Quinn had a clear vision for his retirement.

"I decided that I would work with Native Americans because I never had the occasion to work with them before," he says. "It always struck me that they were people who were very deserving. They had been through difficult times in the United States since the frontier began."

Bishop Quinn shared his retirement goals with Bishop Manuel D. Moreno of Arizona's Tucson Diocese several years ago. Shortly before his retirement became official in February 1994, the Sacramento bishop received a long-awaited letter from Bishop Moreno. "He said he had a

position he would like me to take if I was still thinking of working with Native Americans when I retired” Bishop Quinn says.

Within a couple of weeks, everything came together. “By February 8 or 10, the priests of the Sacramento Diocese had given me a camper – a ‘class C’ RV that’s very comfortable – as a retirement gift,” Bishop Quinn says. The 72-year-old prelate hitched his Ford Escort to the RV and, accompanied by his brother for the road trip, drove to Tucson to begin a new life as a nontraditional retiree.

### **On the Road**



Photo by Randy Pench

### **Bishop Quinn’s RV was a Retirement gift from the Priests of Sacramento**

I interviewed Bishop Quinn in his RV earlier this year and accompanied him to Masses at two Native American mission parishes in Tucson. A slight man with thinning white hair and kind blue eyes, the bishop speaks enthusiastically about his first year of working among several Arizona tribes.

“I’ve been ministering to 10 to 12 villages,” he says. “I was immediately sent to the San Carlos Apache Reservation, near Globe, Arizona, when I first arrived. Then there was need to replace a priest who had died on the Tohono O’odham Reservation, whose villages are a two-hour drive due west of Tucson, so I went there.”



Bishop Quinn usually commuted out to the reservations on weekends during his first year in Tucson. "Sometimes I'd take the RV and camp for a few days, but often it's easier to take the Ford," he says. When it's not on the road, the RV is parked behind Bishop Moreno's residence near a cluster of cacti and grapefruit trees.

The bishop admits that he knew little about Native Americans before coming to Tucson. He once read a Tony Hillerman mystery novel in which the protagonists are Navajo Indian cops, but Quinn had no firsthand knowledge. "There were very few Native Americans in the Sacramento Diocese and in the San Francisco Diocese where I'd been a priest," he says. "When I knew I was coming here, I began to read some background material. Other than that it was a new experience."

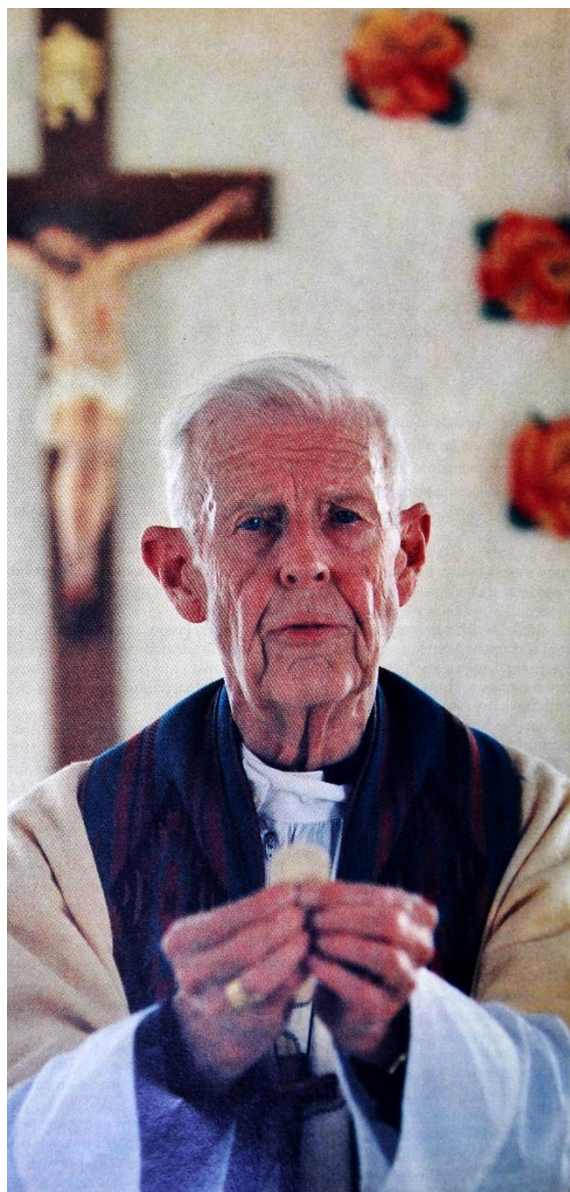


Photo by Randy Pench

### **Celebrating Eucharist at Santa Cruz Church**

He has been struck by the sense of equality among Native Americans he has come to know. "They are a very democratic society," he says. "Everything is done with consultation. You learn when you're ministering to them to work with deliberation and consultation because that's

Upon visiting various reservations in the Arizona desert for the first time, Bishop Quinn realized that the Hollywood depiction of Native Americans was a myth. "Sometimes we see wigwams portrayed in old Western movies, as well as tepees, curling smoke and Indian blankets," he says. "The reality is that there is poor, poor housing on the reservations. You could be in a ghetto or a barrio in any large city."

