

## The Tipi and the Nativity

By Fr. John Weckend

As you may have noticed, this year we have substituted a tipi for the traditional stable in our Christmas creche display. The tipi was more than just a shelter for the Indigenous people of the Plains. Its very construction involved ceremonies and contained many of the symbols which represented the values of the families who lived within. Each of the 15 poles forming the framework have special meaning which, when fastened together near the top, indicate what an integrated human being should strive for in life. The canvas skirting [originally buffalo hide] represented a woman's dress and the maternal act of giving birth was symbolized by the tipi entrance which usually faced east towards the rising sun and the hope surrounding new life.

Tipis were usually set up by women. Men were seen as the providers, guardians, and protectors of the family. The flap at the top of the tipi was opened to allow the smoke from the fire pit inside to escape. However aside from this practical aspect, it opened to the sky and was a reminder of the work of the Creator of the whole universe.

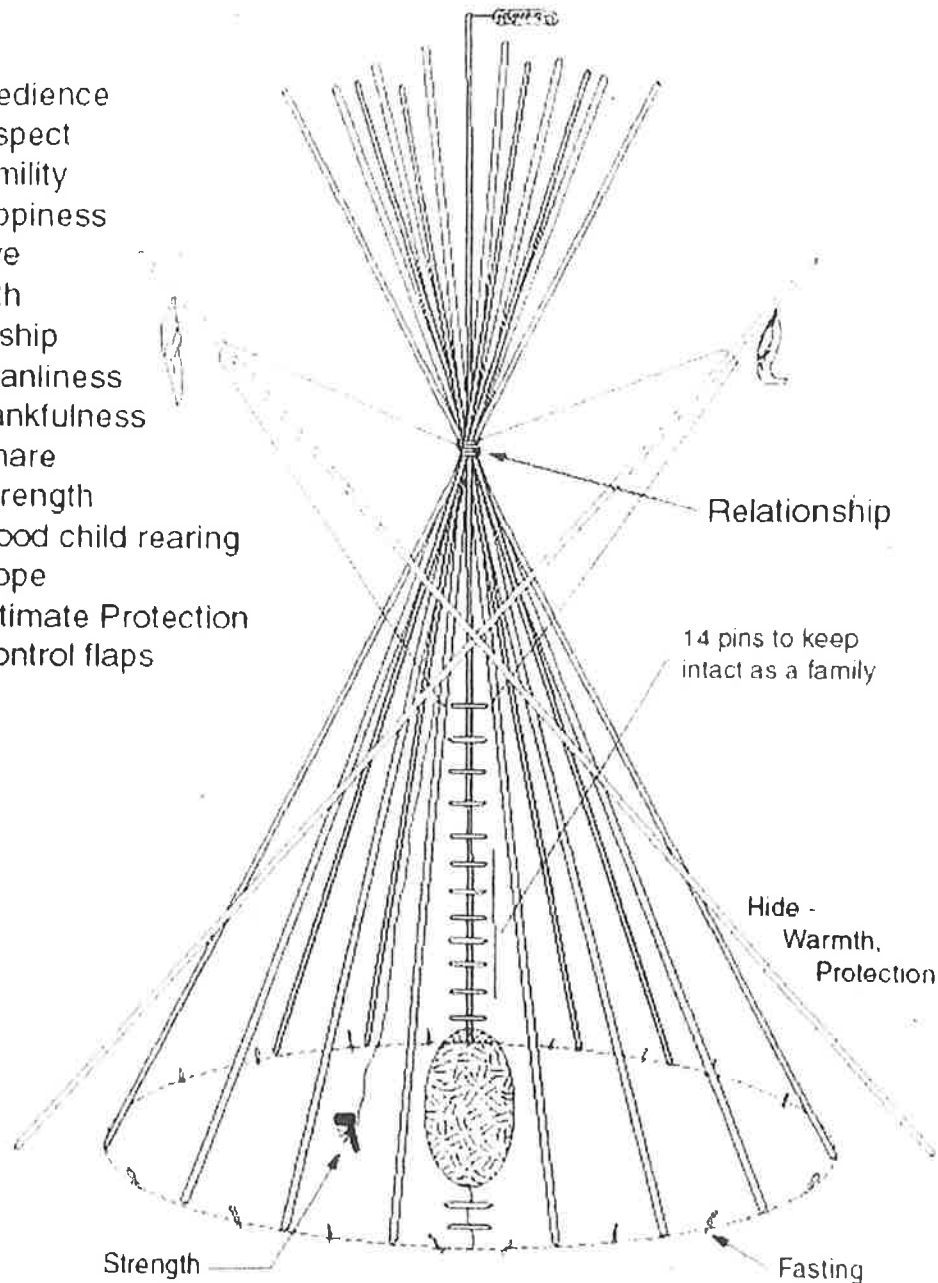
The traditional creche, as we know it today, was inaugurated by St. Francis of Assisi back in the 13th century using the scenario which medieval people envisioned in the cultural setting of their time. The universal Christ is able to reveal himself in the guise of all people in the surroundings that they know and understand. It is with that in mind, we present one that represents the First Nations of this land - the land of the Living Skies -- the land of the Plains.



