

The Formation of Identity and Culture in Native American Catholic Schools

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### Abstract

Around twenty-five Catholic schools serve Native American communities in the continental United States today, and these schools work to preserve tribal languages, spiritualities, and traditions and cultivate the Catholic faith in their students. These schools are especially important for Native American communities working to preserve tribal languages and cultures with limited educational resources, and they provide a quality education for many students in poverty. Native American peoples have suffered cultural genocide which has left tribal languages dying out and cultures and traditions on the margins. Classroom observations from Red Cloud Indian School on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation within the U.S. state of South Dakota, De La Salle Blackfeet School on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation within the U.S. state of Montana, and St. Augustine Indian Mission School on the Winnebago Reservation within the U.S. state of Nebraska reveal the ways in which schools integrate Catholic and tribal spiritualities and identities in religion classes, tribal language and culture classes, Masses, assemblies, and the art, values, and mottos posted around the school. Observations from each of the schools show that formation of Catholic and tribal identities in schools depends on the integration of tribal languages into the school, the spirituality of the religious order present in the school, teachers who model the Catholic faith and tribal identities, religion curriculums which integrate tribal culture, and active parish life. This research highlights the role of Catholic schools in cultural preservation and revitalization for Native American communities.

### The Formation of Identity and Culture in Native American Catholic Schools

Between 1879 and 1965, hundreds of thousands of Native American children were taken from their families and placed in Native American boarding schools designed to, as General Richard Pratt said, “Kill the Indian, save the man” (Ballew and Ward, 2019). These schools aimed to assimilate Native people into American society through forbidding the use of Native languages, destroying Native cultures, and forcing children to abandon tribal spiritualities and adopt Christian religions. Many children suffered abuse in these schools which led to long lasting effects of intergenerational trauma which Native peoples continue to experience today. Boarding schools left Native cultures, languages, and spiritualities dying out, and Native American communities today seek to reclaim these important tribal cultures and languages and preserve important traditions and heritages.

Native American Catholic schools today contrast strongly with their historical predecessors because of their commitment to preserving and celebrating tribal languages and cultures and their work to provide quality educational opportunities to students living in poverty. Each of these schools has a unique approach to Catholic formation and the preservation of tribal languages, spiritualities, and cultures, but all seek to form students in both Catholic and tribal identities. This research identifies the various ways in which Native American Catholic schools form students in both Catholic and tribal identities in their own contexts. Each one of these schools and their approaches to forming Catholic and tribal identities in students reveals the important role of Catholic Native American schools in the preservation of tribal languages, cultures, and spiritualities in the wake of cultural genocide.

### **Literature Review**

Researchers have dedicated little time to examining the current state of Native American Catholic Schools. Because no academic work exists about the current state of Catholic Native American schools, this research therefore begins to fill a large gap in scholarship about these schools and their work in Native American communities.

#### **History of Catholic Native American Schools:**

Research about Catholic Native American schools focuses almost entirely on the founding of mission schools and the boarding school era in the United States. Fr. Francis Paul Prucha, S.J. (1979) writes about the history of Catholic Native American Mission schools from the end of the nineteenth century into the beginning of the twentieth. His work highlights the schools' work to continue the conversion efforts of former missionaries as well as the conflicts between Protestants and Catholics which arose through competition between the mission schools and federal government schools. Prucha also acknowledges that in this era of education, Native American voices were excluded, leading to many problematic systems in Native American education on both sides. Carroll (2000) builds on this research in his work on Catholic Native American boarding schools. He shows how Catholic Native American schools took part in the mission of "Americanizing" Native peoples which led to the destruction of many Native cultures.

Catholic Native American schools today work to preserve and revive the languages and cultures once destroyed by boarding schools and assimilation efforts. The schools must grapple with the history of Catholic education in Native communities as destroying the culture while they continue to teach the Catholic faith and spirituality. This research reveals that Catholic Native American schools today differ greatly from their historical counterparts in their commitment to preserve tribal languages and cultures alongside Catholic values and teachings. Brian Collier's

(2006) history of St. Catherine Indian School in Santa Fe, New Mexico shows one example of a school's transition from the era of mission schools run by white Catholics into a school run and taught by Native people which prioritizes cultural values. Organizations and activities at St. Catherine's such as the "Indian Club" and the inclusion of traditional art forms in the school reflect this emphasis on tribal culture and values. The transition of St. Catherine Indian School echoes the stories of many Native American Catholic schools today which began in the missions and boarding school era.

### **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy:**

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) proposes the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy, linking teaching to culture and building upon past studies which prove the importance of the integration of students' home cultures into the classroom for student outcomes. Culturally-relevant pedagogy as defined by Ladson-Billings seeks to provide a way for students to succeed academically while maintaining their cultural integrity. Django Paris (2012) then expands on Ladson-Billings's work, proposing culturally sustaining pedagogy which not only represents the cultures of students in the classroom but also perpetuates and sustains aspects of students' cultures. The concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy recognizes students of color in particular as having important cultures and academic excellence to bring to the table as actors in their own educations, debunking the stereotype of being "disadvantaged" and "underachieving" as Ladson-Billings (2014) points out in her later work on the subject. Paris and Alim (2014) revisit Paris's initial concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy to also include an emphasis on multilingualism and knowledge of a variety of cultures as a key to power in the increasingly globalized world which does not focus solely on white, middle-class ways of knowing and speaking.

