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**On the Frontier of American Cultures: Catholic Missionaries
Among Native Americans and the Emergence of Catholic
American Culture**

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On the Frontier of American Cultures:
Catholic Missionaries Among Native Americans and the Emergence of American Catholic
Culture

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Anti-Catholicism has been a longstanding force throughout American history whose presence can be traced to the earliest English colonial origins of the country.¹ This lingering element of American society was fueled by the same religious prejudices that had persisted since the Reformation as well as fears that the tyrannical authority of the pope would erode American democracy.² This force would ultimately be revitalized during the 19th century in response to the large-scale immigration of Catholics which saw them rise from only one percent of the nation's population in 1776 to thirty-seven percent by 1860.³ Despite being present throughout the country, this reinvigorated form of anti-Catholicism was particularly focused on preventing Catholicism from taking hold in the West, which was viewed as the future of the fledgling republic.⁴

For many American Protestants, missionary work and education were an opportunity to spread both their religion and their understanding of American culture in order to avoid losing the West to Catholicism. The major Protestant denominations spearheaded efforts to establish mission schools for the Mexicans and Native Americans in the western territories, who they considered to be culturally and religiously un-American, to facilitate their assimilation into American society.⁵ Federal policy also supported the efforts of Protestant missionaries by regularly contracting them to supervise the education of Native American youths on reservations in order to spur western settlement by imposing American culture and virtues on these people.⁶

¹ Bryan Le Beau, "'Saving the West from the Pope': Anti-Catholic Propaganda and the Settlement of the Mississippi River Valley," *American Studies* 32, no. 1 (1991): 101-114.

² *Ibid.*, 102-103.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Jed Woodworth, "Public Schooling in Territorial Arizona: Republicanism, Protestantism, and Assimilation," *Journal of Arizona History* 46, no. 2 (2005): 95-134.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 119-120.

However, Catholics also participated in efforts to minister to the Native Americans, including the missionary efforts sponsored by the federal government.⁷

This raises the question of how these Catholics understood their involvement in an enterprise that many of their fellow missionaries viewed as a means to stop the spread of Catholicism throughout the nation and to propagate a culture that condemned their faith as a threat to the nation's most cherished liberties. In "Mother Katharine Drexel's Benevolent Empire: The Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions and the Education of Native Americans, 1885-1935", Amanda Bresie acknowledges the, at times, contentious nature of the relationships between Catholic missionary organizations and the federal government.⁸ However, she also details their close cooperation and shared goals of promoting American education amongst the native peoples.⁹ In contrast, in "Kindred Spirits and Sacred Bonds: Irish Catholics, Native Americans, and the Battle Against Anglo-Protestant Imperialism, 1840-1930", Connor J. Donnan claims that Catholic missionaries used their evangelization to establish ties with Native Americans in an attempt to oppose the expansion of Anglo-American Protestant culture.¹⁰ Furthermore, he argues that the Irish Catholics' prior experience with Anglo-colonialism was crucial to developing their bonds with Native Americans.¹¹ However, in "Native Americans on the Path to the Catholic Church: Cultural Crisis and Missionary Adaptation", Ross Enochs argues that Catholic missionaries did not see themselves as agents or opponents of the federal

⁷ Ibid., 119.

⁸ Amanda Bresie, "Mother Katharine Drexel's Benevolent Empire: The Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions and the Education of Native Americans, 1885-1935," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 32, no. 3 (2014): 1-24.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Connor J. Donnan, "Kindred Spirits and Sacred Bonds: Irish Catholics, Native Americans, and the Battle Against Anglo-Protestant Imperialism, 1840-1930," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 38, no. 3 (2020): 1-23.

