"Down Too Deep"

Father Pius Boehm, from Reluctant Missionary to Devoted Caretaker at Crow Creek, 1887–1935

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> Thinking back, it all appears to be a dream, and yet many things are only too real. Met a great many people, friends and relatives, brothers and sisters and parents; yet there is nothing like meeting the Little Ones at Home. —Father Pius Boehm diary, 2 November 1904[1]

Seventeen years on the Dakota prairie had left Father Pius Boehm a changed man. As he concluded the journal of his fall 1904 travels from Immaculate Conception Mission School at Stephan on the Crow Creek Indian Reservation in South Dakota, to the World's Fair in Saint Louis, to Saint Meinrad Abbey in Indiana and back again, Boehm exclaimed, "Home Sweet Home!" Had he looked in the mirror, the Benedictine monk and priest might have wondered what had happened to the disconsolate man who arrived at the isolated missionary outpost in January 1887. Now here he was, fresh from a visit with his parents, siblings, relatives, and—importantly for a monk—his confrères and abbot at his own monastery back in Indiana, and yet no fewer than ten times in his short travel diary does Boehm yearn to know how "the little ones at home" are faring. Clearly, his heart had established a residence at Stephan. This sentiment is perhaps not surprising, given his long tenure there from 1887 to 1935. Indeed, Boehm would ultimately become one of the longest-serving Catholic missionaries in American history.[2]

Successfully navigating a wide range of challenges surely had a significant effect on Boehm. Not only did he acclimate to the stark ex-

The author extends special thanks to Fr. Cyprian Davis, Fr. Timothy Sweeney, Fr. Meinrad Brune, Br. Stanley Wagner, Fr. Christopher Uehlein, and Sr. Eileen Neville (all of the Order of Saint Benedict), past and present archivists of Saint Meinrad Archabbey, Blue Cloud Abbey, and Sacred Heart Monastery, whose dedicated work and generous hospitality have made this project possible.

1. Pius Boehm, "Pa's Trip to Indiana and Other Points," Diary, 2 Nov. 1904, p. 35, Box 76, Blue Cloud Abbey Collection, Swiss Congregation Archives (hereafter SCA), St. Meinrad Archabbey, St. Meinrad, Ind.
2. Ibid.

tremes of Dakota and navigate the deep cultural divide separating him from the Dakota Sioux children under his care, but also, as a monk, he was obliged to find a way to continue observing his vows while meeting the heavy demands placed upon him by the outside world. Still, the irony of Boehm's story, not unlike those of other missionaries, is that although he was sent west as an instrument of conversion, the crucible of his experiences radically transformed his understanding of mission, attitudes toward American Indians, and worldview.

Much has been written on evangelizing endeavors among the Sioux, particularly regarding the rivalry between Catholics and Episcopalians assigned to certain tribes under the terms of President Ulysses S. Grant's Peace Policy and successive federal guidelines. While Francis Paul Prucha has detailed the national context of this story, several important studies of specific schools in South Dakota and North Dakota, both government sponsored and church affiliated, have deepened our understanding of how the Sioux and missionaries alike were affected by the attempt to use education, whether through boarding or day schools, as a tool of forced acculturation and assimilation.[3]

Robert W. Galler's work has been especially important in documenting the history of the Immaculate Conception Mission School, presenting an ethno- and environmental-historical survey of this Catholic (and later tribal) boarding school and noting the cultural interactions and negotiated agency among all the institution's stakeholders—not least of all the Yanktonai Dakotas themselves.[4] Although Boehm has certainly

3. *See* Prucha, *The Churches and the Indian Schools: 1888–1912* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979). *See also* Henry Warner Bowden, *American Indians and Christian Missions: Studies in Cultural Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 164–97; Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880–1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001); and Peter J. Rahill, *The Catholic Indian Missions and Grant's Peace Policy, 1870–1884* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1953). Brief introductions to American Benedictine missionary activities can be found in John C. Scott, "'To Do Some Good Among the Indians': Nineteenth Century Benedictine Indian Missions," *Journal of the West* 23 (1984): 26–36, and Joel Rippinger, *The Benedictine Order in the United States: An Interpretive History* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1990), pp. 130–40.

4. *See* Galler, "Making Common Cause: Yanktonais and Catholic Missionaries on the Northern Plains," *Ethnohistory* 55 (Winter 2008): 439–64; Galler, "Tribal Decision-Making and Intercultural Relations: Crow Creek Agency, 1863–1885," *Indigenous Nations Studies* 3 (2002): 95–112; and Galler, "Environment, Cultures, and Social Change on the Great

figured into Galler's studies, the activities of this key figure merit further investigation in their own right, considering Boehm's longevity, his relationships with decision makers at all levels, and the impact on the broader landscape of Catholic education among the Sioux resulting from these interactions. The fact that Boehm's story is not well known despite his forty-eight years of service at Stephan is likely attributable to the presence of more colorful personalities on the scene, including Martin Marty, Ambrose Mattingly, Fintan Wiederkehr, Meinrad McCarthy, Justin Snyder, Francis Craft, and the Sioux "American Sisters."

In addition, although Boehm left behind a rich collection of correspondence, daily diaries, reports, and financial ledgers, this archival material, much of it housed at Saint Meinrad Archabbey and written in the German *Sütterlin* script or in Boehm's own crabbed handwriting, has gone largely untapped. Certainly, it is possible to garner important aspects of his career from his English correspondence with the church's Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions and other agencies, but a fuller portrait may be gleaned from a careful reading of his less-guarded confidential correspondence with the abbey, often embedded with Latin quotations from the Bible and the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, along with a

