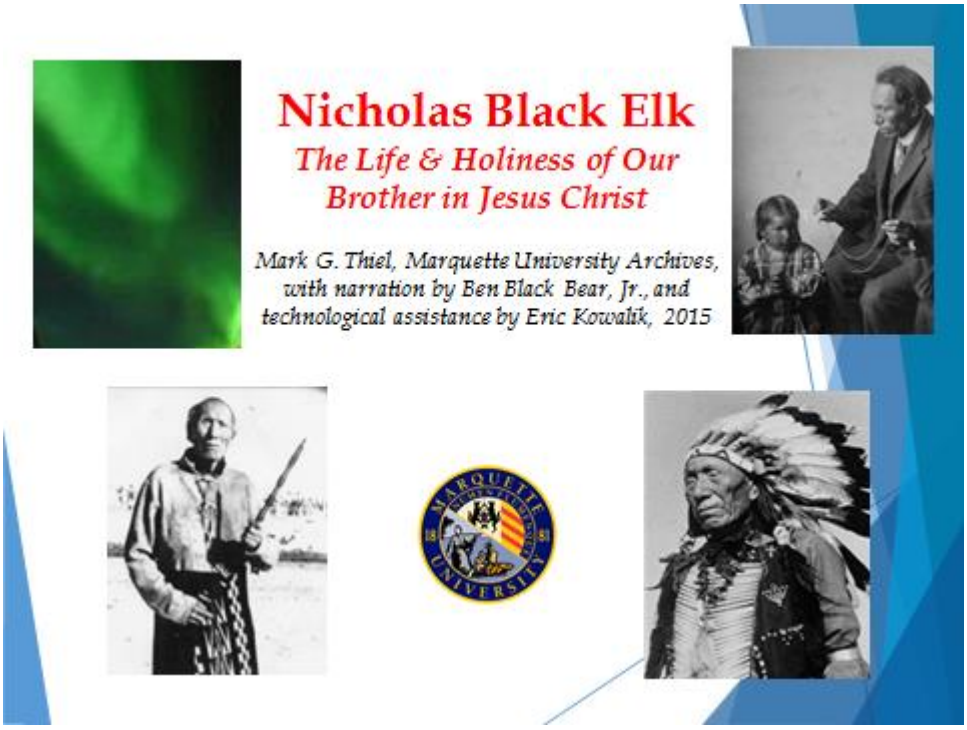
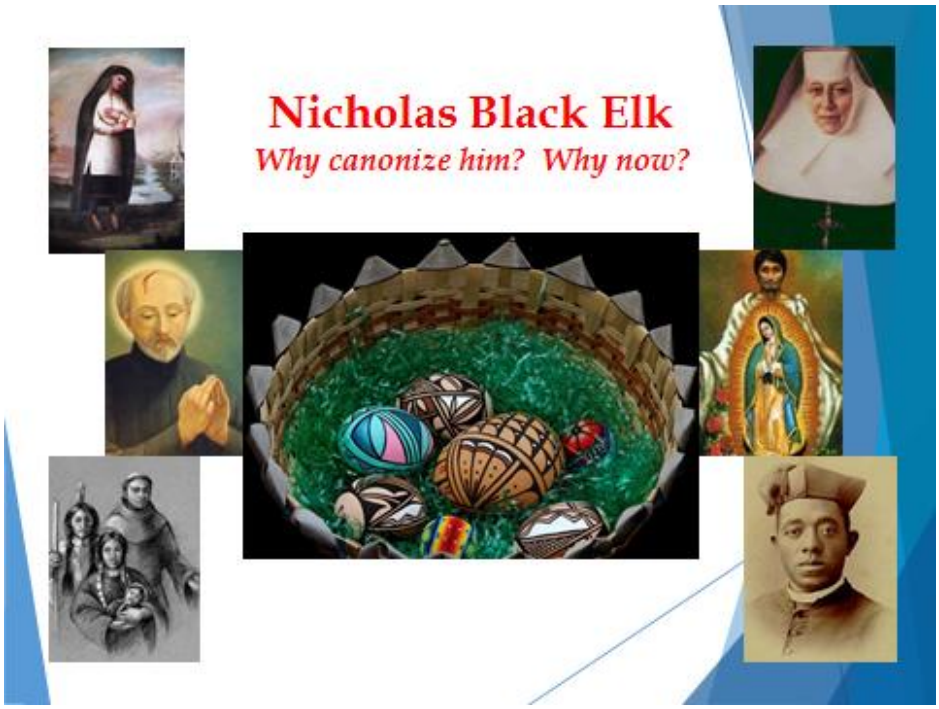
The Life & Holiness of Nicholas Black Elk, Our Brother in Jesus Christ
By Mark G. Thiel, Marquette University Archives, with narration by Ben Black Bear, Jr.,
And technological assistance by Eric Kowalik, 2015-2017

Video: [The Life and Holiness of Nicholas Black Elk, Our Brother in Jesus Christ]

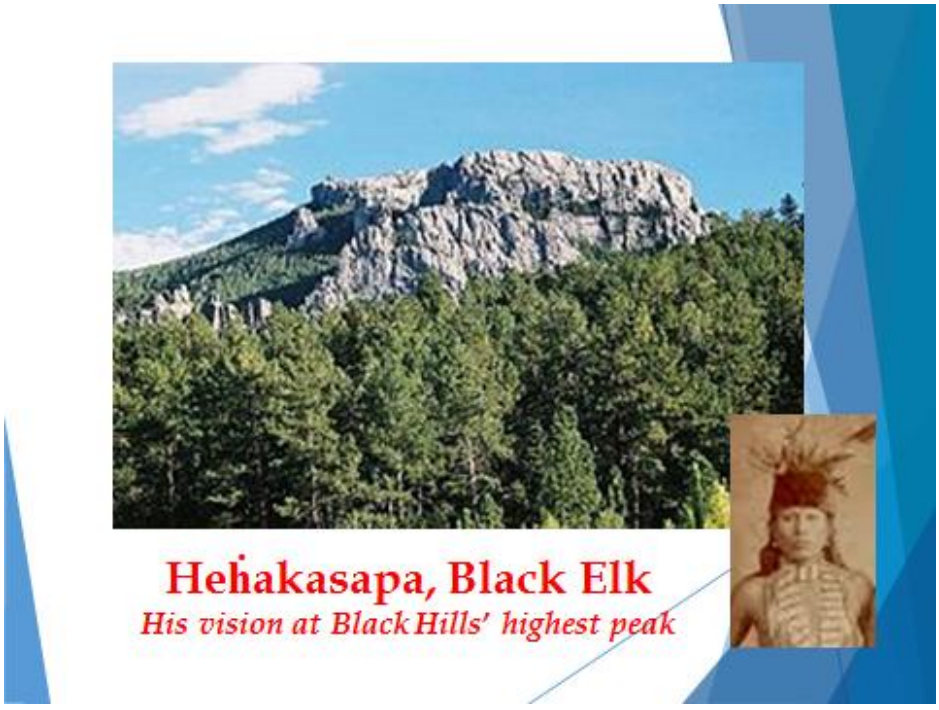


1. Nicholas Black Elk lived a life of holiness during the 19th and 20th centuries. He was a Lakota Sioux holy man and lay convert in South Dakota and he became widely known through the books ***Black Elk Speaks*** and ***Nicholas Black Elk: Medicine Man, Mystic, Missionary***. Baptized "Nicholas," after the saint whose generous giving resonated with Lakota traditions, he committed his life to better knowing the Great Spirit and teaching Jesus' way of peace, love, and harmony towards all creation. In so doing he seamlessly lived Christian and Native ways without contradiction and led over 400 Dakota-Lakota people to baptism in Jesus Christ.



2. *So why canonize Nicholas Black Elk and why now?* By baptism, all Christians are called to become saints, and since its first days, the church has ***canonized*** outstanding Christians it identifies as intercessors of prayer and models of virtue. But north of Mexico, such efforts were delayed until 1884 when the United States bishops felt sufficiently organized. Then they nominated three 17th century candidates from New York State – Mohawk-Algonquin convert ***Kateri Tekakwitha*** and Jesuit Father ***Isaac Jogues***, both on the left, and other Jesuit companions added later. As martyrs, the causes of the Jesuits concluded first and they were canonized in 1930. Kateri's cause then followed and ended with her canonization in 2012. Meanwhile, more North Americans followed, such as Saint ***Katharine Drexel***, a wealthy benefactor who fought racism by funding Catholic schools for African and Native American children and ***Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin*** [Kău -ōu-tă-tō-ŌT-zĭn], a 16th century Aztec convert in Mexico who at the request of Mary, the Mother of God, had a shrine built in her honor. Since then, candidates have been nominated with regularity, such as Apalachee convert ***Antonio Cuipa and 81 companions***, all 17th century converts and missionaries in Florida martyred by Anglo-led slave seekers and ***Father Augustus Tolton***, a pioneering priest born who fought life-long racism and founded Chicago's first African American parish. Now, inspired by Saint Kateri's lead, many faithful believe that Nicholas Black Elk should be nominated too.

3. His daughter Lucy Looks Twice said that ***Heȟakasapa***, or Black Elk, was born into Big Road's band in 1866 on the Little Powder River in Wyoming. In his family, he was the fourth generation named Black Elk after his father and grandfather who were prominent medicine men. While growing up, he played boyhood games, hunted with his father, and listened to the wisdom stories told by his elders, and in so doing, he learned courage, bravery, and spiritual awareness in all things.



4. As a boy, Black Elk achieved devotion and deep belief in divine power, and by age six, his elders agreed that he had received a great vision from ***Wakan Tanka***, the Great Spirit. In it, he prayed atop ***Hinhan Kaga***, or Black Elk Peak, which at 7,242 feet of elevation, is the Black Hills' highest point and the highest one in the United States east of the Rocky Mountains. He recalled, *"I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I 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."* Four years later, on June 25-26, 1876, on the Little Bighorn River in Montana, the Lakota and their allies courageously faced the U.S. Army's 7th Cavalry Regiment and achieved victory in a great battle. And although traumatized, young Black Elk supported his people to the extent possible. Fearing retaliation, several bands, including Big Road's, fled into exile in western Canada where they endured starvation as the buffalo herds declined. Meanwhile, because of his vision, some medicine men helped Black Elk to become a healer like his father and grandfather. Then after four years in Canada, Big Road's Band began its return to South Dakota, and along the way, Black Elk led a horsetail dance to announce the start of his healing practice.