McCarty and Lee (2014) then apply the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy in the context of Native American education and propose culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogy. This concept is based in indigenous educational sovereignty and a reclamation of Native languages and cultures through education. The particular situation of Native cultures after colonization and cultural genocide places increased importance on culturally sustaining pedagogy to preserve languages and cultures in education. Native American Catholic schools take part in this work as they seek to include tribal languages, cultures, and spiritualities in their school communities. This research puts the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy in the context of Catholic education, focusing particularly on how faith practices and school culture sustain Native American cultures and languages in schools.

#### **Native American Catholicism:**

Many Native American Catholics offer examples of the Catholic faith lived out alongside tribal identity and culture, and their examples are important to consider when looking at the intersection of tribal and Catholic identities for students in Native American Catholic schools. These are only four examples of Native American Catholics from different time periods and tribal nations and are not indicative of the diversity of Native American Catholics, but they offer a starting point from which to understand the experiences of Native American Catholics.

Perhaps the most well-known Native American Catholic is St. Kateri Tekakwitha, the first Native American saint. St. Kateri, a member of the Mowhawk tribe in the Iroquois confederacy, converted to Catholicism after encountering French missionaries. She faced much persecution for her conversion and conviction to her faith from her community which led her to flee to Canada where she lived until her death at the age of twenty-four (“Saint Kateri”). Some claim that the Church’s narrative of St. Kateri comes from a perspective of colonization in the

that Catholicism in some way “saved” her from her own people; however, others lift up St. Kateri as being faithful to her own heritage and Catholic faith and celebrate her canonization (“Mixed Reactions,” 2012). St. Kateri is an important figure for many Native American Catholics, and many of schools and parishes researched use her image and story as an example of a Native American saint. Many of the schools also pray for the canonization of Nicholas Black Elk, a Lakota Catholic holy man. The main text on Black Elk, collected and written by John G. Neihardt (2014), describes Black Elk’s early life and focuses particularly on his experiences with Lakota spirituality and traditional religion and ending with the Battle of Wounded Knee. In his life after Wounded Knee, however, Black Elk became Catholic and was a practicing Catholic for forty-six years, also serving as a catechist on the Pine Ridge Reservation (Costello, 2005). The canonization of Nicholas Black Elk would have a particular significance for Native American Catholics seeking to live out their tribal and Catholic identities because of his prominence in both traditions, and therefore Catholic Native American schools pray for his canonization.

Many Native communities have important Catholic Native American figures in their own histories whose stories have significance for their home communities. Simon Pokagon of the Pokagon band of Potawatomi Indians was an author and activist who lived out his Catholic faith while advocating for the rights of his people. In addition to his work as an author and public figure working for the rights of the Potawatomi, Pokagon played an active role in church activities, interpreting sermons, playing church organ, and composing hymns for the church (Filstrup, 2001). Manuel “Bob” Chavez serves as another example of a Native American Catholic for his Cochiti Pueblo community and the alumni and families of St. Catherine Indian School. While on the Baatan Death March as a prisoner of war in World War II, Chavez

promised God that if he survived he would give the rest of his life in service to St. Catherine Indian School which he had attended. He survived and when he returned from the war dedicated the rest of his life to St. Catherine, becoming an important figure to the community as a coach, art teacher, and community leader, inspiring many students in their creative artwork and self-expression (Collier, 2006). These examples of Native American Catholics only give a small sample of the many Native American Catholics serving as their communities, particularly in their work in education. In many of the schools researched, Catholic Native American teachers, staff, and administrators play large roles in the lives of the students and witness to their faith and commitment to tribal culture and identity.

### **Catholic Social Teaching and Educational Practice:**

**Boarding Schools and Abuse.** The Church must respond to the abuses and cultural genocide which occurred in boarding schools and ensuing intergenerational trauma which Native people today continue to suffer. First, the Church must recognize the injustices of the suffering of Native peoples and cultures through the boarding school system which continues to have negative effects on Native American communities today. Mark Trahan's documentary *The Silence* (2011) tells the story of Native peoples in Alaska and the sexual abuse they suffered from priests and Church volunteers through the 1970s in schools and parishes. In the community of St. Michael, nearly 80 percent of the town's children were molested under one priest. Priests and others working for the Church were shuffled around Alaska from one Native community to another without supervision or consequences for their actions, and because of the authority of the Church in those areas, no one believed the victims of the abuse and the Church handled the issue on its own. One survivor, Elise Boudreau says, "If Jesus were to come to the village, I have no doubt in my mind that he would be crying." This image offered by Boudreau reflects a



prominent image in Catholic social teaching. In *Populorum progressio*, Pope Paul VI (1967) identifies, “situations whose injustice cries out to heaven.” This example is only one of many situations of abuse which took place throughout the country in Catholic parishes and schools, and these injustices cry out to heaven for the Church to respond.

The Church must stand in solidarity with survivors of abuse through honoring their experiences and uncovering difficult truths about the abuses committed in Catholic schools and parishes. One way in which the Church can do this is through collaborating with tribes today in Catholic Native American schools and their work with tribal communities to ensure that tribal histories, cultures, and traditions are preserved and celebrated. This transition into collaboration and partnership in Catholic Native American schools shows the increasing power of Native American Catholics in the education of their children and offers hope for the flourishing of cultures and communities.