¹¹ Ibid.

government.¹² Instead, they saw themselves as emissaries of a distinctive American Catholic culture.¹³

The existing academic literature on this topic focuses primarily on Catholic American cultural identity in relation to Native American identity and missionaries from a particular ethnic background. In contrast, this paper focuses on Catholic American identity in relation to broader American identity, and missionaries from diverse national backgrounds. Since the settling of the frontier was viewed by Protestants as an opportunity to spread both their religion and their understanding of American culture, observing the actions and attitudes of Catholics during this time can help answer the question of how American Catholics viewed American culture as well as how they contributed to the development of American identity during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This paper holds that through their ministry to Native Americans during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, American Catholic missionaries advanced a sense of American Catholic identity that viewed itself as being centered on toleration and inclusion towards both American and Native American culture, yet remained distinctive from these cultures as well. This is supported by the pluralistic point of view espoused by American Catholics from across multiple cultural backgrounds. They displayed this point of view as they attempted to navigate the Native American cultures they immersed themselves in as missionaries and the Anglo-Protestant sense of American identity they were forced to confront as immigrants to the United States. It can also be observed in the attitudes and actions displayed by these missionaries in the course of their ministry, which distinguished them from other American missionaries in the eyes of their potential Native converts and Protestant colleagues. Even the ways in which Catholic

¹² Ross Enochs, "Native Americans on the Path to the Catholic Church: Cultural Crisis and Missionary Adaptation," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 27, no. 1 (2009): 71-88.

¹³ *Ibid.*

missionaries cooperated with the American government serve to illustrate their commitment to a distinctive Catholic American culture that served as a middle ground between Native American and Anglo-American society.

A Cultural Crusade or a Call for Inclusion?

While some have asserted that Catholic missionaries stood in opposition to American culture, a closer analysis of their ministry reveals that their true opposition was to their understanding of cultural intolerance. Irish missionaries who worked amongst Native Americans are often hailed as the paradigm of Catholic resistance to the spread of Protestant, Anglo-American society on the American frontier. Their arrival in the U.S. in great numbers throughout the expansionary period of the 19th century is frequently seen as evidence of a concerted effort to combat American culture through their ministry because between 1840 and 1900, the Dublin-based All Hallows College seminary alone sent around 1,000 priests to the United States.¹⁴ The impetus for these targeted missionary endeavors is attributed to the disdain for Anglo-Protestant culture that Irish Catholic missionaries developed while under Anglo-Protestant colonial subjugation. Scholars like Donnan claim the hardships experienced by the Irish while under English rule encouraged them to minister to the Native Americans as they sympathized with their shared experience of encroaching Anglo-Protestant colonialism. They claim that Irish missionaries formed lasting bonds with Native Americans through their ministry as they attempted to stop the spread of Anglo-American colonialism. The importance that English rule had on how these Irish missionaries viewed their ministry is attested to by the annual report of missionary activity issued by the All Hallows Seminary in 1858 as it claimed that Ireland's

¹⁴ Donnan, "Kindred Spirits and Sacred Bonds," 1, 9.

position within Britain's colonial empire was a way to ensure that the Catholic "faith of its children always accompanies the heresy of England, confronting its influence and unveiling its error."¹⁵

However, the bonds forged between Irish Catholics and Native Americans were rooted not as much in Catholicism as they were in cultural traditions that predated the introduction of Christianity. Like many Native American societies, Celtic culture was nomadic, communal, and centered around a herd economy.¹⁶ The similarities between Native American cultures and Celtic culture also manifested themselves in the development of similar law codes as the Navajo legal system centered around the principles of cooperation, friendliness and compassion, while the principles of solidarity, community, and friendship formed the foundation for Celtic Brehon Law.¹⁷ The abundant similarities between Native and Celtic culture were quickly noticed by the Anglo-Protestant colonists who encountered both, because as early as 1691 the Englishman Sir William Petty compared the two by noting that Irish houses were "worse than those of the Savage Americans."¹⁸ This statement makes it unsurprising that centuries later Irish missionaries and their Native American audiences would notice these commonalities and use them to form strong, meaningful connections with one another. Fr. Henry Ganss made these connections when speaking before the American Federation of Catholic Societies as his claim that the "Anglo-Saxon may have been a colonizer" but he was "never was a civilizer" referenced the Irish and Native Americans' shared hatred of Anglo-American colonialism and its attempts to replace their supposedly "savage" cultures with superior Anglo-Saxon "civilization".¹⁹ It is for this reason that

¹⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹⁶ Ibid., 12.