Bishop Quinn says he was immediately struck not only by the poverty on the reservations but also by the Native people's perseverance and close family ties. "The young people often have difficulty finding employment. They'll go into Tucson to get jobs or to Phoenix or even to Los Angeles," he says. "But they always long to come back to the reservation. There's something about the desert, the family, the tribal nation that calls them back. There's a great love of the family among Native Americans."

Celebrating Mass and other sacraments, particularly Confirmation, Baptism and first Communion, has been the bishop's main ministry among Arizona's Native Americans. "I have been working with the Tohono O'odham longer. But now I'm with the Pascua Yaqui Indians, so I'm getting to know them as well, particularly the lectors, Eucharistic ministers and the leaders of the community," says Bishop Quinn.

how they have been accustomed to function. They have a democratic spirit that was here long before 1776.”

### Inspired by Father Eusebio Kino, SJ



Photo from the Internet

### Mission San Xavier del Bac, “White Dove of the Desert,” Tucson, Arizona

While telling the history of the Church’s involvement with Arizona’s Native Americans, Bishop Quinn drives this interviewer to a famous mission church outside of Tucson. Known as St Francis Xavier or “White Dove of the Desert,” the graceful, Spanish-style church has been a center of Church missionary activity for 300 years. The church was built by Jesuit Father Eusebio Kino in 1680. It currently serves the Tohono O’odham people, formerly known as Papago Indians, who live in some 40 villages scattered in the Arizona desert.

### Statue of Father Eusebio Francisco Kino, SJ

Photo from the internet

“Father Kino was known as the padre on horseback,” the bishop explains. “He is very much revered in Tucson. A hospital and thoroughfare are named after him.” Father Kino’s missionary work also took him into Sonora, Mexico, where he ministered to Yaqui Indians. “Some Yaquis came up from Sonora to Tucson as refugees around 1920. They had been driven out of Mexico because they didn’t want to pay taxes to the Mexican government,” says Bishop Quinn. “On Easter Sunday in 1921,





they received a charter from the U.S. government in which some property was deeded to them. Thus they are known as the Pascua or Easter Yaqui.”



The Pascua Yaqui belong to six missions in the Tucson area that recently came together to form blessed **Kateri Tekakwitha** Parish. On a sunny Sunday in mid-February, Bishop Quinn celebrates the 9 am Mass for the parish at Saint Nicholas Indian Center in South Tucson. More than 70 people, including a couple dozen children, crowd into the center’s little hall that serves as a chapel. They had heard the bishop was coming. “He gives wonderful sermons,” says Rex Redhouse, a Navajo Indian. His wife, Maria, who is Filipino, nods in agreement. “People like to go to his Masses,” she says.

### **Preaching on Family**

This particular Sunday happens to be World Marriage Day. In his homily, Bishop Quinn talks about his own experience of family life, and about the rewards and struggles found in marriages and families of all cultures.

“I think I was brought up with a glorified concept of what family life is,” he says to the congregation. “I can dimly remember as a child of four or five climbing in my parent’s bed and sleeping between them. I thought it the warmest, safest place on earth.”

When Bishop Quinn was only six years old, however, his father died suddenly of appendicitis. He tells the congregation that while most professionals admit that two parents are usually better than one in achieving a healthy and strong family, it can be a terrible disservice to single-parent families to believe that they will automatically be dysfunctional.

“Since my father died when I was six, I was raised in a single-parent family,” he continues. Now that may speak to the fact that you can get along all right in a single-parent family, or you may look at me and say, see what happens when you’re raised in a single-parent family!” The congregation chuckles.

Becoming serious again, the bishop acknowledges that the family tradition is very important among the Native American communities, but that, for some, family has not been a happy experience. Discovering that there’s no such thing as a perfect family is very liberating, Bishop Quinn emphasizes to his listeners: “At times a family grows stronger precisely because of its weaknesses, because of its brokenness.” His homily concludes with some “beatitudes for the home,” including this one: “Blessed are the families, where each seeks to bring out the best in the other and to face their daily problems in a courageous spirit.”