**Evangelization.** Many of the violations committed against Native peoples in the United States happened under the guise of conversion to the Catholic faith, leading to historical baggage which impacts how the Church today must approach evangelization in Native American schools. Before authentic evangelization can take place in Native schools, the Church must work for peace and healing for the ways in which past evangelization efforts have denied the dignity of the human person. In *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXIII (1963) says, “The rights of all should be effectively safeguarded and, if they have been violated, completely restored.” When considering this in the case of evangelization in Native American communities, the Church must seek restoration of the rights which have been taken away in the process of forced conversion and assimilation. One aspect of this is restoring and promoting religious freedom for Native American communities. In *Dignitatis humanae*, the second Vatican Council (1965) states that the

human person has a right to religious freedom and that coercion or force may not be used. This understanding of the human right of religious freedom is rooted in the dignity of the human person and their free will, particularly in seeking truth and acting with their own consciences. *Evangelii nuntiandi* (Paul VI, 1975) further affirms this right, saying that religious liberty is a human right that the Church must protect, particularly in the work of evangelization. The Church must recognize the way that it has limited this right of religious freedom for Native peoples and ensure that this no longer takes place in its evangelization efforts as well as seek to make reparations in some way for this denial of the dignity of the human person. Through integrating tribal languages and cultures into Catholic schools, the Church forms students in both traditions and helps them to live out their Catholic and tribal identities and spiritualities, restoring the right of students to freely practice their traditions.

The Church must also work to restore the rights of Native American peoples who have been forced off of their land and put into situations of poverty. The evangelization work of the Church must include a preferential option for the poor which brings the message and mission of Christ to those most in need through being in service to and in solidarity with the poor (Latin American Bishops, 1979). Poverty is “anti-evangelical”, and the Church must take action to condemn the sources of this poverty as well as participate in the work of alleviating situations of poverty. This important step helps restore the rights which have been stripped away through colonization and assimilation efforts. Catholic Native American schools today live out the preferential option for the poor through their work to provide excellent educational opportunities to Native students living in poverty and honor their cultures, languages, and histories.

**Catholic Formation.** Faith formation in Native American schools must be sensitive to and collaborate with the culture in which it is working and include the voices of all people in the

narrative. *Evangelii nuntiandi* (Paul VI, 1975) stresses this influence of culture, saying, “the building up of the Kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures.” Catechesis, therefore, begins with the recognition that Catholicism and tribal cultures, languages, and spiritualities are not inherently incompatible and that they can both exist in a community side by side as well as in an individual who takes on both identities. Pope Paul VI (1975) continues, “though independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not necessarily incompatible with them; rather they are capable of permeating them all without being subject to any one of them.” Many myths surround Native American tribal cultures which lead many to think that adoption of Catholicism by Native peoples must mean that tribal culture is abandoned, particularly because this was the way it took place in the past through assimilation efforts. This, however, is not true, and Catholic Native Americans witness to this through their devotion to their Catholic faith and tribal heritage, traditions, and culture, living out both aspects of their identities. The Church must recognize and lift up the experiences of Catholic Native peoples and celebrate their positions in the Church and in their communities where they serve as witness to the faith in all vocations and walks of life. There is nothing stronger in evangelization than witness, and the Church must support these witnesses from local communities, following the principle of subsidiarity and allowing them to lead the work of evangelization in their homes. In *Evangelii nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI (1975) says, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.” In Native American Catholic schools, these witnesses are often Native American teachers, staff, administrators, and religious who work in the schools and set examples for students. The Church must welcome the voices of these witnesses as members of the Church with hope to bring. Their

presence in the Church fuels an evangelization rooted firmly in Native American cultures and identities.

**Subsidiarity.** The work of the Catholic Church and Catholic schools with Native American communities, particularly in education, must take place the most local level. The document *Quadragesimo Anno* (Pius XI, 1931) calls for large organizations to not take over what can be done on a more local level by smaller bodies and let those operate independently as they are able. In the context of Native American education, this means that both work for boarding school truth and healing as well as the work of Catholic Native American schools must happen on a local level with individual tribes and communities rather than through the implementation of a nationwide program which may not meet the individual needs of many people and communities. For example, while a statement and document from the United States Catholic Bishops about Native American boarding schools and other assimilationist policies would be an important step, the Church must not let the process of healing function in that same way on a macro level and must rather form smaller commissions which can work with tribes and individuals to seek truth and healing for their particular needs in line with the principle of subsidiarity. Native American Catholic schools reflect the principle of subsidiarity in their own awareness of the tribal contexts in which they work and efforts to get to know local communities and represent tribal cultures and languages. The Catholic social teaching principle of subsidiarity emphasizes the need for Catholic Native American schools to continue work which includes local tribal communities and leaders.

### **Methods**

Classroom observations were conducted at three Catholic Native American schools on reservations across the United States: Red Cloud Indian School in Pine Ridge, South Dakota, De

La Salle Blackfeet School in Browning, Montana, and St. Augustine Indian Mission School in Winnebago, Nebraska. Each one of these schools serves different tribal nations and has particular histories, student demographics, religious identities, financial resources, teachers, and staff which distinguish them from each other. Comparing classroom observations from these schools revealed the different ways in which Catholic Native American schools form students in Catholic and tribal identities and which factors impact how this takes place.