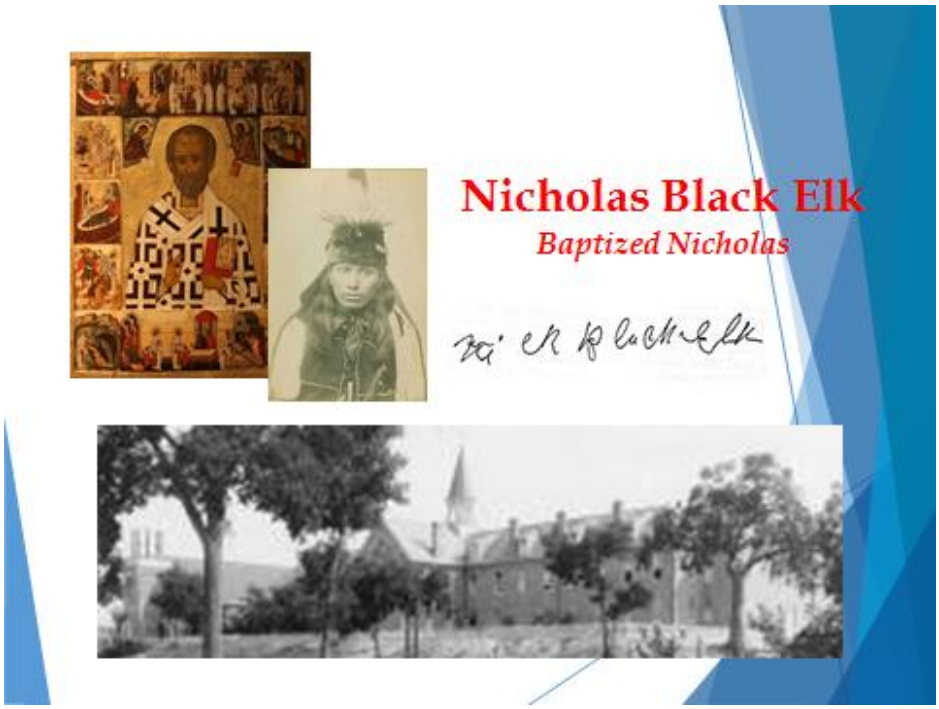
5. Big Road's Band settled at Pine Ridge, one of the agencies of the Great Sioux Indian Reservation, where Lakota life was changing rapidly. Black Elk remained strong in his devotion and respect to the Great Spirit, and he continually sought to learn more about his ways. In early 1885, he dictated a dire but hopeful letter to ***Iapi Oaye*** or ***Word Carrier***, a

Protestant Dakota language newspaper. In it he exclaimed, *"…my relatives, those of you who read the book* [the Bible] *… it is necessary to have the people follow the laws closely. Life on earth is very near* [the end] *I believe…"* And with 176 Lakota people – primarily grass dancers and mission schoolboys – Black Elk signed a letter supporting Pope Leo XIII to declare the Mohawk virgin, Kateri Tekakawitha, a saint in heaven. Based at Standing Rock Agency, it was one of 27 such letters signed by Native North Americans after the U.S. bishops had nominated her in December of 1884, and Lakota people responded resoundingly with a disproportionate share of the 906 total signatures. Quite likely, Father Francis Craft, shown in clerical dress and dance regalia, encouraged this strong response. He was a Kateri devotee who immersed himself in Lakota culture while serving as an itinerant pastor reaching out to the Lakota people.

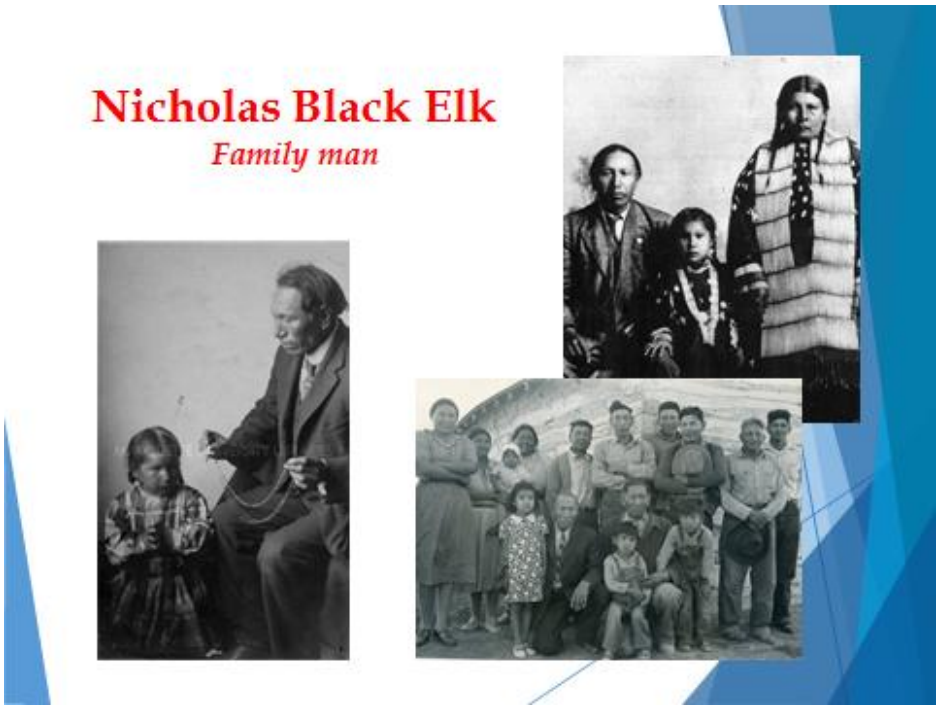
6. Eager for adventure, Black Elk joined "Buffalo Bill" Cody's Wild West show the next year where he visited Chicago, New York, and Montreal. The following year, they visited England, and in London, because of his exceptional dancing ability, he was selected as one of the few to dance for Queen Victoria's private show honoring her 50th anniversary as queen. On the right, a photographer there took his picture in regalia with Elk. To the north in Manchester, Black Elk and others road streetcars. But the show moved on without them, which forced him to sharpen his English-speaking skills. Then alone, he visited Germany and lived with a family in Paris, which further expanded his view of the world. He experienced more hospitality and saw Christian faith in action, and although he grew up believing all Crow Indians were horse thieves and

untrustworthy, he learned to judge everyone fairly and honestly as individuals, rather than as members of ethnic or racial groups, which in ***Iapi Oaye*** he recorded, *"… of the white man's many customs, only his faith…* [their] *beliefs about God's will, and how they acted… I wanted to understand. I traveled to one city after another and there were many customs around God's will."*

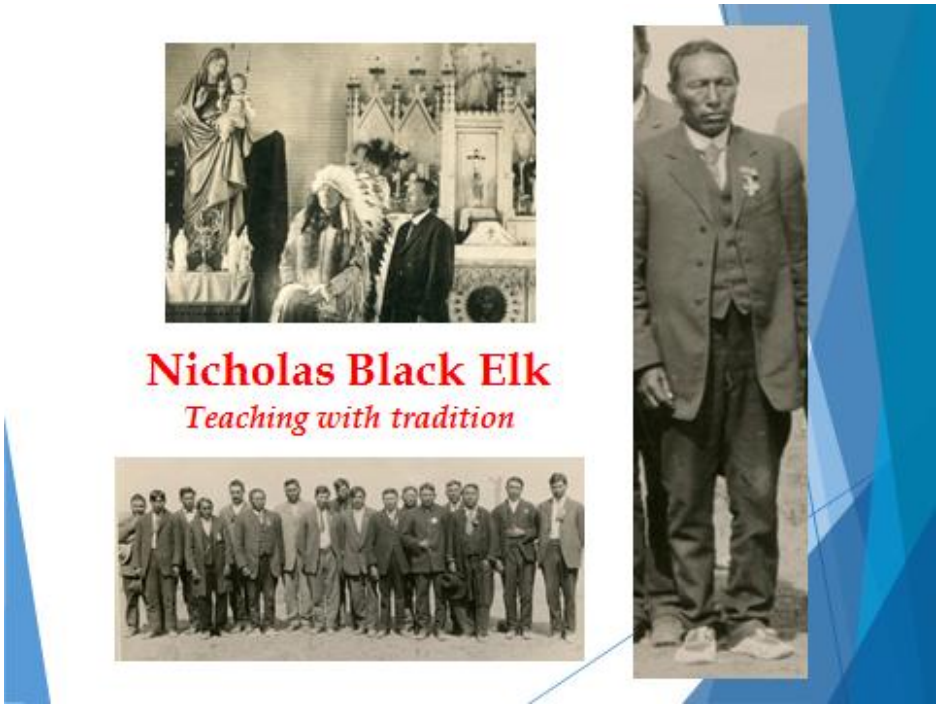
7. By 1889, Black Elk was homesick in Paris, and he met Buffalo Bill who arranged his return home to Pine Ridge. There he continued his spiritual quest by participating in the Messiah Movement or Ghost Dance, a religious revival with Lakota and Christian beliefs. After vigorous dancing, he had another vision. *"I saw the holy tree full of leaves and blooming . . . Against the tree there was a man standing with arms held wide in front of him. I looked hard at him, and I could not tell what people he came from… His hair was long and hanging loose, and on the left side of his head he wore an eagle feather… his body… became very beautiful with all colors of light… He spoke like singing: 'My life is such that all earthly things belong to me. Your father, The Great Sprit, has said this. You too must say this.' Then he went out like a light in a wind…"* and he noted the "*...holes in the palms of his hands*." But the U.S. Cavalry ended it tragically at Wounded Knee Creek on December 29, 1890. Just before it began, Father Craft attempted to persuade ghost dancers to turn back, for which Black Elk complemented him as "…*a very good man, and not like the other Wasichus*." Both were wounded and over 200 people were killed.



8. Two years later, Black Elk married Katherine War Bonnet of the Pine Ridge Agency community of Oglala, where they raised their family. Apparently, she was Catholic, because their three children – all sons including Ben – were so baptized. Katherine died in 1903, and Black Elk continued his healing practice, while he having conflicted thoughts, severe ulcers, and feelings of being drawn by the Great Spirit towards a new direction. The next year, a Lakota family summoned him and Jesuit Father Joseph Lindebner to minister to their dying son. On meeting the priest, Black Elk deferred to him and his Christian prayer without protest and he accepted his invitation to study the Catholic faith at the nearby Holy Rosary Mission. After two weeks of intense study, Father Lindebner baptized him "Nicholas" on December 6th, the feast day of Saint Nicholas. Therefor he took to heart the legacy of his new patron saint – Saint Nicholas – known for his humility and charity, especially towards children and the poor, which resonated strongly with his commitment to healing others. No longer did he sign his name as just ***Heȟakasapa*** or ***Black Elk***; instead, now he signed it ***Nicholas*** or ***Nick Black Elk***. Furthermore, medical treatments soon cured his ulcers permanently.