After the liturgy concludes, Rex Redhouse and several other Native Americans beat a small drum and sing a Mother Earth song “in gratitude to the families present.” Bishop Quinn is then asked to bless a tombstone brought by a family, in the back of their pickup truck, to the parish hall. There is time for some socializing before the bishop heads for another mission to celebrate Mass.

Bishop Quinn chats with the adult parishioners, jokes with kids and poses for pictures. Shedding his bishop's miter and vestments, he shows off his new T-shirt emblazoned with a figure of a Native American on horseback. His popularity is evident with adults and youth alike who cluster around to talk with him.



Photo by Randy Pench

### **Bishop Quinn converses with Clara Valisto and Agnes Segundo at Pisinemo**

"I'm very comfortable with the bishop," says Ramoe Valenta, a Tohono O'odham woman who is part of the parish's drum group. "He's very down to earth, very humble. He's really connected with people." Rosario Otero, a Yaqui Indian and a community activist, says she has been to Bishop Quinn's Masses "three or four times" and always left feeling inspired. "In one of his sermons, he spoke about justice and asked who were the people really doing God's work in the world. As a single parent, I was really touched by his sermon on family life," she says. "I like his words of comfort and find his direction and guidance very helpful."

Upon arriving at San Martin Parish, one of the Pascua Yaqui missions in Tucson, Bishop Quinn pulls on a rope to ring the large church bell. It is time for noon Mass. About two dozen people walk over from their homes to a small white open-air chapel that has no back wall or doors because of the desert heat.

As birds sing and twitter just outside the chapel, Bishop Quinn gives a homily about the meaning of genuine love in marriage and family relationships—and about loneliness. "There is a loneliness in life, not just in the single life or the celibate life but even in the most happily married families," he says. "But in one way that's a good thing. Instead of driving us to seek satisfaction exclusively in a human relationship—which is always a frantic and futile endeavor—

this inevitable loneliness is intended to direct us to a relationship with God.” Quoting St. Augustine, he concludes, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in God.”

Fern Bule, a Yaqui who is a wife and mother, “really understood what the bishop was saying.” She adds: “I wish my husband could have been here.”

### **Missionaries, the “Real Heroes”**

In his ministry to Native Americans, Bishop Quinn likes to point out that he is “strictly an amateur.” He emphasizes that “the real heroes here are the Trinitarians, Jesuits, Franciscans and many other religious orders who have served the Native Americans for years. I’m learning my way, but I’m not giving the time they do, night and day, hour by hour.”

Two Trinitarian priests who have worked with Native Americans in Tucson for more than a decade were generous in their praise of Bishop Quinn. “The bishop is one of the most amazing people I have ever come across,” says Father Rafael Toner. “He has an incredible spirit that just draws the Native people to him. People make it a point to go to his Masses.

Father Dan McLaughlin serves as pastor of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha Parish. In a phone interview, he says that Bishop Quinn has been “of great service to the Native People” —despite a busy retirement schedule which takes him out of the diocese on occasion. “Bishop Quinn held a family mission during May, one of the first missions we have had here in a long time, and many people came to hear him preach,” the priest says.

Back in the RV, Bishop Quinn recalls some profound moments in his ministry with Native Americans—including a Sacramento of Reconciliation service shortly before Easter last year. He and Father McLaughlin celebrated the sacrament during a Sunday liturgy with Yaqui people.

“At homily time, we announced confessions,” he recalls. “The Yaqui people wrote out their sins on slips of paper and came forward in lines to Father McLaughlin and me and Father Angelo, a priest who was assisting. Each person handed us his or her slip of paper, which we put in an Indian ceramic pot with twigs burning in it. We gave them absolution and penance individually. Just about everyone in the church over the age of seven—about 150 to 200 people—went to confession. It was very moving.”

Another moment has a more tragic ring. One day Bishop Quinn was called to a family’s home where there had been the murder of a pregnant woman and a suicide. “I was struck by the family’s openness and willingness to accept death,” he says. “They brought me into the room where the husband had shot his pregnant wife and then himself. They asked me to bless it. Then they brought me around to the back of their compound. There were three crosses there—for the two adults and unborn child. It was just a sad, sad thing, but the family’s demeanor during the whole situation was a lesson in how to accept the crosses of life.”

Celebrating Holy Week liturgies and confirming Native people have been his personal highlights so far, says Bishop Quinn. “To express the joy of the Gloria on Easter Sunday, some Tohono O’odham people walk up and down the aisles showering the people with rose petals. It’s quite beautiful,” he recalls.



