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SPECIAL REPORT

TROUBLING PAST

*The Church's role in America's
Indian boarding school era*

— Pages 9-12



A priest and children stand in front of a church at an Indian boarding school, circa 1900.
COURTESY MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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SPECIAL REPORT

The Indian boarding school legacy

As Americans grapple with tragic past, Catholics part of efforts to shed light

By Maria Wiering
The Catholic Spirit

The doll is about 6 inches tall, handcrafted of red leather, with a tan belt and headband around its long black hair. It's a male warrior, holding a bow.

"This is actually me," D. Richard Wright said of the doll. The parishioner of Gichitwaa Kateri in south Minneapolis made it as part of an effort to process recent findings in Canada of what are believed to be hundreds of graves of children on the sites of former indigenous residential schools. Some Twin Cities American Indians — mostly women — gathered together to make "spirit dolls" representing the children in some of those graves, resulting in an exhibit called "215+" that was on view from November to January at Indigenous Roots in St. Paul.

Wright, 72, is a member of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe. He made a doll of himself, he said, not because he attended an Indian boarding school — he didn't, but his father and grandparents did — but because he wanted to symbolize what he sees as the need for American Indians "to put down our warrior mentality" and "find a way to deal with what's going on in a positive way."

Among American Indians, seeking information in order to understand the history of the Indian boarding school era is largely accepted as the first step toward healing and justice.

The discovery in May 2021 of about 200 unmarked graves on the campus of long-closed Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia has drawn attention to the history of Indian boarding schools in Canada as well as the United States, where the practice began in the 19th century.

The Kamloops discoveries prompted the U.S. Department of the Interior to launch in June the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative, described as "a comprehensive review of the troubled legacy of federal boarding school policies." A report was due April 1 to Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, and it is expected to be released to the public soon.

As the United States begins to confront this chapter of its history, so does the Catholic Church. According to the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS) — which has compiled what is generally regarded as the most comprehensive, albeit admittedly incomplete list of U.S. Indian boarding schools — at least 84 of the 367 identified schools were run by Catholic institutions through contracts with the U.S. government. A group of Catholic archivists researching the topic believe there were many more.

Last summer, employees of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis began to look more deeply into what was already known about its involvement with Indian boarding schools, including one it ran in west-central Minnesota in the late 1800s. Efforts are now underway



COURTESY MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

A priest poses with children in front of a church at an Indian boarding school in an unknown location, circa 1900.

to share archdiocesan records related to boarding schools with the state's tribal nations.

As Archbishop Bernard Hebda and Minnesota's other bishops work to form and strengthen relationships with tribal leaders, he asked for prayers so that the Church "might be able to shed the light that we need on the facts of what happened" and eventually create a "mutual plan between tribal leadership and Catholics in our state to respond in some way."

'Kill the Indian, Save the Man'

As described by NABS, which is based in Minneapolis, the boarding schools were a product of the United States' Indian Civilization Act Fund of 1819 and the Peace Policy of 1869 to "implement cultural genocide through the removal and reprogramming of American Indian and Alaska Native children to accomplish the systematic destruction of Native cultures and communities."

In 1879, Army officer Richard Henry Pratt founded the first off-reservation Indian boarding school, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, which served as a model for the other Indian boarding schools that would come after. It was Pratt who said the words now considered the shorthand for the government policy: "Kill the Indian, Save the Man."

For many who are working to promote awareness of boarding schools, that phrase summarizes the schools' goal: to erase American Indian culture via European American inculturation.

According to historians, children were often taken from their communities through coercion and sometimes force. Some families lost government rations or were imprisoned for non-compliance. Some former students report abuse, overcrowding and malnourishment, including at Catholic-run schools, while others say they have positive memories. Some former students won't speak of their experiences at all.

Many experts say the schools caused intergenerational trauma by hindering former students' abilities to have self-worth, form healthy relationships or raise children well, and made American Indian individuals and families

susceptible to addiction and poverty. The schools' legacy is also interwoven with other government policies to oppress American Indian culture.

Christians of at least 14 different denominations contracted with the government to run some of the schools, NABS states on its website, BOARDINGSCHOOLHEALING.ORG. Other schools were run directly by the government.

According to historian David W. Adams, there were 20,000 children in 25 Indian boarding schools in 1900, and years later, that number was 60,889 — almost 83% of Indian school-age children. It lists 15 Indian boarding schools in Minnesota. About half of those appear to have been run by Catholic religious orders.