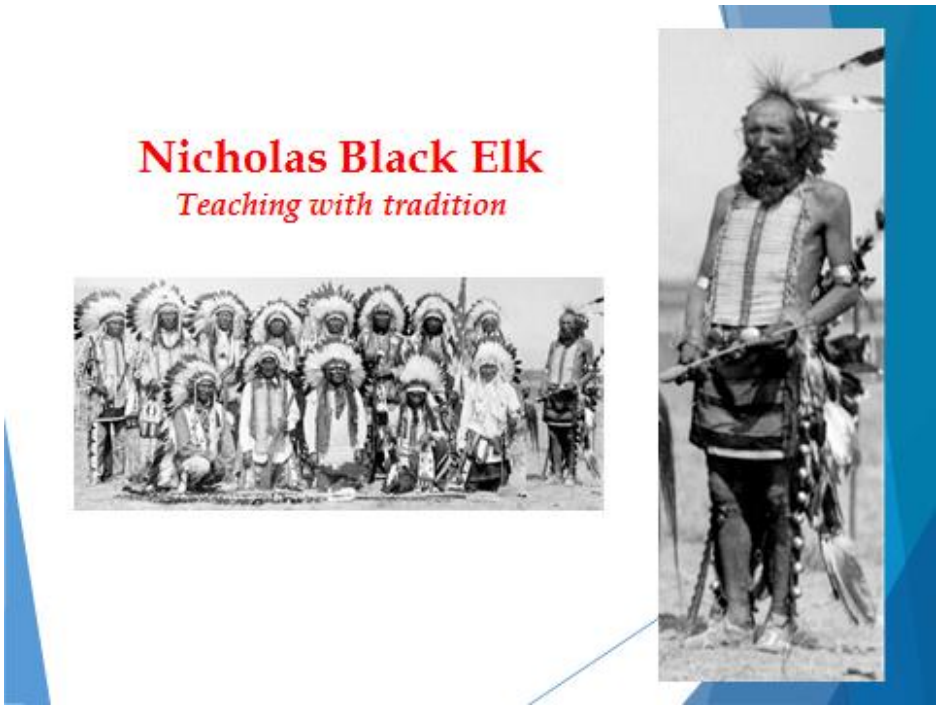


9. Soon, Nick Black Elk married again, and his second wife, Anna Brings White, was Catholic too. She bore daughter Lucy the next year and two sons after that. Anna died in 1942, and thereafter, Black Elk lived with his adult children and their families.

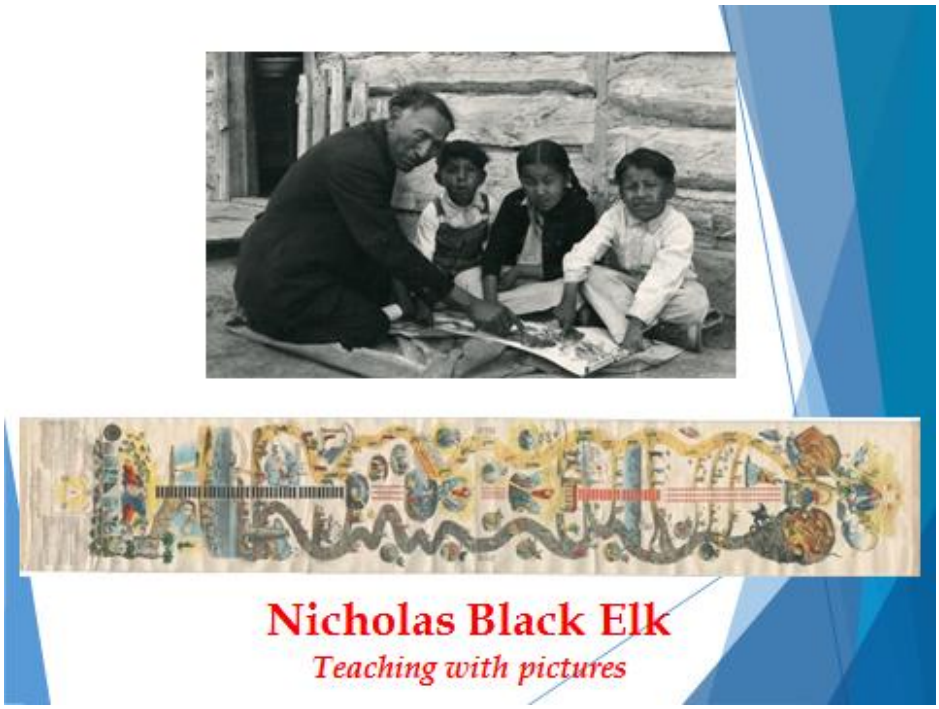


10. Meanwhile, the Jesuits recognized Nick Black Elk's enthusiasm and excellent memory for Scripture and church teachings in Lakota. So, they appointed him as a catechist or teacher of Christian faith where he campaigned for Christ in many camps and

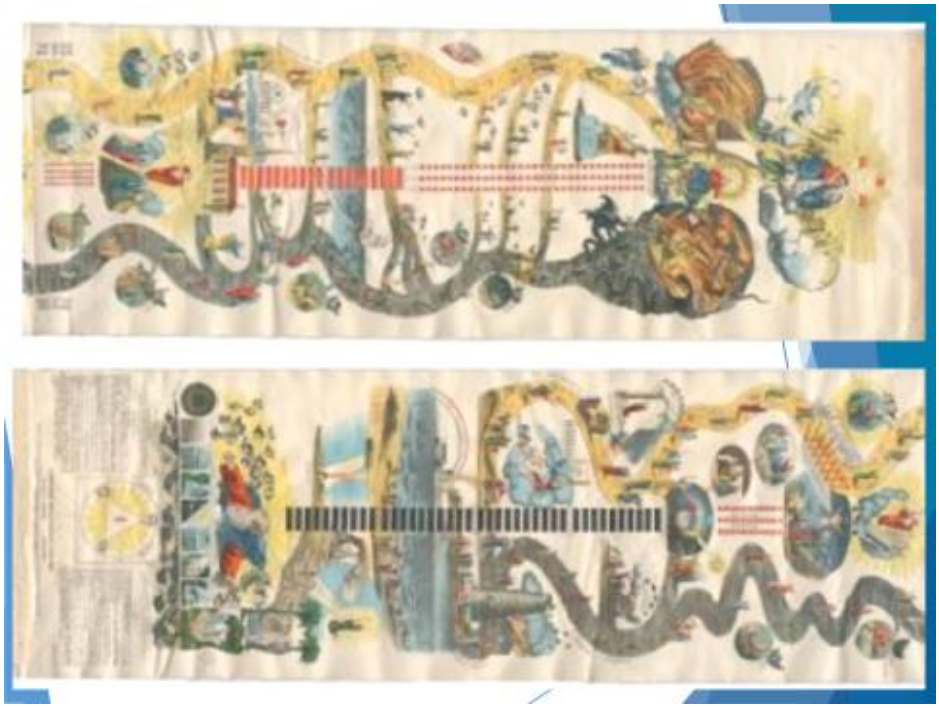
communities. At first, he served from Our Lady of the Sioux Church at Oglala above, and by 1907, he served most years from Saint Agnes at Manderson. In 1911, he attended a statewide Catholic Sioux Congress at Holy Rosary where he and fellow catechists wore three-piece suits donated to the mission. But instead of wearing shoes, Black Elk wore fully beaded moccasins. By then, he had ended his healing practice, because he saw it as contradicting prayer to the Great Spirit as the Triune God of the Creator Father, his son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Likewise, he repudiated the aspects of violence in his great vision. Soon, other Lakota people who knew him as a healer followed him to Jesus.



11. Nonetheless, Nicholas Black Elk continued his overall involvement in traditional Lakota ways. Now in his 40s, he still danced actively as shown in this 1908 lineup at a rodeo in Interior, South Dakota, just north of the reservation. While most dancers wore popular chief's regalia, again Black Elk stood apart and wore the traditional warrior's regalia with the porcupine hair roach headdress and eagle feather crow belt.

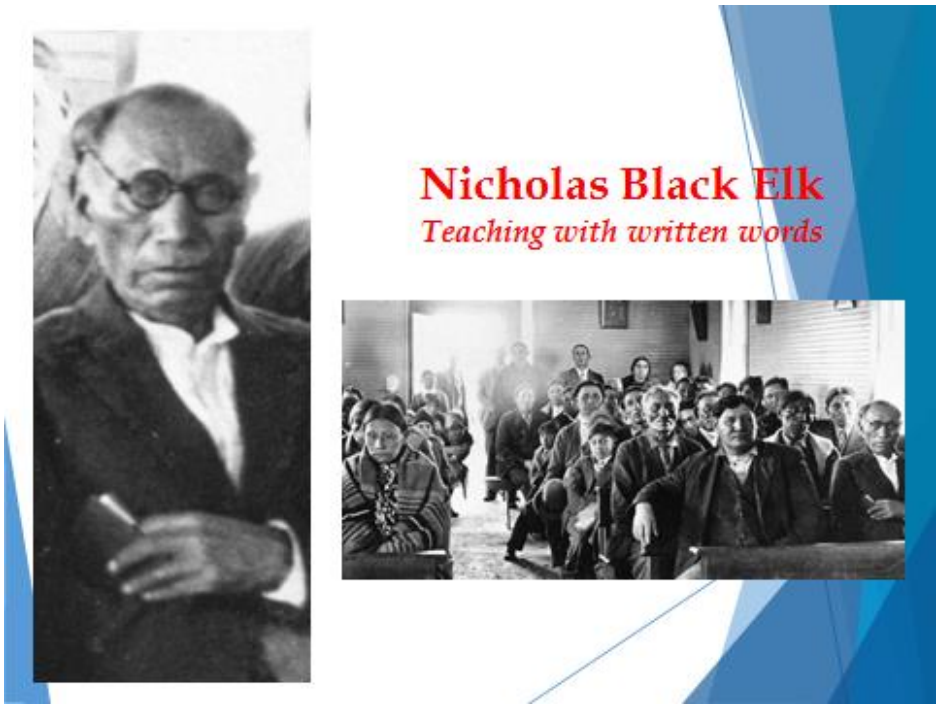


12. As a catechist, Nicholas Black Elk frequently taught the *Bible* with the ***Two Roads***, a colorful teaching scroll invented generations before. Here he's teaching children with it at their Pine Ridge Reservation home during the 1920s.

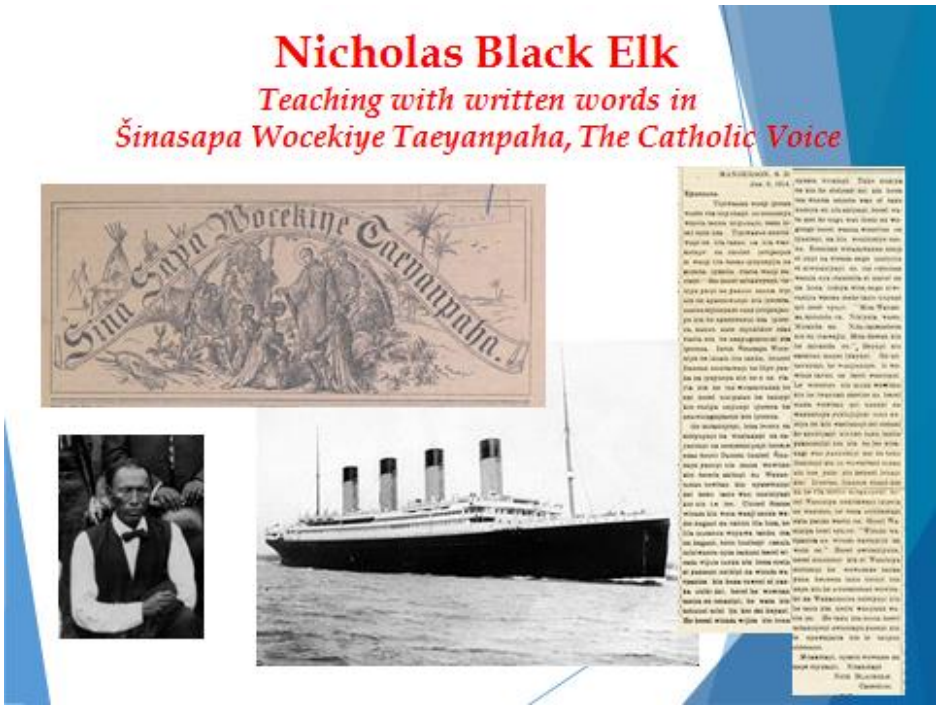


13. Read from bottom to top, the ***Two Roads*** presents a Biblical timeline along the center from the Jewish Old Testament in black to Jesus' New Testament in red and supplemented with pictures of the world's Creation in seven days, the Garden of Eden,

