

Press release from the Diocese of Rapid City. S.D.

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Nicholas William Black Elk, Sr. could become the first male Native American canonized saint from the U.S.

On Tuesday, June 25, 2019, at St. Agnes Catholic Church, Manderson, SD, Bishop Robert Gruss presided at a Mass celebrating the completion of the diocesan phase of the Cause for Canonization of Servant of God Nicholas Black Elk. At the conclusion of Mass, the final documents were signed, sealed and bound with a red cord, readied to be taken to the Congregation for Causes of Saints in Rome, Italy. Fr. Louis Escalante, the Roman Postulator for the Cause, will deliver the final documents.

In Rome, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints will review all the evidence submitted and will carry out their own investigation to determine if all of the proper documents have been submitted. At some point in time, the Congregation will determine if the heroic virtues of the Servant of God Black Elk have or have not been demonstrated. Their vote determines whether the Cause lives or dies. If the vote is affirmative, the recommendation of a Decree of Heroic Virtues is sent to the Holy Father, whose judgment is final. Once Black Elk's Heroic Virtues have been recognized by the Pope, he would be called Venerable, e.g. Venerable Servant of God Nicholas Black Elk. The timeframe for this phase is unknown.

The remaining step before beatification is the approval of a miracle, evidence of the intercessory power of the Venerable Servant of God and thus revealing his union after death with God. Those who propose a miracle do so in the diocese where it is alleged to have occurred, not in the diocese of the Cause, unless the same. The diocese of the candidate miracle then conducts its own tribunals, scientific and theological. A second miracle is required following beatification before he would be declared a saint.

According to records from the Diocese of Rapid City, Black Elk was born in 1865. He came from a family of medicine men and he carried on their work. He was at the Battle of Little Big Horn close to the Montana-Wyoming border in 1876. Around 1877, he joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West show and toured in Europe. He returned to the United States in 1889. In South Dakota, he was injured at the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890. A bullet grazed his thigh.

Through his interaction with Jesuit priests, he converted to the Catholic faith and was baptized on December 6, 1904, the feast of St. Nicholas. One biographer said he took the name Nicholas because he was inspired by the saint's generosity.

Long before Vatican II encouraged the permanent diaconate, there were men serving similar roles in the Diocese of Rapid City. Jesuit priests selected virtuous Lakota men to teach the faith. Called catechists, they ministered to the Native American people in their own language. They taught catechism, prayed with people, and prepared converts for the sacraments. In 1907

Nicholas Black Elk became a catechist.

Black Elk died August 17, 1950, at Pine Ridge. He is credited with bringing more than 400 people into the Catholic Church.

In 2016, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names officially changed the name of Harney Peak to Black Elk Peak in the Black Hills. Black Elk said he had a powerful religious vision there in 1872.

The canonization process began in March 2017, when George Looks Twice and other grandchildren of Nicholas Black Elk presented Bishop Robert Gruss a petition requesting that he initiate the Cause for Canonization of Nicholas Black Elk. On October 21, 2017, Bishop Robert Gruss celebrated Mass at Holy Rosary Church on the Pine Reservation, formally opening the Cause for Canonization of Nicholas Black Elk.

On June 26, 2018 a local committee convened to begin working on the process for canonization of Nicholas Black Elk. Officials of the Inquiry were named and Fr. Luis Escalante, a priest from the Diocese of Sabina-Poggio Mireto, Italy, was chosen as the postulator of the Cause. William White was named the local Vice-Postulator. During the past year, Black Elk's life was researched, historical evidence was gathered, letters written by Black Elk in his Lakota language were translated into English and witnesses who could testify to his virtuous life and holiness of Nicholas Black Elk were interviewed.

Monday, June 24, 2019, the final meeting of the diocesan phase was held in Rapid City. The further promotion of this cause was discussed, the planning of the liturgy for the Mass concluding the Cause was completed, the Officials of the Inquiry took their final oaths and the documents, decrees, and witness testimonies were entered into the record.