



**Directors of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions:  
Monsignor Paul A. Lenz, 1976-2007**

Kevin Abing, 1994

The man chosen to succeed Father Tennelly, Monsignor Paul Lenz, faced a daunting task. Somehow, he had to devise a plan which reconciled the Bureau's traditional objectives with contemporary Native American needs. Furthermore, he faced school closings, funding shortages and strained relations with the Tekakwitha Conference. Monsignor Lenz firmly and decisively met the challenges. As a result, the Bureau has been revitalized. It has resumed its active defense of Native American rights, repaired its link with the Tekakwitha Conference and extended its reach to the Native American community.

Paul Lenz was born on December 15, 1925, the second of six sons of Raymond and Aimee Lenz. He spent his early life in his hometown of Gallitzin, Pennsylvania, and attended the public school there. He attended Altoona Catholic High School and graduated in 1943. He then matriculated at St. Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. In 1946, he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in philosophy. For quite some time, Lenz had considered joining the priesthood. For a while, he even thought he might join the Maryknoll Society to do missionary work. But his plans changed when his father passed away in 1944. Lenz still wanted to become a priest, but he decided to join the diocesan clergy so he could remain close to home and help his mother. Consequently, he began his studies for the priesthood at St. Vincent's Seminary in Latrobe. On April 2, 1949, Bishop Richard T. Guilfoyle ordained Lenz in the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament in Altoona.<sup>1</sup>

For the next twenty-one years, Father Lenz occupied a variety of positions in the Altoona-Johnstown diocese. His first assignment was as Assistant Pastor at St. Patrick Church in Newry. He served in that capacity until 1951, when he became the administrator of St. Monica Church in Chest Springs. In 1953, Lenz was named administrator of St. Joseph Church in Coupon, a position he held for nine months. That same year, Father Lenz took on new duties which he fulfilled for the next seventeen years. He began working in the chancery office; he was named curator of Diocesan Prince Gallitzin Chapel in Loretto, and, as Diocesan Director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, he also raised funds for missionary work. In addition to these duties, Father Lenz also taught theology and served as the head of the Theology Department at Mt. Aloysius College in Cresson from 1956 to 1962. From 1962 to 1970, he was a theology instructor at St. Francis College in Loretto. He was assistant editor of the diocesan newspaper, The Catholic Register, for five years. Beyond these pursuits, Father Lenz also became pastor and administrator of St. Michael's parish in Loretto in 1958 and served in that capacity until 1970.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>"Biography" of Monsignor Paul A. Lenz on file at Marquette University Archives; Interview with Monsignor Paul Lenz, BCIM Director, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, May 2, 1995.

<sup>2</sup>"Biography;" Interview with Monsignor Lenz; BCIM *Newsletter* (January 1978).

A drastic change in Monsignor Lenz's life occurred in that year. He thoroughly enjoyed working within the Altoona-Johnstown diocese, but he yearned to do missionary work. A good friend, Bishop Jerome Pechillo of Paraguay, further stirred Lenz's dream. For years, Monsignor Lenz had raised funds for missions in Bishop Pechillo's diocese, but Pechillo also asked Lenz to come to Paraguay and establish a mission there for the Altoona-Johnstown diocese. By 1970, Lenz was ready for a change. He asked and received permission from his bishop to go to Paraguay and serve as a missionary in the Prelature of Coronel Oviedo, another close friend. This was Monsignor's first encounter with Indian people, and the situation in Paraguay was radically different from that in Pennsylvania. The mission to the Guarani Indians was located in a remote jungle region of Paraguay, about 140 miles from the capitol of Asuncion. There was no plumbing or electricity, and the area was accessible only by dirt roads.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond the primitive conditions, Lenz, his fellow missionaries and, especially, the Guaranis had to contend with government harassment. Under the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner, military officials constantly mistreated the people. According to Lenz, the only one to raise a voice of protest on the Indians' behalf was the Catholic Church. As a result, some government officials tried to intimidate the Catholic missionaries. One event in particular stood out in Monsignor Lenz's mind. The Guaranis raised tobacco as a cash crop, and the Catholic Church loaned substantial amounts of money to the Guaranis for fertilizer and other helpful items. In February 1972, the national price of tobacco rose, but a new regional governor arrived at that time. He seized an opportunity to defraud the Indians out of millions of dollars: he told the Guaranis that he would buy all of their tobacco but at the previous year's price. The situation was an "economic disaster" for the Guaranis. The people tried, but failed, to protest to other government officials. The Catholic Church, however, managed to air its grievances against the governor. In retaliation, the governor had Lenz and the other missionaries rounded up and imprisoned for a week. Because the missionaries were American citizens, they were not physically harmed, but the episode illustrates the extent the government would go to abuse the Guarani Indians and their supporters.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the hardships, Monsignor Lenz cherished the four years he spent in Paraguay. He loved the people and the challenges he faced. To enhance his missionary skills, Lenz learned to speak Spanish fluently and picked up enough of the Guarani language to "offer Mass, hear confessions, defend...myself."<sup>5</sup> Lenz hoped to spend the rest of his life in Paraguay, but once again, circumstances altered those plans. In 1974, a good friend of Lenz's, the pastor of St. John the Evangelist Church in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, died suddenly of a brain tumor. Bishop James J. Hogan asked Lenz to return home and become the parish's new pastor. Reluctantly, he agreed. After a year in Pennsylvania, Lenz "realized that [his] heart was still in Paraguay." Bishop Hogan informed Lenz that he could return to South America once several new priests had been ordained. Lenz eagerly anticipated renewing his missionary labors, but he could not foresee that he would soon be doing missionary work of a different sort.<sup>6</sup>