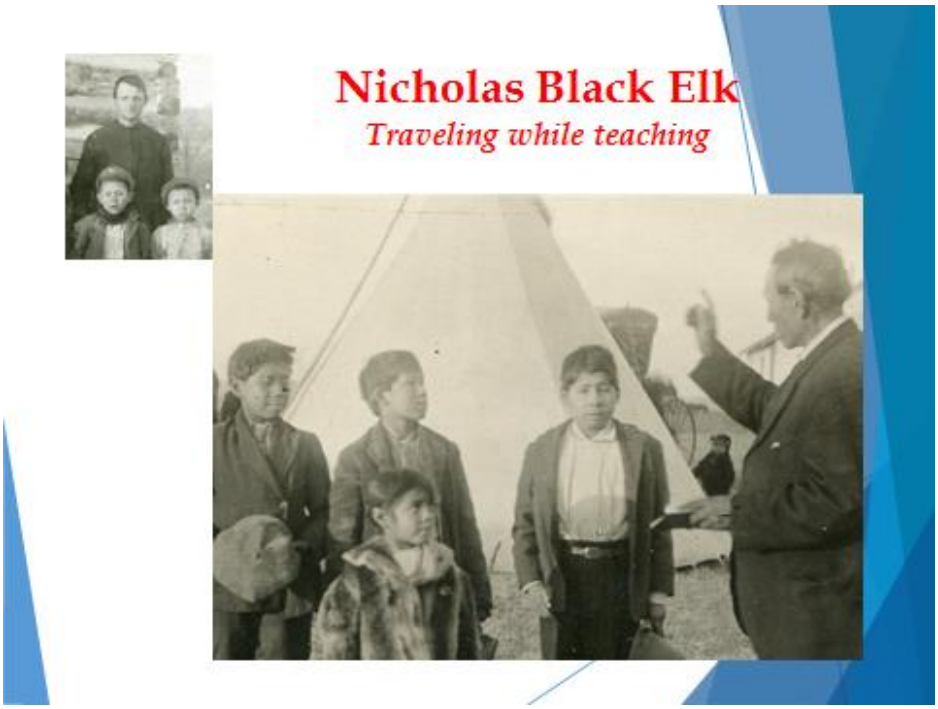
Jesus' life, and the Church's founding to eternal judgement. The sides support the center with two parallel roads of contrasting conduct. The left presents a golden good way of righteousness with pictures of Noah's Ark and the flood, the seven sacraments, the seven virtues of the Church, and the Communion of saints leading to a celestial Heaven; and the right presents a black bad way of difficulties with pictures of Cain's sin leading from Eden to the Tower of Babel, the Protestant Reformers, and the Devil to a fiery Hell.



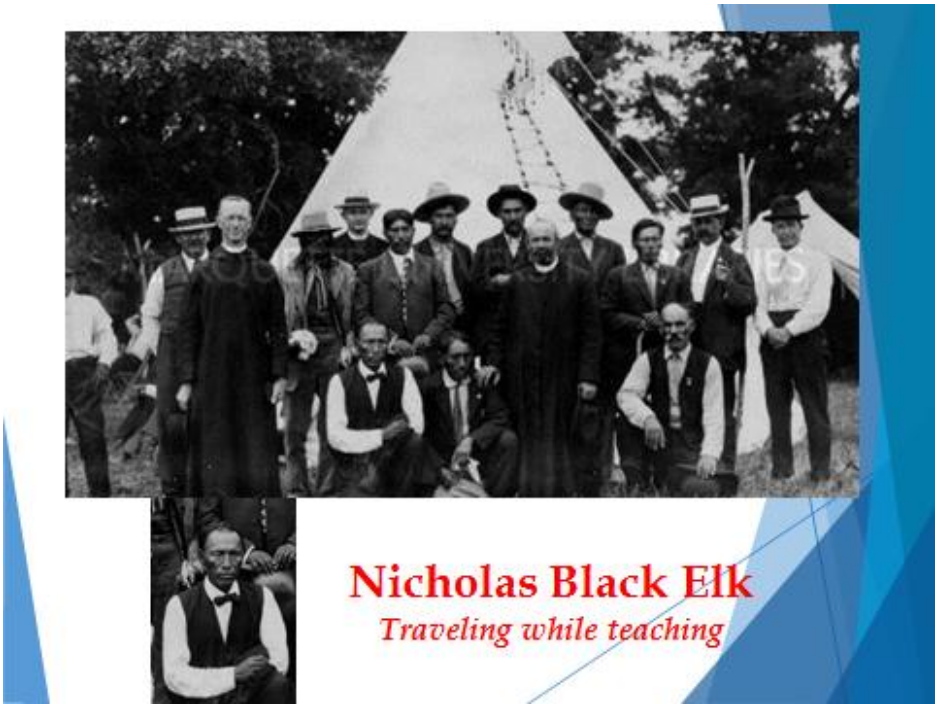
14. Glasses were difficult to acquire. So only those with poor eyesight and a desire to read and write made the effort. Nicholas Black Elk was so motivated, as shown in Saint Elizabeth's Church, also in Oglala, in 1936 at age 70. Since he was past school age when schools were first established at Pine Ridge, he made the extra effort and taught himself to read and write newspapers, the *Bible*, and other books in Lakota and English.



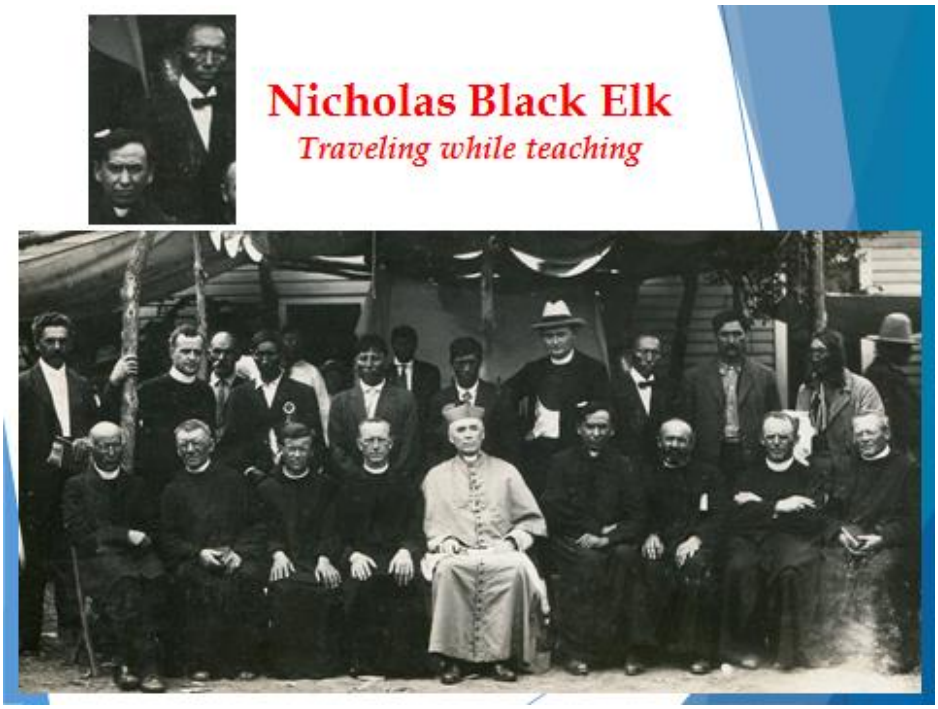
15. Like other catechists, Nicholas Black Elk wrote pastoral letters about Christian living. They appeared in ***Šinasapa Wocekiye Taeyanpaha*** or ***The Catholic Voice***, a Lakota language newspaper distributed across the Northern Plains while the government forbade children to speak their language in school. From 1907 to 1916, he wrote more than a dozen letters, and like Saint Paul, he called people to Jesus by relating personal experiences to the *Bible*. In this 1914 letter, he used the sinking of the steamship Titanic as a metaphor in addressing the problem of greed in the world. It had sunk two years earlier and was similar the ones he used in transatlantic crossings. "*Men of the United States constructed a very large and fast boat. We made many millions of dollars, so that in a few nights, one crossed the ocean… They said never would the boat sink... Yes, those rich men believed it. They did not know what they would come up against. So, one day they struck against something, so the boat they made sank from blindness, a difficulty that came over them, and their fright was great. Yes my Relatives, take a look. There was an accident due to a great honor. The trouble with the world's honor is that the trouble is up above. In worldly honor we twitch. You pay your debts up above when you are up against something. [Yet] You do not see when you are struck by something large… There is a grave sin here. Then you will say: "Lord, Lord!" … That is very troublesome, my Relatives. Desire to be close to our Savior. Desire to stay in our ship."*



16. Because of his teaching abilities, the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, in Washington, D.C., funded Nicholas Black Elk to preach on several reservations. Starting in 1908, he did so in Wyoming, Nebraska, and South Dakota with his close friend and partner, Jesuit Father Henry Westropp on the left. Here he's teaching on the Rosebud Reservation.



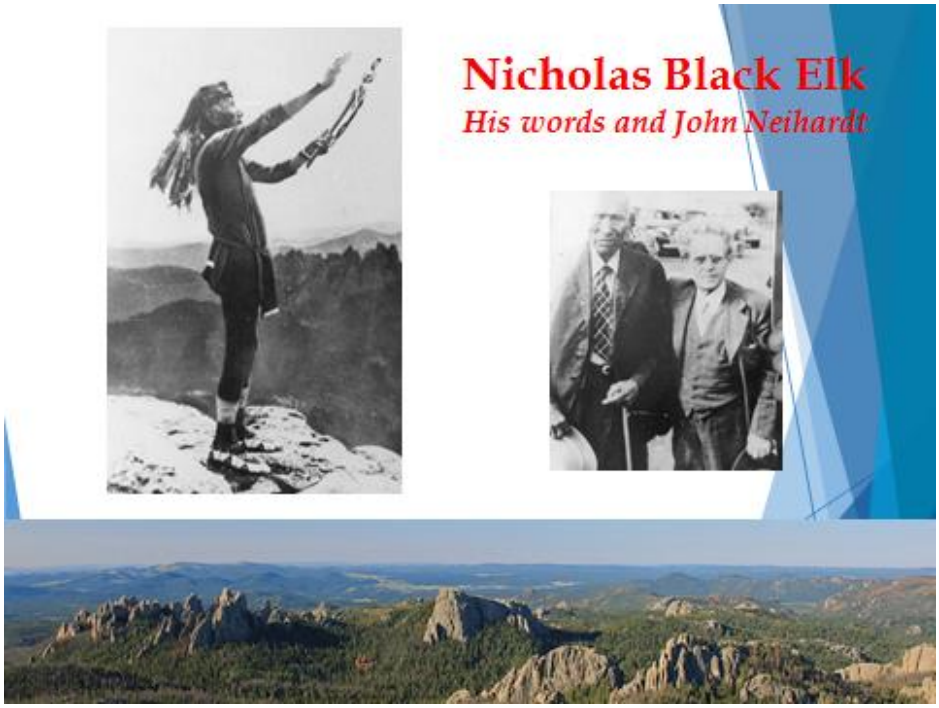
17. From 1913 to 1916, Nicholas Black Elk and Father Westropp served on the Yankton Reservation in South Dakota, which ended when he attended a statewide Catholic Sioux Congress there with these catechists and clergy.