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Plains: A History of Crow Creek Tribal School" (Ph.D. diss., Western Michigan University, 2000). On Catholic missions in Dakota Territory and South Dakota in general, *see* Mary Claudia Duratschek, *Crusading along Sioux Trails: A History of the Catholic Indian Missions of South Dakota* (Yankton, S.Dak.: Benedictine Convent of the Sacred Heart, 1947); Duratschek, *Builders of God's Kingdom: The History of the Catholic Church in South Dakota* (Yankton, S.Dak.: Sacred Heart Press, 1985); and M. Serena Zens, "The Educational Work of the Catholic Church among the Indians of South Dakota from the Beginning to 1935," *South Dakota Historical Collections* 20 (1940): 299–356. A convenient introduction to German-language periodicals detailing missionary work on the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations is provided by Karl Markus Kreis, ed., *Lakotas, Black Robes, and Holy Women: German Reports from the Indian Missions in South Dakota, 1886–1900*, trans. Corinna Dally-Starna (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007). Most recently, Harvey Markowitz's *Converting the Rosebud: Catholic Mission and the Lakotas, 1886–1916* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018) presents an invaluable parallel study from an anthropological-historical perspective, focusing on the Franciscan and Jesuit missions to the Sicangu Lakotas, though *see also* Ross Alexander Enochs, *The Jesuit Mission to the Lakota Sioux: Pastoral Theology and Ministry, 1886–1945* (Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed & Ward, 1996). For an overview of St. Meinrad Abbey involvement, *see* Kevin Abing, "'To Make Them True and Faithful Christians and Good Citizens': Missionaries of Saint Meinrad Abbey and the Sioux Indians, 1876–1896," in *To Prefer Nothing to Christ: Saint Meinrad Archabbey, 1854–2004*, ed. Cyprian Davis (St. Meinrad, Ind.: Abbey Press, 2004), pp. 153–206.

mindfulness that Boehm, whom the Sioux nicknamed Ista Maza (Iron Eyes) for the wire-rimmed spectacles he wore, saw the world largely through Benedictine—or even medieval—lenses.

In chronicling Boehm's own gradual change of heart at Stephan Mission, it is helpful to focus on several milestones along his journey, with special attention to his formative monastic education (shaped largely by Bishop Martin Marty's worldview), his struggle to establish his own authority at Stephan, and his subsequent efforts to secure the school's long-term survival. Ironically, Boehm began his time at Crow Creek with the greatest reluctance but ended it with the greatest devotion and disappointment that those who had brought him west in the first place with promises of grand success and support—the bishop, the abbot, the federal government—all had profound changes of heart as well.

Although many studies have chronicled Catholic schools and missions on the Great Plains, the particular nature and experience of the *monastic* missionaries who answered the call to Dakota is often understated or underappreciated. Yet it is an absolutely vital element of the larger story. Distinguished from their Protestant counterparts by a cenobitic background that prized obedience to monastic superiors, as well as a pronounced tendency to call upon medieval models of behavior in a world that seemed keen to distrust or even persecute them, the German Benedictine monks and nuns who took up residence at Crow Creek brought with them a distinctive worldview that shaped their attitudes and actions toward potential converts, secular partners, adversaries, patrons, and one another.[5]

The many unexpected challenges the Benedictines encountered in this harsh frontier environment as teachers, priests, confessors, caretakers, fundraisers, merchants, farmers, and ranchers at Immaculate Conception Mission School often prompted them to make key decisions bearing an imprint far more resonant with the ideals of medieval monasticism than with the realities of life on a late nineteenth-century

5. Markowitz, *Converting the Rosebud*, pp. 68–85, provides important insights into the searing effects that Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*, the struggle between the Prussian state and the Catholic Church in the 1870s over control of educational institutions and broader issues of sovereignty, had on Franciscans and Jesuits who emigrated and later staffed the Rosebud reservation missions. The experience at Stephan Mission was somewhat different, however, since none of the school's religious staff hailed directly from Germany but rather (at least for the men) from a Swiss Benedictine foundation in southern Indiana.

Immaculate Conception Mission School, pictured here in 1895, served the dual roles of educating and Christianizing the Crow Creek reservation population.

reservation. They came by this stance honestly, having been inspired (or cajoled) to come west by Martin Marty, the charismatic Catholic "Apostle to the Sioux" who insisted that he and his fellow Benedictines were uniquely qualified by their monastic heritage and present circumstances to undertake such missions. To be sure, Marty would become the spokesman for a grand Benedictine vision for Dakota. It is therefore well worth exploring, if only briefly, the development of that vision and the imprint it would leave on his protégés, including Boehm.

It would have been difficult for contemporaries to predict that Aloys Marty, born in Schwyz, Switzerland, in 1834 and later a monk and teacher at the great abbey of Einsiedeln, would close his life halfway around the world as one of the most influential and controversial American bishops of his time. Of special interest here is the sustained rhetorical use Marty made of early Benedictine history as he justified monks' active participation in a host of evangelical endeavors, as Paul G. Monson has demonstrated in several key studies.[6] Already as a stu-

6. An insightful overview of Martin Marty's and Boniface Wimmer's views on Benedictine stability and utility may be found in Paul G. Monson, "Monastic Evangelization? The Sacramental Vision of America's Early Benedictine Monks," *American Catholic Studies* 124 (2013): 45–59, and Monson, "Useful Monks: The Idea of Utility in Early American Benedictine Monasticism," *Downside Review* 131 (2013): 69–86. Joel Rippinger, "Martin Marty: Founder, First Abbot and Missionary Bishop," in Davis, ed., *To Prefer Nothing to Christ*, pp. 55–84, provides a useful summary of Marty's activities relevant to the present study. For

dent at Einsiedeln, Marty took an active interest in the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, drawing heavily upon its literature and leadership in the decades to come. At a farewell gathering on 19 December 1852 for those brothers leaving for America, Marty was chosen to deliver a stirring address titled "The 6th and 19th Centuries: A Benedictine Historical Analogy," in which he exhorted his colleagues not to shrink from embracing what he saw as the Benedictine Order's evangelizing destiny.[7]

A quarter century later, having long since arrived at Saint Meinrad Abbey, Einsiedeln's daughter house founded in southern Indiana in 1854, to put it in order as its appointed prior and then abbot, Marty turned his gaze westward, drawn by the dramatic events transforming the frontier. Recognized as the leader of Catholic missionary efforts among the Sioux as early as 1876, Marty, through his extensive travels and encounters with Indian leaders, helped the Catholic Church carve out a place for itself in the post-conquest "civilizing" mission, despite the pride of place the implementors of President Grant's Peace Policy had assured the Episcopalians on many reservations. Between Marty's own efforts and those of his Jesuit and Franciscan contemporaries, various Catholic missions and schools would be established throughout Dakota Territory, including the one at Stephan.