This year, the bishop spent Holy Week with the Pascua Yaqui people. “For the Pascua Yaqui, Easter is a great event,” he says. “During Holy Week, different people will represent the Pharisees and Judas and dramatically act out the great struggle of good versus evil. Some of the men involved don’t sleep from Holy Thursday until Easter Sunday.”

At the Yaqui Mission of Cristo Rey in Tucson on Good Friday, “the whole community venerates the cross,” says Bishop Quinn. “They caress the entire body of the corpse. Non-Native come to watch because it is so moving.”

During a “wonderful confirmation in the Tohono O’odham village of Santa Rosa,” Bishop Quinn received a feathered and beaded crosier from the youngsters who were confirmed. He uses this crosier in most of his liturgies with the Native people. “I enjoy going to the confirmation classes to help the young people get ready for this important sacrament,” he says. “The native American youngsters—like most young people I have confirmed—have a sense that there’s something important here.”

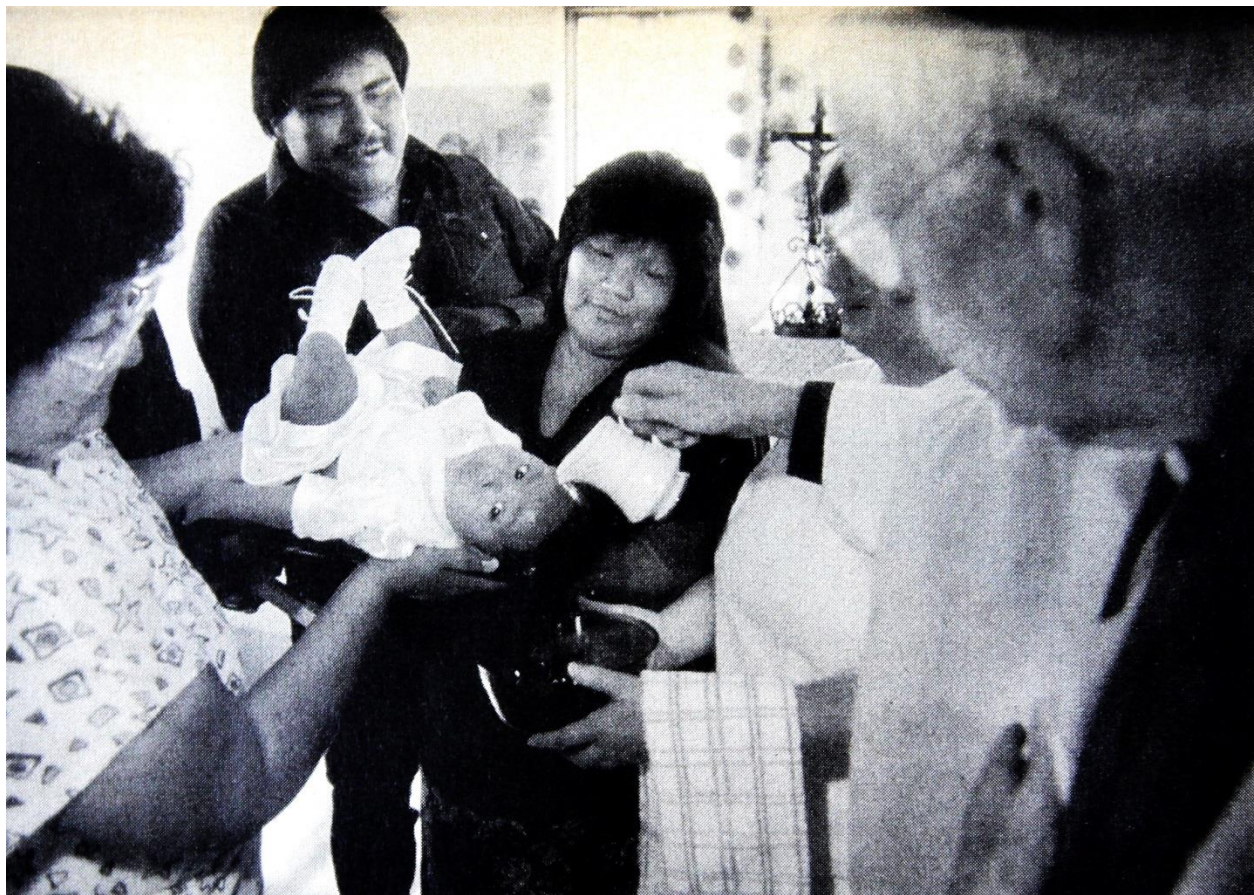


Photo by Randy Pench

### **Bishop Quinn baptizes three-month old Gary Joseph Alexander**

After a confirmation, baptism or wedding, “the Native people involved will make a semicircle outside church,” says Bishop Quinn. “Often someone brings oranges and candies and gives them out. Everyone goes by and congratulates the, embraces them. It’s a nice community spirit.”