In the fall of 1975, Lenz received a call from Cardinal Krol, a member of the BCIM Board, asking if he would become the Bureau's new director. Lenz was naturally disappointed that he would not be able to return to Paraguay, but Cardinal Krol told him that if the "Church calls,...you should respond." Earnestly desiring to serve the Church, Lenz acceded to the Cardinal's request. In

---

<sup>3</sup>"Biography;" Interview with Monsignor Lenz.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Lenz to Father Ed Bober, C.S.S.R., January 23, 1978, BCIM, Series 1-1, Box 351, folder 2.

<sup>6</sup>Interview with Monsignor Lenz.

March 1976, Bishop Hogan informed Cardinal Cooke that Lenz was ready and willing to assume control of the BCIM, but his parish would "sorely miss him." Hogan also offered his own assessment of Lenz's suitability for the position. Monsignor Lenz, he wrote, was an "exemplary priest by any standard. In particular, his experience with the Propagation of the Faith Office, together with the practical tour of duty-three years with Bishop Pechillo in Paraguay-should be of invaluable assistance to the Bureau." Hogan concluded that Lenz had "exceptional organizational ability and welcomes a challenge such as the one now confronting him." On July 5, 1976, Monsignor Lenz officially took over as the sixth director in BCIM history.<sup>7</sup>

In the years since Monsignor Lenz has led the Bureau, not only has he built upon the traditional parameters established by his predecessors, but he has also adopted several measures to revitalize the organization. From the outset, Monsignor perpetuated the BCIM's concern for religious instruction, as he struggled to keep Catholic Indian schools open. In the last two decades of Father Tenny's directorship, federal funding for these institutions steadily dwindled, prompting several school closures. During Monsignor Lenz's tenure as director, all government funding for Indian schools ceased. In 1983, the situation became critical. The BCIM received numerous "panic calls and letters," begging for help to keep the four Catholic Indian secondary and forty-three primary schools operating. The Bureau, Lenz noted, was "called upon as never before." In response, Lenz founded the Association of Catholic Indian Schools in June 1983 to coordinate plans to maintain the schools. Furthermore, he addressed funding needs through direct mail campaigns, personal appeals and wills of request. As of 1995, only one Indian school had closed in Monsignor Lenz's eighteen years as director.<sup>8</sup> Yet another example of Monsignor Lenz's expansion of BCIM customs involved his efforts to coordinate Bureau activities with the Catholic hierarchy. Lenz was shocked to discover that many bishops were completely unaware that the Bureau existed; even today, many believe the Bureau is nothing more than a fund-raising organization. Consequently, Lenz traveled extensively to meet with various Catholic organizations and elaborate upon the BCIM's functions. He also inaugurated a program in which the bishop of every diocese appoints a director to act as a liaison with the BCIM. Moreover, he initiated a new BCIM publication. In 1964, the Bureau suspended publication of The Indian Sentinel. Since that time, the BCIM had no means to publicize its missionary efforts. Monsignor Lenz realized how vital the Church's support was for the Bureau's success. Thus, in 1978, he decided to publish the BCIM Newsletter to inform clergymen, government officials and the general public about the Bureau's activities. The newsletter has been a decided success. Lenz started with a mailing list of seven hundred names. Today, the newsletter reaches over twenty thousand people, and the list grows every week.<sup>9</sup>