Allison Spies, archives program manager of the archdiocese's Office of Archives and Records Management, says there were more than 15 schools in Minnesota, and she is working to identify those operated by the Catholic Church. Among them was the Catholic Industrial School for Boys at Clontarf in Swift County, about 150 miles west of the Twin Cities. The archdiocese administered the school from 1877 to 1892. Beginning in 1884, most of its students were American Indians. (See related story "A window into the Catholic Industrial School at Clontarf" on page 11.)

Spies began reviewing the archdiocese's Catholic Industrial School papers in August, and in November, she joined the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Subcommittee on Native American Affairs' Accountability and Healing Project, where she is collaborating with archivists of other Catholic institutions. She is now coordinating the Minnesota Catholic Conference's efforts to identify archival information held by the state's dioceses about Catholic-run Indian boarding schools, and share that information with Minnesota's 11 tribal nations.

(Editor's note: This story's reporter has assisted Spies in inventorying the archdiocese's archival material related to the Catholic Industrial School at Clontarf.)

That work is the initial outcome of a December meeting between

Catholic bishops and leaders, including Archbishop Hebda, and representatives of the state's tribes to discuss how the Church can assist the tribes' efforts to gather information about the boarding schools.

Removing children from home

Federal Indian boarding school policies continued into the 1970s. In the following decades, many former boarding schools transitioned to day schools, including some that today protect and teach Native language and culture. However, many American Indians believe the boarding schools have an outsized effect on their lives today.

Richard Wright, who crafted the red leather doll as a way of reflecting on his response to the boarding school legacy, worked in Minnesota corrections before beginning a career in drug and alcohol abuse recovery. Now an indigenous spiritual health expert at the Indian Health Board of Minneapolis, Wright began his career as a probation officer for American Indians. His roles have given him an up-close look at challenges American Indians face — poverty, addiction, racism, homelessness — and he describes the boarding schools' contribution to them as "huge."

"The boarding schools were hard on the American Indian families because they removed Indian children at the age of 5 for the purpose of educating them in a system that was designed for them to assimilate them into mainstream society," he said. "Our culture was strong back then. We spoke our own language. We had our own way of raising children, and that was taken away."

At many schools, the children weren't allowed to speak their own language or wear their own clothes. Oftentimes, their hair was cut, severing them from an important symbol. "Our hair ... back then, means our life," Wright said. "The longer our hair means that we've lived a long time, and we want to continue to live a long time."

While many boarding school accounts focus on students' experiences, their parents suffered, too, Wright said. With children away from home, families couldn't observe and celebrate the traditional rites that marked a child's growth. That eroded the social fabric of Indian communities, things that encourage families to flourish, he said.

"And when that's removed, a lot of parents started drinking," he said. "They had no children. They were in grieving."

In Wright's work as an addiction counselor, boarding school often comes up, even for people one or two generations removed from attendance. "They're still experiencing the results of what their grandparents experienced," he said.

He sees it manifest in people not knowing how to manage anger or being harsh with their children's emotions.

He said one woman told him, "Richard, I don't even know how to play with my kids. All we do is we sit at home and watch TV together and we don't talk." "And that's the result of being in the boarding schools because you could not

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talk unless you were spoken to," Wright said. "Not being able to express feelings, not being able to tell somebody, like a parent, 'Gee whiz, something's going on with me, mom, that's making me feel this way.'"

While Wright is working to process the boarding schools' legacy in a positive way, guided by his knowledge of American Indian traditional spirituality, he knows there are many who are simply angry. Last fall, he was moderating a virtual space for grieving for attendees of an online NABS conference. What he saw was "anger, a lot of anger."

And some are angry at their community or even themselves, he said. "How is it that we could not have helped our Indian children? Why didn't we take a position back then and say no to the social workers that came for those kids?"

Maryanna Harstad is the program director at Gichitwaa Kateri, an archdiocesan parish established to minister to American Indian Catholics. She was adopted from the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe as an infant by a Catholic couple in Minneapolis. When she was 18, she was able to identify her tribe through the Minnesota Department of Human Services.

She went to the Leech Lake Reservation and "just started asking around." She was able to find her grandmother, who told her about her mother, then living in California. Eventually she connected with her mother, who also told her about her birth father, who was enrolled in the Blackfeet Indian Nation in Montana. They met, she learned, at boarding school.

Harstad, 62, first learned about the boarding school system as a student in American Indian studies at the University of Minnesota. She later learned that her mother had attended the Indian boarding schools in Pipestone and then Flandreau, South Dakota, for her whole kindergarten-to-grade-12 education.