He notes that even the dogs are included. At some of the Tohono O’odham parishes in the desert, dogs wander in and out during Mass. “Sometimes there will be four or five dogs lying or sleeping under the pews,” Bishop Quinn says. “I’ve learned to bring dog biscuits with me when I go to the outer missions. In the spirit of St Francis—the Tohono O’odham’s patron saint—you also have to take care of the dogs.”

### **‘Getting Back to the Essential Priesthood’**



Photo by Randy Pench

### **Friendly dogs are ever present as Bishop Quinn begins Sunday Morning Eucharist at Pisinemo**

Bishop Quinn loves being a circuit-riding parish priest. “It’s a different life, but it’s really all about getting back to the essential priesthood I was ordained for,” he says. “I’m able to minister to people at the sacramental level, in their crises.” He enjoys serving as an ordinary bishop, he hastens to add. “My 14 years in Sacramento, with all the administrative work, were still a happy 14 years. The collaboration of clergy, religious and laypeople was everything I could have asked for,” he says. “My work here in Tucson is personally satisfying and gratifying because it’s dealing with people one-on-one and in congregations.”

Bishop Quinn likes to joke that he was chosen as auxiliary bishop of San Francisco in 1978 because “I couldn’t run fast enough!” A year later, he was appointed to head the Sacramento Diocese. He credits his mother for encouraging his vocation to the priesthood; on the bottom of his chalice—which he enjoys showing to congregations with whom he celebrates Mass—is his mother’s wedding ring.

Francis A Quinn was born in Los Angeles on September 11, 1921. After his father died, his mother went to work in a shirt factory to support Francis and his older brother. Despite

growing up without a dad and in a home where finances were tight, the bishop has fond memories of his childhood. "I was an altar boy and loved the parish priests at St John Church in the Napa Valley. They were very good to the young people," he says. "I was also inspired by the Dominican sisters who taught us in school. All in all, it was a happy youth."

When he was 13, Francis entered St Joseph College and Seminary in Mountain View. He completed his theology studies at St Patrick Seminary in Menlo Park and was ordained as a priest for San Francisco Archdiocese in 1946.

"All of my priesthood was spent in San Francisco where I taught high school, served as assistant superintendent of schools, edited the diocesan newspaper and became a pastor and then auxiliary bishop," Bishop Quinn says. He received a doctorate in education from the University of California at Berkeley in 1962.

While serving as bishop of the Sacramento Diocese, Quinn was appointed to the board of directors of Catholic Relief Services. When administrative problems cropped up in the field, he would often be sent overseas to iron them out.

"I've had occasion to go to all the trouble spots in East Africa, as well as to Egypt, the Holy Land, India, the Philippines, Indonesia and China," Bishop Quinn says. "It felt good to spend some time working with people who have been denied the good things of life, who live in grinding poverty in Calcutta or Nairobi. It's too easy to be insulated in the United States."

In the back of his mind, however, were the indigenous people of the United States—a people he also felt called to serve. Bishop Quinn plans to continue his ministry with Native Americans in the Tucson Diocese at least through the end of this year. The bishops of Phoenix, Arizona, and Gallup, New Mexico, have also invited him to work with Native Americans in their dioceses, but Bishop Quinn hasn't made any decisions yet. Eventually, he will return to Sacramento. For the moment, however, he is content.

"I've learned a lot from the Native Americans here," he says. "I'm very impressed with their wisdom and their reverence for nature. There is a quiet joy, a serenity or tranquility that they possess in the midst of often difficult circumstances." Perhaps most impressive, the bishop adds, is the sense of community among the Native Americans he knows.

"They are very watchful and thoughtful of each other. Their families extend out to aunts, uncles, grandparents, the whole community," he says. "If there's a child who seems to be in need, the community embraces that child and takes care of it. It does the same with adults who are in any way neglected. The rest of America could learn from that."

Above all, says Bishop Quinn, "I feel accepted here. I'm just a parish priest. The Native Americans love their priests and sisters."

#### **About the Author**

*Catherine Walsh is a freelance writer based in Taos, New Mexico, and a former assistant editor of St Anthony Messenger publication. She writes often about Native Americans and the Church.*