¹⁷ Ibid., 12-13.

¹⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹⁹ Ibid., 11.

the kinship between Natives and Irish missionaries should be seen as the result of the unique cultural similarities that they shared, rather than a general Catholic antipathy to Anglo-American culture.

On the contrary, the objections raised by Irish Catholic missionaries towards Protestant, Anglo-American culture illustrate an aversion to cultural intolerance and commitment to acceptance of all cultures. In the eyes of many Irish missionaries, intolerance was the chief characteristic of Anglo-Saxon Protestantism. This view was articulated by the Irish missionary, Father Patrick O'Reilly, who, when describing the treatment of Native Americans by Protestant Anglo-Americans in 1863, claimed "The Anglo-Saxon... did all in his power to extirpate their race."²⁰ According to these missionaries, Anglo-American culture was marked by its inability to countenance other cultures. Therefore, in their quest for Empire, the Anglo-Saxons sought the physical removal of new peoples they encountered or the extermination of their culture through assimilation. To them, Catholicism represented the opposite trend as it was a faith that was willing to accommodate the new cultures it came into contact with. Many Irish Catholics agreed with the sentiment espoused by Fr. Ganss that the Catholic Church provided "life-giving currents" to these cultures that would sustain them instead of seeking their destruction.²¹

These views were not limited to Irish missionaries as the cross-cultural consensus among Catholics living in America during the 19th and early 20th centuries proved to be support for cultural toleration. German Catholics demonstrated similar support for one Church comprised of many cultures. One of the most prominent spokesmen from these ideas was Joseph Jessing, a former Prussian soldier whose dedication to the Catholic faith pushed him to immigrate to the

²⁰ Ibid., 7.

²¹ Ibid., 11.

United States in 1867 in order to avoid fighting against his fellow Catholics in an impending war with France.²² Once in the U.S. he became a Catholic priest and devoted his ministry to promoting both the Catholic faith and German culture amongst his fellow German immigrants through outlets like his German-language newspaper the *Ohio Waisenfreund*.²³ While his writings often emphasized the importance of retaining one's German language and culture, his understanding of the Catholic Church is surprisingly multi-cultural as he describes it as a church that “embraces all people and all languages since it is catholic.”²⁴

Saving Cultures, Communities, and Souls

While Catholic missionaries may not have actively sought to oppose the spread of Protestant, Anglo-American culture on the frontier, their missionary work often ran counter to the plans of the main agents of Anglo-American colonization. Among Native Americans, it was commonly understood that Catholic missionaries were set apart from other white men and that they were not agents of American colonization. Native Americans distinguished Catholics from other whites by referring to them as “Blackrobes”, a title that reflected not only their distinctive attire but also their actions and attitudes that distinguished them from Protestant missionaries.²⁵ While acts like the celibacy of Catholic priests, which was rarely practiced by both Protestant missionaries and Native Americans, differentiated Catholic missionaries in the eyes of Native Americans, it was more often the openness of Catholics to elements that were common in Native culture that distinguished them from other missionaries and caught the attention of potential

²² Thomas Stefaniuk, “Joseph Jessing, German-American Catholics, and National Myth-Making in Late Nineteenth-Century America,” *American Catholic Studies* 126, no. 1 (2015): 1-24.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁵ Enochs, “Native Americans on the Path to the Catholic Church,” 80.

converts.²⁶ A skill that was possessed by Catholic missionaries, but often not by Protestants, was knowledge of Native languages as Catholics took it upon themselves to write dictionaries of the various Native American languages, while the Jesuits employed Native theological terms to describe God when preaching in order to help them in their evangelization to the Natives.²⁷ The Catholic missionaries saw the use of Native languages as a way to provide the “life-giving currents” that would sustain Native American cultures within the multicultural, universal Church. This practice took on urgent importance as language was often the first target of Anglo-American initiatives aimed at assimilation. As Arizona made plans to establish its public education system in the 1870s, the territory’s governor, Anson P. K. Safford, made it clear that a primary function of the education system would be the establishment of the English language within non-English speaking communities when he said that it was “essential” that those who speak a “foreign tongue” be “educated in the language of the laws that govern them.”²⁸ The threat of losing their ancestral language to assimilationist policies made the use of these indigenous languages by Catholic missionaries all the more appealing to many Native Americans who viewed it as a means to preserve some of the key aspects of their culture that were challenged by American westward expansion.