Harstad said her mother became estranged from her family. Harstad was born when her mother was 24, the second of her five children, all of whom were removed from her mother's home due to her struggles with alcohol and depression. Harstad thinks her mother's life may have been different if she had grown up with her family.

In March 2019, Harstad participated in a listening session hosted by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Phoenix, Arizona. She was there to present on inculturation of Native practices in Catholic worship based on her experience at Gichitwaa Kateri. But, after the participants finished sharing their prepared topics, the conversation turned to boarding schools.

"It wasn't the only theme, but there was a lot of interest in it and questions on the part of the bishops and those listening," she said.

Harstad thinks about the photos some schools used to show the difference they were making — one of the Indian children as they were when they arrived, with long hair and Native clothing, next to one of the children in western garb.

"Here is a set of children as they came to the schools, and here they are in their military-looking uniforms. This is the positive change we made." But it was not that. It was children who lost what "family" means," she said. "They go home for the summer or they go home after school, and don't even remember their language. They can't even communicate because they've been forced not to speak their language, even among each other. They're punished. The idea of taking away everything that is Indian takes away that loving home that they have and their understanding of it. That carries forward into how they raise their children."

Harstad said she would like non-Native Catholics "to try and see the traumatic

legacy of the boarding school era from the perspective of Native people. And I realize that's a difficult thing. But in any kind of situation, if you try to look at it from the perspective of those who felt the impact, that's a place with more understanding" than trying to justify those who caused harm.

Denise Lajimodiere, a recently retired associate professor of educational leadership at North Dakota State University in Fargo, has dedicated her research to understanding the history of Indian boarding schools. Her 2019 book "Stringing Rosaries: The History, the Unforgivable, and the Healing of Northern Plains American Indian Boarding School Survivors" chronicles the stories of boarding school attendees in their own words, gathered from interviews she conducted of former students living in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota. Most of them attended Catholic-run schools.

Interviewees describe confusion at being taken from their homes, feeling abandoned by their parents, and the instilling of shame about their culture and language. Some said their parents couldn't afford for them to return home for school breaks or summers. Many of the stories describe physical, sexual and emotional abuse, sometimes from the adults running the school — including priests and religious sisters and brothers — and sometimes from other children.

'It starts with confronting history'

Lajimodiere is an enrolled citizen of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, Belcourt, North Dakota. Her father attended the Chemawa Indian School near Salem, Oregon, established in 1880 by one of Pratt's collaborators. Like many working in Indian boarding school research or advocacy, Lajimodiere calls former boarding school students "survivors."

"It's sort of like Holocaust survivors," she said. "Many of them never told their stories because it's so traumatizing."

The Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs, a Presbyterian minister and director of community engagement and racial justice for the Minnesota Council of Churches in Minneapolis, works as a cultural facilitator to help faith communities confront injustices against American Indians. That includes speaking about Indian boarding schools.

"I have long said that every Native person alive today is no more than three generations removed from a direct ancestor being in boarding school, and I've never been proven wrong in that," said Rev. Jacobs, 45. His grandmother was sent to a Lutheran-run boarding school in Red Springs, Wisconsin.

A member of the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohican Nation in central Wisconsin, Rev. Jacobs said that his grandmother's father — his great-grandpa — attended that first boarding school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The school closed in 1918. Its cemetery includes 186 graves of students who died, as well as prisoners of war held at the school. Last July, the remains of nine of those children were reinterred at the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

"There are schools with graveyards attached to them, and that is never right. There were white people, white kids, who went to boarding schools as well, and when their children died, they were brought home, and they were buried with family. And their family could grieve, and their family could say goodbye. ... There's no justifying this. ... There are children in the ground that were never allowed to go home, that just became stories, wonderings of whatever happened. And that's not OK."

For U.S. Catholics, revelations of the boarding school era mean grappling with some survivors' accounts of horrible treatment

in the schools, including from priests and religious sisters. There is also the question of Christians' involvement in the first place.

Cathy Chavers, chairwoman for the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa near Nett Lake in northern Minnesota, said she sees religious denominations contracting with the government to run schools as an example of following the status quo.

"Nobody really knew what to do with the Indians," she said. "They (the government) needed the land, they needed the resources, they needed whatever. And it was for civilization. For the Catholics, they were just going with the flow. ... They were going by the direction of the government, and the government wanted to assimilate."

