

Highlights from the Holiness of Nicholas William Black Elk, Sr., 1866 – 1950

As a youth, Black Elk received a great vision to serve the Great Spirit. He became a great healer among the Lakota people, but called to serve more, he embraced baptism and Jesus as his savior, which he saw as fulfilling their way of life. Over 400 native people heeded his call to baptism, and since then, his life inspired the emergence of inculturated Native American Catholicism with native ceremonies in Christian context.



All pictures in South Dakota, left to right, top to bottom: 1. Age ca. 42, ca. 1908: Black Elk prayed the rosary and taught his daughter Lucy Looks Twice to do likewise. She said that her father prayed it often and also held it when praying with his pipe [BCIM 00559]. 2. Age 42, 1908: He celebrated life with good humor and dance (wearing bustle). Roundup at Interior; Ralph R. Doubleday, photographer [SPM 0029]. 3. Age 45, 1911: Among fellow catechists, Black Elk showed his Lakota pride and wore moccasins with his suit and tie (center), Catholic Sioux Congress at Holy Rosary Mission, Pine Ridge [BCIM 00669]. 4. Age 70, 1936: Black Elk (with book) wore glasses to study Scripture. Mass at St. Elizabeth Church, Oglala; Jesuit Father Joseph A. Zimmerman, photographer [BCIM 00657]. 5. Age 61 or 62, 1927 or 1928: He taught the "Two Roads" picture catechism with the Good Red Road of Jesus and the Black Road of Difficulties. Broken Nose cabin, Pine Ridge Reservation; Jesuit Father Eugene Buechel, photographer [SFM ITS 00042]. 6. Age 71, 1937: Black Elk taught Lakota ways to tourists. Duhamel Indian Pageant, Black Hills; W. Ben Hunt, photographer [WBH BCIM 01287]. 7. After he passed, 1970s: His son Ben Black Elk prayed with his pipe at his grave. His daughter Lucy believed her father was born in 1866, as stated on his baptismal record. St. Agnes Church cemetery, Manderson; Jesuit Father Paul B. Steinmetz, photographer [HRM-RCIS 02141]. Courtesy Marquette University Archives.

Born into a great lineage of traditional healers, Black Elk was favored by a great vision, in which he was atop Harney Peak in the Black Hills. While still very young, he too became a healer and his continued a lifelong quest to better know and serve the Great Spirit.

Soon, he noticed Christianity. In 1885, he signed a native petition urging the Pope to declare Kateri Tekakwitha a saint in heaven. During the next three years, he traveled to Europe with Wild West shows and saw Christianity in action. He returned home to the South Dakota Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, and while participating in the Ghost Dance, he had visions of Jesus and was wounded in the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre. In 1904, while praying for a boy's healing, he met a Jesuit who invited him to study Christianity. He did so, and was baptized Nicholas William during the "Moon of Popping Trees" on December 6th, the Feast of St. Nicholas. Thereafter, he followed St. Nick as his Christian model of charity and generosity, which resonated with Lakota values and his role as a healer.

Believing that the Great Spirit led him to greater service through Jesus, he became an authentic Christian who seamlessly intertwined and followed Lakota and Catholic teachings with peace, love, and harmony for all creation. He regularly prayed with his rosary and pipe and participated in mass and Lakota ceremonies. In 1907, the Jesuits appointed him a catechist (teacher of Christian faith) because of his enthusiasm and excellent memory for learning Scripture and church teachings in Lakota. Like St. Paul, he traveled widely, preached and told stories, and wrote pastoral letters with *Bible* verses on good Christian living, which Lakota newspapers distributed. Oftentimes, he taught the faith by narrating the "Two Roads" picture catechism, which featured colorful graphics of the "Good Red Road of Jesus" and the "Black Road of Difficulties." From 1927 to 1946, he used this background to narrate demonstrations on traditional Lakota life and ceremonies for Black Hills tourists.

John G. Neihardt and Joseph Epes Brown provided glimpses of his life and advocacy in *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* and *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Sacred Rites of the Oglala Sioux*. However, the full life story Black Elk envisioned did not materialize until after his daughter Lucy Looks Twice requested Michael F. Steltenkamp to do so, which culminated in *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala* and *Nicholas Black Elk: Medicine Man, Missionary, Mystic*.

Just before he passed on August 17, 1950, Black Elk predicted that God, in his mercy, would show a sign in the sky. Although out-of-season, aurora borealis danced with unprecedented brilliance in the night sky, both overhead at his wake at St. Agnes Church and around the world.

More Information

A Retreat with Black Elk: Living in the Sacred Hoop by Marie Therese Archambault, Cincinnati, Ohio: Franciscan Media, 1998.

Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala by Michael F. Steltenkamp, University of Oklahoma Press, 1994; his "Catholic" years, 1904-1950, first alerted today's readers about his life as a catechist.

Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux, The Premier Edition, by Nicholas W. Black Elk; edited by John G. Neihardt and Raymond J. DeMallie, Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2008.

Catholic Ladder Pictorial Catechisms, Marquette University e-Archives:

http://www.marquette.edu/library/archives/earchives_atoz.shtml; 1. Click on "In the Spotlight"; 2. Select issue, "Jan. 2009-Catholic Ladders Pictorial Catechisms."

Nicholas Black Elk: Medicine Man, Missionary, Mystic by Michael F. Steltenkamp, University of Oklahoma Press, 2009; the principal source for this essay with Black Elk family interviews and perspective.

Pictures of Nicholas Black Elk, Marquette University e-Archives:

http://www.marquette.edu/library/archives/earchives_atoz.shtml; 1. Click on any collection; 2. Click "Advanced Search"; 3. Enter keywords "Black Elk"; 4. Under "Searching collections," add "Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions," "Holy Rosary Mission - Red Cloud Indian School," and "In the Spotlight"; and 5. Click "Search."