In addition to preserving traditional Native cultures, Catholic missionaries also did much to preserve the unity of Native American social structures. On a tribal level, Catholics encouraged unity amongst Native nations and adherence to traditional rituals through the establishment of tribal congresses. The policy of the U.S. government divided Native peoples,

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid. Donnan, “Kindred Spirits and Sacred Bonds,” 12.

²⁸ Woodworth, “Public Schooling in Territorial Arizona,” 102, 114.

like the Sioux, across multiple reservations throughout North and South Dakota.²⁹ However, Jesuit missionaries sought to bridge these geographical divides by establishing congresses for the Catholic Sioux which drew members of the Sioux nation, some from as far as hundreds of miles away, to a single reservation to meet with one another.³⁰ These meetings not only stressed the unbroken nature of the Sioux community but also the continuity of culture among the Sioux through the symbolic structure of these meetings. The congresses would often take place at a scaffolding structure that intentionally resembled the structure where the pre-Christian ritual of the Sun Dance occurred.³¹ While the celebration of the Mass was substituted for the Sun Dance as the centerpiece of the meeting of these Catholic Sioux, the sacrificial themes of both religious rites elicited obvious parallels.³² Through these congresses, Catholic missionaries provided the Sioux with the opportunity to organize in order to assert their connection with one another as well as their cultural heritage in defiance of the barriers imposed by the U.S. government.

The ministry of Catholic missionaries also preserved Native social structures at the smaller, but still vital, level of the family. Family ties, and the cultural bonds associated with them, were yet another target of the assimilation efforts of the U.S. government and Protestant missionaries. After an attempt under the administration of Ulysses S. Grant to educate Natives by contracting missionaries from various denominations to teach in districts within Indian territory was abandoned, Protestant missionaries and the federal government began cooperating in a new endeavor to establish boarding schools for Native Children.³³ Much like Arizona's public schools, the primary purpose of these institutions would be the assimilation of the Natives into

²⁹ Enochs, "Native Americans on the Path to the Catholic Church," 84.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 85.

³² Ibid.

³³ Woodworth, "Public Schooling in Territorial Arizona," 119.

American culture as supporters made it clear that they sought to remove Native children “from home influence and put them in charge of interested and competent teachers.”³⁴ Their Native language was far from the only element of their culture targeted at these schools as students were dressed in uniforms of suits and gingham dresses while new English names obtained at baptism often accompanied these new Western styles.³⁵ The logic underpinning these schools was clear, complete immersion in Protestant, Anglo-American culture was needed to assimilate the Native peoples but could not be accomplished on tribal lands as no matter how many trappings of American culture a Native child was covered in while away, they would all be stripped away the moment they return to the influences of their home. Try as hard as they might, many Protestant teachers never believed their instructions could compete with the lessons continually imparted by Native parents.

An opposite logic undergirded the approach of Catholic day schools. While Protestant missionaries viewed the chief benefit of a boarding school as its ability to keep Native children away from their families, Catholic missionaries believe that the key strength of the day school was that it allowed these children to return to their families. This view found one of its clearest expressions in Mother Katherine Drexel, a major advocate for Catholic missionary efforts among Native Americans, who in 1891 founded the religious order of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People that was dedicated to this task.³⁶ Drexel lauded the concept of Catholic day schools by saying that:

It is the ideal of Catholic education to have day schools for the children whence they may return at night to the family circle, and, what is particularly desirable in the case of a

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 121.