At Red Cloud Indian School on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in southwest South Dakota, Maka Akan Najin Black Elk works as the school's executive director for truth and healing. He has become a key voice bridging Native and Church efforts to address boarding school history and legacy.

Red Cloud Indian School was once a boarding school, and Black Elk's grandfather and great-grandfathers attended the school at that time. Now the school is a Lakota language immersion school.

In an October article in *America* magazine he co-authored with William Critchley-Menor, a Jesuit seminarian, Black Elk pointed to the research of Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, a Hunkpapa/Oglala Lakota psychologist who developed a widely adopted model for "historical trauma," or trauma rooted in unresolved grief that can pass through generations. Resolving this trauma has four parts, she says: confrontation, understanding, healing and transformation.

At Jesuit-run Red Cloud, efforts are focused on the first step, confrontation. And that is where the Church needs to join American Indians, Black Elk told *The Catholic Spirit*.

"This has been a history that mainstream America has not known about and it has not taught about, it's not talked about," Black Elk said. "For Native people, this is not news. It's not shocking. It's family history."

Families' relationships to boarding schools are complex, Black Elk said, especially as some of the institutions have transitioned from boarding schools focused on erasing culture to day schools focused on preserving it, like at Red Cloud. Some people have positive memories of their boarding school experience, he said.

Black Elk, who is Catholic, said that he sees the Catholic Church trying to "make sense of" the boarding school history.

"It starts with confronting the history," he said. "It starts with learning about it, knowing about it. It starts with sort of reckoning with that history, especially if you're doing it for the first time as maybe a non-Native. Then you have to take the time to understand it, understand its impact, and understand why that history is still relevant today and the legacy of it, and also understand the complexity of it, that it's not a black-and-white story, but that it takes time to sort of wrestle and chew on all of that."

Based on its own teaching, the Church should not have gotten involved in running boarding schools, Black Elk said. Drawing from an article published in September in *Church Life Journal* by Canadian theologian Brett Salkeld, Black Elk said, "We (Catholics) were where we should not have been, running schools that said that Native people had to change their culture in order to be Christian. We should not have been running schools that took children away from their families, when we believe that parents are the first teacher, even from a theological perspective."



MARIA WIERING | THE CATHOLIC SPIRIT

D. Richard Wright is an expert in indigenous spiritual health at the Indian Health Board of Minneapolis. A longtime addiction counselor, he said he sees the intergenerational effects of the boarding school era in his clients and community.



MARIA WIERING | THE CATHOLIC SPIRIT

Maryanna Harstad is the program director at Gichitwaa Kateri in south Minneapolis, home of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis' Office for Indian Ministry. Her birth parents attended Indian boarding schools.



COURTESY THE REV. JIM BEAR JACOBS

The Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs is the director of community engagement and racial justice for the Minnesota Council of Churches. In his role, he speaks to church communities about the Indian boarding school era.



MARCUS FAST WOLF COURTESY RED CLOUD INDIAN SCHOOL | CNS

Maka Akan Najin Black Elk, a leader in Native American and Catholic education for truth, healing and reconciliation, is seen in front of the Red Cloud Indian School in Pine Ridge, S.D., May 5, 2021.

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A window into the Catholic Industrial School at Clontarf

Archdiocese ran rural Indian boarding school from 1884-1892

By Maria Wiering
The Catholic Spirit

"Parents want him badly" is among handwritten notations in an arrivals and departure record from 1889-1890 from the Catholic Industrial School in Clontarf. From 1884 to 1892, the then-Archdiocese of St. Paul contracted with the U.S. government for the school's use as an Indian boarding school, drawing students from more than a dozen different tribal nations, particularly in the Dakotas.

Located in west-central Minnesota, Clontarf is now in the Diocese of New Ulm, which was established from the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis' territory in 1957. Some of the school's records are held by the archdiocese as part of the personal papers of Msgr. Anatole Oster, the school's superintendent while it served as an Indian boarding school. The archdiocese and other Minnesota dioceses are currently working with tribal leaders to share archival material related to known boarding schools.

As former Bishop James Shannon recounted in a September 1956 story for *Minnesota History* magazine, Archbishop John Ireland founded the Catholic Industrial School near St. Paul in 1874 with the goal of training immigrant children in farming and industrial arts. Enrollment was low, so, with the expansion of the railroad, he moved the school across the state to Clontarf in 1877. Franciscans from Brooklyn, New York, came to staff the boys-only school, but it drew no pupils. In 1884, Archbishop Ireland contracted with the U.S. government to board and educate boys from Indian tribes.