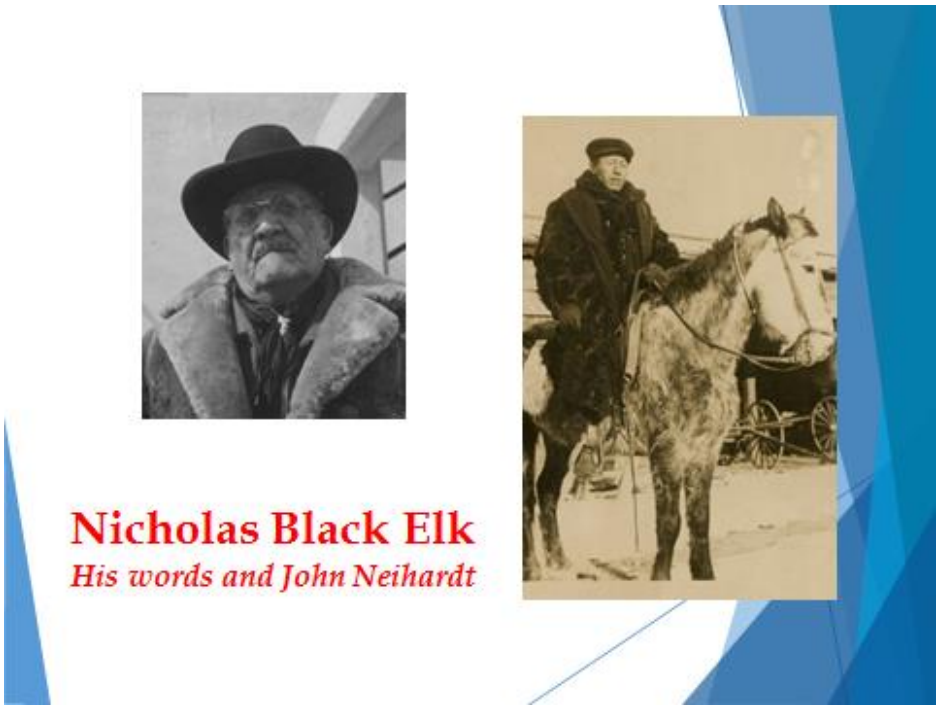
18. Later that summer, Nicholas Black Elk attended a Catholic Sioux Congress on the Fort Peck Reservation in Montana. Shown next to him is Ojibwa Father Philip Gordon, a gifted speaker from Wisconsin and chaplain at Haskell Institute in Kansas.

19. During World War I, Nicholas Black Elk lost his friend, Father Westropp, because mission needs in India prompted him to go there. Then, Black Elk teamed up with other Jesuits and catechists from his base at Saint Agnes in Manderson, as shown here in 1947 after a meeting with fellow elders in the church hall now named Black Elk Hall in his honor. With them is Father Eugene Buechel, one of the last fluent Lakota-speaking

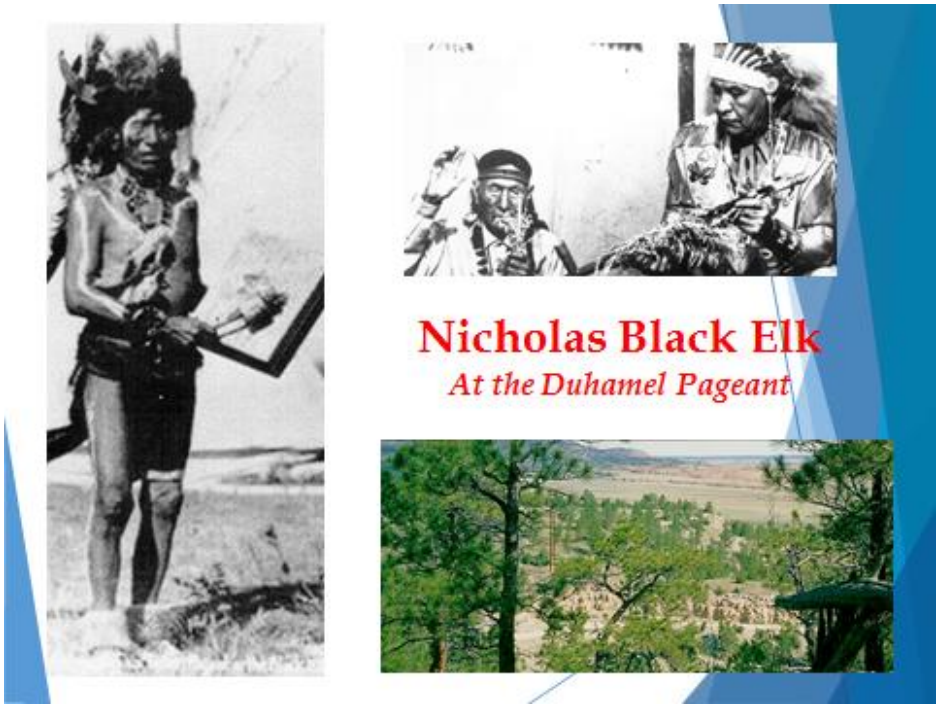
Jesuits who seamlessly presented Christianity in Lakota. Now, monolingual American-born Jesuits prevailed, who were less immersed in Lakota language and culture and more insistent on following the church's Roman-centric rules. In 1933, a horse-drawn wagon accident disabled Black Elk and forced him to use a cane.



20. In May 1931, author John Neihardt interviewed Nicholas Black Elk for what he called his life story – ***Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux, as told to John G. Neihardt.*** Familiar with such works, Black Elk welcomed the project and told his entire life story with the expectation it would inspire others to follow Jesus as the son of the Great Spirit. In so doing, he gave the month of his spiritual rebirth on Saint Nick's Day or the "Moon of Popping Trees" as his actual birth month; he used the red and black road metaphors from the *Two Roads*; and he concluded his story by taking Neihardt to the top of Black Elk Peak and praying his Thanksgiving Prayer**,** now understood in the light of Jesus Christ. But they had different agendas. To encapsulate his story for non-Lakota readers, Neihardt decluttered it and focused on his great vision, added a solemn and reverent tone, and ended it tragically at Wounded Knee when he was just 24. That enabled Neihardt to keep its message simple and avoid the complexities of his ongoing spiritual quest. This disappointed Black Elk and undermined his credibility as a loyal Catholic and it confused the public and many of his admirers.

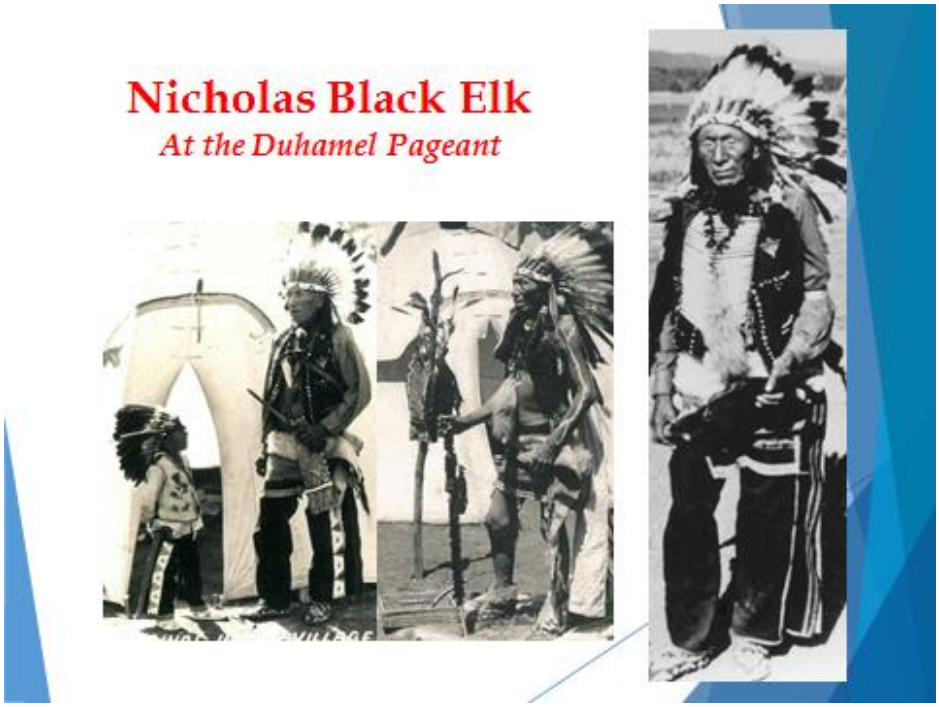


21. Medicine man Frank Fools Crow, Black Elk's nephew, felt that Neihardt failed to capture his uncle's humor and personality. Nicholas Black Elk was a consummate joker with a whimsical perspective and love of animals. Here he's riding "Baloney," one of his favorite horses, who like all the others, had an English name beginning with "B."

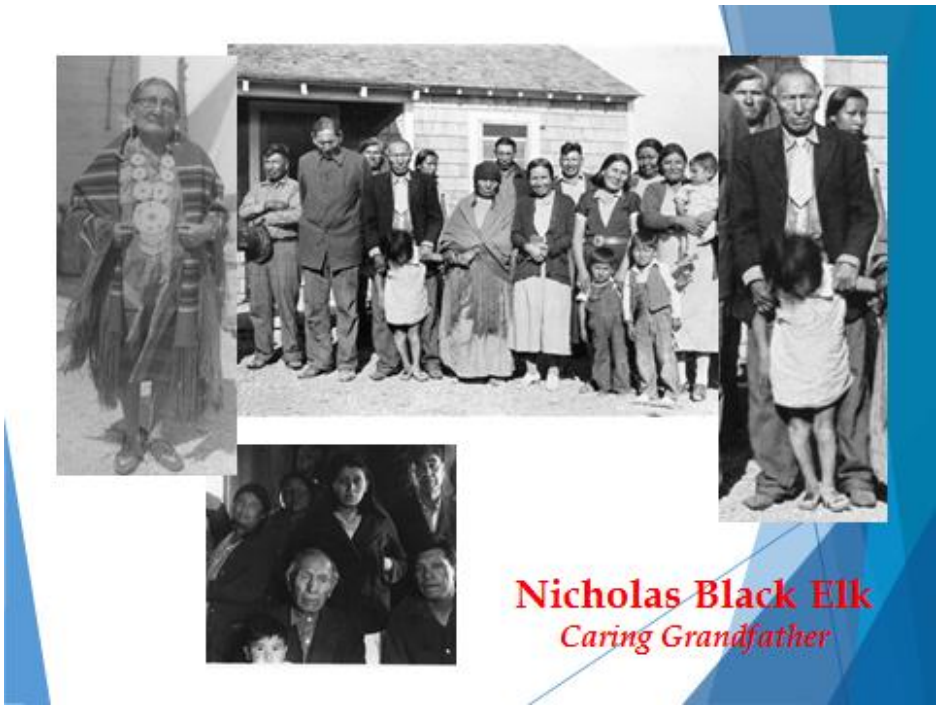


22. Meanwhile in the Black Hills, sculptor Gutzon Borglum and crew were carving Mount Rushmore, which generated substantial tourism. Soon, Rapid City businessman Alex Duhamel organized a summertime Lakota pageant nearby, which used brief depictions of traditional religious ceremonies and lifeways presented twice daily. He invited Nicholas

Black Elk to narrate and demonstrate key events, for which *Black Elk's Speaks* provided a basis to teach Lakota heritage. To do so, he selected, reenacted, and described seven religious ceremonies as seven rites parallel to the Catholic Church's seven sacraments, which Joseph Epes Brown edited as ***The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux***.