Thanks to Monsignor's efforts, the Bureau is more widely known among the Catholic hierarchy, but the process has been troublesome, with its share of setbacks along the way. For example, in 1978 the United States Catholic Conference's [USCC] Ad Hoc Committee on National Collections launched a move to consolidate the Commission Lenten Collection with several other collections. Since the turn-of-the-century, the Commission Collection has been one of the primary

---

<sup>7</sup>Interview with Monsignor Lenz; Bishop James Hogan to Terence Cardinal Cooke, March 26, 1976, BCIM, Series 1-1, Box 350, folder 3.

<sup>8</sup>Lenz to Sister Annette Roach, June 10, 1983, BCIM, Series 1-1, Box 359, folder 2; Lenz to Robert Dinndorf, August 18, 1983, BCIM, Series 1-1, Box 359, folder 3; Interview with Monsignor Lenz.

<sup>9</sup>Interview with Monsignor Lenz.

funding sources for African American and Native American missions. When Monsignor Lenz became BCIM director, the collection totaled roughly two million dollars. With Cardinal Krol's blessing, Lenz forcefully pushed to increase the amount. He made sure every bishop knew about the upcoming collection, and he visited the bishops who needed the funds and explained how the money would be used. As a result, the Commission Collection increased by \$520,000 in Lenz's first fifteen months as director. Because of his success, the Ad Hoc Committee's decision both mystified and frustrated Lenz. Lenz wrote a friend that he felt that he had "really revitalized this office." But, because of the USCC's constant pressure, Lenz was not sure he wanted "to keep up the pace that [he has] been through since [he] came here." He could foresee great success, but he could not "see all the politics behind [the consolidation]. I just want to function as a priest and not as a politician."<sup>10</sup>

Attempts to consolidate the collections dragged on into 1981. Lenz and Cardinal Krol traveled to Chicago to meet with the USCC committee and save the Commission Collection. The committee met with interested parties on an individual basis. When Monsignor Lenz's turn came, the committee chairman informed him that the Commission Collection was at the "bottom of the list" and that it was definitely going to be consolidated. The committee's high-handedness angered Lenz, who asked the members: "you mean to tell me that I have to go out and tell all the black people in the church and the Native American people in the church that the United States Catholic Conference doesn't care for them? That you can have all other things, but they're at the bottom of the barrel as you told me?" Lenz added that consolidation would threaten everything the BCIM hoped to accomplish, and he could not wait to go to Philadelphia and tell Cardinal Krol the way the USCC "regards the black and Indian people and himself and all these programs." Lenz concluded by telling the committee members that he would fight them every step of the way. Lenz's outburst evidently swayed the USCC for it saved the Commission Collection. Since then, Monsignor Lenz continued to build up the collection, which surpassed seven million dollars in 1994.<sup>11</sup>

Just as Monsignor Lenz improved relations with the Church hierarchy, he had to do the same with Catholic missionaries and Native Americans in general. Prior to Lenz's arrival, many in these groups believed that the Church and the BCIM had lost touch with Native American concerns. The Tekakwitha Conference was an effective gauge of how strained the relationship had become between people in "the field" and those in the Catholic hierarchy. The Conference had been established in 1939 as a forum for Catholic missionaries to discuss shared problems and concerns. From its inception, the Conference received the support of Father Tenny and the BCIM. Toward the end of his tenure, however, Tenny distanced the Bureau from the Conference, believing its members had become too identified with Native American social activism.

Monsignor Lenz discovered firsthand how tense the situation had become. In 1977, the Tekakwitha Conference invited Native Americans to attend the annual meeting for the first time. Sensing an opportunity to heal wounds, Lenz attended the meeting and found forty-eight "disgruntled people." Lenz quietly slipped into the audience and listened to a priest lament how the Church and the USCC did not care about the Conference. Worst of all, the speaker added, the Church appointed "some guy from South America" to be the new BCIM director. The priest concluded that the members should divvy the Conference's meager treasury among themselves to buy lunch at the local McDonald's and disband the Conference altogether. One can only imagine

---

<sup>10</sup>Interview with Monsignor Lenz; Archbishop Thomas McDonough to John Cardinal Krol, January 7, 1978, and Lenz to "Dear Al," January 18, 1978, both in BCIM, Series 1-1, Box 351, folder 2.

