

Historical Insights

by Daria Sockey

Black Robe Peacemaker: Pierre De Smet (by J. G. E. Hopkins)

In 2015, a statue of Fr. Pierre De Smet was removed from its spot on the grounds of St. Louis University. The statue depicts De Smet holding a crucifix high in one hand, while with his other hand he blesses two Native Americans, one of whom is kneeling. Apparently a group of students and faculty saw in this sculpture nothing more than a symbol of racism and “white supremacy.” The Jesuits who run the university responded by removing the statue and placing it in the university museum as the new centerpiece to its “Collection of the Western Jesuit Missions” exhibit. Although some decried this decision as caving in to political correctness (and an appalling ignorance of history), one must admit that the sculpture’s current setting, amidst educational signage and artifacts, could actually help dispel some of that ignorance.

Young readers of *Black Robe Peacemaker* will be similarly well equipped to dispel modern ignorance. This well-researched book is very faithful to original sources. Adults and older students who want more detail might turn next to *Apostle of the Rocky Mountains* by Rev. E. Laveille, a 1915 reprint whose author quotes extensively from the writings of Fr. De Smet and other contemporaries.

Black Robe Peacemaker teaches us amazing things about Fr. De Smet and the intrepid Jesuit missionaries. But it teaches us even more about the Native Americans. Let us examine each in turn.

Pierre De Smet. The life and work of Fr. Pierre De Smet might be incomprehensible to those who today decry the “imposition of European culture” on native peoples. He was not, himself, a “settler” and his opinions on westward expansion and so-called Manifest Destiny ranged from mixed to negative. He had no intention of imposing anything. His only wish was to share the words of everlasting life with a people who had not yet heard them. One might as well speak of parents “imposing” nourishment, shelter, and affection on their children, or a doctor “imposing” medicine on a sick man. The Christian faith was a gift from God—not from Europe—to all men, and De Smet wanted only to give what he himself had received. De Smet’s secondary project—teaching the Indians to settle, hunt and grow their own food in a permanent location, might be seen not as imposition but certainly as persuasion to adopt elements of a culture that was foreign to the western tribes. (Although not foreign because it came from Europe: recall that growing corn, squash, and beans was part of the culture of eastern tribes long before white men came to North America) Here, De Smet was being pragmatic. He wasn’t trying to destroy tribal life but to insure its survival. De Smet saw the inevitability—not the justice—of the relentless westward expansion of white settlers. Indians living on already claimed, settled, cultivated land would have been harder to push onto reservations than Indians who were nomadic hunters. He mediated peace treaties between any warring parties—tribe against tribe, and American settlers or government against tribes.

In the end, De Smet and the missions he’d founded experienced destruction and suppression that paralleled the same oppression and exile experienced by so many Indian tribes on their own. The treaty of 1868 had been broken by the white men. The Flatheads’ land that De Smet had taught them to farm was stolen from them. In 1870 the Bureau of Indian Affairs, under

President Grant's direction, apportioned out missionary control of Indian reservations and territories among various Christian denominations, without regard to which churches already had the largest presence in each area. Established Catholic mission properties were often handed over to Protestant groups, and Catholic missionaries were forbidden from working in all but 7 of the 94 Bureau agency districts. This, despite the fact that the vast majority of existing Christian missions and mission schools were Catholic.

This restrictive Bureau policy was eventually scrapped, and as the Catholic population of the United States grew, the Church eventually had the funds and manpower to set up new Indian missions and revive old ones. Another Portraits title, *Door of Hope*, deals with this phase of the evangelization of Native Americans, focusing on the work of St. Katherine Drexel.

The Indians. In other Portraits titles—*Star of the Mohawks* and *Joseph the Huron*—we learned of the valiant efforts of the French Jesuits among the eastern Indian tribes, and that despite all their efforts, only a (persecuted) minority of the Indians embraced Christianity during those early years. Further research would reveal that those missions came to a sad end when the English beat France for the control of Canada. But in *Black Robe Peacemaker* we learn that the seed planted in Canada fell to the ground, died, and then bore fruit 4000 miles away in the Rocky Mountains. The first evangelists of the Flathead, Nez Perce, and Kalispel Indians were Canadian Iroquois! *Apostle to the Rockies* provides more details on this remarkable transmission of their faith; an earlier Iroquois “Ignatius” and his companions had been skilled catechists and lay leaders in their day:

“The Flatheads...learned from this earlier Ignatius the principal mysteries of the faith, the great precepts of Christianity, the Lord's Prayer, the Sign of the Cross, and other religious practices. Their lives were regulated by this teaching; they said morning and night prayers, sanctified Sunday, baptized the dying and placed a cross over the graves of their dead.” (*Apostle to the Rockies*, p.99)

So strong was the faith of the Flatheads that they risked (and sacrificed) several lives, making not one but four journeys of many thousands of miles to beg for the Black Robes who could alone turn their aspiring church in the Rockies into the real thing. Their persistence, over the course of ten years, brings to mind the parable of the widow and the judge, or the gospel account of the Syro-Phoenician woman who would not be discouraged in her quest for a miracle. Here we have an object lesson in the meaning of Baptism of Desire. When their prayers were finally answered and Father De Smet made it across the Rockies, the priest was met not by ignorant pagans, but by a throng of eager catechumens.

Another virtue the Indians had in abundance was that of prudence, or discernment. As the years went by, the betrayals and broken promises of the American government piled up. It's a wonder that the Catholic tribes did not reject Christianity as merely the religion of their oppressors, a religion whose tenets the white men practiced so poorly! But no, they had the keen intelligence, aided by supernatural grace, to cling to the Gospel, which came to them from God, albeit through a culture that was in other ways foreign, threatening, and even deadly.

Pierre De Smet's readiness to serve and instruct the Indians during that moment in history when they were actively seeking a Black Robe opened the fullness of faith to them just in time. He is a man to admire for both his physical and moral strength, his love for the Indians and willingness to adapt to their Indian culture. He is the type of priest whom our Holy Father extols: willing to go to the peripheries and take on the “smell of the sheep.” The Indians who received the word of God and cherished it responded with great personal piety and what is more, a willingness to spread the faith to others. (They are role models for us laity, who still make every

excuse to avoid our role in evangelizing our neighbors, still expecting our overworked priests to do it all for us.) Joined in Christ, those who were “Other” became brothers. Cultural differences remain, but their relevance fades in the light of a greater shared culture: citizenship in the kingdom of heaven. We might turn to these great Catholics of the American West for their intercession as we work to resolve the racism and cultural conflicts of our own day. Old Ignatius of the Iroquois, Old Simon of the Flatheads, and Louise Sighouin of the Coeur d’Alenes, pray for us! Pierre De Smet, pray for us!