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Sodalities Strengthened Faith of Dioceses' Indians

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By Mark Thiel

(Editor's note: Following is a synopsis of a thesis paper written by Mark Thiel, formerly of the Diocese of Rapid City. Thiel, 40, has a master's degree in History Education and is an assistant archivist for the Catholic Native American Records section of the Marquette University Library Archives, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He also works with the Jesuits and is the archivist at Holy Rosary Mission, St. Francis Mission and Red Cloud Indian School.

Thiel lived in South Dakota from 1980 to 1983. He was the archivist for Oglala Lakota College at Pine Ridge where his duties included keeping tribal records. He keeps current on South Dakota events by visiting the Jesuits at Holy Rosary and St. Francis Missions annually. He also attends the National Teakawitha Conferences.

While the family lived in South Dakota Thiel's wife, Patricia Poskie-Thiel, worked for the Diocesan Religious Education Office and taught second grade at St. Elizabeth Seton Central Catholic School. She is currently teaching in a parochial school in Wisconsin.)

The great Catholic Sioux Congress of June 25-29, 1910, was spectacular. A crowd of 4,000 Sioux sodality delegates and representatives from other tribes welcomed Archbishop Diomed Falconio, a papal delegate, to Standing Rock Reservation.

The Sioux expressed their loyalty and devotion to the Church. In a ceremony the papal delegate was given money, a pipe and tobacco (symbolic of surrendering tribal beliefs) and an Indian name, Inayan Bolsa or Standing Rock. The name referred to the Great Rock of Rome. The conclusion was a great handshake. All persons in attend-



Catholic Sioux Congress, Ft. Totten, N.D. Bishop Martin Marty began the congresses July 4, 1891. The Indians had a tradition of gathering during the summer solstice so the time chosen was quite popular. The U.S. government opposed the summer congresses because they wanted the Indians involved in patriotic celebrations not religious ones. (Photo courtesy of Mark Thiel from the Marquette University Archives. Copyright St. Michael's Mission, St. Michael, N.D.)

ance shook hands with Falconio while singing European Christian hymns translated into the Sioux Language.

Even as the congress was being held, there was a growing disinterest in the church on many Sioux Reservations. In the late 1800's original interest in the church came about through the Sioux seeking new religious practices to solve temporal problems. Many were prepared to add Christian teachings to their spiritual traditions. The concept of exclusive religious truth was foreign.

One early missionary, Fr. Pierre De Smet, also served in the role of mediator and peacemaker between the U. S. military and the Sioux. De Smet was followed in ministry by Fr. Martin M. Marty, a Benedictine abbot, in 1876.

Marty came to the territory in response to an appeal by the Catholic

Indian Missions, an advocacy agency established to defend Catholic Indian missionary interests from the President Ulysses Grant administration's peace policy. The policy until 1881 limited Catholic evangelization among the Sioux to the Devil's Lake Reservation and the Standing Rock Agency.

Marty, with the aid of a local woman who had a French and Sioux heritage, established a school. It served children and provided Sioux language classes for missionaries. After six years of evangelization, interest in the church varied from completely indifferent to openly hostile. Frontier ministry required priests of youthful vigor, strength, tenacity and eccentricity. Marty welcomed all the priests he could get, including troublemakers.

Native resistance to evangelization led to the use of improvisation in ministry. Marty teamed with two other missionaries, Fathers Ignatius Court and Jerome Hunt, to organize separate but complementary sodalities for men and women. The first sodalities were established at Ft. Totten, North Dakota.

Each society had the conventional officers plus unique positions such as door keeper, visitor of the sick, waiter, herald, hair cutter and horse trader. Membership was limited to Catholics married within the Church who had received first communion.

The sodalities made their official debut on St. Joseph's Day, March 19, 1884. Sodalists were quick to observe the Sabbath and catechize their brethren. They were also known for avoiding polygamy, profanity, and drunkenness. The sodalities provided men with new and valued opportunities for community stature. As in pre-reservation days, young adults were again given compelling reasons to live by high virtuous standards.

Sodality meetings were typically held each Sunday with prayer services led by a catechist or an infrequent Mass when a priest was available. The services included songs, prayers, gospel readings, and catechism class as preparation for receiving the sacraments.

The meeting would be followed by a joint-affairs meeting commenced by the St. Joseph Society president. He would present an address on some aspect of Christian faith. Afterwards, he would appoint two to four men to speak on that subject. The program then continued with the St. Mary Society president selecting a similar complement of women speakers. Open questions and comments followed, including mutual encouragements for leading a Christian life and public confession on former ways.

In South Dakota the people were

virtually untouched by Roman Catholicism. Most conversions were reported among small children enrolled in mission schools. A break through was accomplished in 1888. Catholic missionaries arranged for a contingent of St. Joseph Society members from Ft. Totten to visit Standing Rock Agency. The Ft. Totten sodalists soon established four St. Joseph's and four St. Mary's Societies, one for each community. Local Catholicism grew rapidly.

Marty became Bishop of Dakota Territory. He saw the sodalities as a promising lay extension of the institutional Church that could relieve the shortage of priests and religious within the diocese.

Other Catholic evangelizers in South Dakota included the Jesuits, who established St. Francis Mission near the Rosebud Agency in 1886 and Holy Rosary Mission near the Pine Ridge Agency in 1888. Immaculate Conception School at Stephan on the Crow Creek Reservation was established by the Benedictines in 1887.

Hunt traveled to St. Francis to teach Sioux Language fundamentals to the Jesuits and stressed the importance of beginning immediate preaching in the language.

By 1890, the Messiah movement or Ghost Dance (promising salvation and deliverance for the Indian people) was peaking. During the summer of 1890 a sense of crisis gripped the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations. Pent-up frustration emerged from that season's drought, economic crisis, and starvation. The message of the Messiah movement promised a return of the buffalo. At Holy Rosary Mission all but six children were taken home by parents, fearful of the movement's turmoil.

On December 29, 1890, the massacre at Wounded Knee occurred.

In June of 1891, several months after peace had been restored, Marty issued a general invitation to all Catholic Sioux and the Catholic Sodalities for a general congress to be held at Standing Rock Agency over the Fourth of July. The time was a popular one for a Sioux gathering since in pre-reservation days, the sun dance was the premier annual and ritual renewal of the Sioux tribes. It was held at summer solstice and the date nearly approximated July 4.

Two thousand Sioux gathered for the first general Catholic Sioux Congress. Contingents were present from several reservations including Devil's Lake, Cheyenne River, Pine Ridge, Rosebud and the host reservation, Standing Rock.



Ignatius Court shown in a full headdress. Court was a Catholic convert with a mission school background. He joined Bishop Martin Marty and Fr. Jerome Hunt in adapting the old European sodalities to the Indian culture. (Photo courtesy of Mark Thiel from the Marquette University Archives).

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