Convinced as he was that Benedictines were best suited for this work because of their vow of stability (which also resonated with the government's aim of settling all tribes on specific reservations), Marty wrote a remarkable series of letters in 1878 and 1879 to his superiors back in

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further background on monk-missionaries and problems of conversion in the early medieval period, which were much on the minds of Marty and his contemporaries, *see* Richard Sullivan, "The Carolingian Missionary and the Pagan," *Speculum* 28 (1953): 705–40, and Steven A. Stofferahn, "Staying the Royal Sword: Solving the Conversion Dilemma in Early Medieval Europe," *The Historian* 71 (2009): 461–80.

7. Martin Marty, "Abschied," Box 1, St. Meinrad Abbey Letters in Einsiedeln Archives Collection, St. Meinrad Archabbey Archives (hereafter SMAA), St. Meinrad Archabbey, as discussed more fully by Monson, "Monastic Evangelization," p. 52. For a wider description of the event, *see* Alcuin Leibold, ed., *Pioneer Letters*, 5 vols. (St. Meinrad, Ind.: Abbey Press, 1989), 1:50–53. A letter dated 17 December 1852 from Father Francis Sales Muller to Father Athanasius Tschopp, Dean of Einsiedeln Abbey, took pains to support this optimistic view: "Such missions are completely in accord with the spirit of the *Rule* and the original Order of Saint Benedict. I have no doubt that a monastic foundation in America will become a source of support for Einsiedeln" (Ibid., 1:59).

Switzerland outlining the brightest of expectations. He thanked them for "the joyful news that you and our confrères of the thousand-year-old civilizing band of Saint Meinrad are enthusiastic about the Benedictine apostolate to the heathens! . . . Certainly you will also thank God that His splendid task has been entrusted to the Order of Saint Benedict and the family of Saint Meinrad!"[8] Marty then added, "Never have I marveled so greatly about the help of Divine Providence as in this undertaking. I still believe that the conversion of these pagans is a work which God has destined for the Order of Saint Benedict."[9]

Marty, however, was also aware of the need for outside assistance. Jockeying for position with other orders, he asked the head of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions in Washington, D.C., in a 9 October 1878 letter for help in building a massive Benedictine monastery somewhere in Dakota Territory, "on the same plan if not on the same dimensions as the abbeys created one thousand years ago in the wildernesses and among the barbarous nations of Europe."[10] Ten years later, having since resigned the abbacy of Saint Meinrad to take up his new role as vicar apostolic to Dakota Territory, Marty wrote from the newly built schoolhouse at Stephan Mission to Mother Katharine Drexel, the wealthy founder of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in Pennsylvania who took as her special cause the conversion of freed slaves and conquered American Indians (and whose money had paid for the building). Marty could look back with satisfaction to see that at least part of his dream had come true. "Every day," he noted, "furnishes me with new proofs for the conviction which led me to engage in the In-

8. Marty to Ildephonse Hurlimann, Dean of Einsiedeln Abbey, 6 Jan. 1878 in Leibold, ed., *Pioneer Letters*, 4:1486.

9. Marty to Basil Oberholzer, Abbot of Einsiedeln Abbey, 8–9 May 1879, in Leibold, ed., *Pioneer Letters*, 5:1568.

10. Marty to J. B. Brouillet, Director of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions (hereafter BCIM), 9 Oct. 1878, in Alcuin Leibold, ed., *Bishop Martin Marty Letters*, 6 vols. (St. Meinrad, Ind.: Abbey Press, 1992), 2:522. Marty's enthusiasm knew few bounds: "For the surrounding population of hitherto untutored savages this house will exhibit a bright model of Christian life in its liturgical, moral, and social aspect, where they shall learn how to work and pray. . . . In no distant future the sons of Saint Benedict shall thus see themselves surrounded by a double family, the monastic and the rustic community, both united by faith, labor and common prayer. From the midst of the boundless prairie so long unapproachable and deserts henceforward re-peopled shall arise everywhere the hymn of joy, gratitude and adoration" (ibid.).

dian mission twelve years ago, that the establishment of a Benedictine monastery in or near the Indian country would civilize and Christianize the aborigines of this country, as similar institutions have elevated the barbarous nations of Europe in the sixth and following centuries."[11] Martin Marty's grand vision in the 1870s thus set the stage for generations of Catholic missionaries in the Dakotas. With Marty's own career cut short by illness, however, it was left to his successors to navigate the many changes of heart—among themselves and their patrons and critics—that marked the story of missionary and educational endeavor in the years that followed.

From the start, the mission school Martin Marty set up at Stephan had a difficult time of it. Running a boarding school was a complicated business, and as with many of Marty's initiatives, the project he proposed was big on inspiration, short on specifics. Settling the details fell to those on the ground, who would inevitably be obliged to improvise. So it was that in January 1887, a band of Benedictine monks from Saint Meinrad Abbey, including the thirty-four-year-old Father Pius Boehm, made their way a thousand miles across the Midwest and Great Plains to their new mission station on the Crow Creek Indian Reservation. Having answered the call from Marty, they were welcomed by a number of Yanktonai chiefs, though with a note of warning that if they overstepped their calling and tried to take away any land, they would be unceremoniously kicked out.[12] The black-robed missionaries, who often preferred to speak German amongst themselves, must have struck an odd picture on the frozen prairie, but so began a Catholic educational endeavor that would loom large at Crow Creek for nearly a century.

Born 12 February 1852 near Fulda, Indiana, to poor Bavarian immigrants, Georg Boehm had attended school at Saint Meinrad, taken monastic vows (at which time he adopted the name "Pius"), and been ordained in 1877, all during Martin Marty's abbacy. His formative years having been shaped by Marty, Boehm was ripe for the picking when his former abbot-turned-bishop came looking for missionaries. Yet he was the most reluctant of missionaries at the start, for a close look at his

11. Marty to Drexel, 2 Jan. 1888, in Bishop Martin Marty Letters, vol. 2, p. 1048, Martin Marty Archival Historical Series, SMAA.