According to a school register kept from 1884 to 1891, the school drew students from tribes in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota. Records show that students' enrollment was federally funded for three years. The school enrolled around 60 Indian boys a year, as well as some white students, primarily from the Catholic Orphan Asylum in Minneapolis. Most of the students are listed as "half-breeds." Most of the students are identified as Catholic, with notations on which sacraments they had received.

The Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions in Washington, D.C., served as an intermediary between the school and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The Catholic Church stopped operating the school in 1892, when the U.S. government stopped contracting with third parties, such as churches, for the operation of non-reservation boarding schools. Archbishop Ireland sold the school to the federal government, which continued to run the school for six more years, until 1898.

According to an 1888 account of the school from Msgr. Oster, under the terms of the school's contract, it could enroll students ages 6 to 18 to teach them agriculture, stock raising and "the elementary branches of education." Some students also learned a trade, he said. (See sidebar "Contemporary accounts.")

The school was to furnish clothing, board, books, stationery, tools for farm and garden work, teachers and medical care. Msgr. Oster said that the school was run by four Franciscan brothers, two male lay teachers, and four other staff members. In August 1888, Msgr. Oster noted 106 boys at the school, with 69 of them Indians. The government paid the school \$100 per Indian student.

Documents held by the archdiocese include students' names, ages, tribes, father's name, date of arrival and departure, and sometimes some other notes. They also note if a boy ran away or died.

The register lists 18 boys as having died between 1884 and 1891. Several of them note consumption, or tuberculosis, as the cause of death. With the heading "St. Paul Diocese Industrial School of Clontarf," a stone monument at St. Malachy Cemetery in Clontarf erected during the town's centennial celebration in 1978 notes the graves of 14 "Sioux and Chippewa Indian youths who died while attending the school."

Allison Spies, the archdiocese's archives program manager, said she hopes to work with affected American Indian tribes to answer the question of how many boys died while attending the school and where they might be buried.

Documents in the archives also contain letters between the school and agents for the Bureau of Indian Affairs about the boys and the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions. Some of them are about boys who are sick, or whose parents want them to return. The letters request permission to send boys home and indicate the school required government funding to pay for those trips.

Spies is currently working on behalf of the Minnesota Catholic Conference to help the state's dioceses identify and share records related to Indian boarding schools with the state's 11 tribal nations. She is also working to identify and contact other tribes whose children were enrolled at the Catholic Industrial School at Clontarf and other Catholic-affiliated boarding schools in Minnesota, as well as the religious orders that are known to have run or staffed them.

CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNTS

In September 1885, the *Northwestern Chronicle*, a Minnesota Catholic journal, wrote a description of the Catholic Industrial School, calling it "an interesting institution — educating Catholic boys." The somewhat idyllic description noted that the 2,000-acre campus included two large buildings — one with dormitories, classrooms and a reception hall, the other with a kitchen, chapel, refectory, more classrooms and work rooms. The curriculum included reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar and agriculture, carpentry, shoemaking, tailoring and other trades.

The boys raised vegetables in a 20-acre garden, grew wheat and oats, and cared for nearly 100 head of stock, 50 hogs and "a well-stocked chicken house." The author noted plans for cheese and butter-making "on a large scale," thanks to the gift of a thoroughbred bull to the school by James J. Hill, president of the Manitoba railroad and a frequent collaborator of Archbishop John Ireland. The bakery oven, the *Northwestern Chronicle* said, could bake 150 loaves at a time.

According to the *Chronicle*, there were 102 boys at the Catholic Industrial School in September 1885: "a number of white boys and Indians and half-breeds placed at the school by the United States Government." The article listed boys as being between ages 9 and 20.

The author of the *Chronicle* report noted that the boys were taught by the Franciscan brothers "who have charge of the institution" and lay teachers. The author commented on the students' language skills and academic abilities, noting "the Indians all speak some Indian dialect, many of them are well conversant with French, and a majority speak English fluently, which even the youngest seem to learn easily. ... They read, those who have been to school for some time, with ease and accuracy. Their pronunciation is good, though the French half-breeds have a slight French accent. Their penmanship is excellent, putting to shame many of the scholars in our public and parochial schools." and during a recent examination they performed a number of difficult problems in weights and measures."

The *Chronicle* went on to report that the boys also enjoyed and performed well the "duties of farm life ... and seem thoroughly at home and contented. The extensive grounds of the institution admit a wide range for the boys, and when not occupied with their studies or work, can be seen scattered all over the prairie, without distinction of race or color, playing marbles, shooting bows and arrows, playing ball and amusing themselves with a number of other games."

