

**Homily for the Mass Concluding the Diocesan Phase
of the Cause for Beatification and Canonization
of Servant of God Nicholas William Black Elk, Sr.**

Bishop Robert D. Gruss
St. Agnes Catholic Church
Manderson, South Dakota
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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 any members of the family of Servant of God Nicholas Black Elk who are here today. Bringing to conclusion of the diocesan phase of the cause of canonization of Black Elk is a rewarding moment – an important moment for all of us. Now we will hope and pray that Pope Francis, when the time comes, seeks to move the cause forward by making Black Elk Venerable. This would be an important step. But in the meantime, as we forward all of the materials to Rome, we wait and continue to promote this cause and pray that a miracle happens through Black Elk’s intercession.

The readings we have chosen today come from the liturgy of Mass of All Saints. We all know that Nicholas Black Elk has not yet been declared a saint by the Church, but by choosing this Mass setting, we are celebrating all the saints now in heaven – declared and undeclared – among whom we pray that Nicholas Black Elk is now one, though not yet declared a saint. But as we all know, he has been declared Servant of God and we ask the Holy Spirit to move this cause forward. Our hope and prayer is that the summary of his life and virtues being presented to the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints will lead him to being named Venerable.

I want to take a moment to speak about the Communion of Saints. References to the communion of saints in Catholic belief can be found dating back to the fourth century. The term appears in the Apostles’ Creed, thought to have been written in the fifth century. In the Eastern Rite churches, it meant primarily a communion of “holy things”—our sharing in one baptism and especially in the Eucharist, which both represents and brings about our unity as one body of Christ.

In the Western Churches, the common understanding of the communion of saints refers to a communion of “holy ones,” both the living and the dead. If we recall the New Testament understanding, “saints” means not canonized saints (a much later development), but rather all the people of God.

St. Paul began his letter to the Philippians with these words, *“To all the holy ones in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers and ministers: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”* (Phil. 1:1) In some biblical version the word “saints” is used instead of “holy ones.”

The communion of saints is the Church” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 946). It has three states or divisions, the communion of saints of the living, those who are still on their pilgrim journey on earth; and the communion of saints of the dead or the faithful departed, some of whom are being purified, those in purgatory, and the ones who are enjoying eternal glory in the presence of God, those in heaven (Catechism, No. 954).

The best thing about the communion of saints is that it connects us all—because we are one body of Christ. When we celebrate the Eucharist, we pray with all those who have gone before us. We who are living can pray for the dead, “the souls in purgatory,” who need prayers on their journey to God. The multitude in heaven pray for the rest of us, inspire us by their example, and remain present to us in ways of which we know yet not. As we celebrate this Mass today, we are mindful of being united with Nicholas Black Elk in this Eucharist.

In the first reading from the Book of Revelation we find a vision of all the nations gathered around God’s throne in heaven – *“a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue. They stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation comes from our God, who is seated on the throne, and from the Lamb.”*

Perhaps there is a connection between this vision and Black Elk’s vision of all the nations of the earth coming together around the living tree – the tree which gives life – God himself. Who knows and we may never know. But we do know that the One who gives life is the Creator. We also know that Black Elk’s visions were seemingly prophetic in the sense that in the Two Roads Maps there were featured ideas and images that both subtly and overtly paralleled those in his vision.

From the Sixth Grandfather:

“And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as

daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy.”

I will let others determine the connection, but obviously there is something very holy about this vision which guided the life and ministry of Nicholas Black Elk.

As we bring the conclusion of this Diocesan phase of the Cause for Canonization, our hope and prayer is that one day Nicholas Black Elk will become one in the Communion of Saints as recognized and named by the Church for his life of heroic virtue and holiness and intercession.

Pope Francis speaks of saints as men and women who live the Beatitudes which Jesus spoke to the people in the Sermon on the Mount from this Gospel today. He wrote in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete Et Exsultate* [in English – Rejoice and Be Glad] – On the Call to Holiness in Today’s World, that the saints are blessed because they were faithful and meek and cared for others. The best description of the saints – in fact, their “identity card” – is found in the beatitudes, which begins, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” [*Gaudete Et Exsultate*, 63]

As Christian saints have done throughout the ages, Christ’s followers today are called “to confront the troubles and anxieties of our age with the spirit and love of Jesus.” This description fits the life of Nicholas Black Elk. He sought to confront the troubles and anxieties of his age with the spirit and love of Jesus. As he actively engaged the spirit inside of him, the openness to the Spirit of God in his life led him to his conversion and his life as a Catholic catechist.

As we know, Nicholas as a young man, was an important medicine man, using his gifts from God to heal the sick. After becoming Catholic he embraced a different way of healing. With his gifts of being able to memorize Scripture and speak convincingly about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, he became a missionary disciple for his time – and an example for our time. For Black Elk, a life given over to Jesus was the answer to life’s problems and challenges. This Servant of God challenged people to renew themselves, to seek this life that Christ offers them – a life he modeled and about which he preached – again an example for all of us as we seek holiness in our lives.

Damian Costello wrote about this in a recent article in the Vermont Catholic. “Black Elk explained this hope in a 1909 letter he wrote to the Lakota. He listed the tribes he visited and included the settlers among them.

All — whether Lakota, allies or former enemies — are good people and he prayed for all. “We all suffer in this land,” Black Elk wrote. “But let me tell you, God has a special place for us when our time has come.””

This speaks of how the Beatitudes were Black Elk’s identity card. *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you falsely because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.”*

Such was the life of Nicholas Black Elk, this missionary disciple. Again as Pope Francis wrote in *Gaudete Et Exsultate* – *“Although Jesus’ words may strike us as poetic, they clearly run counter to the way things are usually done in our world. Even if we find Jesus’ message attractive, the world pushes us towards another way of living. The Beatitudes are in no way trite or undemanding, quite the opposite. We can only practice them if the Holy Spirit fills us with his power and frees us from our weakness, our selfishness, our complacency and our pride.”* [*Gaudete Et Exsultate*, 65]

In his local missionary newsletter Black Elk 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.”¹ Of course as we all know, Christ’s work is never done. And perhaps Nicholas Black Elk’s life is not done as well – yes, on this earth it is – but as we seek his intercession before the throne of God for all of us, his ministry continues.

As this diocesan phase comes to an end, we pray the work done by so many will lead to sainthood for this Lakota holy man. May he continue inspire many others to walk the good red road as he did, offering a way forward in hope — a better path for all.

Nicholas Black Elk, pray for us.

¹ Fr. Michael Steltenkamp, S.J.; Nicholas Black Elk: Medicine Man, Missionary, Mystic, page 223