

**Mass for the Initiation of the Cause for Beatification and Canonization
of Chief Nicholas W. Black Elk, Sr.**

October 21, 2017
Most Rev. Robert D. Gruss
Bishop of Rapid City
Holy Rosary Church
Pine Ridge, SD

Welcome to all of you. As we gather for this historical event in the Diocese of Rapid City, we are blessed by your presence. I want to acknowledge in a special way members of the family of Nicholas Black Elk Sr. This is truly a blessed day for all of you – but for all of us. Again, welcome.

In the Gospel today we heard these words:

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”¹

These words from Jesus are all too familiar to most of us. Not only is it a response to expose those who sought to trap Jesus as hypocrites, but it is an invitation for all of us to live appropriately in this world but with a greater view on God himself.

In particular, to “render to God the things that are God’s” invites us to acknowledge by the way we live our lives the words of Isaiah from the first reading, *“I have called you by your name; I am the LORD and there is no other, there is no God besides me. It is I who arm you, though you know me not, so that toward the rising and the setting of the sun people may know that there is none besides me. I am the LORD, there is no other.”*²

What Jesus is saying to the Pharisees is that the justice of true holiness means a consistent returning each thing to its proper creator and owner, the coin which is a tribute to Caesar to Caesar and man’s immortal soul to God.

In other words, you and I have been created in God’s image and likeness. It is the human person, who bears the image of the living God. And this living image of God within us signifies that we belong by right to him who made us, just as the image on the coin signifies that it belongs to Caesar.

¹ Matthew 22:21

² Isaiah 45:4-6

In addition, and because we are transcendent, spiritual beings, this divine reflection within us means that, in a certain sense, we may and must aspire to a relationship of intimacy with God, as friend it relates to friend and as lover relates to lover. God's desire and whole purpose in creating us in his own image is so that we relate to him.

And so our highest obligation in life, and one that is imposed on every man woman and child, regardless of nationality or citizenship, is to give ourselves back to our Creator. And Jesus, as the revelation of the Father, was inviting his audience in the Gospel into that relationship of love.

This relationship is meant to be sought anew each and every day. We are invited to give to God ourselves over and over again each day. This includes being docile to His will, devoting our lives to Him and working for His Kingdom of mercy, love, and peace.

We must always remember that this relationship with Jesus is in communion with and mediated through the Church, the Body of Christ. As Pope Francis cautions – “there is no such thing as “do-it-yourself” Christians or “free agents” when it comes to faith.”³

It is the Church who perpetuates Christ's saving mission in the world. Like the seven liturgical sacraments, the Church is both a sign and an instrument of God's grace. As sign, the Church points the faithful toward communion with God and one another in this life and eternal union forever in the next. As instrument, the Church makes communion with God possible by means of the gifts given to her by Christ: her doctrine, laws, and sacraments. The Church, then, is the sacrament of Christ: she makes His work of salvation visible and accessible to human beings.

Think about how your faith was passed down to you. Someone introduced you to Christ and his Church. Someone was a missionary for you. This is the way it has been since the beginning. It could have been your parents; it could have been someone else. But someone was a missionary for you.

When we think of the life of Black Elk, he was introduced to Christianity and the Catholic faith. This was part of his history. But it first began as he actively

³ Pope Francis, Weekly General Audience, June 25, 2014

engaged the spirit inside of him. From a very young age, there was an openness to the Spirit of God in his life.

God truly is the Lord of history. He cares for everything, from the least things to the greatest events, and thus he guides all of history to its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. God used a personal invitation from a Jesuit priest to lead this child of God, Black Elk, down a new path to becoming this great disciple in the Catholic faith for the Lakota people.

Black Elk's love for the Lord and for Sacred Scripture led him to become a catechist, fulfilling not only his mission, but the Sacred Mission of all disciples – *“to attract and form intentional disciples who joyfully, boldly and lovingly proclaim and live the mission of Jesus Christ, leading to eternal life.”*⁴ For 50 years, Black Elk lived this mission in leading others to Christ.