The writer remarked that the Indian students "are irreproachable in their morals. The school, be it understood, is not a reformatory, but, occupying a position between the ordinary school and every day (sic) life, is designed to prepare the boys for earning an honest livelihood."

The boys "every boy except one, an Indian, who is a Pagan" went to confession and Communion monthly, the writer stated, "and from neither the whites or Indians was a single oath or immoral expression heard in the course of several visits made to the institution by the writer."

The story concluded with a note that the school aimed to increase enrollment, "although the expenses are necessarily large and there is no tuition fee except what is paid by the government for the Indians and half-breeds." He noted that the school needed a library, and readers were welcome to donate for that cause.

Two other competing accounts of the school ran in the summer of 1886 in the *St. Paul Pioneer Express*. The first was printed in late July by the paper's editor, A. Gerardin, and a lengthy rebuttal came in early August from the school's superintendent, Msgr. Anatole Oster.

Gerardin's piece, titled "A trip to Clontarf," called



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The Catholic Industrial School at Clontarf is pictured in this undated photograph. The then-Archdiocese of St. Paul ran the school and contracted with the U.S. government to accept American Indian boarding students from 1884-1892.

into question the care of the boys, especially in food and cleanliness. He said he was approaching the school when he encountered three children herding sheep. "I asked them how they liked to stay here at school. They answered, 'Not at all.' I asked, 'Why?' 'Because we do not get food as we do at home.' 'Would you prefer being at home?' Their answer was short and in the affirmative, while tears stood in their eyes."

Gerardin went on to say that about 20 boys had recently run away from the school and he indicated he talked with three of them "and their stories agree with those left behind." He went on to say that the school gets government support, "and it would seem that funds should be sufficient to give the children a better bill of fare than bread and syrup twice a day, with soup for dinner and meat but once a week" especially considering the boys' farm work. "It is a matter which the heads of the church and other proper authorities should investigate."

In response, Msgr. Oster stated that Gerardin had gone to Clontarf looking for fault and that he "took good care not to find me." After calling into question Gerardin's report based on its faulty geography alone, he also said that 11 boys had run away since the winter, and one was sent home for "insubordinate conduct and bad language." Of those who ran away, he said, "five Sioux ran away on account of a death occurring in the house, and I understand that it is according to a superstition in their race."

As for the others, Msgr. Oster said, "Seven more were demanded home by their parents, and after permission had been obtained from the Indian department, they were sent home well clad, their passage paid and with money in pocket for meals on the road. Four more ... were taken home by their fathers who would not wait for the permission from the department which I had asked, but which had not yet arrived; had they waited, the boys would have been sent home without expense to the parents. There are a few whose time has expired" — presumably the students' three-year limit of government-funded tuition — "and for whom I am daily expecting permission from the government to let them go honorably and comfortably."

Msgr. Oster said the students eat well — meat once a day — and he provided a list of food and supplies, including 400 pounds of soap, used between April 1 and June 30. As for the boys with dirty and ragged clothes — a description he disagreed with — he wrote, "I suppose your own son never came home but with a clean face, and your good wife was never called upon to mend his clothes after a rough play such as all boys are apt to indulge at times."

He added, presumably with sarcasm, "In the four years that the school has been in existence our death rate has been 1 and 6-10 percent, a convincing proof that the children are starved, unwashed, miserably clad, etc. Let the unprejudiced reader judge."

— Maria Wiering

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No. We shouldn't have been involved, and we were. So how do we deal with that?

"We have to reconcile. We have to make peace with that," he continued. "We have to acknowledge and recognize the sin that has been committed. I think the Church is trying to do that to a certain extent."

Brenna Cussen is among Catholics working to help the Church address the boarding school past. A member of the Catholic Worker movement living in southwest Wisconsin, she started connecting with other Catholics interested in the issue in 2020. She met a Jesuit who had formerly worked at Red Cloud, and they formed a small group of Catholics — mostly members and affiliates of religious communities — who met virtually every two weeks to learn about Indian boarding schools, the Church's involvement and ask what could be done in response.

The discovery of the Kamloops graves moved their work forward, Cussen said, because they no longer had to convince Catholics it was an issue to care about. "What we had to do is provide education or provide platforms for Native and non-Native speakers who have been working on this for many years," she said. "By the Church cooperating with this policy, we caused a lot of harm. I feel responsible as a non-Native Catholic to commit to a posture of deep listening, repentance and repair."