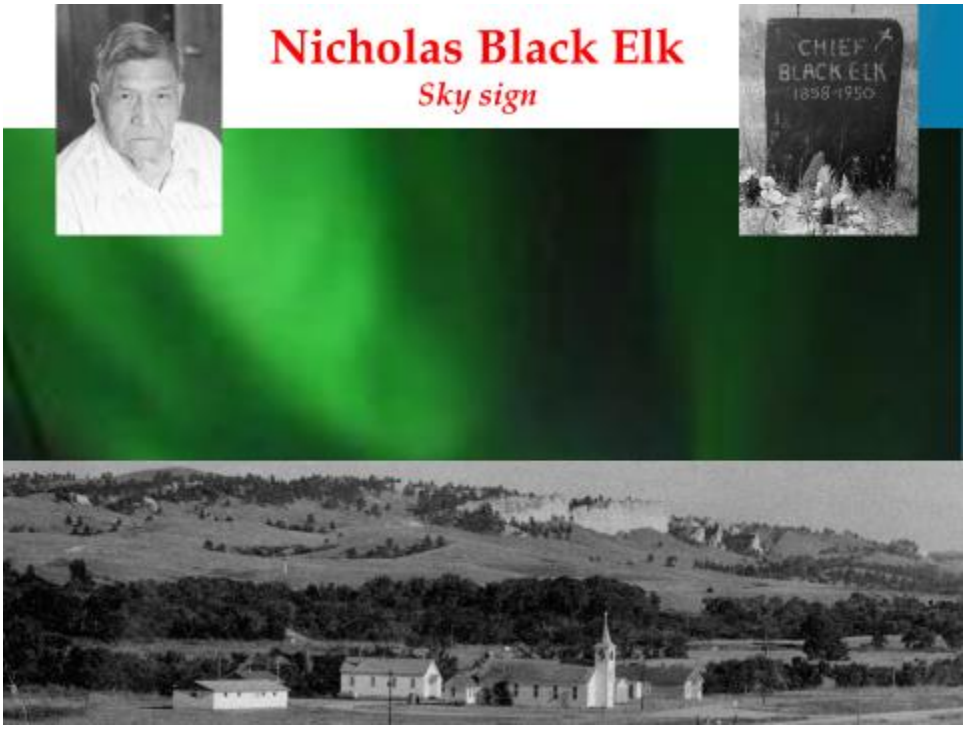
23. The Duhamel pageant continued for more than a decade. In it, Nicholas Black Elk wore Chief's regalia too, and on the left, he posed with grandson George Looks Twice, his daughter Lucy's son. Besides the reenactments, Black Elk increasingly practiced traditional worship, which some Jesuits angrily branded as "heathen." This dismayed him as proof of their ignorance, because he believed he was following the Great Spirit's will. Meanwhile, some fellow catechists passed, traditional ceremonies regained traction, and some of friends and family drifted away from Church. Nonetheless, Black Elk's dual commitment remained strong and he encouraged others to do likewise.



24. Before passing, Nicholas Black Elk shared some of his life's little-known details. His daughter Lucy Looks Twice, on the left, then concluded that 1866, and not 1863, was his correct birth year; she knew he held his rosary constantly while praying, whether praying with it or with his pipe; and she knew his Thanksgiving Prayer differed markedly from Neihardt's version, which she retold and prayed:

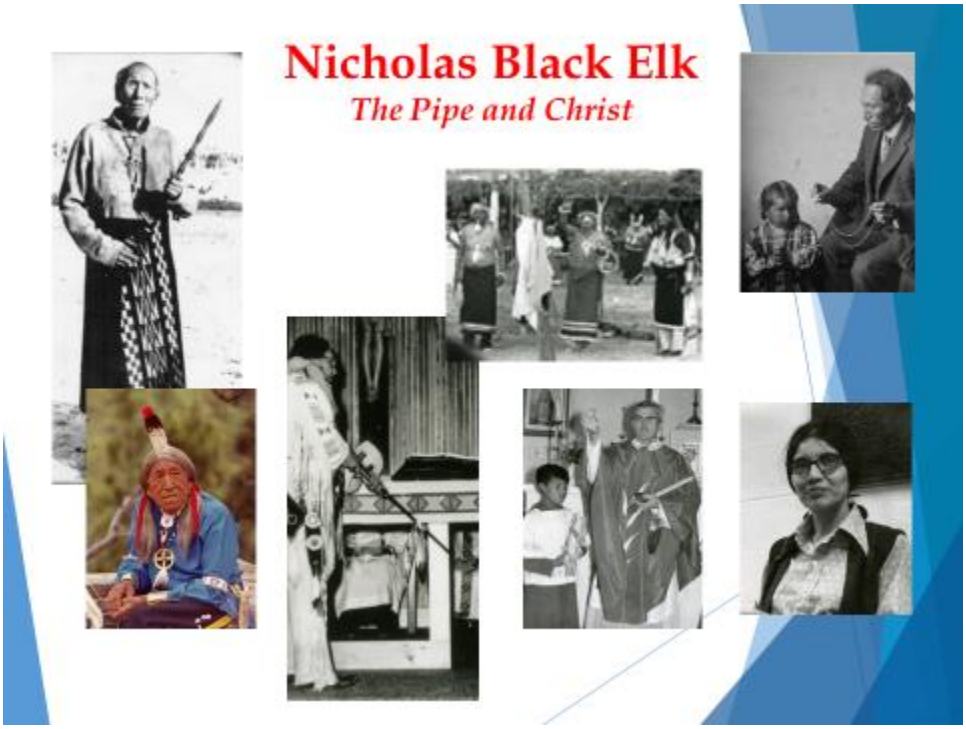
> *I am talking to you, Grandfather Great Spirit, on this day.*
> *Pitifully, I sit here.*
> *I am speaking for my relatives, my children, my grandchildren,*
> *And all my relatives—wherever they might be.*
> *Hear me, Grandfather Great Spirit.*
> *With your help, our needs are taken care of.*
> *You have helped us in the time of want during the past.*
> *And on this day we wish to thank you.*
> *Hear me, O Great Spirit.*
> *This day is a day of thanksgiving.*
> *The nations of living things the world over—and we the two-leggeds,*
> *Along with the children and the smaller ones with them—come to you today to express thanks.*
> *In the future make us see a red day of good.*
> *In the past you have preserved us from evil on this red road.*
> *Keep us on this road, and do not let us see anything wrong.*
> *I, my children, and my grandchildren shall walk—led like children by your hand.*

You have helped us in all things.
And Grandfather, Great Spirit, through your power alone we have survived.
Grandfather, Great Spirit, you have come and put us down—gathered together on Mother Earth.
And while we continue in this world you provide food for all living creatures.
So we give you thanks on this day.
Grandfather take pity on me.
One day, we shall go and arrive at the end of the road.
In that future, we shall be without any sin at all.
And so it will be in the same manner for all my grandchildren and relatives
Who will follow us as well.
We give you thanks, Grandfather, Great Spirit.
I am sending this prayer to you.



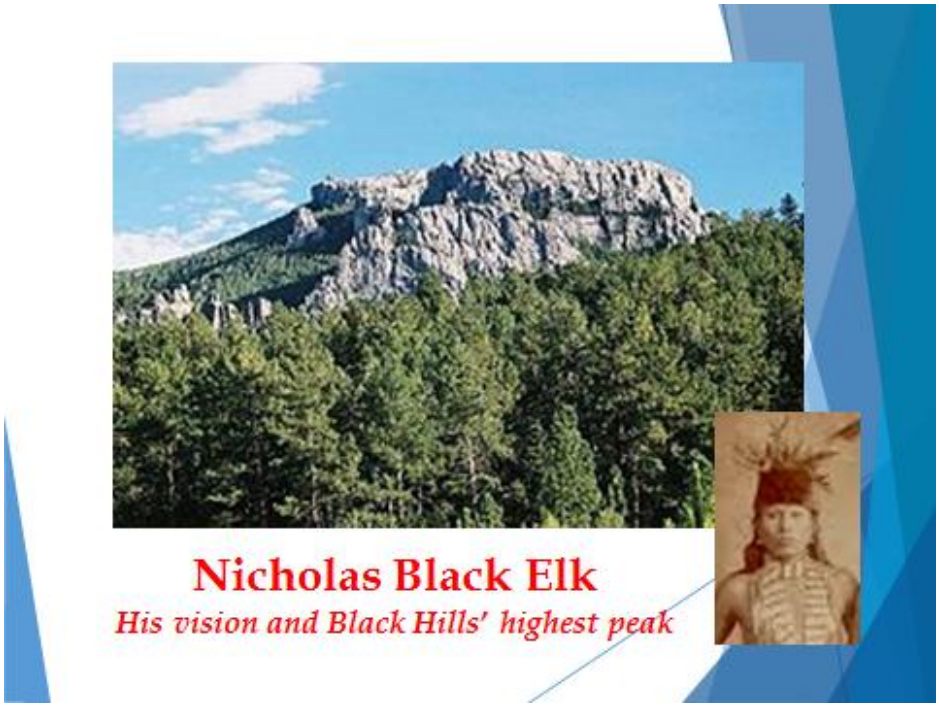
25. When near death in 1950, Nicholas Black Elk humbly predicted, "*I have a feeling that when I die, some sign will be seen. Maybe God will show something… which will tell of his mercy.*" On August 17th, he received the church's last rites for the fourth time and died that day. At his wake, the skies above Manderson danced vigorously with an extraordinary display of aurora borealis seen around the world. On the left, his friend John Lone Goose reflected, "*God* [was] *sending lights to shine on that beautiful man*" and Jesuit Brother William Siehr exclaimed, "*The sky was just one bright illumination, I never saw something so magnificent… everything was constantly moving… in every direction… from the east and south, north and west… they'd all converge up to the top*

where they'd meet—rising up into the sky, and it was a tremendous sight." 351 years earlier, Shakespeare penned about great leaders in *Julius Caesar*, "*When beggars die there are no comets seen; The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes.*"

