

# Black Elk and the need for catechists

I write these words as the annual November meeting of the United States bishops comes to a close. We bishops discussed many significant matters—from racism and immigration to the liturgy for the baptism of children. But I would like to emphasize one theme in particular that came up frequently in our conversations, namely, the catechesis of our young people. I have a rather intense personal interest in the topic since, at the conclusion of this gathering, I officially became chairman of the bishops' Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis.

In his formal address to us at the commencement of the conference, Archbishop Christophe Pierre, the Apostolic Nuncio to the United States, reiterated statistics that I have often remarked regarding the growing number of “nones” or religiously unaffiliated in our country. He especially noted the rise of this cohort among people under thirty years of age. For every one person who joins the Catholic Church today, he reminded us, six are leaving. We must make a renewed commitment, he concluded, to the indispensable work of handing on the faith. The Archbishop's intuition in this regard was confirmed, over and again, by bishops who spoke, in various sessions and forums, of a crisis of catechesis in our church.

I had this wake-up call from the Pope's representative very much in mind as my friend, Bishop Robert Gruss, the bishop of Rapid City, South Dakota, rose to speak on the second day of the meeting. Bishop Gruss' happy task was to present to us the case for the beatification and canonization of Nicholas Black Elk, a Lakota Indian medicine man who, at midlife, converted to Catholicism. After hearing the bishop's impassioned presentation, we enthusiastically voted to approve the advancement of Black Elk's cause. What especially struck me in Bishop Gruss' brief biographical sketch is that Black Elk, after his conversion, eagerly took up the task of catechesis within his community. Due to his impressive memory and acute mind, he was able to convey the complexities of the Bible and Church teaching to his fellow Lakotans who had embraced the faith. And very much in line with the Catholic conviction that grace builds on and perfects nature, Black Elk endeavored to incorporate his

mystical sensibility and healing power into the fuller context of his Catholicism. It was his holiness and prayerful connection to God, even more than his learning, that brought his people closer to Christ.

My prayer is that, if the cause of Black Elk moves forward, we might one day invoke him as a real icon for catechists in the Catholic Church. There is an army of volunteers across our country who give generously of their time to pass on the faith to our young people, but I wonder how many of these laborers in the vineyard of the Lord truly realize the sacredness of their task. Without good catechists, more and more of our young people will fall into secularism and indifferentism. And as these unaffiliated in ever greater numbers come of age, our society will be adversely affected, for Christian ideas and values will be less and less at play.

So what can catechists today take from the example of Nicholas Black Elk? First, they can commit themselves to the assiduous study of the faith. As I have argued before, huge numbers of the young identify intellectual problems and questions as the reasons they are leaving the faith: religion in relation to science, the existence of God, the objectivity of moral values, etc. Without smart catechists, the kids abandon the faith. It's as blunt and as simple as that. My nephew, who is starting his first year at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) this fall, went through religious education as he was coming of age. To be frank, he found the vast majority of his training superficial and remembers almost none of it. But one year stays in his mind. In his sixth grade religious education class, he had a catechist who had a master's degree in theology and who took the young people, with some rigor, through a study of the Bible. Please don't tell me that the kids can't handle that sort of challenge; on the contrary, it's what they remember—and savor.

Secondly, they can see their work as a true vocation, a sacred calling, a mystical obligation. As Pope Paul VI put it so memorably, men and women of today listen to witnesses more than to teachers, and to teachers in the measure that they are also witnesses. Or as the cliché has it: the faith is caught more than taught. Some years ago, I read a study that indicated what drew young people to the faith were not gimmicks or histrionics or the pathetic attempt to be “relevant” to them. What drew them were teachers who knew their subject matter and were obviously committed to it.

Catechists, the Church needs you! We're losing our kids to secularism. If anyone of sharp mind and faithful heart is reading these words, take seriously the possibility that God is calling you to this sacred work. And I pray that one day catechists can look to Nicholas Black Elk as exemplar and heavenly friend.