Observations at each school involved observing classes and other school events to see how teachers and administrators explicitly and implicitly teach Catholic values and beliefs. The research specifically focused on how the schools integrate Catholic and Native American spiritualities both in the curriculum and school environments. This took place first through visiting religion classes and seeing how Catholic beliefs are explicitly taught to students. The research particularly focused on how Native American histories, spiritualities, and languages are or are not present in the curriculum. Another aim was to identify how the teachers present the material and how they connect it to the daily lives of the students. Observations also took place through attending Mass and other spiritual practices at the schools. The research examined how Catholic Native American schools and parishes integrate tribal culture and languages into the liturgy. Observations also included noting how religious art, posted values, and other forms of visual communication reflect Native American culture and history versus the dominant narrative of Catholicism.

## **Findings**

### **Red Cloud Indian School**

Red Cloud Indian School serves Lakota students on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. The Red Cloud system operates an elementary, middle, and high school on the main

campus and then another K-8 school in a nearby town on the reservation. They also run six local parishes for local residents. Classroom observations at Red Cloud included religion and Lakota language classes in all grade levels in addition to a variety of other classes. Red Cloud is a Lakota Catholic school, and they take both parts of that identity very seriously, celebrating in equal amounts both their Catholic and Lakota heritages. For example, for each Mass they celebrate in the high school there is also a sweat, a ritual of traditional Lakota prayer, for the school community. Additionally, the high school spiritual formation curriculum involves alternating semesters in Lakota and Catholic spiritualities, helping students learn about both traditions.

The religion classes and the liturgies at Red Cloud integrate Lakota language and traditions in a variety of ways. One common practice at Red Cloud is smudging, a practice in many Native American tribes to purify the prayer space which involves burning sage and having each person fan the smoke over themselves. In the middle school religion classes, for example, at the beginning of class before prayer, the students all stand and one student goes to each person with the sage so that each person can perform the practice. The students then, after performing the cleansing of the prayer space, say their prayer as a class, both in English and in Lakota. They begin class in both traditions, Catholic and Lakota, bringing them together side by side. Lakota language and culture are also present in visuals in the religion classrooms. In the elementary school religion classroom, for example, there is a wall with pictures of Catholic saints with the Lakota words for “Holy, Holy, Holy” posted next to them (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Religion classroom wall at Red Cloud Indian School with text in Lakota which reads, "Holy Holy Holy." January, 2018.

Also, in the middle school religion room, the Our Father, Hail Mary, and the Sign of the Cross are written on posters in Lakota (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* "Hail Mary" prayer in Lakota in middle school religion classroom at Red Cloud Indian School. January 2018.

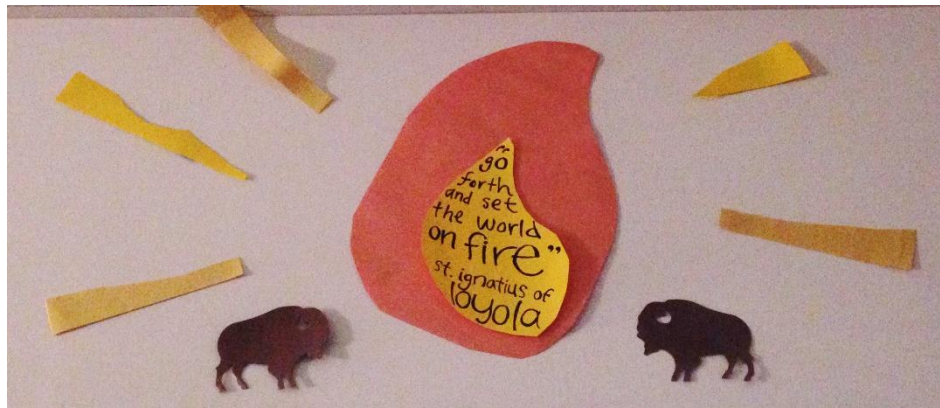
The spiritual formation curriculum at Red Cloud takes into account that a majority of the students at the school are not practicing Catholics. Lessons often center on topics such as

spirituality and morality which include various perspectives rather than emphasizing the specific religious doctrine and beliefs of only the Catholic Church. A few examples of this took place in the religion classes during the observations. In the middle school religion class, the students worked on a spirituality project where they could either interview a friend or family member about their spirituality or they could research a spirituality that interested them. This allowed students to feel connected to the religion curriculum even if they or their families were not Catholic. They could interview their family members about their Lakota spirituality, research Buddhism if that interested them, or learn about any other religious tradition. After doing their interview and research, they would present what they learned to the class and the teacher could discuss Catholic spirituality and what that entails. Through this, students could learn about that and perhaps come to a deeper understanding of their own faith or a greater appreciation for the Catholic tradition. Another example of the way Red Cloud creates spiritual formation which meets the needs of their students is in the junior and senior Catholic spiritual formation curriculum. During junior year, the students study ethics, and in senior year, they examine social justice issues. Both of these topics can integrate a Catholic lens and involve learning about the Church's teachings and perspectives on the issue, but they also can apply to large truths and philosophies to which all students on some level can probably relate. The senior year class also involved a senior service project which encouraged students to live out their faith through service to their community, helping build compassionate students who use their education to give back to others.

Red Cloud is a Jesuit school, and that constitutes an important part of their Catholic spiritual identity. Around twelve Jesuit priests live at Red Cloud, working at both the school and the parishes. Their presence has a large impact on the Catholic identity of the school and the



presentation of Catholic spirituality to students. Red Cloud emphasizes certain Jesuit values such as “God in all things” and “men and women for others” (see Figure 3).



