



Directors of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions: Introduction

Kevin Abing, 1994

The Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions (BCIM) was truly an organization born of necessity. The immediate background for its establishment was President Ulysses S. Grant's implementation of the "Peace Policy" in 1869. Throughout the decade, intermittent warfare marred relations between white Americans and the Indian tribes occupying the far western portions of the United States. Although both sides committed ruthless acts, the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864 stood out for its senseless brutality. Scattered Indian attacks caused panic among Colorado settlers, who demanded that the military crush the uprising. On the morning of November 29, 1864, Colonel John M. Chivington, a former Methodist minister, and a force of Colorado militia attacked a band of peaceful Cheyenne Indians camped near Sand Creek. The soldiers ignored a white flag raised by the Cheyenne leader, Black Kettle, and viciously killed and mutilated one hundred and fifty men, women and children. Although Colorado inhabitants hailed Chivington and his men as conquering heroes, the slaughter disgusted humanitarians in the East and sparked calls for changes in federal Indian policy. Subsequent government investigations reported that the Indians' discontent stemmed from the loss of their hunting grounds caused by persistent American expansion, the aggression of lawless whites and the corruption within the Indian Bureau. The time was ripe to institute a policy in which the Indians would be "conquer[ed] by kindness."¹

The result was Grant's "Peace Policy." To prevent further depredations upon the Indians, they would be confined to reservations. There they would be taught how to live like "civilized" (i.e., white) people. To prevent abuses within the Indian Bureau, Grant decided to allow religious denominations to nominate Indian agents. In theory, this would bring competent and moral persons into the Indian service. And these same religious organizations, working with the government, would supply churches and schools to aid the Indians' transformation into responsible American citizens.²

To put the policy into effect, the government parceled out Indian agencies to the religious denomination then at work among the Indians. By this time, the various Protestant societies had, for the most part, dropped out of Indian missionary work, focusing their efforts overseas. The Roman Catholic Church, however, had expanded its work among Native Americans. For this reason, Catholic clergymen expected to be given control of thirty-eight Indian agencies.

Their expectations were unfulfilled. The Indian Department assigned only seven agencies to the Catholics. Fourteen agencies were turned over to the Methodists, ten to the Orthodox Friends,

¹Francis Paul Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis: Christian Reformers and the Indian, 1865-1900* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 3-29.

²Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis*, 30-33.

nine to the Presbyterians, eight to the Episcopalians, six to the Hicksite Friends and five to the Baptists. Naturally, the Catholics were disappointed. Augustin Magloire Alexander Blanchet, Bishop of Nesqually, Oregon, and his brother, Francis, Archbishop of Oregon City, wrote numerous letters to government officials insisting that the agencies be distributed in an equitable manner, but to no avail. Realizing that concerted action was needed, the Blanchets wrote to archbishops and bishops across the country in November 1871. The Blanchets asked that they be allowed to act on the church's behalf in order to achieve a just redistribution of Indian agencies, but they received only a lukewarm response from the church hierarchy.

Undaunted, Francis Blanchet decided that the church's interest could best be served by a full-time representative in Washington, D.C. He pursued this course throughout 1872, urging James Roosevelt Bayley, Archbishop of Baltimore, to name someone to the post. Bayley, however, was unfamiliar with the situation out West. Thus, no concrete organization was established that year. The prospect that the Indian Department would reallocate the Indian agencies in 1873 seemed scant.

The push for a Catholic organization received a boost in November 1872 when Father Jean-Baptiste Abraham Brouillet, Vicar General of the Diocese of Nesqually, arrived in the nation's capitol. Bishop Augustin Blanchet had dispatched Brouillet to Washington to look after diocesan interests, but shortly after his arrival, Brouillet lent his many years of experience to Archbishop Bayley. In January 1873, they contacted western bishops with Indians in their dioceses, soliciting their opinion regarding a Catholic agent in Washington, D.C. All replies were favorable, and it was left to Archbishop Bayley to find a suitable person. On March 17, 1873, he chose General Charles Ewing, an influential Washington lawyer and Civil War veteran, to act as Commissioner. The BCIM was officially established on January 2, 1874, when Bayley notified the Secretary of Interior of Ewing's appointment.

With this rather inauspicious start, the BCIM began its work. Initially, the Bureau focused its efforts on maintaining churches and schools on their assigned agencies and on gaining access to agencies assigned to other denominations. Over time, the BCIM's labors extended to political advocacy of Indian rights. But throughout its history, the Bureau's guiding principle has been to bring Native Americans within the pale of the Catholic Church. Because the BCIM was, and is, a relatively small organization, its fate has been closely linked to its six directors. For better, and sometimes for worse, the directors' character shaped the Bureau's course. Its history has been marked with much controversy. On several occasions, the existence of the Bureau and of Catholic missions as a whole seemed in doubt. But through a combination of compromise, accommodation and stubbornness, the BCIM has persevered.