<sup>11</sup>Interview with Monsignor Lenz.

the surprise the Conference members felt when Monsignor Lenz introduced himself. They must have been especially gratified when the director promised to give his full support for the Conference, including financial backing from the Commission. Encouraged by Monsignor Lenz's words, the Conference expanded its efforts to attract new members. The following year, 250 people attended the annual meeting; the year after that, the number grew to six hundred. The Conference did, indeed, become an effective link between Native Americans, Catholic missionaries and the BCIM. At the 1979 meeting, Native American members changed the tenor of the Tekakwitha Conference by demanding that their grievances be heard. They chastised the Catholic Church for its lack of sensitivity for Native American cultures and called for greater involvement in Church affairs. Since that watershed meeting, the Conference has become "the voice of Native American Catholics." The Conference has prospered since then, and Monsignor Lenz estimates that nearly three thousand will be present at the 1995 meeting in Potsdam, New York.<sup>12</sup>

Monsignor Lenz further capitalized on the opportunity to connect with the Native American community by spearheading moves to integrate Native Americans into the Catholic Church structure more effectively and make them feel that they were truly a part of the Church. Since 1968, the Catholic Church in the United States has had a permanent deaconate. A number of Native Americans joined as a means to serve the Church. Years later, Monsignor Lenz learned that Indian students at the Sioux Spiritual Center in South Dakota were having problems adjusting to the program. They felt uncomfortable around their classmates and were having difficulties with their textbooks. Three Jesuit priests, Father Patrick McCorkell, Father John Hatcher and Father Tibor Horvath designed a series of three textbooks specifically for Native American students. The Bureau published the textbooks, which have gone through at least three publications, and are used across the country. Since that time, the Sioux Spiritual Center has trained roughly forty Native American deacons. Monsignor Lenz also established a fund to provide financial support for any Native American who desired to join the priesthood. Unfortunately, not many have taken advantage of this program.<sup>13</sup>

Monsignor Lenz hoped to catapult Native Americans even higher into the Church hierarchy. Shortly after becoming director, he began a campaign to have a Native American appointed bishop in the Catholic Church. By 1983, he was discouraged by the inertia within the Church, and he vented his frustration to Cardinal Krol:

Sometimes, when I know of the tremendous history of this office, how former directors had immediate access to the Holy See, to the White House, and caused things to happen, I feel frustrated and worthless even, when I know what should be done and I cannot move those things...When I know there are now 14 hispanic bishops and 7 black bishops, and 3 new auxiliaries for the military ordinariate, I cannot understand why a competent priest with Indian blood cannot be ordained a bishop so the First Americans could have one of their own culture and blood serve them.<sup>14</sup>

Monsignor Lenz persevered. At a meeting with Cardinal Krol, Lenz brought Donald Pelotte, an Abenaki Indian, to the Cardinal's attention. The Provincial of the Fathers and Brothers of the Blessed Sacrament Community, Pelotte had earned a doctorate degree and also had published a

---

<sup>12</sup>Interview with Monsignor Lenz; Bill McKenney, S.J., "The Tekakwitha Conference," in *Tekakwitha Conference Cross and Feather News*, March/April 1994, pp. 15-16.

<sup>13</sup>Interview with Monsignor Lenz.

<sup>14</sup>Lenz to Cardinal Krol, April 28, 1983, BCIM, Series 1-1, Box 359, folder 1.

book on John Courtney Murray. Pelotte so impressed Cardinal Krol that he joined Monsignor Lenz's campaign. Finally, in 1986, Pelotte was named coadjutor Bishop of Gallup. Two years later, Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M., a Potawatomi Indian, became the second Native American bishop when he was assigned to the Diocese of Rapid City, South Dakota.<sup>15</sup>

In his efforts to bring Native Americans closer to the Church, Monsignor Lenz set his sights even higher. Shortly after becoming director, Lenz launched a crusade to have Kateri Tekakwitha promoted to sainthood. As a young girl, Tekakwitha was the first of her Mohawk tribesmen to convert to Catholicism. Many other Native Americans added their voices to Monsignor Lenz's in calling for Kateri's canonization. The first step toward that goal was reached in June 1980 when Kateri was beatified. To celebrate the occasion, Lenz organized two pilgrimages to Rome, enabling many Native American Catholics to meet with Pope John Paul II. Although he was overjoyed with the partial triumph, Monsignor Lenz stepped up his efforts to have Kateri canonized. He lobbied Church officials, wrote numerous letters and encouraged everyone to pray for that blessed event.<sup>16</sup>

All the while that Monsignor Lenz worked to increase Indian participation within the Catholic Church, he also revived and extended the BCIM's role as social activist. But, in this regard, he broke from previous Bureau directors. All of them had worked to protect Indian legal rights and improve their living conditions, but only within the context of the "civilizing" process. They voiced no protest against the undermining of traditional Native American cultures. That changed with Monsignor Lenz, who became the first BCIM director to protect ancestral Indian customs actively.

