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Book Review: Mission Sitting Bull: The Cultural Conquest of the Sioux and Their Varied Response

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Book Reviews

Manuel Menrath. *Mission Sitting Bull: The Cultural Conquest of the Sioux and Their Varied Response*. Masthof Press: Morgantown, Pennsylvania, 2017. 458 pp. $20.00.
[Translation of: *Mission Sitting Bull: Die Geschichte der katholischen Sioux*. Von Manuel Menrath. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2016.]

Immigrants to this country have always come for a variety of reasons—seeking financial stability, religious freedom, or a more adventurous life. Among the immigrants from Switzerland in the 1850s and 1860s were also Benedictine monks from Einsiedeln and Engelberg whose main purpose was to seek a place where their monastic life would not be exposed to the uncertainties of Swiss politics after the Catholic Cantons had lost the war of 1847 (the so-called Sonderbundskrieg). Perhaps the most unusual among them was Martin Marty (1834-1896) from Einsiedeln whose main—though at first hidden—motivation, was to become a missionary to American native peoples. In 1860 he was sent to Einsiedeln's struggling foundation of St. Meinrad in Indiana to assess its viability. For Marty this was a fortuitous assignment because as a youngster he had been deeply impressed by the missionary spirit of his teachers in the Jesuit gymnasium in the town Schwyz. Yet when the Jesuits were expelled from Switzerland in 1847, he finished his education in Einsiedeln and then became a Benedictine monk and priest.

With his prodigious physical and mental energy, he soon stabilized the new foundation in Indiana, and when it was raised to the status of an abbey in 1870, Pope Pius IX appointed Marty as its first abbot. Marty's missionary zeal, however, had never abated, and by 1874 he began to pursue his dream to convert the Sioux Indians in South Dakota to Catholicism. From then on he lived mostly in the Dakota

territory, was appointed as Apostolic Vicar of the Dakota Vicariate in 1879 and in 1889 as the first Bishop of the Diocese of Sioux Falls. Although Marty always remained a Benedictine, Menrath is correct in describing him as a "Jesuit-like Benedictine", especially since in his missionary zeal he placed little emphasis on the Benedictine values of stable rootedness in his own community.

Marty's main work took place among the Sioux already living on reservations, especially Standing Rock and Devil's Lake; through the religious schools he established there and elsewhere, he converted many of them, primarily their children, to the Catholic faith; and to this day a large part of the Sioux are Catholic. Yet from the beginning he had yet another goal: the conversion of Sitting Bull (1831-1890) who refused to sign any treaties with the U.S. government and who tried to preserve the independence of his Hunkpapa Lakota people but failed when even in Canada the bison herds, the mainstay of their livelihood, disappeared so that in 1881 he and his people were forced to return to accept life on reservations in the States. For Marty, his conversion would have been the crowning of his mission: he visited Sitting Bull three times in 1877, 1878 and 1879 in Canada, saw him again later, but never succeeded in converting him.

With great skill, wide knowledge of the sources and historical sensitivity, Menrath describes the cultural parameters of both Marty's nineteenth century conservative Catholicism and Benedictine formation and of the spirituality of the Sioux whose traditions were not textually fixed and whose lifestyle had always been based on a flexible approach to their environment. The main achievement of this study lies in Menrath's ability to show the complex clash of two civilizations that were mutually unable to understand each other. And while Marty clearly saw the misery of the Indians on the reservations and in a compassionate manner tried to help them by circumventing some of the government's policies, his own deeply held view of the Indians as ignorant, lazy and in need of much help made him a collaborator in the government's attempt to socialize the nomadic natives into sedentary farmers. He wanted them to take pride in owning a small plot of land—as European and Swiss Settlers did—not understanding that, for them, no one could

truly own any part of this amazing land that they saw as a gift of the Great Spirit and thus were called to tend for their descendants.

While the figure of Sitting Bull is not the study's main focus, as the title suggests, he is still Marty's main opponent as the one who is absolutely opposed to his world view that is based on eternal and unchanging religious and cultural truths. The Indians, however, were able to respond to his religious mission as well as the political mission of the government in a more varied manner: they recognized that their children needed to be educated so that they would be able to deal with the government on their own without translators. Sitting Bull succinctly summarized the Indian response by saying: "When you find anything good in the white man's road, pick it up; but when you find something bad, ...leave it alone." The author also shows how, despite their unequal position, the Indians to this day have been able to salvage important parts of their own culture. Much of the information about this is, however, found in the copious and often very instructive footnotes.

Menrath places his study of Marty's mission in the wider context of missionary and global history, showing how, based on the new understanding of history since the 1970s, we have gained a better understanding of the fact that European missionaries and settlers in the U.S. all had deeply colonizing effects by superimposing European concepts upon the native population in this country and many others. He shows this by comparing missionary boarding schools in the U.S. with similar schools in Canada, New Zealand and Australia as well as the manner in which Germany and Switzerland dealt with children of parents who did not seem to fit into the social and moral milieu of bourgeois society (foster care, *Verdingkinder*). Menrath provides a fascinating glimpse into the way the nineteenth century—despite all its intellectual and political advances—contributed to what is now called the cultural conquest of the Sioux and other native peoples.

It is the merit of this study that its author describes this deep-seated clash of civilizations without undue bias—charting both Marty's socialization in the conservative Catholic Switzerland and the Sioux spirituality with remarkable sensitivity. Although his description of the views of Marty and the U.S. government cannot be but more negative,

this is because he, the Catholic Church and the U.S. government were imprisoned by the limits of their own socialization. How difficult it is indeed to overcome the limits of such socializations is clearly evident in our current struggles to deal more equitably with an every greater variety of groups making up today's societies all over the world.

~ S. Marianne Burkhard, OSB JCL