12. Pius Boehm, "Reminiscences of an Indian Missionary," *Indian Sentinel* 3 (Oct. 1923): 154–55.

Pius Boehm appears here in 1877, ten years before he joined other monks from Saint Meinrad Abbey for mission work at Crow Creek.

correspondence with the abbot reveals that something had happened, either at the monastery itself or at his assigned parish in the nearby village of Saint Henry, to prompt him not so much to *go* to Dakota as to *leave* Indiana. Writing in anguish to Abbot Fintan Mundwiler from Stephan on 21 March 1887, Boehm confessed:

> I am troubled with my own private grief. You well know how I came here; it was my own choice, because I had no other. . . . At home everybody and everything seemed to look down upon me as a criminal and even the mute walls appeared to accuse me. . . . I came here to forget,

> but I have not forgotten yet. Nay, in the stillness of sleepless nights and in the loneliness of dreary days I ponder and remember that justice has not been meted out to me. The greatest scoundrel on God's creation gets a fair trial . . . but I, a poor priest, is condemned without any hearing, sentenced by an exulting mob, crying: "Down with him! Crucify him!" . . . Today I would challenge suspension rather than forfeit my rights. . . . The world would know today that I did not run away because I could not stand the test. It is passed and I am glad of it, but it leaves a wound, which time cannot obliterate.

Boehm's mental state, likely made worse by the long Dakota winter, prompted the despondent monk to add bitingly of the Sioux in the same letter: "All they want is to eat and drink, hide away in their holes and then repeat it again after a week or so." Such an outlook could hardly have been what Marty had hoped for in a missionary.[13]

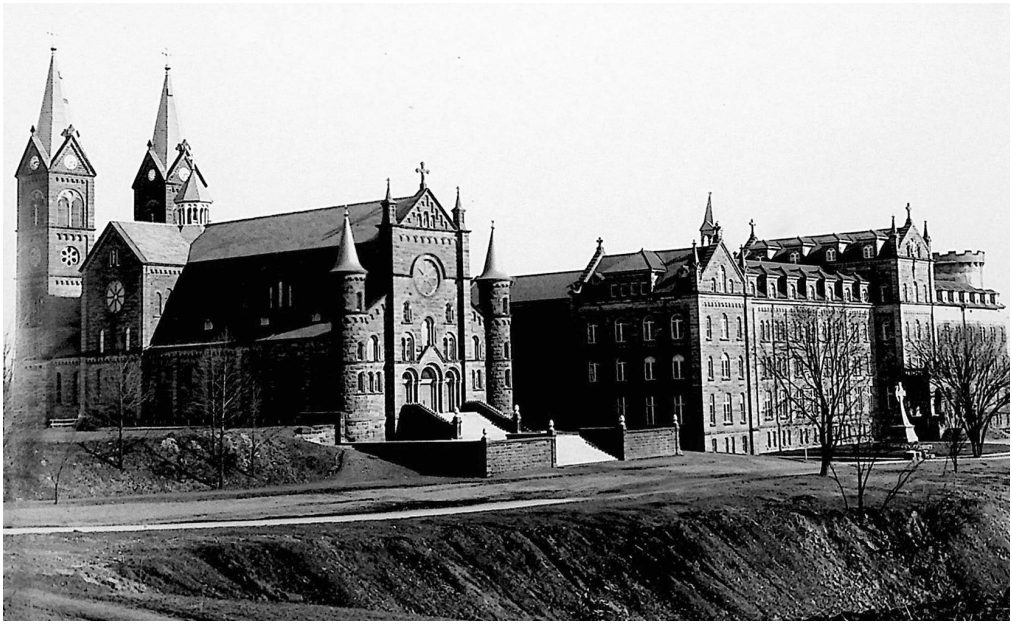
Even so, Boehm's perspective began to undergo a remarkable change in the context of a struggle over authority. It is a complicated tale, featuring overlapping lines of control that manifested themselves for many years and required Boehm to exercise considerable diplomatic skill and stubbornness to resolve, as evident in his dealings with his fellow monks, his own abbot at Saint Meinrad, local bishops, the federal government, the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, and, not least, distant patrons. Highlighting such competing claims reveals not only the fault lines within this particular institution but also the complexity of the relationships that sprang up among the various groups believing themselves to possess a vested interest in the well-being of the school and, of course, the children living and learning there.

It is worth reiterating that most of the key administrative figures involved were monks or nuns. The moniker "monk-missionary" is, after all, something of an oxymoron, given that separation from the outside world, along with vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and—for Benedictines—stability, were what made a monk a monk, giving his intercessory prayers special value. Still, western monasticism has also long acknowledged an obligation to serve those in the world; in

13. Boehm to Mundwiler, 21 Mar. 1887, St. Meinrad Monks: Personal Records and Papers (hereafter SMMPRP): Pius Boehm, Box 2, SMAA. The archives reveal no further clues as to the nature of his "crime," but it appears to have stemmed from a conflict among the monks, rather than an offense against a parishioner.

this vein, Marty was keen to heroicize early medieval monks' evangelizing efforts among the pagans. Monasteries were also perennially compelled to defend their rights and interests in the face of encroaching secular powers. The complex and contestable claims on property and political allegiance certainly served as one of the great narrative drivers of Europe's so-called feudal age, not to mention as a topic of never-ending historiographical debate among medievalists.[14] This background—which would not have seemed as esoteric to the monks of Saint Meinrad and Stephan as it might today—is helpful when considering similar episodes of contested authority, especially those that featured a distinctively Benedictine manner of navigating overlapping claims and, not least, of maintaining discipline and order in an unpredictable environment.

14. A helpful overview may be found in Barbara H. Rosenwein and Lester K. Little, eds., *Debating the Middle Ages: Issues and Readings* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 1998), pp. 105–210. *See also* the many colorful episodes involving contested authority related by Fulbert of Chartres in Frederick Behrends, ed. and trans., *The Letters and Poems of Fulbert of Chartres* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, 1976).



By the time this image was recorded shortly after 1900, Saint Meinrad Abbey had become an imposing presence on the Indiana landscape.

