

**Presentation at General Assembly to Bishops  
November USCCB Meeting  
Baltimore, Maryland  
November 14, 2017**

I come before you today seeking your prayerful support to move forward the process for beatification and canonization of Nicholas Black Elk. Information about his life has been included in your packets. I have been asked to share with you a few words about Nicholas Black Elk and why this is important for the Church today.

Nicholas Black Elk (circa 1863-1950) was a member of the Oglala Sioux tribe on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, currently in the Diocese of Rapid City. Black Elk was a Lakota medicine man for the first half of his life, having been a witness to the Battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876 and the massacre of more than 200 of his people at Wounded Knee in 1890. Even prior to his conversion, he was widely known among his people as a holy man and a mystic.

It is recorded that in the height of the Sioux wars, Black Elk was given a vision at an early age – the message that we must all live as one. This vision influenced his life over the years, but especially as a catechist, in many ways forming his identity for the rest of his life.

He converted to the Catholic faith, taking the name “Nicholas” after St. Nicholas. Following his baptism on the feast of St. Nicholas in 1904, he became a noted catechist and missionary, working closely with the Jesuits on a number of Indian reservations. He continued celebrating Lakota rituals, while fully embracing a Catholic life grounded in the sacramental life of the Church. With little formal schooling, he learned to read and write and the Sacred Scripture became his friend.

Catechists were the lifeblood of early faith communities among the Lakota people, taking the place of priest when they were not available – instructing new converts, visiting the sick, burying the dead, leading scripture services and preaching, and baptizing those who were seeking conversion. This ardent catechist and internationally admired mystic filled this role.

John Lone Goose, a longstanding friend of Black Elk, said that once the holy-man was baptized, he made a lifelong commitment to the Gospel. He “learned what the Bible meant, and that it was good. Lots of people turned to the Catholic Church through Nick’s work.”

Black Elk, a Catholic husband, father, grandfather and elder, became an energetic catechist and was personally instrumental in the conversion of hundreds of natives – baptizing approximately 400 people over his 46 years as a catechist. This is the very kind of “missionary discipleship” that Pope Francis is calling the lay faithful to embrace as part of their own path of holiness.

He melded whatever he could from his Lakota culture into his Christian life and then became an “apostle to the Lakota people”, leading others to a deeper life in Jesus. This enculturation can always reveal something of the true nature and holiness of God. He challenged people to renew themselves, to seek this life that Christ offers them. He believed that all the ills that engulfed his people could be remedied through the Catholic faith and practices that he modeled and about

which he preached. For Native American people, Black Elk provides an icon who reveals what God has called all of us to be — people of faith and hope and a source of hope for others.

St. John Paul II in a homily to the native peoples of Canada given in 1984 shared these words:

*Through his Gospel, Christ confirms the native peoples in their belief in God, their awareness of his presence, their ability to discover him in creation, their dependence on him, their desire to worship him, their sense of gratitude for the land, their responsible stewardship of the earth, their reverence for all his great works, their respect for their elders. The world needs to see these values – and so many more that they possess – pursued in the life of the community and made incarnate in a whole people.*

This was the work and ministry of Nicholas Black Elk. He strengthened the bonds between Native Americans and European Americans, promoting the message of Jesus Christ as love, peace and harmony.

While St. Kateri Tekakwitha's canonization in 2012 was certainly merited, Black Elk's name and holiness are still far better known to the general public than hers. But unlike St. Kateri, his association with Catholicism was not known until the recent past, especially through the works of Jesuit priest, Fr. Michael Steltenkamp – *Nicholas Black Elk: Medicine Man, Missionary, Mystic*, and other authors. Among those who know of his life as a Catholic catechist, there are many who think he, like St. Kateri, should be canonized.

The Church's special recognition of Black Elk's saintly life will provide the Indian faith-community, and peoples everywhere, the example of a very special person whose presence to others is worthy of imitation. As a model, he showed how Native American culture could enrich the Body of Christ, integrating the two traditions, thereby bringing a richness to both.

This Catholic missionary and mystic holy-man of the Oglala Sioux, would be a welcome symbol to all Native Americans, leaving a legacy of someone who sought the Sacred, who lived the gospel in everyday life, and who inspired others (Indian and non-Indian) to do the same. This is the Lakota-Catholic identity that defined his life – an identity that many people encountered across the Pine Ridge Reservation during his lifetime.

Brothers, I ask your prayerful support to move forward the process for beatification and canonization of Nicholas Black Elk.