*Figure 3.* Quote from St. Ignatius of Loyola on the wall of a religion classroom at Red Cloud Indian School alongside buffalo, important animals in Lakota culture. January 2018.

The Jesuits have been at Red Cloud for over 125 years, and that history has an important role in Red Cloud’s identity as a Lakota and Jesuit school. The volunteers who make up about a third of Red Cloud’s teaching corps enhance this Jesuit identity. These young people coming out of college often come from Jesuit schools and incorporate Jesuit values in their classrooms in the ways they talk about God and how they talk about their own spiritual lives. As the administration at Red Cloud seeks to define their identity as a Jesuit and Lakota institution, they have identified the common virtues between the Jesuit and Lakota traditions which can help join together both spiritualities (see Figure 4).



*Figure 4.* Cross at Red Cloud Indian School shows the combination of Lakota and Catholic spiritualities through the Christian symbol of the cross and the four directions and colors important to Lakota culture. January, 2018.

The school community also aims to show students that they can be both Lakota and Catholic. For example, the freshman spiritual formation teacher created a panel discussion for her students where she brought in Lakota Catholics to talk about their own spiritual journeys and formation. Efforts such as this bring together identities for students and give them examples of other Lakota Catholics living out their faith.

### **De La Salle Blackfeet School**

De La Salle Blackfeet School (DLSBS) serves Blackfeet students in Browning, Montana in grades 4-8. The Christian Brothers in the LaSallian spiritual tradition run DLSBS, and a majority of the students are Catholic. DLSBS integrates Blackfeet language and tradition in the school such as having the Blackfeet word of the day at the daily assembly, a prayer in Blackfeet during classes, Blackfeet lessons in social studies classes, and some traditional music at

assembly. Blackfeet language and tradition is not as large a part of the curriculum or the Catholic formation at DLSBS as Lakota language and spirituality is part of daily life and classes at Red Cloud; however, students and teachers take great pride in that identity and preserving the language and culture. For the most part, the school looks and feels like a traditional Catholic school. A daily assembly involves multiple prayers, each class begins with a prayer and taking intentions, and the religion classes are very doctrine-based. The school emphasizes the Native American Catholic identities of students in a variety of ways such as an image of St. Kateri Tekakwitha in each classroom, the first Native American saint, images of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and more diverse images of Jesus and other biblical figures (see Figure 5).



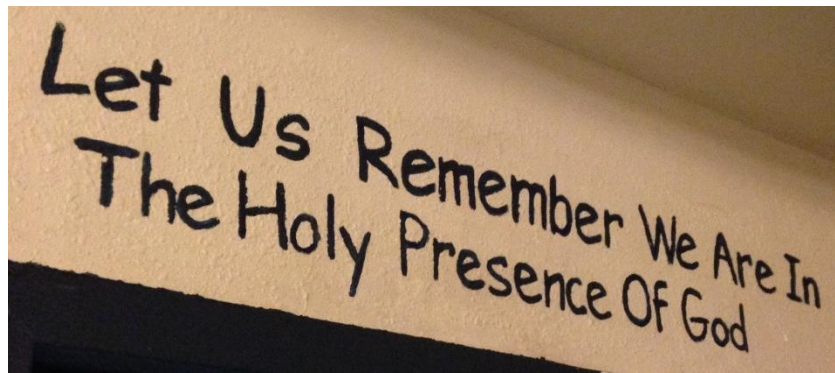
*Figure 5.* Image of St. Kateri on the wall at De La Salle Blackfeet School. January, 2018.

The teachers and administrators are also almost all non-Blackfeet with the exception of one staff member. This contrasts with Red Cloud where the faculty and staff include people from on and off of the reservation.

DLSBS has a strong Catholic community. Students take prayer very seriously, and they enjoy leading prayer in each class and taking intentions for their friends and families. Also, DLSBS celebrates more liturgies than Red Cloud: Mass is celebrated each week and Catholic

sacramental preparation is part of the religion curriculum. Observations looked at eighth grade confirmation classes, and students took the class very seriously, working every day through a curriculum from the company Dynamic Catholic. During the research period, students were baptized and receive their First Communion as part of a school liturgy. The fifth grade led the Mass, and students served as lectors, gift-bearers, and leaders of the procession into the church. The families of many students attended, and a celebratory luncheon took place after the Mass for all students and their families. The parish and Catholic community on the reservation are very involved in the school because, in contrast to Red Cloud, DLSBS is a relatively new school which has only been there for fifteen years. The parishioners who worked to form the school are the same ones who are now supporting its operation both financially (with the help of other outside donors) and spiritually through their prayers and presence. The school grew out of the desire of the parish to have a place to send their children to Catholic school, and since then the Christian brothers have operated the school with the support of the parish and in collaboration with parishioners. Students are constantly reminded of God through constant prayer and time for reflection, and the religion curriculum seems to try to give students a strong base in theological truth and Catholic doctrine rather than necessarily looking at just personal spiritual formation.

Similarly to Red Cloud, the distinct spirituality of the religious order plays an important role at DLSBS. LaSallian mottos are painted all over the school, there is an image of St. John Baptist de la Salle in each classroom, and each prayer begins and ends with LaSallian sayings and invocations (see Figure 6).



*Figure 5.* LaSallian prayer painted on the wall at De La Salle Blackfeet School. This invocation begins each class, assembly, and prayer, and it is an example of the LaSallian tradition lived out at DLSBS. January, 2018.