³⁶ Bresie, “Mother Katherine Drexel’s Benevolent Empire,” 2.

pagan people, the children may carry into the home the lessons of faith and morality learned in the classroom.³⁷

While one of the main reasons that she advocated for day school education may have been so that it could be used to introduce the new elements of Catholic Christianity into the cultural units of Native families, this policy also had the added benefit of allowing for the preservation of the Native family structure. Furthermore, her reasoning operated on the assumption that the family unit would act as a hub of cultural exchange because, just as the child could spread knowledge of the principles of the Catholic faith to their parents, so too could parents spread knowledge about the customs and beliefs of their tribe. Both Protestant and Catholic missionaries understood the Native family as a nexus for the transmission of Native culture. Yet while Protestants tended to fear and sought to eliminate this point of exchange, many, but not all, Catholics acknowledged the opportunity they posed and attempted to work within existing Native social structures.

Drexel's ministry also frustrated Protestants and endeared Native Americans through its use of Catholic material culture. The symbols and holy objects of Catholicism were an object of particular concern for 19th-century Protestants who were so averse to using visual mediums and objects of veneration in their worship that one Presbyterian magazine felt comfortable condemning the cross as "a perverted, abused symbol of a great system of superstition".³⁸ Yet at the same time many Protestants began to recognize the strong visual appeal of these objects with one 1853 book of church design released by the Congregationalist Church acknowledging that the cross "appeals so forcibly and so favorably to the simplest understanding".³⁹ Mother Drexel's

³⁷ Ibid., 22.

³⁸ Ryan K. Smith, *Gothic Arches, Latin Crosses: Anti-Catholicism and American Church Designs in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 1-224.

³⁹ Ibid., 69-70.

ministry fully embraced these objects that so disturbed Protestants as she made sure that the missionaries she sponsored were always supplied with crucifixes and medals they could supply to potential Native converts.⁴⁰

In addition to distinguishing Catholics from Protestant missionaries, the use of holy items also proved to be successful in driving Native interest in Catholicism as Drexel made an observation that was strikingly similar to those of Protestant observers when she noted that these objects “all make mute appeal to the hearts of the Indians.”⁴¹ One reason these objects proved so alluring to Natives is that they called upon ideas of ritual that were shared by Native Americans and Catholics which Catholic missionaries were often eager to embrace in their ministry. Catholics were quick to notice that many Native cultures shared with them the religious belief that certain objects and rituals could invoke sacred power and used this belief to introduce Catholic doctrines.⁴² Using this shared theological principle, Native beliefs in helper spirits were likened to the Saints and Guardian angels whose intercession could be obtained through the use of objects like holy medals.⁴³ However, it was doctrine like this that was most detested by Protestants and often cited as an objection to the use of Catholic objects. Writing in the 1830s, one Baltimore pastor made it clear that while “we can approve of painting and statuary” it was not permissible to “kneel before them” as doing so would “drop the second commandment” and its prohibition of idolatry.⁴⁴ American Protestants considered the veneration of sacred objects in the belief that they could call upon sacred power to be unacceptable idolatry. Still, Catholics continued to embrace this theological assumption they shared with Native Americans and in

⁴⁰ Bresie, “Mother Katherine Drexel’s Benevolent Empire,” 8.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Enochs, “Native Americans on the Path to the Catholic Church,” 82.

⁴³ Ibid., 82-83.

⁴⁴ Smith, *Gothic Arches, Latin Crosses*, 80.

doing so managed to build a sense of kinship with these Native peoples while also reinforcing key tenets of their cultural worldview.

Middlemen and Frontiersmen

However, Catholic missionaries did not outright repudiate Anglo-American culture and were willing to work with the U.S. government as well as Native Americans. Despite her support of Catholic day schools, Drexel remained willing to work with government-run boarding schools as well. Throughout the 1910s Drexel dispatched members of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament to government boarding schools throughout Arizona and New Mexico where they were tasked with providing for the religious education of Native children by coordinating catechism classes and preparing students to receive the sacraments.⁴⁵ Drexel's willingness to have her order work within these schools illustrates that she did not view the efforts of the U.S. government as inherently opposed to the goals of her ministry and instead recognized that they posed an opportunity to help further her mission. Similarly, while the efforts of Catholic missionaries could help reinforce certain elements of Native American culture, they also often worked to undermine other aspects of Native culture as well. While Native cultures tended to be polygamous, Catholic missionaries served as firm advocates for the adoption of monogamous practices that paralleled those of wider American society.⁴⁶ Catholics also pushed Native Americans to embrace western concepts of universal ethics as they were frustrated by Native tribal ethics which one Jesuit missionary exasperatedly described when he noted that "They very

⁴⁵ Bresie, "Mother Katherine Drexel's Benevolent Empire," 12.