Narratives of the early years at Immaculate Conception Mission School usually begin with the dramatic exchange between the Yanktonais and the missionaries in January 1887 and then relate a generally harmonious story about building a school from scratch, with the duties of superintendent exercised in orderly fashion and succession by George Willard (1887), Vincent Wehrle (1887–1888), Father Stephen Stenger of Yankton (1888–1889), and then Father Pius Boehm of Saint Meinrad (1889–1930).[15] What one actually finds on the ground, however, is a remarkably raucous struggle over authority from the outset: the problem being that Marty departed without having appointed a clear leader of the mission in either Stenger or Boehm. Even then, as confusion reigned at the mission, it was not immediately evident whether it was Marty's right as vicar apostolic to choose, or whether that purview lay with the new abbot.

Executive power, therefore, quickly emerged as a major source of strife at Stephan, with both Boehm and Stenger viewing the abbot at Saint Meinrad, rather than Bishop Marty, as the natural recourse for appeal. While records housed in the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions archives give the impression that Stenger's installation may be attributed to Boehm's own vacillation early on, a much different view emerges from a series of vitriolic letters Boehm wrote home to Abbot Mundwiler calling attention to the school's gross mismanagement. Beginning on 3 April 1887, Boehm observed that the school was as yet "nothing else but a boarding house." The situation had improved little by the following winter, judging from a similarly critical letter on 5 January 1888. By 17 October, it is clear, regardless of his former reluctance to assume control, that Boehm was now impatient to do just that, even to the point of asking the abbot, "Did your Lordship not tell me last summer that you would put me in full charge of the mission?" By early the following year, the situation had broken into open conflict, detailed in three long letters on 15, 25, and 29 January 1889. According to Boehm, Stenger had gone so far as to enlist the chambermaid to inform all the schoolchil-

15. *See*, for example, Duratschek, *Crusading along Sioux Trails*, pp. 163–65, and Duratschek, *Builders of God's Kingdom*, pp. 113–17. Galler, "Environment, Cultures, and Social Change," pp. 163–64, provides critical insight into the perspectives of Yanktonai leaders Bull Ghost, Standing Elk, and Drifting Goose on the larger question of who had the authority to appoint the mission's administrators and staff in the first place.

dren they need not listen to Boehm any longer. Boehm retaliated with a thinly veiled accusation of an illicit relationship between Stenger and the girl. Stenger was eventually compelled to leave but continued to write letters attacking Boehm well into the summer.[16]

Bickering among monks was nothing new, of course. Of far greater consequence were issues of outside appeal and local control. The fact that both men viewed Abbot Mundwiler as the default arbitrator is telling since Marty is sometimes portrayed as serenely in control of the overall undertaking. Quite to the contrary, when serious problems arose, it was the home monastery to which on-the-ground monastic staff turned, albeit with limits. Six years later, though more firmly established in his position as superintendent, Boehm sought to delineate his authority in more specific detail in a wide-ranging letter to the abbot, complaining about a recent inspection of the school by the federal government's Indian agent at Crow Creek. He was principally frustrated that while the government held him personally responsible for the effective running of the school, in practice he found it difficult to enforce discipline among the staff, who often refused to heed his admonitions. "It does look to me," he wrote,

> that where [there] is a responsibility and a duty to perform, there ought to be some authority. Of course, as a true son of Saint Benedict, I am aware that I should confer with my superiors—I do not think that I must reproach myself on that line; but after that has been done, I think, my word ought to be final, subject to an investigation if there are any grounds. From a language like Brother Phillip's "Ich gehe oder thu's wenn der Abt es mir sagt" [I'll do something when the abbot tells me to do it] nothing good can result; nine times out of ten matters are delayed and serious blunders are made as in the case on hand. . . . I hope you will not think that I wish to prescribe to you; I speak in the spirit the holy rule allows and I felt it was my duty to tell you.[17]

Clearly, Boehm faced significant challenges, the solutions to which reveal how his monastic background continued to inform his actions.

16. Boehm to Mundwiler, 3 Apr. 1887, 5 Jan., 17 Oct. 1888, 15, 25, 29 Jan. 1889, SMMPRP: Pius Boehm, Box 2, SMAA.

17. Boehm to Mundwiler, 6 Feb., 1895, ibid., referring to Brother Philip Ketterer from St. Meinrad Abbey, who served as on the staff at Stephan from 1889 to 1895.

With the immediate question of the superintendency settled, Boehm began to rally his considerable energies toward managing relationships with the school's staff, his own distant abbot at Saint Meinrad, local bishops, the federal government, the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, and important patrons. Staffing the lonely boarding school—twenty miles from the nearest railroad depot—would prove a constant struggle. The natural source for teachers was Saint Meinrad, yet the abbey's record on that score was not uniformly inspiring, as the home institution had a tendency to send, on occasion, disgruntled or unsatisfied members of the community to its daughter house, which was obliged through Benedictine obedience to accept them. Whether it was dealing with Brother Phillip's obstinacy or mitigating the mentally unstable Meinrad McCarthy's attempts to force students and staff to pray the rosary at improvised altars (including one at the bottom of a vacated outhouse), Boehm was constantly aware of the need to ensure the well-being of the school's students.[18]

If Boehm found his fellow monks irksome at times, the nuns often proved to be outright exasperating, at least from his perspective. Although day-to-day interactions were generally harmonious, there was strain between Boehm and a few of the sisters who, at Marty's request, had come from Sacred Heart Convent in Yankton and Saint Mary's Convent in Zell to teach classes and to care for the school's female students. The nuns had their own ideas about authority, though, and time and time again made a point of deferring to their faraway abbess rather than heeding all of Boehm's orders. The latter was particularly outraged that the women refused to obey "their lawful superiors."[19]

18. For a short account of Meinrad McCarthy's experiences and some of the trials he caused the main monastery, *see* Alfred Kleber, *History of Saint Meinrad Archabbey* (St. Meinrad, Ind.: Abbey Press, 1954), pp. 395–410. In summarizing Father Meinrad's troubling case in a letter to the Apostolic Delegation in Washington, D.C., Boehm noted that "canon law was constantly on his lips, but it existed only for others, he would submit to no authority, not even to his Abbots, who dismissed him twice for insubordination. . . . I complained to Abbot Fintan, a few days before his death, and he refused to have any further dealings with [Meinrad], saying that he was excommunicated" (Boehm to Donato Sbaretti, 14 Dec. 1898, Deceased and Former St. Meinrad Monks: Personal Records and Papers [hereafter DFSMM]: Meinrad McCarthy, Box 42, SMAA).