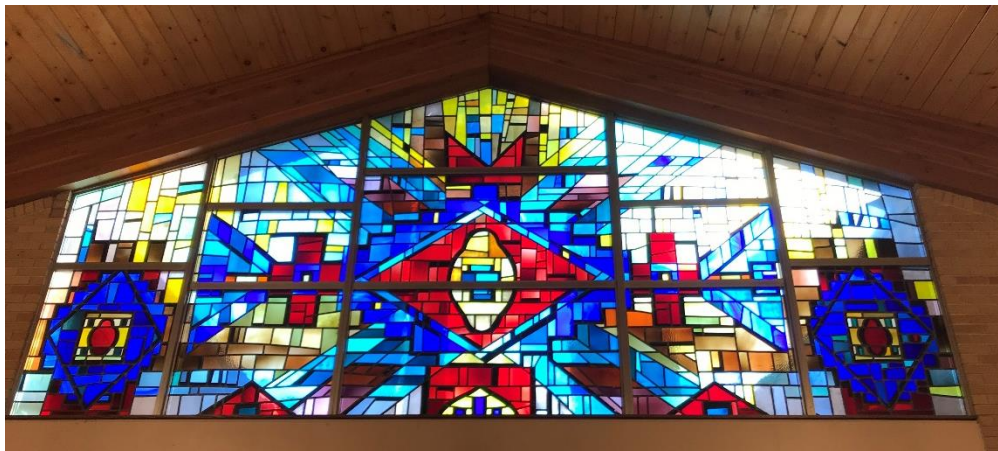
Students have a spiritual father to look to in St. John Baptist de la Salle, and the LaSallian identity unites the school and also connects students with the larger network of LaSallian schools all around the country and the world. One example of this LaSallian connections is through the groups of high school “immersion” students who visit all year from many LaSallian schools, spending a week at the school each helping out in classes. These high school students bring in outside experiences and perspectives to the students, many of whom do not often have the opportunity to go off of the reservation. During classroom observations, the students had a scavenger hunt to look up information regarding LaSallian tradition and identity, and this built up pride in their own spiritual heritage and ownership over that part of their identity.

DLSBS still places a strong emphasis on the Blackfeet identity of their students, and this is evident in the way that the teachers work to integrate Blackfeet culture and history into their classrooms. For example, the social studies teachers have curriculum focusing on Blackfeet history. In one lesson, students filled out a Blackfeet scavenger hunt which had different facts about the tribe. Students also participated in an essay contest with the prompt: “What does it mean to be Blackfeet and Catholic?” Many students mentioned the fusion of Catholic beliefs and

practices with a cultural basis and heritage in their Blackfeet culture. The teachers, although mainly not Blackfeet, make efforts to learn about the tribe and be a resource for students about language and culture.

### **St. Augustine Indian Mission School**

St. Augustine Indian Mission School serves students from the Winnebago and Omaha tribes in Winnebago, Nebraska. St. Augustine was founded by St. Katharine Drexel in 1909, and their school history inspires much of their school values and Catholic character. The school serves students in grades K-8 and the mission also operates four parishes which minister to the local community. St. Augustine brings Catholic and tribal identities together in similar ways to Red Cloud and DLSBS. Many visual signs throughout the school and church show the ways that St. Augustine integrates Catholic and tribal culture in their school life (see Figure 6).



*Figure 6.* Stained glass window at St. Augustine integrates traditional tribal art into the Catholic church. October, 2018.

Much of the Catholic spiritual life at St. Augustine centers around saints and Catholic figures important to indigenous communities and the history of St. Augustine. Each classroom has a picture of St. Katharine Drexel and St. Kateri, and the church features paintings of these saints as well as other Native art (see Figure 7).



*Figure 7.* Images of St. Katharine Drexel and St. Kateri side by side in the church at St. Augustine. October, 2018.

These pictures in classrooms are placed beside posters of the Ho-Chunk language which help students learn tribal languages, showing the how the Catholic and tribal identities work together. Weekly Mass also reflects the integration of Catholic and tribal identities. Smudging with a feather and sage takes place during the opening song after the procession in each direction of the church, and students pray at the end of each Mass for the canonization of Nicholas Black Elk, a Lakota Catholic man.

Sisters and other consecrated religious play an active role in the life of the school and Catholic identity and formation at St. Augustine. The Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament who founded the school worked in the school until 1944, and the Missionary Benedictine Sisters then began their ministry in 1945 and continue to serve there today. Sr. Sarah, a Missionary Benedictine Sister, teaches religion to many students at St. Augustine, and students learn about the Church and religious life through her witness and presence. Deacon Don Blackbird, a deacon

who is a member of the Omaha nation, serves as the principal of the school. He spends a lot of time with students and has an active role in school life, especially in liturgies where he often preaches. Deacon Blackbird serves as an important role model for students in how they can live out their Catholic faith and tribal culture and spirituality side by side. Teachers also live out their Catholic faith in many ways, and, like Red Cloud and DLSBS, a few volunteer teachers work at St. Augustine who live in community and share their faith with students.

