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**Review of *Nicholas Black Elk: Medicine Man, Catechist, Saint*
by Jon M. Sweeney**

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Jon M. Sweeney. *Nicholas Black Elk: Medicine Man, Catechist, Saint*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021. 144 pages. \$16.95 (paperback).

In 2017, at the annual meeting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Bishop Robert Gruss from the Diocese of Rapid City South Dakota presented the case for the canonization of Nicholas Black Elk, perhaps the most famous holy man of the Lakota Sioux. Nebraska author John Niehardt helped make Black Elk known internationally through his book, *Black Elk Speaks*, in which Black Elk shared with Niehardt the Lakota vision of the spirit otherworld that Black Elk feared would be lost as native American culture was dying. Yet Black Elk was also a Catholic in the second half of his life, due in part to the presence of the Jesuit missionaries in South Dakota. Black Elk's family, much earlier, had lobbied for his canonization, based on his role in converting some 400 people to the Catholic faith, as well as a number of "miraculous healings accredited to the intercession of Nick" (p. 104).

Sweeney's book is a brief attempt to discuss Black Elk's life within the evolution of the Plains Indians, the tragedies faced by Native Americans, his conversion to Catholicism and his role as a catechist of the Catholic faith. Interspersed across this narrative is the role of the Jesuits as missionaries in South Dakota, who were instrumental in many elements of Black Elk's Christian faith formation. Sweeney seeks to reconcile how Black Elk could simultaneously hold and practice both Catholic and Lakota religious beliefs.

In the first half of Sweeney's book, the author overviews Black Elk's participation at the Battle of Little Big Horn, the slaughter of Native Americans at Wounded Knee, and Black Elk's travels around the United States and Europe in which he showcased Lakota culture and dance-

rituals. This overview is brief, and unfortunately arguably cursory, but it is certainly successful in whetting the appetite for more reading regarding Black Elk.

The book's second half is more compelling as Sweeney examines Black Elk's conversion to Catholicism, which was fostered by Jesuits, or "Black Robes," who welcomed many elements of Lakota beliefs alongside Catholicism. Sweeney discusses Black Elk's conversion moment, which occurred when the Lakota Holy man was ministering to an ill Native American boy using Lakota healing methods. During this, he was interrupted by Jesuit priest, Joseph Lindebner, who aggressively confronted Black Elk and called upon him to end his Lakota ways and convert to Catholicism. Black Elk's conversion came immediately after. However, Sweeney argues that the event seemed both uncharacteristic of both Black Elk and Fr. Lindebner's behaviors and personalities.

Regardless of the perplexing circumstances of this exchange, what is clear is that Black Elk accepted Catholicism, and for the remainder of his life served as an entrepreneurial catechist, bringing the faith to many, while explicitly supporting key elements of Catholicism. Nonetheless, other evidence suggests Black Elk's ongoing respect for and use of his Lakota religious beliefs. In discussing Black Elk's Catholicism, Sweeney is critical of Niehardt for neglecting Black Elk's Catholicism in his own book, suggesting that Niehardt may have exaggerated certain elements of Black Elk's vision (p. 5) and suggests that Niehardt was more of a story-teller than historian. Sweeney somewhat flippantly notes "we'll leave it there" (p. xvi). It's quite a critique to make of

Niehardt, which would be more convincing with additional supporting evidence from Sweeney.

Despite his critiques of Niehardt, Sweeney's main conclusion is that Black Elk could hold both Lakota and Catholic perspectives simultaneously. Sweeney maintains that Nicholas Black Elk successfully co-existed among these religions, which were fostered by the Jesuit missionaries at the time who embraced an ecumenical outlook, and thus found ways to be inclusive and welcoming of Lakota beliefs. As noted, a Jesuit arguably played a critical role in his conversion. Jesuits also established the first missions among the Lakota population and helped create the first Lakota-English dictionary. And, Jesuits presided over Black Elk's Christian funeral.

In sum, this book is a very useful primer for more study of Black Elk as well as the Jesuit missionaries. It's rather brief coverage of Black Elk is both its strength, in that this book is highly accessible to a wide readership, but also its limitation due to its sometimes very limited analysis. The book should certainly be viewed as only a starter for understanding Nicholas Black Elk. HJE