

Documentary explores the life and faith of Servant of God Nicholas Black Elk

It isn't often that a Native American is considered for sainthood in the Catholic Church, much less one who was a cousin to Crazy Horse, toured with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and was involved in the Battles of Little Bighorn and Wounded Knee. Nicholas Black Elk may be better known for all of these things, yet his Catholic faith is the highlight of a new documentary that began airing on ABC affiliates in May.

Movie Trailer

To view a trailer for the documentary "Walking the Good Red Road," visit <https://bit.ly/3f03Ch7>.

"Walking the Good Red Road: Nicholas Black Elk's Journey to Sainthood," a documentary more than a year in the making, involved the collaboration of media, historians and the Lakota people. The film was helped by a grant from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Christopher Salvador of New Group Media, based in South Bend, Indiana, served as director and producer for the documentary, while Sister Judith Zielinski, OSF, functioned as screenwriter and producer for the project. She became involved when she received a phone call from a Catholic theologian of Native American history who wanted advice on creating a short video about Nicholas Black Elk.

A 'bridge builder'

Nicholas Black Elk lived a fascinating life in a time of great

turmoil for the Oglala Sioux people. As a young boy, Black Elk took ill and fell into a coma during which he had a vision that he felt called him to serve as a spiritual leader for his people. His search for understanding took many years and another vision in which he saw “the Son of God.”

Though his first wife was Catholic and his children raised in the Faith, it wasn't until he was in his 40s that Black Elk finally committed himself to baptism in the Catholic Church. After embracing Catholicism, Black Elk became a devout catechist, guiding nearly 400 other Native Americans to the Catholic Church. The title “Good Red Road” refers to the manner of teaching that Black Elk used for evangelizing children, which employed a pictorial scroll with the “red road” leading to heaven.

Being Christian and Native American did not always come easy for the baptized Lakota, but Black Elk learned to merge the two. He spent many years working with the Jesuits who served as spiritual leaders on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, traveling with them and holding prayer services when no priests were available. Black Elk died in 1950.

“I see Black Elk as a kind of bridge builder,” Sister Judith said. “He embraced Christianity, but didn't reject the Lakota way.” Black Elk reportedly was often seen carrying both a rosary and a Lakota prayer pipe. He was able to teach young people that the God of Christianity fit Lakota spirituality as well.

Producing the documentary

Filmed predominantly on the Pine Ridge Reservation, the documentary features testimonies from Lakota Sioux elders who knew Black Elk as well as some of his descendants, including his grandson and voice recordings of his daughter, Lucy Looks Twice. Also interviewed in the documentary are Catholic leaders, including Bishop Robert D. Gruss of Saginaw,

Michigan, formerly of the Diocese of Rapid City, South Dakota. Bishop Gruss opened the canonization process for Black Elk and Jesuit Father Michael Steltenkamp, the biographer for Black Elk's life, among others.

In the 1880s, the Lakota Sioux chief Red Cloud trusted the Jesuits above any other religious organization. He advocated in Washington for the government to send Jesuits (or the Blackrobes, as they were called) to South Dakota to attend the spiritual needs of his people on the reservation. His wishes prevailed, and the Jesuits built a school and church on Pine Ridge Reservation, which remains to this day. The school was renamed in the 1960s to Red Cloud Indian School to give pride and ownership to the native peoples.

The Jesuits in residence at Pine Ridge today played an important part in bringing Black Elk's story to life through the documentary, providing interviews along with time-period religious artifacts from their own archives, which lent authenticity to the film.

Sister Judith spent long hours doing research at Marquette University, the Jesuit college in Milwaukee that holds the nation's largest archive of information on Native American Catholicism. Every detail was important in the filming, so Salvador and Sister Judith scouted filming locations on the Pine Ridge Reservation and sought actors from among the Lakota Sioux who spoke the language and understood their customs.

With the cause for his canonization opened, he is titled Servant of God Nicholas Black Elk. As the process continues, Black Elk could become the first male Native American saint recognized in the Catholic Church. St. Kateri Tekakwitha of the Mohawk tribe was the first Native American Catholic saint.

Much of what was previously known of Black Elk is taken from a book written about his life in the 1930s by John Neihardt called "Black Elk Speaks." Unfortunately, according to Sister

Judith, the book makes no mention of his Catholic faith. "People were surprised because of the lack of knowledge about him as a Catholic," Sister Judith said.

She continued: "Nicholas was a true mystic. His search for God, for the Great Spirit, led him to Christ. ... But he also remained open to the spirituality of the Lakota, which is very nature-based – very Franciscan. He was able to integrate that in his Catholicism."

Sister Judith sees Nicholas Black Elk as an extraordinary example of sainthood today. She relates how with all of the suffering of his people, Black Elk could have become bitter and distrustful, but instead he sought holiness and forgiveness. "When I look at our world, we are so polarized, we find it difficult to have a sense of unity. ... He is an incredible symbol of what we need in our times."

New Group Media and the Diocese of Rapid City will be making "Walking the Good Red Road" available on DVD and streaming platforms in early summer.

Jennifer Barton writes from Indiana.