⁴⁶ Enochs, "Native Americans on the Path to the Catholic Church," 81.

seldom steal from each other” but “they see no harm in appropriating the property of their enemies.”⁴⁷

Catholic missionaries not only contented themselves to work through the institutions of the federal government and to promote the ethical principles they shared with Protestant Christians to the detriment of Native ethics but also proved to be willing to accept their own sense of American identity. Despite his objections to Catholic German immigrants accepting American culture and, in the process, abandoning their cultural heritage, Fr. Joseph Jessing ultimately considered himself and his fellow Catholics to be fully American. While still referring to himself and members of the German Catholic community within the United States as “Germans”, this remained purely a cultural designation as he notes that the essence of being a German is “our language and all the good things that are associated with it”.⁴⁸ However, while he asserted his commitment to remaining culturally German, Jessing also strongly encouraged German Catholics to “be the best patriots, proper Americans”, indicating that he, like many Catholics, had fully embraced an American identity.⁴⁹

However, the American identity embraced by these missionaries proved to be a middle path that allowed them to operate between both Native American and Protestant, Anglo-American cultures. While Drexel was willing to work through government-run boarding schools, her collaboration with the government did not constitute enthusiastic support of their mission to assimilate Native children into the prevailing Protestant, Anglo-American culture. Throughout her ministry, Drexel was forced to advocate for methods of evangelization that she did not fully

⁴⁷ Ibid., 81.

⁴⁸ Stefaniuk, “Joseph Jessing,” 7.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

support but felt the need to embrace in order to ensure the overall success of her work. Despite her strong support for day schools, Drexel found herself advocating for Catholic boarding schools as the government began building a series of public day schools for the Native Americans to which she had been ministering.⁵⁰ The reason for her advocacy of these Catholic boarding schools, as well as her work with government run boarding schools, was her fear that these public schools “would be detrimental to the Catholicity of the Pueblo Indians.”⁵¹ If anything, Drexel’s decision to cooperate with the government boarding schools was driven by her fear of these institutions’ goals of assimilation as she feared that the children sent to these schools would be converted to Protestantism under the influence of their Anglo-American instructors. Drexel saw both the perils and the opportunities posed by these institutions. She understood that the religious instruction that Native children were exposed to at these schools could sway them to Protestantism. However, she instead sought to use them as an opportunity to draw them into the Catholic faith. Just as Catholic missionaries carefully chose what elements of Native culture to embrace and which to reject in carrying out their ministry, so too did Drexel carefully discern what elements of Anglo-American colonialism served her goals and which did not.

The way in which Catholic missionaries understood themselves as mediators who had to navigate between Native American and Anglo-American culture is further highlighted by the way in which both the American government and Native nations called upon the missionaries to act as their representatives. In an 1864 letter to the Superior General of the Jesuit Order, Jesuit missionary Pierre-Jean De Smet details how he was asked by the American Secretary of the

⁵⁰ Bresie, “Mother Katherine Drexel’s Benevolent Empire,” 21.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Interior and Commissioner of Indian Affairs to go on a diplomatic mission among the Sioux to negotiate a peace with them on behalf of the U.S. government.⁵² This request indicates that the American government trusted De Smet and other Catholic missionaries to represent their best interests before the Native Americans. However, De Smet's thoughts about this potential mission reveal that he saw himself as not only an advocate for the American government but for the Native peoples as well as he notes that his "only object would be to announce to them the word of the Lord, with the words of peace, and to put an end, by wholesome advice, to the massacres of the whites and thereby prevent the entire extinction of the Sioux nation".⁵³ De Smet viewed himself as an impartial agent in the conflict between the two sides whose main interest was serving the best interests of both Native Americans and Anglo-Americans through his announcing of the "the word of the Lord".