St. Augustine celebrates the culture and traditions of their students in many ways throughout the year. Students have classes in Ho-Chunk, the local tribal language, taught by a teacher from the local community, and the Kateri Warrior Drum Group teaches students traditional music and dancing and performs at a variety of cultural events. Teachers use examples from the local community and language in their classes, and students are encouraged to be proud of their tribal and Catholic identities. For example, in a seventh grade religion class on Pentecost, students learned about speaking different languages by the teacher asking how people speaking Ho-Chunk could understand people speaking Omaha. She pointed to the Holy Spirit and contextualized this biblical event in tribal languages and the history of her students.

### **Discussion**

Each of these Native American Catholic schools recognizes and celebrates both the Catholic and tribal identities of their students in their school culture. Observations at Red Cloud Indian School, De La Salle Blackfeet School, and St. Augustine Indian Mission School reveal five aspects of Catholic Native American schools which are particularly important to the formation Catholic and tribal identities: integration of tribal languages into the school, vibrant spirituality of the religious order present in the school, teachers who model the Catholic faith and tribal identities, religion curriculums which integrate tribal culture, and active parish life.



Language and oral tradition are often important parts of Native American cultures, and the preservation and integration of tribal languages plays a crucial role in Catholic Native schools' efforts to integrate tribal culture into the school culture. In each school, this took a different form. At Red Cloud, Lakota language curriculum exists in all grade levels, and prayers in Lakota help students connect their Catholic and tribal identities. DLSBS also promotes the Blackfeet language through having the Blackfeet word of the day at assembly and prayers and classroom commands in Blackfeet, although it does not have a language curriculum that is as developed as Red Cloud's. St. Augustine, similarly to Red Cloud, hires local teachers from the Ho-Chunk tribe to teach their Ho-Chunk language classes, and through this, language becomes a way of connecting to the local community and involving community members in the education of their children. Language connects students to their communities and helps school leaders and teachers from the outside the culture to learn more about the backgrounds and heritages of their students. One story illustrates this from an elementary classroom at St. Augustine. The Ho-Chunk teacher could not attend at the class that day, and the teacher who was not Native decided that they would still work on Ho-Chunk during that class period rather than doing something else with the time. While the teacher did not speak Ho-Chunk, she led the students through the vocabulary sheet they were working on, and the students taught her the correct pronunciations for the words. Students owned their own language, and the teacher's humility in asking for their guidance revealed her own desire to learn about their culture. Additionally, the teacher's decision to teach the Ho-Chunk lesson despite her being a substitute reminds students that Ho-Chunk language is an integral part of the school culture and their education, not off to the side.

The spiritual identity of the religious order present at a school shapes and permeates the formation of Catholic culture. In Native American Catholic schools, each spirituality offers an

opportunity to integrate tribal languages, cultures, and spiritualities into the Catholic character of the school. At Red Cloud, Jesuit spirituality is the lens through which the school relates the Catholic faith to Lakota spirituality, and Jesuit values form the core beliefs of the school culture in their commitment to service and justice as well as looking for God in all things. Similarly, DLSBS bases much of their school prayer life and faith formation off of LaSallian values, and immersion groups from other LaSallian schools link students to other Catholic schools and groups. While St. Augustine does not have a particular Catholic spiritual tradition as part of their school identity, their history serves a similar role. The school is dedicated to honoring the mission of St. Katharine Drexel and the Sisters of the Sacred Heart and takes pride in their long history as a mission school and roots in the community. The images of St. Katharine Drexel around the school and prayers asking for her intercession reveal this unique spiritual heritage. The spiritualities of each school offer a basis for the formation of Catholic culture in the school and help schools and students find their place and connections in the larger Catholic sphere.

Teachers in Catholic Native American schools have an immense impact on school cultures and the way students come to know and understand Catholic and tribal traditions. Students learn about Catholic and tribal histories and traditions from teachers, and teachers serve as role models in the Catholic faith as well as in their commitment to tribal traditions and community involvement. The way in which teachers serve as role models changes slightly depends on their own personal identity and experience with the community they serve. For example, a teacher who is Native and from local community will be a role model in a different way from the way that a white volunteer teacher from off of the reservation will be a role model. Both offer important gifts to the community that they serve, but they take different forms. The teachers at Red Cloud Indian School model this in their work with students. Native teachers help

students understand their heritage and traditions which fosters the formation of their Lakota identities, and the teachers help students grow in the Catholic faith through their own faith lives and examples of how you can be Lakota and Catholic. Volunteer teachers also form students in both identities; however, they do this through living out their commitment to their faith in their service to the school and personal faith lives as well as showing their commitment to learning about Lakota culture and spirituality and valuing that in their classrooms. The witnesses of all teachers in Native American Catholic schools play an important role in the formation of a vibrant Catholic culture in a school which celebrates and preserves tribal cultures. The role of teachers as models in faith makes it even more important that Catholic Native schools have Catholic Native faculty and staff from the community who can model for students how they can live out an honor both aspects of their identities. This requires that Catholic schools commit themselves to hiring from the local community and also work to ensure that community members have access to education that will allow them to take positions as teachers and administrators.