Tipi created by Mother Teresa Middle School 8<sup>th</sup> grade student, Jaylynn Custer

# The Tipi Teachings

1. Obedience
2. Respect
3. Humility
4. Happiness
5. Love
6. Faith
7. Kinship
8. Cleanliness
9. Thankfulness
10. Share
11. Strength
12. Good child rearing
13. Hope
14. Ultimate Protection
15. Control flaps



## Tipi Structure

Adapted from Four Directions Teachings.com Elder: Mary Lee

To start, we take three poles and bind them together to make a tripod. Each pole also has a very specific meaning. These three together fortify the structure. They are obedience, respect, and humility. Notice the poles, the way they stand. If they stood straight up and down, they couldn't support a tipi. But balanced properly together, they are able to reinforce each other. There's a teaching in that. In order to make a family, you need three: the two parents and the child, to make that balance.

The tops of the poles have many teachings. Each one points in a different direction. We are like those poles. We all need the strength and support of our families and communities, but we accept that we all have different journeys and point in different directions.

The poles also teach us that no matter what version of the Great Spirit we believe in, we still go to the same Creator from those many directions and belief systems; we just have different journeys to get there. And where the poles come out together at the top, it's like they're creating a nest. And they also resemble a bird with its wings up when it comes to land, and that's another teaching: the spirit coming to land, holding its wings up.

## **Tipi Poles**

Each pole holds many teachings and takes a long time and much experience to truly understand. Here are some words on each pole, to give a beginning idea of what the poles represent.

### **Obedience**

Obedience means accepting guidance and wisdom from outside of ourselves, using our ears before our mouth. We learn by listening to traditional stories, by listening to our parents or guardians, our fellow students, and our teachers. We learn by their behaviours and reminders, so that we know what is right and what is wrong.

### **Respect**

Respect means giving honour to our Elders and fellow students, to the strangers that come to visit our community, and to all of life. We must honour the basic rights of all others.

### **Humility**

We are not above or below others in the circle of life. We feel humbled when we understand our relationship with Creation. We are so small compared to the majestic expanse of Creation, just a "strand in the web of life." Understanding this helps us to respect and value life.

### **Happiness**

After the tripod is up, the fourth pole completes your doorway. This fourth pole teaches us happiness. We must show some enthusiasm to encourage others. Our good actions will make our ancestors happy in the next world. This is how we share happiness.

### **Love**

If we are to live in harmony we must accept one another as we are, and accept others who are not in our circle. Love means to be good and kind to one another and to our selves.

### **Faith**

We must learn to believe and trust others, to believe in a power greater than ourselves, whom we worship and who gives us strength to be a worthy member of the human race. To sustain our spirituality, we need to walk it every day. Not just sometimes, but every day. It's not just once a week; it's your life.

### **Kinship**

Our family is important to us. This includes our parents, brothers, and sisters, who love us and give us roots that tie us to the lifeblood of the earth. It also includes extended family: grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, and their in-laws and children. They are also our brothers and sisters and give us a sense of belonging to a community.

### **Cleanliness**

Today when we talk about cleanliness, most people think hygiene, and that's very important. But years ago, when old people talked about cleanliness, they meant spiritual cleanliness. When I used to sit with the old Kookums in their tipis, spiritually, they were so powerfully clean. Clean thoughts come from a clean mind and this comes from our spirituality. With a clean mind and sense of peace within we learn not to inflict ills on others. Good health habits also reflect a clean mind.

### **Thankfulness**

We learn to give thanks: to always be thankful for the Creator's bounty, which we are privileged to share with others, and for all the kind things others do for us.

**Sharing**

We learn to be part of a family and community by helping with the provisions of food and other basic needs. Through the sharing of responsibilities, we learn the value of working together and enjoying the fruits of our labour.

**Strength**

We are not talking about physical strength, but spiritual strength. That was instilled in us when we were young people through fasting. We must learn to be patient in times of trouble and not to complain but to endure and show understanding. We must accept difficulties and tragedies so that we may give others strength to accept their own difficulties and tragedies.

**Good Child Rearing**

Children are gifts from the Creator. We are responsible for their wellbeing, spiritually, emotionally, physically, and intellectually, since they are blessed with the gift of representing the continuing circle of life, which we perceive to be the Creator's will.

**Hope**

We must look forward to moving toward good things. We need to have a sense that the seeds we are planting will bear fruit for our children, families, and communities.

**Ultimate Protection**

This is the ultimate responsibility to achieve the balance and well being of the body, mind, emotions and spirit for the individual, the family, the community, and the nation.

**Control Flaps**

The control flaps on a tipi teach that we are all connected by relationship and that we depend on each other. Having respect for and understanding this connection creates and controls harmony and balance in the circle of life. When we don't know how to use the flaps, it gets all smoky inside the tipi, and you can't see, which is like life – because if we can't live in balance, we can't see clearly where we're going.

**Conclusion**

For every time that a pole is added, a rope goes around to bind that pole into place. That rope is a sacred bond, binding all the teachings together until they are all connected.