19. Boehm to the Prior of St. Meinrad Abbey, 25 July 1893, SMMPRP: Pius Boehm, Box 2, SMAA. Galler, "Environment, Cultures, and Social Change," pp. 165–68, 182, details the normal duties of the sisters at the mission.

Boehm struggled to maintain harmony among the mission school staff while ensuring the well-being of students, pictured here in 1899.

Always simmering, these tensions boiled over in summer 1893 when the Yankton sisters took their complaint to Bishop Marty in Sioux Falls. Letters between Marty, Boehm, and the prior of Saint Meinrad flew fast with accusations, and it is clear the bishop sympathized with the nuns—thanks, no doubt, to the monks' impolitic clanking of cowbells as the sisters departed for the summer recess. With the next academic year looming, however, and facing the real possibility that the school might find itself precipitously short of teachers, Marty tried to effect a reconciliation in the sisters' favor.[20]

Boehm would have none of it. In a 17 August 1893 letter to Marty, he upbraided the bishop for his lack of evenhandedness, going so far as to make serious countercharges and even threats. First, he said he planned to inform Abbot Mundwiler of the present difficulties, thereby implying that Marty's authority was not necessarily suzerain. Second, he mused whether it might not be best simply to shut down the school,

20. The timing of Marty's intervention on behalf of the Yankton convent is interesting, given his bitter conflict with the Mother Superior of the Presentation Sisters in Aberdeen earlier that year, recently recounted by Margaret Preston, "Three Catholics and a Congregationalist: Four Women and the Founding of a Medical Industry in South Dakota," *South Dakota History* 47 (Fall 2017): 205–8.

which naturally imperiled Marty's hopes for the Sioux. Third, he made a point of reminding Marty of core Benedictine virtues embodied in the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, charity not least of all. Boehm did not take this step lightly, as attested by his journal entry later that day ("Sent our finale to the bishop. Caute ires [Beware his wrath]."), but the fact that this determined monk had stood up to the larger-than-life bishop, hitting him where it hurt, speaks volumes about the language of authority used in such negotiations and to Boehm's deepening ties to the school—which, incidentally, opened on time that September.[21]

One may well wonder how Boehm had come to be at such loggerheads with his former mentor. The answer appears to lie buried both in the confidential correspondence between Boehm and his abbot and, tragically, in the graveyard at Stephan. The issue was not just over lines of authority, but also the violent tempers of a few of the sisters. In a letter dated 15 November 1892, Boehm had made an oblique reference to "one sister who has been a fomenter of trouble wherever she was and [is] causing the other sisters a good deal of annoyance now."[22] Then on 18 July 1893, Boehm informed Marty that not only did the nuns have no control over the girls but it had been necessary for him personally to intervene as school superintendent.[23]

Boehm had put Marty on alert, but it would not be enough. Returning to the mission on 25 July 1893 after several days of visiting outlying communities, Boehm confronted a grisly scene. Six-year-old Julia Little Wounded had been killed the day before, her father attributing the death to a cruel blow to the head by Sister Victoria Mulligan. Boehm immediately wrote a confidential letter to the prior at Saint Meinrad, informing him of the disturbing turn of events and reminding him that "you know as well as I do myself that none of the girls wish to return if

21. Boehm to Marty, 17 Aug. 1893, SMMPRP: Pius Boehm, Box 2, SMAA. In the aftermath of this episode (and following Boehm's own visit to St. Meinrad that fall), Abbot Mundwiler counseled him to "let God alone to be your witness and try to please him in all you do, work in the spirit of obedience and in the spirit of our Holy Rule and God will bless your work and store up a great reward for you"—perhaps with an implicit warning not to forget his own ties to the mother house (Mundwiler to Boehm, 10 Dec. 1893, Abbatial File: Fintan Mundwiler, Abbot, Official and Personal Papers, Box 7, SMAA).

22. Boehm to Mundwiler, 15 Nov. 1892, SMMPRP: Pius Boehm, Box 2, SMAA.

23. Boehm to Marty, 18 July 1893, Pius Boehm Correspondence, Blue Cloud Abbey Collection, Box 76, SCA.

the Yankton sisters come to the mission again. . . . You know better than I am able to tell you how the children were abused and mal-treated."[24] Additionally, in his 17 August 1893 letter to Marty, Boehm noted vis-à-vis his wider dispute with the sisters that "there has been brought no specific charges against any sister and I do not propose to do so now; but, if you can approve of their conduct and blame us for their shortcomings, which you evidently did, as I have positive proof, I am unable to comprehend how you can reconcile it with truth, charity and justice."[25]

It is important to recognize that Boehm himself only recorded the schoolgirl's burial—not the cause of her death—in the mission's daily logbook and that no legal action was brought against the sister in question.[26] Still, at least in the context of Boehm's own metamorphosis, he had unmistakably begun to adopt the cause of the school as his own, taking the students' safety to heart. Though this transformation had been long in the making, Little Wounded's death was apparently the tipping point. Indeed, a few months later, one finds Boehm describing his pupils as "my children" for the first time in his voluminous correspondence, indicating that he had come to view his station less as an assignment and more as a calling.[27]

At the same time Boehm was establishing his authority and becoming personally vested in the mission at Stephan, he was also obliged to find a way for the school to prosper. The home abbey could not be depended upon for much material aid, and it soon dawned upon Boehm that the school would need federal government support, just as it became clear

24. Boehm to the Prior of St. Meinrad Abbey, 25 July 1893.

25. Boehm to Marty, 17 Aug. 1893.

26. Immaculate Conception Mission School Daily Record, 25 July 1893, Logbook 2, Blue Cloud Abbey Collection, Box 76, SCA. Ambrose Mattingly noted in his own subsequent letter to Marty that, in contrast to the obedient servant Father Pius, "about thirty or forty of the Yankton sisters have been here; a very great portion of whom have created their sensations and have retired from the service leaving Father Pius to veil from the public eye the muss and disturbances which their insubordination and vindictive conduct had called into existence" (Mattingly to Marty, 17 Aug. 1893, SFSMM: Ambrose Mattingly, Box 3, SMAA).