He used whatever means was available to him to obtain converts, most famous, the *Two Roads Map* as a catechism – the Black Road and the Red Road; the Red Road leading to a deeper life in Christ through the Spirit. He embraced the mission to which he had been called – to help others live in the balance of the Lakota and Catholic culture leading to a deeper life in Jesus. He melded whatever he could from his Lakota culture into his Christian life. 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. “For [Black Elk], the ills that engulfed his people could be remedied through adoption of a religious practice that he modeled and about which he preached.”⁵

In his local missionary newsletter he wrote: “I spoke mainly on Jesus – when he was on earth, the teachings and his sufferings. I myself, do a lot of these things. I suffer, and I try to teach my people the things that I wanted them to learn, but it's never done.”⁶ Of course, Christ's work is never done.

We all must realize that we, too, have been called into the missionary field. Our baptism leads us there. Like Black Elk, if we are docile to the Lord's

⁴ Mission Statement of the Diocese of Rapid City

⁵ Fr. Michael Steltenkamp, S.J.; Nicholas Black Elk: Medicine Man, Missionary, Mystic, page 223

⁶ Fr. Michael Steltenkamp, S.J.; Nicholas Black Elk: Medicine Man, Missionary, Mystic, page 223

will, devoting our lives to Him, we will be out working for His Kingdom of mercy, love, and peace.

We cannot live isolated religious lives – not if we believe that the reign of God is in our midst. You and I are called to be God’s servants and instruments of Christ’s love in building and advancing his kingdom. Each of us has to decide how we can participate and are called to participate.

The interior possessing of God’s love is the basis of spirituality and at the heart of following Jesus. And it is our pathway to inner freedom and love. Lives focused on and lived for Christ brings about true freedom. Everything else can potentially enslave us, and so often does in some way.

Repaying God with what belongs to God is called the Christian life. Jesus lived His interior life by pouring Himself into His life’s calling and ministry. He lived on the outside what He experienced on the inside – the Father’s profound love for him.

We are all on the Red Road and perhaps have a ways to go I know, but the call is here, the time is now, and the grace is ours by God’s divine generosity.

We worship today at this altar in which Jesus continues to serve us from his divine generosity of love made present in his saving sacrifice. When we worship at other altars, we forget who we really are.

So today, one again, we “give the Lord glory and honor”⁷.....and we give to God what is His by accepting who we are and.....whose we are.

⁷ Responsorial Psalm from 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

The life of Nickolas Black Elk, Sr. has been well documented since the time of his death on August 17, 1950. In living his life as a dedicated catechist, spiritual leader and guide, he inspired many to live for Christ by his own story. As I mentioned earlier, in his own search for God, he found a way to merge both the Lakota culture and the Catholic culture that drew him deeper into the mystery of Christ's love and the Church.

One of the things that are required for sainthood and to initiate the Cause, and what has been expressed to me in regard to Nicholas Black Elk - a reputation of holiness that has spread among the faithful about the purity and integrity of life of the Servant of God and about the virtues practiced by him to a heroic degree.

Another one of the requirements is establishing the reputation of intercessory power that has spread among the faithful about the graces and favors received from God through the intercession of the Servant of God.

Friends, this is what has been expressed to me about Nicholas Black Elk and this is why we are here today.

As we know, the process for the Cause for Beatification and Canonization for Nickolas Black Elk is a long one. The first phase involves gathering testimony about his life and his virtues. Both public and private writings are collected and examined. This documentary phase can take many years. But this is the phase in which we begin today for this Servant of God, Nicholas Black Elk, Sr.

Where the process ends is now up to the Holy Spirit and Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Our task now is to continue to gather more information, testimony about his life, and to pray that he is found worthy to have his cause moved forward.

So at this time, I would ask that the Decree to initiate the Cause of Beatification and Canonization of the Servant of God Nicholas Black Elk, Sr. to please be brought forward.