Another way in which each of these schools used to integrate Catholic and tribal cultures is through the religion curriculum. The way that schools do this depends on the contexts of their students and communities, but each school takes advantage of religion classes to form students in both aspects of their identities. In Red Cloud which serves mainly non-Catholic students, this takes place through alternating semesters in Lakota and Catholic spirituality in the high school in the spiritual formation curriculum which helps students to know and understand both traditions. The religion curriculum at DLSBS focuses more on Catholic spiritual formation and sacramental preparation because most of the students are Catholic; however, the school still integrates Blackfeet identity through projects such as the “What does it mean to be Blackfeet and Catholic?” essay contest. Similarly, St. Augustine has a religion curriculum which focuses

mostly on Catholic spiritual formation and also includes aspects of tribal culture and identity through teachers connecting Catholic beliefs and stories to aspects of the students' lives in their community. The seventh grade teacher exemplified this when she told the story of Pentecost and connected it to people speaking Ho-Chunk and Omaha and being able to understand each other through the Holy Spirit. Religion curriculum in Catholic Native American schools works to help students know and understand the Catholic faith and tribal spiritualities and cultures, taking into account the particular backgrounds and faith identities of their students and their families.

Parish life links Catholic Native schools to community members who do not have students at the school and also is a space of spiritual formation outside of school for many students who attend with their families. Each of the schools researched has one or more parishes associated with it which serve the local community, and liturgies in these parishes offer opportunities for the integration of tribal culture with Catholic practices. The art in these parishes often features Native saints and symbols, and practices from tribal culture such as smudging are often part of the liturgy. The integration of both cultures in liturgy shows students how both traditions work together. Parishioners also often attend school liturgies, offering students a chance to see community members practicing their faith. The parish brings families together for faith celebrations and offers a gathering space for community to grow in support of the students at the school. One example of the strength of parish life in supporting Catholic schools is the role of the parish in the founding of De La Salle Blackfeet School. Around fifteen years ago, parishioners at Little Flower Parish in Browning, MT wanted a Catholic school for their children. They contacted the Christian Brothers, and DLSBS was founded. The school grew out of the desire for faith formation in education from the local community, and the parish continues to support the school and its students. Today, school Masses bring together students, faculty,

families, and parishioners, and Sunday Masses are opportunities for students to practice their faith with their families.

Each school where research took place uses all of these aspects in their work to build a school culture which celebrates Catholic and tribal traditions. While each school has a unique culture and approach to spiritual formation, these parts of school life are the base from which schools examine the needs and gifts of their own communities and cultures and create a school culture which reflects the local community.

### **Conclusions**

In the wake of cultural genocide, tribal languages and cultures must be integral parts of Catholic Native American schools. The legacy of boarding schools still impacts Native communities today, and the Church has a long way to go in recognizing the atrocities which took place and the damage to Native peoples and working for truth and healing. Catholic Native American schools are one place where this work for healing can take place. The schools offer important spaces for the preservation of tribal languages and cultures, and this can take place through and alongside the formation of Catholic culture and identity. Red Cloud Indian School, De La Salle Blackfeet School, and St. Augustine Indian Mission School each exemplify this in their school cultures, and their unique approaches to Catholic and tribal formation offer a framework through which other Catholic Native American schools and also other Catholic institutions in Native communities can celebrate both heritages. The integration of Catholic and tribal culture helps tribal languages and cultures survive and flourish, works against the myth that you cannot be both Native and Catholic, and may lead towards a more peaceful relationship between the Church and Native peoples which has been broken in the past through assimilation efforts.

In situations of poverty and geographical isolation, Catholic Native American schools often do not have the ability to research the unique challenges they face and the way that other peer institutions address these. Organizations which link schools such as the American Indian Catholic Schools Network offer more opportunities for collaboration between schools, but researchers still have not dedicated resources to learning about Native American Catholic schools today and the particular challenges they face and opportunities they have. This research addresses one aspect of the work of Native American Catholic schools, but there is still much research to be done in the field and working alongside tribal communities and school leaders. If Catholic Native American schools are to continue preserving tribal languages and cultures, forming students in the Catholic faith, providing excellent educational opportunities for students, and working within the community, this research must take place to support their work.

Future studies with Catholic Native American schools and regarding the Church's larger involvement in Native communities should cover a variety of issues regarding the history of the Church in Native communities, Native American Catholicism, Catholic social teaching in the context of the Church's work with Native peoples, trauma in Native communities, and approaching all of these issues through schooling. What is the impact of intergenerational trauma from boarding schools and missions on the perception of the Church by Native peoples? How does the integration of tribal languages and cultures into Catholic schools and institutions impact the way that students and community members perceive Catholicism? What does Catholic evangelization look like in Native communities when considering the history of assimilation? How do students perceive their own identities as Catholic Native Americans when taught by Catholic Native teachers versus Catholic non-Native teachers? How do Catholic Native schools serving mostly non-Catholic students differ from schools serving mostly Catholic students in

their curriculum and school cultures? What does Catholic social teaching say about the in Native communities? How can other models of indigenous Catholic education outside of the United States inform the work of Catholic Native American schools? Further investigation of these questions will help the Church to work with Native communities to preserve language and culture through schools, parishes, and other organizations.

### **Afterword**

The five aspects of Catholic and tribal formation in Catholic Native American schools identified in this research can be used as a framework for the formation of Catholic Native school culture which respects and celebrates both identities. Both new schools and existing schools which are looking to inform and shape their school culture can examine these components in their own schools and communities in order to form their own approach to spiritual formation. This framework brings together common factors of many Catholic Native American schools which can be a base for the formation of Catholic school culture for Native students. The implementation of the framework reveals the diversity of each school and the tribal culture and community it serves as well as the unique history and Catholic spirituality of the school. This framework, backed up by examples from the three schools where observations took place, may be given to Catholic Native American schools as a guide for their own formation of Catholic culture, and individual schools can add or subtract elements from the framework as it suits their context.

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