In fall 2021, the organization put on a four-part webinar series for about 800 Catholics, many of them members of women's religious communities. Speakers included Black Elk; Christine Diindisi McCleave, then the CEO of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition; and Bishop Donald Bolen of the Archdiocese of Regina, Saskatchewan.

Some Catholic religious orders are already exploring their history of boarding school involvement. The Benedictines in St. Joseph and Collegeville, for example, have already done considerable work to uncover this past and work with tribes it affected. The College of St. Benedict and St. John's University have a website providing a history of Indian boarding schools they ran through federal contracts secured through the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions. Those Indian boarding schools include ones that were on what is now their college and university campuses.

The group Cussen helped found is collaborating with the USCCB's Subcommittee on Native American Affairs under the temporary name the Catholic Native Boarding School Accountability and Healing Project, or AHP, where she collaborates with Spies, the archdiocese's archivist.

Minnesota is well represented in the AHP, Spies said. Among its members are Shawn Phillips, director of the archdiocese's Office of Indian Ministry and the pastoral minister at Gichitwaa Kateri.

Cussen and Spies are on the archives subcommittee that is working to put together an official, accurate list of Indian boarding schools and day schools ever run or staffed by Catholics in the U.S.

"No such list exists," Cussen said. "(NABS) has a pretty good list that they've created, but even they say it's not totally complete or accurate. ... We want to find out where all the records for these schools ... are located."

And that's a particular challenge, Cussen said. As American Indian leaders call for records' release, "the problem is a lot of these archives are in multiple, like maybe even hundreds of different locations all across the country. ... And sometimes these schools had like five or six different (religious) orders that came in and staffed for a period of time. Each one of these orders will have records pertaining to the school."

Cussen, Spies and others are trying to speak with religious communities and archivists, "letting them know how important it is to find those records, organize them," Cussen said, and then collaborate with the impacted Native communities, so that the records, when shared, respect different Native communities' traditions and wishes. Some may want the documents publicly available, and others may not.

"It's not as simple as 'release the records' — the records are about people's lives," she said. "There's a lot of pain in there. There's sometimes beauty. Sometimes people just want to see a picture of their grandfather. As Maka has said, not everybody's boarding school experience was horrible. Some people have fond

POPE FRANCIS: 'I AM VERY SORRY'

The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition is advocating for Congress to pass a bill that would establish a Truth and Healing Commission on U.S. Indian boarding school policies, similar to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Canada established in 2008 to document the history and impact of its Indian residential schools. The commission was active until 2015, when it released an executive summary of its findings and a list of 94 "calls to action" to heal the relationship between Canadians and indigenous people. No. 58 on that list calls upon the pope "to issue an apology to Survivors, their families, and communities for the Roman Catholic Church's role in the spiritual, cultural, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children in Catholic-run residential schools."

Last month, Pope Francis met with indigenous leaders from Canada at the Vatican. He apologized and told them he would repeat that apology during a visit this summer to Canada. He said he was "deeply grieved by the stories of the suffering, hardship, discrimination and various forms of abuse that some of you experienced, particularly in the residential schools."

"It is chilling to think of determined efforts to instill a sense of inferiority, to rob people of their cultural identity, to sever their roots, and to consider all the personal and social effects that this continues to entail: unresolved traumas that have become intergenerational traumas," he said. "I feel shame — sorrow and shame — for the role that a number of Catholics, particularly those with educational responsibilities, have had in all these things that wounded you, in the abuses you suffered and in the lack of respect shown for your identity, your culture and even your spiritual values. All these things are contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For the deplorable conduct of those members of the Catholic Church, I ask for God's forgiveness and I want to say to you with all my heart: I am very sorry."

— Maria Wiering

memories. So, we just want to communicate that all people's experiences should be honored, and their privacy. ... It's just going to have to be carefully done."

Cussen's research has uncovered evidence of priests who were opposed to the federal boarding school policy and fought against it.

"There were these Catholics who saw it for what it was and tried to oppose it. I'm proud of those people and that's part of our tradition. Catholics started schools doing education with Native communities long before the U.S. policy started. ... There were instances of Native communities asking for Jesuits ... (because they were) more interested in culture and communal understanding."

Larry Martin, an Ojibwe language scholar and professor emeritus of American Indian Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, said the Church's involvement in Indian boarding schools is unfortunate and contributed to the loss of Native culture, especially language. However, he said, some Catholic missionaries actively worked to preserve Native language, and their contributions should not be diminished.