27. Boehm to Fintan Mundwiler, 3 Sept. 1893, SMMPRP: Pius Boehm, Box 2, SMAA, similar in tone to the dedication of his 1904 travel diary "for the little ones at home." A few months earlier, Boehm had entered into the daily logbook the extraordinary comment that "a good many Indians present, and for the first time for years they did not trouble Pa" (Immaculate Conception Mission School Daily Record, 21 May 1893, Logbook 2, Blue Cloud Abbey Collection, Box 76, SCA).

to the Office of Indian Affairs that it likewise required help—including that of religious institutions—to "Americanize" the Sioux. Thus began an uneasy relationship between Immaculate Conception Mission School and the federal government, whereby the former received annual contracts to educate the reservation youth whose families chose to send them there rather than to the federal boarding school at Fort Thompson.

The arrangement held at Stephan Misson from 1887 to 1897, but the decade proved a rocky one.[28] The surviving correspondence features a great deal of mutual suspicion and sectarian rivalry and also shows the interested parties talking past one another much of the time. In a forceful corrective sent to Boehm on 2 November 1891, for instance, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Thomas J. Morgan insisted that three children from the Santee Agency, though Catholic, be returned immediately to a government boarding school in Nebraska. Discounting Boehm's contention that his clerical duties obliged him to accept all Catholic children, Morgan maintained that the contract was not with any other entity (that is, the Diocese of Sioux Falls, Saint Meinrad Abbey, or the Catholic Church itself), but rather solely with Boehm and that he personally would be obliged to comply with the letter of the law.[29] At least from this perspective, there was no conflicted view of authority (which Boehm might actually have appreciated), but the fact of the matter was that, whether as a monk of Saint Meinrad Abbey in faraway Indiana or as a cleric under the purview of the bishop in Sioux Falls, Boehm could hardly be held up as an independent party in a binding contract with the federal government.

Such nuanced legal controversies came to an end, however, when the government withdrew its support in 1897. Although the mission's

28. For detailed records from 1887–1897 direct government contracts, *see* Abbey Parishes, Missions, Chaplaincies: Stephan, Immaculate Conception Mission, Financial Records, 1890–1950 (hereafter ICMFR), Box 18, SMAA. The government contract's quarterly stipends for Stephan varied widely from year to year, ranging from $1,800 in 1890, to $2,700 in 1892, to $1,500 in 1895, to $1,100 in 1896, to its final installment of $810 in 1897. Boehm's ledgers began to feature sales of cattle in fall 1894 ($573.45 for twenty-five head) when rumors began to fly about the end of contract support, and continued with a spring sale in 1897 of sixty-three head ($1,140.71), and a spring sale in 1898 that netted $2,030. Certainly this went some distance toward replacing the former government stipend, but it was not nearly as reliable as regular government support.

29. Morgan to Boehm, 2 Nov. 1891, SMMPRP: Pius Boehm, Box 2, SMAA.

small cattle herd provided some income, the school was forced to seek out charitable donors and would continue to do so for the next seventy years.[30] While the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions provided some aid, its contributions never matched expectations. Far more reliable was the assistance offered by Mother Katharine Drexel of Pennsylvania. Drexel had traveled for a time through Dakota Territory with Martin Marty in the early 1880s, and she readily provided, at his request, funds for the first school buildings at Stephan in 1887. Drexel continued to send modest financial gifts to the school over the next decade and then ramped up her donations once the government stopped letting contracts. In 1898, for example, her contributions came to $4,135.58, nearly half of the school's total annual income.[31]

Drexel's support was clearly indispensible, but it also came with a price. Dozens of detailed letters flowed between Pennsylvania and Stephan Mission, full of advice and expectations. One memorable dispatch arrived on 29 January 1895:

> You do not know how delighted I am that you should interest yourself thus in the great farm-mission work you have undertaken for the sake of Our Lord. . . . The success of the farm and your success in teaching the boys how to work the land and raise stock, poultry, etc. is also the success of the Mission so dear to the Blessed Virgin. When you have a moment to spare, do please tell me what crops you expect to plant in the spring, and how many acres you intend to devote to each crop. When should trees be planted and should you have cuttings for same or seeds? Write in time that we may send them. Don't you think they should be laid out in a curved avenue, leading to the <u>front</u> of the school house,

30. For the national political context leading up to the federal government's withdrawal of support from religious contract schools, *see* Prucha, *Churches and the Indian Schools*, pp. 26–40. Galler, "Environment, Cultures, and Social Change," pp. 203–7, discusses the ripple effects of the end of the contracts, noting continued support for the mission by Yanktonai leaders, though this matter was not always uncontested.

31. Drexel to Boehm, 29 Nov. 1898, ICMFR, Drexel Correspondence, Box 18, SMAA, in conjunction with an examination of Boehm's annual financial reports to St. Meinrad Abbey. *See* Galler, "Environment, Cultures, and Social Change," pp. 129–30, on Drexel's initial gifts to the Dakota missions. Recent biographical studies of Mother Drexel, who was canonized by the Catholic Church in 2000, include Cordelia Frances Biddle, *Saint Katharine: The Life of Katharine Drexel* (Yardley, Penn.: Westholme Press, 2014), and Cheryl C. D. Hughes, *Katharine Drexel: The Riches to Rags Story of an American Catholic Saint* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William Eerdmans Press, 2014).

