



**Directors of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions:
3. Monsignor William Henry Ketcham, 1901-1921**

Kevin Abing, 1994

The BCIM, under the guidance of the Bureau's third director, William Ketcham, weathered the storm. In fact, relations between the government and the Bureau had improved dramatically by the end of Ketcham's tenure as director. A changing social and political climate in part contributed to the new-found spirit of cooperation. But Father Ketcham himself also helped calm the troubled waters. He shared Father Stephan's combativeness, but possessed the tact and diplomacy that Stephan lacked. Both qualities served Ketcham well. When he assumed control of the BCIM, much of the government's Indian policy seemed directed at curtailing the BC

IM became a widely-respected Indian reform organization.

William Henry Ketcham was born on June 1, 1868, in Sumner, Iowa. Unlike other BCIM directors, Ketcham's family was not Catholic; the family could trace its ancestry back to the

William received his first Communion, and the following September, he was confirmed. At St. Charles', Ket

on Holy Saturday, April 4r,

vitality and growing executive ability." He was a class leader and also served as Prefect of the Children of Mary. And during the summers, he gained his first missionary experience, ministering to the "lukewarm Catholics" near his home in Wills Point. Ketcham studied at St. Charles' for three years and acquired a B.A. degree on July 23, 1888.

Ketcham's career shifted dramatically in 1900 when Archbishop Ryan of Philadelphia called the missionary to Washington, D.C., to assist Father Stephan with his duties as BCIM director. Ketcham had met Stephan several years earlier at the 1893 Chicago Exposition. Impressed by Ketcham's ability and zeal, Stephan asked Bishop Meerschaert to release Ketcham from his mission field and allow him to join the BCIM. The Bishop declined Stephan's request, claiming that Ketcham's services were desperately needed in the Indian Territory. As Stephan's health deteriorated, Archbishop Ryan "suggested" in August 1900 that Ketcham serve the Bureau. The priest relented and made his way to Washington, D.C. Ketcham quickly assumed control of the Bureau while Father Stephan recuperated in Europe. Shortly after his return, however, Stephan passed away. In the wake of Stephan's death, the BCIM's board of incorporators chose Ketcham as the Bureau's third director.¹⁰

Ketcham inherited a number of problems which threatened the Bureau's existence as well as that of Catholic missions as

had gradually reduced the amount of rations allotted

The matter lay dormant for several years as Ketcham battled over the rations issue, but the BCIM renewed the petition once again in 1904. This time, President Theodore Roosevelt decided that the funds could be used for sectarian schools, if the Indians approved of such an application of their funds. The Indian Department issued contracts for eight schools to the BCIM. Protestant opponents did not let the Catholics savor their victory. They appealed to Roosevelt to reverse his decision, but he rebuffed them. Then they launched an all-out assault in Congress. Anti-Catholic

behalf and as a sign of respect, President Taft appointed Father Ketcham to the Board of Indian Commissioners on December 3, 1912.²³ In his dual role as BCIM director and Indian commissioner, Ketcham traveled around the country investigating problems involving Native Americans. He made his most substantial contribution trying to improve health conditions among the Indians. Many Native Americans suffered from tuberculosis and trachoma. Father Ketcham worked tirelessly to remedy the situation, especially within his old missionary field in Oklahoma. In 1917, he helped inaugurate Oklahoma's health drive and secured the cooperation of the Governor, the State Commissioner of Health, and officials from the Oklahoma Tuberculosis Association. Ketcham was also largely responsible for the appropriation for the sanitarium near Fort Sill and helped establish Carter Sanitarium at Talihima. In addition, Ketcham put his study of the Choctaw language to contribute to the Indian Department's health drive. He translated a number

went for a ride that afternoon. But, the following morning, at the breakfast table, Ketcham suffered a heart attack and died very suddenly.²⁸

Ketcham's death at the age of fifty-three shocked everyone connected with Indian mission work. Co-workers and government officials alike praised Monsignor Ketcham's work effusively. Reverend Philippe called Ketcham a saint. He asked a mutual friend of Ketcham's, "You know what a saint is? It is a man who is consistent and logical with himself to the very extreme--that was the case with Monsignor."²⁹ The Board of Indian Commissioners also honored the Monsignor. In a tribute, the Board stated Ketcham's death was an "irreparable" loss. Ketcham "endeared himself to every member of this Board" and he "proved that men, differing widely in matters of creed and church doctrines, can cooperate in perfect harmony with a common purpose and for a common good."³⁰

Ketcham's remains were taken to his home in Oklahoma. In addition to the funeral mass, a Solemn Mass of Requiem was held at St. Paul's Church in Washington, D.C., on November 22. Many high-ranking Church officials, congressmen, members of the Board of Indian Commissioners, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Burke and other prominent citizens gathered to pay their respects.³¹

Ketcham's successor as BCIM director and close friend, Father William Hughes, offered another Requiem Mass that same day at St. Basil's Church in Los Angeles. Hughes' moving tribute neatly summed up Ketcham's career:

The Sioux Indians formally conferred on him the name Wambli Wakiata, the Watching Eagle. For ten years in Indian Territory, he watched at the doors of the Indian homes. He noted as a father their comings in and goings