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An American Catholic: Nicholas Black Elk, A Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux

“I cured with the power that came through me,” stated Heñáka Sápa, or Nicholas Black Elk, a medicine man and holy man from the Oglala Lakota (Sioux) tribe, prior to his conversion to the Catholic faith. He was born “in the Moon of the Popping Trees (December) on the Little Powder River in the Winter When the Four Crows Were Killed (1863).” Fourth in his family to bear this name, Black Elk descended from a line of medicine men, and was a cousin of the Oglala war chief, Crazy Horse (Black Elk and Neihardt 7). The former healer, often referred to as the “holy man,” now, a little under seventy years after his death, has an opened cause for canonization. Originally a non-Catholic man who was faithful to the Native American spirituality and then converted to the Catholic faith, Nicholas Black Elk exemplified the idea of missionary discipleship as a devout Catholic lay person, while also being able to preserve much of his Native American heritage and culture.

Black Elk passed away just fifteen years shy of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, but he lived during a time that Catholic immigrants appeared to be unwelcome in the United States; however, Catholicism was rapidly spreading and was the largest Christian denomination in America at the time (McGuinness 1). The Catholic population, largely made up of immigrants fleeing from oppression in Europe, included many faithful who suffered from persecution and a shortage of priests, but there was hope in the continual growth. “Fewer than five hundred priests served the Catholic population in 1840, but by 1890 that number had reached nearly nine thousand” (O’Toole 101). Though South Dakota, Black Elk’s place of residence, did not become a state until 1889 (“South Dakota”), Russian-German settlers came to

the territory in 1873, and brought with them a cohort of people in which two-thirds of the settlers were Evangelical, one-fourth were Catholic, and the rest were “a mixture of several faiths” (Richter 156). During the lifetime of Nicholas Black Elk, two new Dioceses were being founded in South Dakota. The Diocese of Sioux Falls was established by Pope Leo XIII just ten days after the inception of South Dakota (“About the Diocese”), and it included the entire state. In the year 1902, the supreme pontiff split the Diocese of Sioux Falls in two: the Diocese of Sioux Falls included the state’s land east of the Missouri River, and the Diocese of Rapid City, where Black Elk resided, included the land west of the river (“Diocesan History”). During the early 1900s, the Diocese of Rapid City was quickly increasing in the number of members and had six new parishes in under five years after its split from the east-river Diocese (“Diocesan History”), creating a new environment conducive to flourishing within the context of the faith.

Born in the upper-Midwest during the Civil War time period, Nicholas Black Elk was part of the Oglala Lakota Native American tribe, and he spent most of his life residing in South Dakota. When prefacing the story of his life as it is told by John G. Neihardt in the book *Black Elk Speaks*, the holy man said, “This, then, is not the tale of a great hunter or of a great warrior, or of a great traveler, although I have made much meat in my time and fought for my people both as boy and man, and have gone far and seen strange lands and men. So also have many others done, and better than I” (1). With this statement, Black Elk described his loyalty to his land and his people. During his interview with Neihardt in the year 1931, an interpreter was required for communication due to the fact that Black Elk “did not know English and only spoke Sioux” exhibiting his adherence to the Native American, specifically the Oglala Lakota, culture (ix).

Black Elk was able to reconcile many parts of his Lakota culture with his Catholic faith, but when it came to the aspects that conflicted, he chose the practices of the Catholic Church over

his cultural practices (Smith). Neihardt describes the mindset of the Native American people for half a decade leading up to the turn of the century by identifying the “great Messianic dream that came to the desperate Indians in the middle 80’s of the 19th century and ended with the massacre at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, on December 29, 1890” (vii)—the killing of about 300 Native Americans by white soldiers (“Massacre At Wounded Knee, 1890”) on the newly-established Pine Ridge Indian Reservation (“Pine Ridge Indian Reservation”). Black Elk was active during this time in what was called the “Messiah Movement,” and was labeled as a “kind of preacher” or “a *wichasha wakon* (holy man, priest)” who had “been of some importance in the Messiah affair” (Black Elk and Neihardt vii-viii). This occurred a little over a decade before the holy man’s conversion to Catholicism in 1904 (Smith). When Neihardt first visited Black Elk in 1930, the old medicine man showed the writer a “sacred ornament” that had belonged to Black Elk’s father and “had been used for many years by both father and son in their sacred ceremonies” (ix).

It consists of a leather star tinged with blue, and from the center of the star hangs a strip of hide from the breast of a buffalo, together with a feather from the wing of an eagle. The ornament is suspended from a leather loop to be placed about the neck. Holding the star before us, Black Elk said: “Here you see the Morning Star. Who sees the Morning Star shall see more, for he shall be wise.” Then lifting the eagle feather, he said: “This means Wakon Tonka (the Great Mysterious One); and it also means that our thoughts should rise high as the eagles do.” Then, lifting the strip of buffalo hide, he said: “This means all the good things of this world—food and shelter.” Handing the ornament to me, he said: “My friend, I wish you all these things. Put it around your neck.” (ix-x)

This wish of goodwill toward the stranger was an expression that crossed cultural borders because the intent was the same, even though the execution was different. Because of his original faithfulness to his Native American spirituality, it was no surprise that Black Elk was a holy, spiritual Catholic presence upon his conversion. Basil Brave Heart, a man of the Lakota tribe, recalled being a child and encountering Black Elk, saying he was a “very humble man,” “very soft-spoken,” “had a great spiritual dignity about him,” and he “felt drawn to his presence” (Smith).

A consistent theme in the various writings about the life of Nicholas Black Elk is his commitment to evangelization. In speaking about the impending interview with Neihardt, Black Elk said, “As I sit here, I can feel in this man beside me a strong desire to know the things of the Other World. He has been sent to learn what I know, and I will teach him” and “There is so much to teach you. What I know was given to me for men and it is true and it is beautiful. Soon I shall be under the grass and it will be lost. You were sent to save it, and you must come back so that I can teach you” (Black Elk and Neihardt ix-x). Neihardt commented on the holy man’s thoughts after the interview had been conducted, “it was increasingly clear that his real interest was in ‘the things of the Other World’” (x). According to Peter Jesserer Smith of the *National Catholic Register*, Black Elk was “an energetic Catholic catechist” and “He shared the Gospel to Native and non-Native people, often using his Two Roads pictorial catechism” (Smith). In these ways, Nicholas Black Elk demonstrated the universal call to missionary discipleship as a lay person.

Nicholas Black Elk exemplified a life of maintaining his cultural values while also being one-hundred percent faithful to the Catholic Church—by doing so, he was able to live *in* the world but not *of* the world. Due to his faithfulness to the Church and his dedication to

evangelization, Black Elk's cause for canonization was opened in 2017 (Smith) and may make him the second Native American to be canonized in the Catholic Church—the first being St. Kateri Tekakwitha (Hebblethwaite). The former medicine man is a model of how one ought to live a life that includes the proper cooperation of cultural and religious practices in America without compromising any aspect of the faith, while also going forth to teach others.

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