Katharine Drexel took an active interest in the Immaculate Conception mission and became one of its most generous and reliable benefactors.

piazza side? Could you send a little sketch to me as to where you think the trees would look best? I am seriously anxious about the chimneys. Can anything be done for them during the winter whilst the fires are lighted? Who was the mason? . . . I am very anxious about all the dear souls at the school-house, and I entreat you to buy coal-oil barrels, to put one full of water near each chimney, with a bucket near-by. Also to examine the chimneys every night and to have a long ladder hooked to the house in case of fire. Won't you please ask the Blessed Virgin every day

> at Mass to save the Mission-buildings from fire. When it [is] possible to arrange the chimneys what are you going to do? Enclosed please find a check for $15.00 as honoraria for 15 Masses which I beg you to say for our dear father and mother, saying one Mass on February 15th, the date of our father's death. Please, Revd. Father, your blessing, and believe me very truly yours in Domino.[32]

If Boehm found such micromanagement annoying, he never let on in his responses, which remained regular and courteous.

Nonetheless, underlying tensions regarding both allegiance and authority eventually emerged. On at least one occasion, Boehm seems to have taken more liberty with Drexel's funds than she found acceptable. A sharply worded letter arrived on 27 February 1900, and although it did contain a check, it also featured a pointed reprimand for not having consulted her about the recently completed renovations at the school: "I am sorry to have kept you waiting so long for a reply," Drexel wrote, "but as the work was undertaken without my knowing anything of the matter, I felt that it was hardly the right thing for me to pay for what I had not given my consent to pay."[33] Boehm emerged from these exchanges with critical financial backing, but he was obliged to incorporate yet another stakeholder into his already crowded attentions and loyalties.

All too ironically, Boehm's own attachment to the mission at Stephan was taking hold at the very same time other stakeholders' confidence in its purpose began to wane. Even Drexel's generosity largely faded after 1903, as she believed the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions would take up the slack.[34] When declining health compelled Martin Marty, the prime missionary mover himself, to transfer to the See of Saint Cloud in 1895, he was succeeded in Sioux Falls by a less-than-enthusiastic Bishop Thomas O'Gorman. Indeed, according to a little-known anecdote passed on to Alfred Kleber, archivist at Saint Meinrad, by Boehm's successor, Justin Snyder, Boehm awoke with a fright one night shortly after O'Gorman's death in September 1921 claiming to have seen a mysterious light moving about the room. When Snyder suggested that it

32. Drexel to Boehm, 29 Jan. 1895, ICMFR, Drexel Correspondence, Box 18, SMAA.

33. Drexel to Boehm, 27 Feb. 1900, ibid.

34. Drexel to Boehm, 10 Dec. 1903, ibid., asking for confirmation of the BCIM's forthcoming support.

might have been the bishop's troubled soul paying an apologetic visit, Boehm bitterly remarked, "I don't see why he'd be coming around now, when he never came around when he was alive."[35]

Even back home, letters from the prior at Saint Meinrad to his counterpart at Einsiedeln indicate that as early as December 1893, the Indiana monastery was growing ambivalent toward the far-flung Dakota missions.[36] The fact that Boehm eventually took this waning interest as a betrayal by his monastic brethren speaks volumes about the change he had undergone since his own desultory start at Crow Creek. Getting wind of a later attempt to bring the monks home, he implored Abbot Athanasius Schmitt in a 9 February 1901 letter to reject such counsel, arguing that he and his fellow missionaries "could not entertain the thought for a moment to abandon the mission after so much hard work has been done, much achieved in a spiritual way, 'the stakes are down too deep.' . . . Abbot Fintan and bishop Marty would turn in their graves if we yielded to the temptation of the evil one and abandon[ed] Stephan."[37]

Schmitt relented and continued to offer nominal support, including the service of various monks from time to time, but the mission—like any monastic cell—was expected to pay its own way. Years later, after Boehm had suffered a physical collapse in late 1919, Ambrose Mattingly ruefully reflected to Schmitt that "an attitude of mere passive tolerance toward the work of the missionaries on the part of our superiors is more discouraging than any other difficulty confronting us. The conviction that such apathy towards our work exists is hard to escape."[38] Though Boehm partially recovered, the bulk of his work—with the notable exception of keeping the mission's daily logbook—was handed over to others. Nonetheless, he chose to remain at Stephan until his death on 19 July 1935 and even made clear his wishes that, despite being

35. Alfred Kleber, biography of Martin Marty, manuscript notes (ca. 1952), Box 13 (Stephan), SMAA.

36. Isidore Hobi to Ildephone Hurlimann, Dec. 1893, in *Pioneer Letters*, ed. Leibold, 5:1971: "Here the general opinion is that it would be better if all our men were called home, and His Lordship [Abbot Mundwiler] desires that also," largely because of the lack of direct supervision over their fellow monks.

37. Boehm to Schmitt, 9 Feb. 1901, SMMPRP: Pius Boehm, Box 3, SMAA.

38. Mattingly to Schmitt, 4 Jan. 1920, DFSMM: Ambrose Mattingly, Box 4, SMAA.

a monk of Saint Meinrad Abbey, he preferred to be laid to rest on the prairie.[39]

Focusing so intently on just one man's experiences naturally entails the risk of myopia associated with any biography, and the story of an endeavor like that of the mission school at Stephan can only truly be told from a range of perspectives. Father Pius Boehm's tale, however, has the promise of enriching the collective understanding not just of one school on the Crow Creek reservation, but of American evangelizing as a whole. Throughout his long tenure at Stephan, Boehm was obliged to reconcile vision with mission, particularly in resolving conflicting loyalties, competing authorities, issues of discipline, chronic financial shortfalls, and his own attitudes toward American Indians. In this, it was his habit of turning to medieval models at critical junctures that set him and his fellow monk-missionaries apart in subtle but significant ways from their contemporaries and, certainly, from their student charges. While today's visitor to Stephan will find impressive new facilities for the Crow Creek Tribal School, little is left of Martin Marty's grand vision for the Dakotas. In the wake of natural calls for self-determination in the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 and the secularization of the school in the 1970s, the buildings once key to the original mission have fallen increasingly into disrepair. Yet the memories of Stephan and Catholic mission schools like it—many of them run by Benedictine monks and nuns—remain vivid, not just for historians, but for myriad Sioux still living on the Northern Great Plains.

39. "Father Pius, Pioneer Mission Priest, Ends Long Years of Efficient Service," *Highmore Herald*, 25 July 1935.