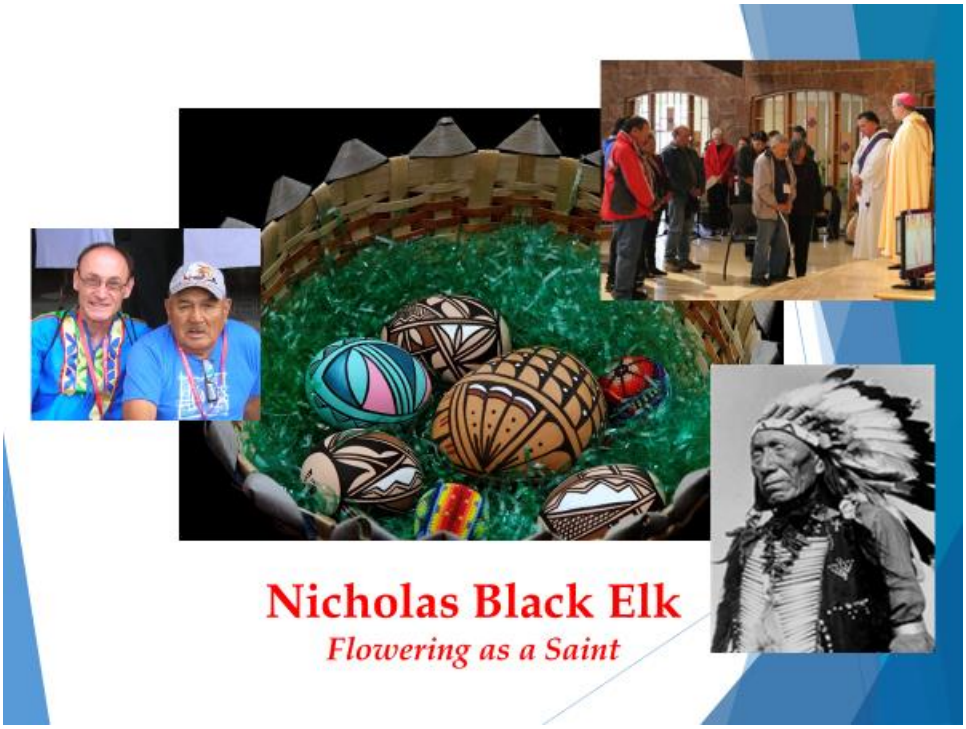


26. Two decades later, the movement for Native American studies acclaimed *Black Elk Speaks* and the Second Vatican Council recognized the world's cultures as indispensable to the church's global mission. This convergence led the church and all people of faith and goodwill to seek inspiration from the legacy of Nicholas Black Elk. From left to right, his son Ben Black Elk, who had attended Red Cloud, the former Holy Rosary Mission School, endorsed its efforts to integrate Lakota language and culture into its curriculum; medicine man Frank Fools Crow prayed with his pipe while blessing the altar at Saint Isaac Jogues Church in Rapid City; Jesuit Father Paul Steinmetz prayed with his pipe at mass and celebrated mass on the Sun Dance grounds at Fools Crow's request; and Standing Rock Lakota Franciscan Sister Marie Therese Archambault developed the retreat guide, ***A Retreat with Black Elk – Living in the Sacred Hoop***. Meanwhile, Jesuits and medicine men compared Lakota and Christian traditions in lengthy discussions that culminated in ***The Pipe and Christ: A Christian-Sioux Dialogue***; the Catholic Church Extension Society honored Black Elk and the Rapid City diocese's early Lakota catechists with its ***Lumen Christi Award*** for outstanding evangelization; and the diocese conducted an intense 10-year follow up with Lakota parish representations and community elders that culminated in ***Recommendations for the Inculturation of Lakota Catholicism***.

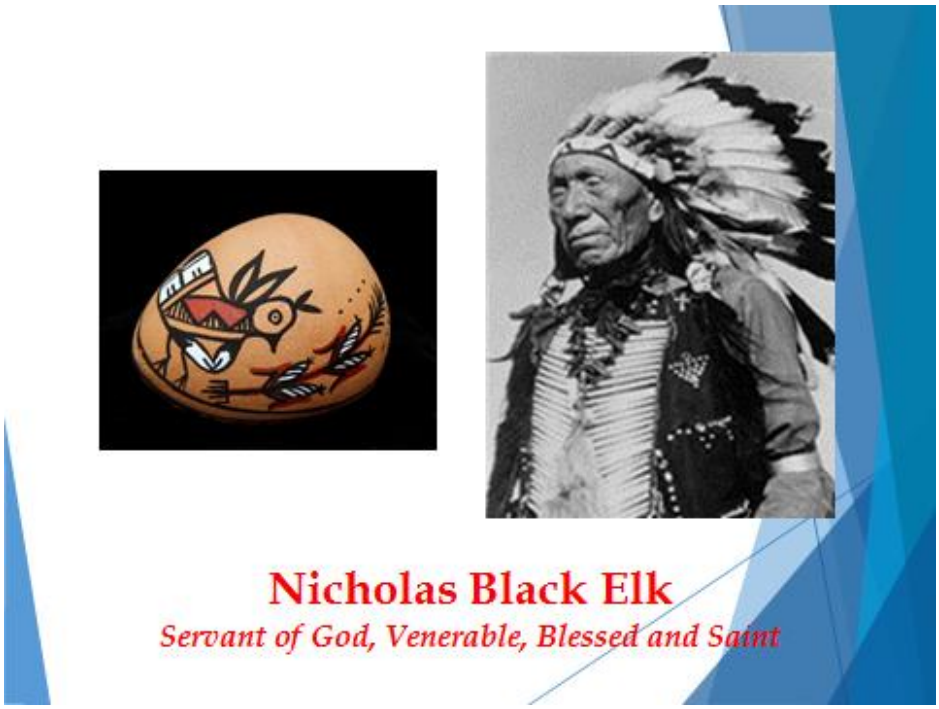
27. Knowing that *Black Elk Speaks* was not the story her father envisioned, Lucy Looks Twice used a chance encounter at Red Cloud School to recruit Father Steltenkamp to write that full story. At his 1976 priesthood ordination, she honored him at his priesthood ordination by placing the Stoll on his shoulders, which symbolized his new priestly commitment. Thereafter, he spent years in painstaking research, collecting and analyzing oral testimony, personal papers, and published research, which culminated in two books, ***Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala*** and ***Nicholas Black Elk: Medicine Man, Missionary, Mystic***.



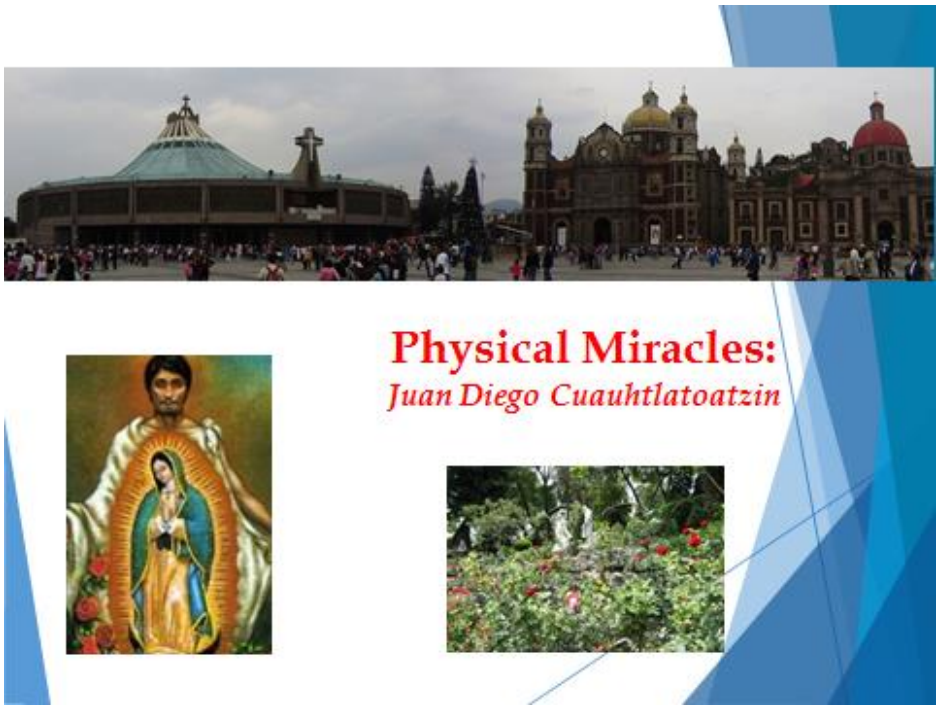
28. Many had wished to see the Black Hills' tallest peak renamed after this holy man, and while politicians argued the merits of the change, the power that counts didn't wait. He made his proclamation on those starry nights in August 1950. 30 years later, the U.S. Congress designated nearby Black Hills land as the Black Elk Wilderness within the National Wilderness Preservation System, and in 2016, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names renamed it, "Black Elk Peak."



29. So too, many would like to see the Catholic Church proclaim Nicholas Black Elk as one of God's ***canonized saints***. For two years, from 2014 to 2016, over 1,200 people of goodwill – Native and non-Native from across the United States and elsewhere – signed a petition requesting Black Elk's canonization cause, which his grandchildren presented to Rapid City Bishop Robert Gruss. Among them was his grandson, George Looks Twice, shown with Marquette University archivist Mark Thiel at Saint Kateri's canonization in Rome four years earlier. When they first met that day, it was a random encounter and they didn't know each other, and Looks Twice sat next to Thiel and told him his hope that someday his grandfather would be canonized too. Since then, other Native Catholics repeated the wish and gathered signatures for the petition. Clearly, Black Elk serves as a model of holiness for many people of faith and canonized saints comprise an ever-growing flowering bouquet, to which Holy Mother Church continually adds more recognized saints. While all causes are arduous, the sainthood pathway and pace under Pope Francis has been the best-ever, and his advocacy for indigenous people and the earth resonates well with Black Elk who served Jesus and the Great Spirit while advocating for peace, love, and harmony among all of creation.