Bishop Frederic Baraga of Marquette, Michigan, for example, was a grammarian of American Indian languages. In 1837, he published a Catholic prayer book in the Ottawa language. He later wrote a grammar book and a dictionary of Ojibwe still in print today, Martin said.

An Indian school in Harbor Springs, Michigan, trained students to be printers, and they published what Martin thinks was the first Ojibwe-language newspaper for a mostly Catholic audience. That press also published a hymnal in 1901 called the "Anishinabe Negamod."

These contributions have been helpful to Martin, who is Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe, and his collaborators working to translate Catholic hymns into Ojibwe for use at Gichitwaa Kateri, their parish.

Archbishop Hebda is familiar with the Harbor Springs Indian boarding school, Holy Childhood of Jesus. It was in the Diocese of Gaylord, Michigan, where he was bishop from 2009 to 2013. It was torn down to make way for new construction, but one room was preserved. Visitors wrote notes about the school on the chalkboard. Some former students shared happy memories, Archbishop Hebda said, and other memories were difficult.

Archbishop Hebda emphasized respecting the fact-finding phase and cautioned against drawing conclusions before more information is gathered.

However, he was struck by the story of one woman who came to the Gaylord diocese looking for an Indian school's records. She said she had lost her identity in the boarding school system, and she was afraid to marry because she never could be certain that the other person was not her brother.

"As I read about these schools and I have a better sense for what happened in these schools, I have a deeper sense of how perplexing her problem was," he said.

Given the history of Catholic religious orders educating children on the peripheries in the most difficult of settings in the United States and abroad, Archbishop Hebda said he could understand how so many communities of priests, brothers and sisters could have seen running Indian boarding schools as an opportunity for helping "a young person develop his or her skills and ... reach his or her potential."

"Whether that noble desire was something that should have been rethought in light of the repercussions of taking a child away from his or her family, I'm not sure about that. That's one of those areas where we need a lot more information," he said. "It's not so clear yet whether the Church's involvement brought Christ's love into an awful situation or whether it made the system possible."

In 1975, the Minnesota bishops released a document calling for "dialogue and reconciliation" between the Church and American Indians. While expressing gratitude for the priests, religious and lay missionaries who left their homelands to share the Gospel with Native people, and in many cases aimed to learn Native language and culture, the bishops also stated that "the unconscious limitations of their missionary efforts frequently contributed to the disruption of Indian cultures by undermining the people's pride in self, community and heritage." The statement did not specifically mention boarding schools.

Titled "A New Beginning," the statement, which was prepared by the Minnesota Catholic Conference, called for the Church to reflect on its own attitudes and work for justice for American Indians, and urged Catholic parishes and institutions to educate their members about American Indian culture and needs, and fully integrate their American Indian members, including in their leadership.

The document was the first of its kind among American bishops, Spies said, and she sees Minnesota's bishops having a new opportunity to lead "positive efforts" as they respond to the boarding school era, especially in this stage of fact-finding and sharing information. Those efforts are the focus before any healing can begin, she said in an interview for "Practicing Catholic," the archdiocese's radio program on Relevant Radio 1330 that aired April 22.

"It's also essential that any efforts toward healing are Native-led," Spies said. "All of us, including descendants of settlers, need to engage in this work of truth-seeking and healing; we're all grappling with this colonial legacy of oppression and injustice. However, the right steps toward healing on this issue must be in relationship with, and at the invitation of, the American Indian nations — centered on Native needs and directed by Native voices."

Following the December meeting organized by the MCC, the tribes' leaders asked the bishops to make all relevant information available digitally to all of the state's tribes. Tribal leaders are currently reviewing a drafted memorandum of understanding about how to proceed in sharing that information.

Chavers, the Bois Forte chairwoman, was at the meeting with the bishops. She said she is optimistic about their collaboration, but the fact-finding will take years. She hopes it leads to better education on American Indian history — in schools and in the wider public. She also hopes there will be cooperation for using ground penetrating radar to search for graves around Minnesota's former boarding schools. "It's going to take a lot of research," she said.

Chavers' grandmother attended a boarding school near Lake Vermilion, an experience she never talked about. She also never spoke her Native language after leaving the school, Chavers said, which is why it was never passed down to Chavers, who grew up just 19 miles from the Nett Lake reservation. Now at age 62, Chavers is working to learn the language her grandmother once spoke.

"Now we're trying to get that back," she said.