

# Nicholas Black Elk

Catechist



Black Elk's life spanned two very different eras. He lived and knew well the ancient spiritual traditions of his people. Many books have been written about his early life as a medicine man.

Less well known is his life as an apostle for Christ among the plains tribes. He never went to school, yet he acquired a deep understanding of the Catholic faith. His gentle wisdom and holy life will surely inspire Catholics of every nation.

When Black Elk was a child in the 1860s the Oglala Sioux still roamed free on the plains. Little did they know how much or how soon their way of life would be changed forever.

At age nine he experienced a great vision which influenced him for the rest of his life. He felt that he had been chosen for some special purpose, and struggled to understand what this could mean. Later, he learned the ways of a healer and eventually became a medicine man.

As a young man he witnessed the defeat of Custer at the Little Big Horn and the tragedy of Wounded Knee. Later, when the Sioux were forced onto reservations, he joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and toured throughout the U.S. and Europe.

### **THE JESUITS**

By 1882 the buffalo were gone. Spotted Tail and Red Cloud, chiefs among the Brule and Oglala, decided to invite the Jesuits to their reserves. These 'Black Robes' had gained the respect of the plains tribes, and the chiefs wanted their help in dealing with the whites, and in learning new ways to survive. Also many among the Sioux, a deeply spiritual people, wanted to learn the Christian teaching.

The U.S. government, never a friend of the Catholic Church, opposed this move. But the Sioux leadership insisted, and in 1886 the Jesuits came to live among them. These men soon became fluent in the Lakota language. People were drawn by their teaching and a few asked for baptism.

### **CONVERSION**

Black Elk's boyhood friend Kills Brave became Catholic, and asked him to think about it too. He put off this request until a chance meeting in 1904 that marked a cross roads in his life. That November he was called upon to doctor a dying boy. He went immediately with his medicines and everything he needed for the ceremony. But, at the boy's lodge, he found himself face to face with a Black Robe who had also come to anoint the boy and pray for him.



What he believed to be most sacred were the Sacraments and especially the 'Holy Food' of the Eucharist. To pray the Mass was to join in the great prayer of Christ himself. To him this was what was important now.

#### **A GIFTED PREACHER**

He had a rare gift for making clear the teachings of the Catholic faith, using examples the people understood. Pat Red Elk, who knew him, recalled, *"Those old converts could really talk. They'd just give you the works! When Nick got up he really preached. People sat there and just listened to him. They could picture what he was talking about."*

Black Elk was not only a powerful preacher but he also knew how to defend his faith. Once when a minister asked him why he honored the Blessed Virgin, the following exchange took place. Black Elk asked him: *"Are the angels good people?" "Yes," he replied. "And St. Elizabeth, is she good?" "Yes." "And the Holy Ghost?" "Yes." "Well, then, if all these honored her, why shouldn't I?"*

#### **AN OGLALA APOSTLE**

Not only did he teach among the Sioux, but he carried the gospel message to other tribes as well. Black Elk and other catechists, travelled to the Arapahoes, Omahas, Shoshones, and others. Through interpreters he taught the name of Christ to Indians who had never heard it. In some places they were turned away, but mostly they were well received and many became believers.

#### **MAN OF PRAYER**

Prayer filled his whole life and the power of his prayer was much respected. People often called upon him to pray with them. He told them, *"Never fail to pray everyday. God will take care of you and reward you for this. Say the rosary too, because that is one of the powerful prayers of Our Lord's mother."*

He came to be honored among his people as a wise and holy man. He never drank or spoke harshly of others, he was always happy and did his best to follow the good road.

John Lone Goose recalled, *"Nick wanted to teach God's word to the people. So he kept on learning, learning, learning. Pretty soon he learned what the Bible meant, and that it was good. He said, 'I want to be a catechist the rest of my life. I want it that way from here on!'"*

*"He'd go around preaching with the priests. Lots of people turned to the Catholic Church through Nick's work. He never talked about the old ways. All he talked about was the Bible and Christ. The old, young, mixed blood, even the white man, everybody that comes to him he teaches, from the Bible, from his heart."*

### **TRIALS**

Black Elk did not have an easy time of it. He had to suffer for his new faith. Some people made fun of him and said vicious things about him. He told his daughter Lucy, *"At first they called me names and said that I was the devil. But I was a catechist, so I never paid any attention to them. Pretty soon they quieted down and started coming to me. I found out that the ones who said those bad things about me were the ones most easily converted into the church. They'd come and tell me this problem and that problem, and just by looking at their faces I could understand what kind of people they are in their hearts."*

### **THINGS OLD AND NEW**

While Black Elk fully accepted the Catholic faith, he believed that many of the old ways had come from God. He often compared his people to the Israelites who waited for Christ. He said, *"God prepared us before the missionary came. Our ancestors used the pipe to know God. That's a foundation! But from the old country came Christ from heaven -a wonderful thing-the Son of God. And the Indian cares about this."*

He used both the pipe and the rosary in his prayer, and saw a connection between the old ceremonies and Christianity. But, just as God had given the old ways to the First Nations, he believed that now Christ had brought even greater gifts, and these must not be ignored.



Black Elk sensed that he was encountering a spiritual power far greater than his own. He was curious about this, and when the priest invited him to stay awhile at the mission, he accepted. There, his interest in the Christian faith grew into a firm conviction of its truth.

He recognised in Christ, the true 'Red Road' of all creation, and turned to him with his whole heart and soul. On Dec. 6th he was baptised and took the name Nicholas. He felt that the Lord had "selected him" to lead his people into this new way. In this was the true fulfilment of his vision and the real work of his life.



*Black Elk teaching children catechism using the Two Roads Map. 1935*

## THE CATECHISTS

The priests were few, so they appointed catechists to help them. One of the first was Nicholas Black Elk. These catechists met regularly for special days of training and prayer. On Sundays, when no priest was available, they led a service of hymns and prayers, and after reading the scripture they would instruct the people. When necessary, it was they who baptised, buried the dead, and visited the sick. Most of all the catechists were trained to teach converts about the Catholic faith.

Black Elk taught himself to read, and immersed himself in the study of the Bible and of prayer books written in Lakota. His friend

He liked to say, *"To live close to God is more enjoyable than to live easy - with all the pleasures and riches - because such things will never reach to heaven."*

### **HIS LAST YEARS**

For thirty one years he labored to spread the news of the hope, love and mercy that can be found in Christ. Even when old age forced him to retire, he continued visiting, consoling and praying with others. In 1941 his wife passed away and during his last years he lived with his children.

In spite of illness and suffering he remained cheerful and uncomplaining. As his life drew to a close, he confided to his daughter Lucy that he was well prepared. He said that a sacred man, a very holy priest from overseas, came everyday and prayed with him. No one doubted him.

### **A SIGN FROM HEAVEN**

Before his death on Aug 17, 1950 he told his family, *"I have a feeling that when I die, some sign will be seen. Maybe God will show something. He will be merciful to me and have something shown which will tell of his mercy."* And indeed, on the night of his wake the sky was filled with unusual signs and a brilliant display of northern lights, such as no one had ever before seen.

Nicholas Black Elk never went to school. He had been both warrior and healer. He knew and loved the spiritual traditions of his people. Yet he saw Christ as their fulfillment, and His religion as the new way which the Creator meant for all to follow. He remained solid in his Catholic faith to the end. The legacy of this great and humble man lives on in those who like him, remain steadfast in faith, hope, and love.

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All quotes are taken from the book **'Black Elk, Holy Man of the Oglala.'** This is a fascinating account of his life as a Catholic catechist, written by Michael Steltenkamp. University of Oklahoma Press.

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