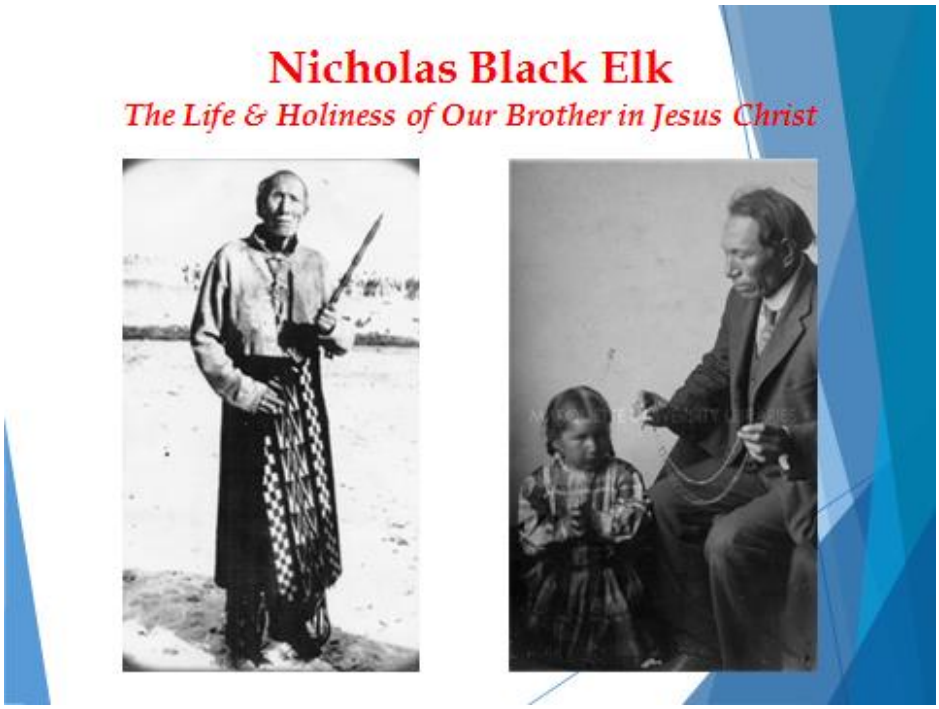


30. But, the cause for Nicholas Black Elk has not yet begun. Before it does, Bishop Gruss as ***petitioner***, must formerly apply or ***petition*** the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in Rome. Because this is an extensive process, he will need reasonable assurances that the cause will succeed. First, a diocesan tribunal must carefully gather and study all relevant writings and testimony of his holiness in accordance with Vatican protocol. When he approves the tribunal's results, he will submit it with the petition application for review by the Congregation and the Holy Father, the pope. If they approve, the Holy Father will declare him ***Servant of God Nicholas Black Elk***. This will officially open his cause at the first of a four-step process of *Servant of God, Venerable, Blessed,* and *Saint*. Next, Bishop Gruss will seek an endorsement from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops; *postulators* will be appointed as official liaisons between Rome and the diocese; and the diocesan postulator will commission the writing and compilation of a *positio,* or special biography with support documents focused on his holiness, which the Congregation and the Holy Father will review. If through the positio, the Pope recognizes his virtues, he will declare him ***Venerable Nicholas Black Elk***. Most who reach this step will be declared saint eventually, but only God knows for sure. Now, intercessory prayers are encouraged, prayer cards may be issued, and resulting alleged favors and miracles will be recorded. Congregation protocols are always strict and causes vary greatly in length for many reasons. If the Holy Father authenticates a miracle occurring through his intercession, he will declare him ***Blessed Nicholas Black***; a feast day will be designated; and it will permit churches to be named in his honor with some restrictions. After the Holy Father authenticates a second miracle, he will be canonized ***Saint Nicholas Black Elk*** and the church will lift the previous restrictions. While causes have taken hundreds of years, many today are completed in just ten years. Nonetheless, there are always significant expenses, for which the petitioner must take responsibility.

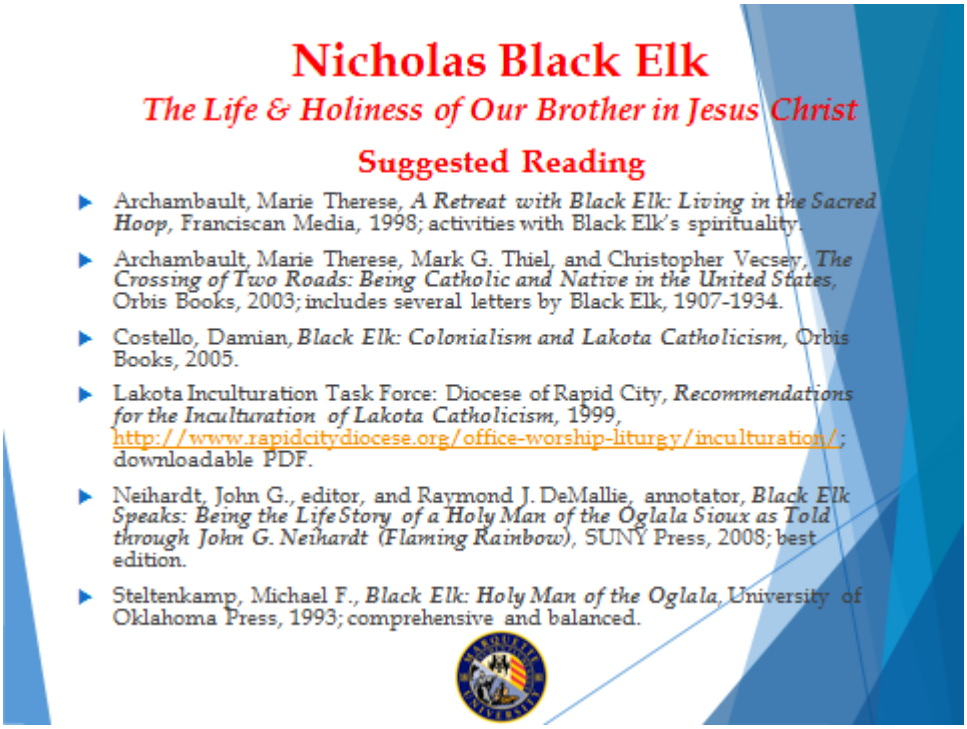


31. In the canonization process, God is in charge because the signs that validate authenticated miracles come from intercessory prayers to candidates. While the Catholic Church teaches that Jesus alone holds all power and all prayers must be answered by him, history shows that ***he chooses*** to not act alone. Rather, he collaborates with his vast multitude, the *Communion of Saints*. In causes, miracles must be attributed exclusively to only one candidate, which the Congregation for the Causes of Saints and the Holy Father, the pope evaluate. The church regards miracles as phenomena not explicable by natural and scientific laws, which may be *physical* or *medical*. Depicted here is a *physical miracle* received by ***Saint Juan Diego*** of Mexico. In 1531, he received four visions from *Mary, the Mother of God* as Our Lady of Guadalupe. In the royal dress and language of the Aztec, she requested the building of a church in her honor on a hill where an Aztec temple had stood. As a sign to the bishop, she requested he gather roses in his cloak from the site, even though they were out-of-season. Nonetheless, he found roses blooming, and while presenting them to the bishop, they discovered her image imprinted on his cloak. Today, the image remains permanently and inexplicably vibrant and well-preserved. And it's displayed in the churches on that holy hill and throughout the country it's the premiere Catholic symbol. In 2002, Juan Diego's canonization reaffirmed the dignity of Catholic and Inter-American Native traditions and the rights of native people.

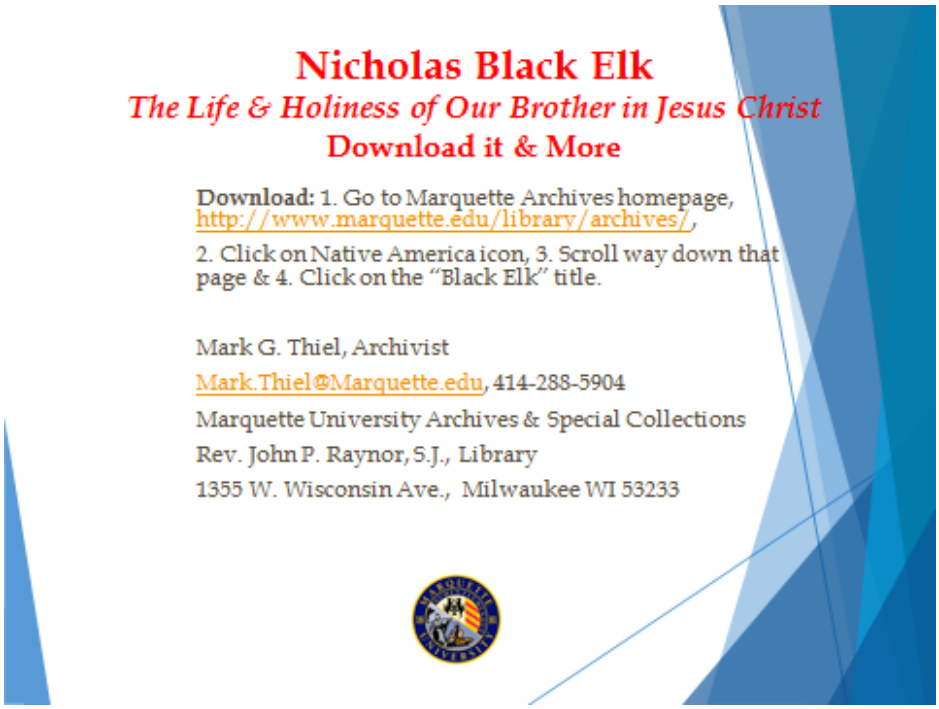
32. In 2006 at Seattle Children's Hospital, the Lummi boy Jake Finkbonner received a ***medical miracle*** at age six. Like Saint Kateri, he had a life-threatening infectious disease affecting his face, but his was strep-A. To fight it, hospital staff performed daily surgeries without success. Then just before his surgery one day, Mohawk Sister and Tekakwitha Conference Director Kateri Mitchell and his parents prayed to Saint Kateri for the disease to stop while next to him with her bone relic pressed to his body. Moments later, hospital personnel whisked him away and removed the bandages and found him disease free. That year the Tekakwitha Conference held its gathering in Washington State where at the Lummi Nation longhouse, Jake, his family, and pastor stood next to Archbishop Brunet who announced that the Congregation for the Causes of Saints was evaluating Jake's cure as a possible miracle through Saint Kateri's intercession. He explained that the congregation – comprised of cardinals and bishops – was scrutinizing Jake's medical records and the testimony of Sister Kateri and his parents, doctors, nurses, and other witnesses plus opinions from hired experts in history, medicine, and theology. Through several steps, they and the Holy Father had to confirm that it was a miracle clearly attributable to just one intercessor with God, and only after all other possible explanations have proven inadequate. Six years later in 2012, while the Mohawk Nation planned to host that year's conference in New York State, the Vatican announced that Pope Benedict XVI had authenticated Jake's cure as a miracle through Kateri's intercession and that she would be canonized that fall in Rome. As a guest of honor, Jake attended both events. In the center at the conference, he handed Saint Kateri's relic to a representative of the next year's event while Sister Kateri looked on and on the right at her canonization mass, he received communion from Pope Benedict.



33. Throughout his life, Nicholas Black Elk sought to know more about the Great Spirit and to serve him better. In so doing, he learned to follow Jesus Christ and seamlessly live Christian and Native ways without contradiction; he spread widely a message of peace, love, and harmony for all creation and he led over 400 Dakota-Lakota people to baptism and he served as godfather to 113 of them. Although he lived during troubled times, he always respected the Sacred, the relatedness of all beings, and care of the earth. Today, his life resonates with thousands of the faithful, and through continued prayer by his many dedicated followers, we hope and believe that his canonization will come to pass in the Lord's time and according to his plan.



34. Many materials are available on the life and holiness of Nicholas Black Elk. However, for a balanced introduction, these works are recommended: ***A Retreat with Black Elk – Living in the Sacred Hoop*** by Marie Therese Archambault; the letters of Nicholas Black Elk, 1907-1934, in ***The Crossing of Two Roads: Being Catholic and Native in the United States***, edited by Marie Therese Archambault, Mark G. Thiel, and Christopher Vecsey; ***Black Elk: Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*** by Damian Costello; ***Recommendations for the Inculturation of Lakota Catholicism*** by the Lakota Inculturation Task Force of the Diocese of Rapid City; ***Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux / as told through John G. Neihardt (Flaming Rainbow)*** and annotated by Raymond J. DeMallie; and ***Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala*** by Michael F. Steltenkamp.



35. To download the illustrated script from this PowerPoint, go to the Marquette Archives homepage, click on the Native America icon, scroll way down that page, and click on the Black Elk title. For questions and further research, contact the author by email or phone at mark.thiel@marquette.edu and 414-288-5904.

Credits and Endnotes