Native Americans also trusted Catholic missionaries to help them pursue their interests. This can be observed in the 1877 appeal of Lakota leaders Red Cloud and Spotted Tail to President Rutherford B. Hayes for Catholic priests to help teach Lakota children how to read and write in English, a field that Catholic missionaries had more success in than Protestant missionaries.⁵⁴ The reason these native leaders asked specifically for Catholic priests and why Catholic missionaries had greater success in teaching English to Native children was their openness to Native culture. Natives understood the advantage that understanding English would provide them in their interaction with Anglo-American settlers but at the same time feared that

⁵² Pierre-Jean De Smet to Peter Jan Beckx, February 23, 1864, in *Life, Letters, and Travels of Pierre-Jean De Smet, S.J., 1801-1873: Missionary Labors and Adventures among the Wild Tribes of the North American Indians, Embracing Minute Descriptions of Their Manners, Customs, Games, Modes of Warfare and Torture, Legends, Traditions, etc., All from Personal Observations Made during Many Thousand Miles of Travel, with Sketches of the Country from St. Louis to the Puget Sound and the Altrabasca*, ed. Hiram M. Chittenden and Alfred T. Richardson (New York: F.P. Harper, 1905) 812-813.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 813.

⁵⁴ Donnan, "Kindred Spirits and Sacred Bonds," 15.

acceptance of this aspect of Anglo-American culture would lead to Anglo-American culture supplanting their own Native cultures. Through their willingness to learn Native languages, Catholic missionaries were not only able to better communicate with their Native pupils in order to effectively impart their lessons but also signaled to Native Americans that they did not seek to replace their pre-existing culture. This is further supported by the 1908 account of the Franciscan missionary, Father Anselm Weber, who noted that the Navajos saw the advantages of Catholic education and agreed to send their children to Catholic schools “with pleasure” after he explained that the Franciscans would “assist them in making practical use of what they had learned at school” and that they “could not use any force or drastic means to induce them to send their children”.⁵⁵ Weber noted that their assent to outside education was surprising as they had “been at the point of going upon the warpath” ten years earlier in order to resist sending their children to compulsory government education.⁵⁶ The Navajos’ response to Anselm illustrates that their opposition was to forced education that they saw as an attempt to replace their own culture. However, they were more than willing to accept lessons in Western culture when it was voluntary and on their own terms. As a result, Native American leaders were willing to accept Catholic missionaries into their tribal lands even as they sought to negotiate cultural and political tensions with the broader Protestant, Anglo-American society. This further reinforced the position of Catholic missionaries as neutral participants in the cultural clash of American westward expansion.

Despite its acceptance and identification with certain elements of both Native American and Protestant, Anglo-American culture, the American Catholic culture, propagated by late 19th

⁵⁵ Enochs, “Native Americans on the Path to the Catholic Church,” 86.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

and early 20th century Catholics ministering to Native Americans on the frontier, established itself as a distinct culture situated in between both societies. A commitment to cultural toleration served as the foundation of this emerging American Catholic culture. This commitment encouraged immigrants to the New World to engage, rather than oppose, both the indigenous and Anglo-centric Protestant cultures they encountered in the U.S. as they grappled with the question of how to be both American citizens and faithful Catholics. However, their embrace of these cultures was not unqualified as in forging their own path toward American identity, Catholic missionaries did not fully embrace either culture. Catholic missionaries skillfully interacted with both cultures throughout their ministry as they obstructed the spread of Protestant, Anglo-American culture by embracing Native cultures as part of their evangelization efforts. At the same time, they also worked through some of the main instruments of Anglo-American cultural expansion when they deemed it necessary to defend and further cultivate the rising Catholic American culture they were pioneering. As the American nation expanded westward, Catholic missionaries led the way, acting sometimes as a vanguard and other times as a barrier to American expansion but always acting for their own sense of American identity in a land of many competing cultures and identities.

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