Monsignor Lenz did not act alone. Indeed, there was a larger movement within the American Catholic Church to respect fully Native American cultures and traditions. In May 1977, a council of Catholic bishops issued a statement urging government officials to develop policies which would provide a measure of justice for Native American peoples. Lenz echoed those sentiments, pledging to join Indian tribes "in their efforts and struggles to overcome everything which condemns their tribal membership to remain on the margin of human existence." He also vowed to aid Native Americans "obtain their basic human security as a people within their distinctive cultures." This "liberation by justice," Monsignor Lenz added, must "envisage the whole person in all aspects, right up to and including openness to the Creator, always coming back to the relationships of people among themselves and with their Creator."<sup>17</sup>

To achieve justice for Native Americans, Lenz pressed government officials for fair treatment. Similar to Monsignor Ketcham, Lenz often appeared before Congressional committees and offered testimony in defense of Indian rights. In 1977, for example, he testified in favor of the Indian Religious Freedom Act. Moreover, Lenz also hired a Jesuit priest, Father Ted Zuern, to work with Congressional leaders and to monitor government actions with regard to Native Americans. For eight years, Father Zuern admirably performed his duties from the BCIM office. During that time, he began writing articles in the Newsletter, vociferously protesting any injustices perpetrated upon Native Americans. Although Father Zuern is no longer connected with the BCIM in any official capacity, he still contributes articles for the Newsletter. Thanks to BCIM intervention and a more favorable climate of public opinion, Native Americans won several hard earned victories, but sometimes the process was dishearteningly slow. In 1986, Monsignor Lenz bemoaned

---

<sup>15</sup>Interview with Monsignor Lenz; Monsignor Paul Lenz, "Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions: Over a Century of Service" (n.p., n.d.), 13.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.; *BCIM Newsletter* (October/November 1979), (March-July 1980).

<sup>17</sup>*BCIM Newsletter* (August 1978).

the second-class treatment which the government and the general public historically accorded Native Americans. But he was not simply foisting blame on others. He acknowledged that the Catholic Church was equally guilty. But, he wrote, "thanks to God, things are changing and the Church on all levels is trying to be supportive." Similarly, he noted that there had been improvement on the government's part, but "the proper and right consideration is dreadfully slow."<sup>18</sup>

In certain respects, Monsignor Lenz's defense of Native traditions and religions may seem to be a complete repudiation of historic Catholic missionary work, but such is not the case. In 1982, he emphatically stated that the "Church must never apologize for bringing Jesus to the Native American peoples. The Church must never compromise Jesus or His Word or sacraments in order to accommodate to old Indian religions." He admitted that the Bureau should strive to preserve the cultural heritage of Native Americans and that there was "so much good, so much truth about God and His creation in these old religions." But, he added, Native religions were "incomplete in themselves, devoid of God's ultimate revelation of Himself and His plan for His people in Jesus." To Monsignor Lenz, there was no conflict of interest between Catholic evangelizing and respecting Native religions. In many ways, the two were compatible. Years later, Monsignor Lenz commented that several Native American rituals had been incorporated into the Church's liturgy.<sup>19</sup>

In this regard, Monsignor Lenz displayed the characteristics, which have truly revitalized the Bureau. By steadfastly upholding the traditional precepts of Catholic missionary work, he demonstrated firmness and a strength of conviction. Yet, he also evinced a flexibility and a willingness to adapt by integrating Native American rites into the Catholic Mass. Those qualities will be absolutely critical as Monsignor Lenz and the BCIM encounter new challenges in the twenty-first century.

---

<sup>18</sup>Interview with Monsignor Lenz; *BCIM Newsletter* (April 1986).

<sup>19</sup>*BCIM Newsletter* (September/October 1982); Interview with Monsignor Lenz.