



**Directors of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions:  
4. Monsignor William McDermott Hughes, 1921-1935**

Kevin Abing, 1994

Father William Hughes built upon Ketcham's legacy. He was one of the most prolific writers and forceful speakers ever to be associated with the Bureau, and he utilized those talents to sustain the Bureau. Although the BCIM's existence was not imperiled, as it was under Monsignor Ketcham's directorship, Hughes faced a different set of challenges.

William McDermott Hughes was born on January 9, 1880, in Sacramento, California. His father, Owen, came to the U.S. from Ireland as a small boy. He and his family lived in New York for many years, and Owen eventually found work as a millwright and mechanical engineer. He journeyed to California when the state was yet in its "pioneer era" and labored in the mining centers along the coast. Eventually, Owen settled in Sacramento and, along with his wife, Catherine Ellen McDermott, raised a large family there, including William. William's interest in Native Americans was developed at an early age. As a young boy, he spent a great deal of time playing, hunting and fishing among the Indian tribes of northern California. He attended Sacramento's public schools and then entered St. Mary's College in Oakland, graduating in 1900 with a Bachelor's degree.

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California, he was assigned to St. Mary's parish in San Jacinto, a modest community nestled in the southern reaches of the Sierra Nevada mountains.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Father Hughes began the work that consumed most of his adult life. Using San Jacinto as a base, Hughes ministered to a far-flung territory, including Catholic subjects in Murietta, Perris and Temecula and the Indians residing on the Soboba, Cahuilla and Los Coyotes reservations. Over the next two years, Father Hughes experienced many hardships traveling along the two hundred-mile circuit in his parish. The distances were such that Hughes often went without meals or slept under the stars with a haystack or the ground as a bed. Hughes usually made the trip on horseback, but on one occasion, he borrowed a friend's motorcycle to overcome the distance problem. The resourceful missionary's experiment did not fare well. He successfully maneuvered up a steep grade, but when he reached the top, he nearly collided with a team of wild colts. Hughes lost control of the machine and was spilled onto the ground. He was unhurt, but the motorcycle was disabled. Unable to go forward, Hughes pushed the cycle back down the mountainside. He finally reached San Jacinto after an arduous trip of nearly two days. Once he reached home, Hughes replaced modern technology with a "trusty horse."<sup>3</sup>

Despite the tribulations, the young priest soon gained the trust and admiration of his Native flock. This circumstance stemmed, in part, from Hughes' deep and abiding concern for the Indians' welfare. The history of the Mission Indians, Hughes once wrote, was the "history of a century of dishonor under Mexican and American rule." White encroachment uOsahuill2c"0nsahucavb.38n8985 uOsahd4(t).

about Native traditions. Hughes' success was such that, together, he and the faithful on the Soboba Reservation erected a beautiful mission-style chapel.<sup>5</sup>

These achievements did not go unnoticed by Father William Ketcham. The BCIM director visited the California mission field in 1909 and, in his annual report, praised the young priests who have "fallen heir to the spirit of labor and sacrifice and of zeal for the salvation of the Indians which characterized the missionaries of old."<sup>6</sup> Father Hughes especially impressed Ketcham. In October, Ketcham informed Hughes that he had "dreamed a dream" which Hughes must not confide to anyone else. "During all the years of my work here & all my wanderings," Ketcham wrote, "I have had my eyes open to discover a coadjutor & possible successor in the Bureau." Hughes, Ketcham insisted, was the first and only one whom he had met who would "fill the bill." Ketcham then proceeded to list why he thought Hughes was the answer to his dream:

You are an American, a westerner, an idealist not wanting on the practical side, you could get along with our public men and I think with our churchmen. You have had experience on the missions and know a good deal of Indians and you have a heart for the Indians.

Ketcham did not think the time was right to propose such a plan to the Board of Prelates, but he did have another alternative. He proposed to appoint Hughes as a lecturer for the Bureau. Over the course of time, he could make Hughes assistant director. Hughes then could divide his time between the lecture circuit and BCIM headquarters where he would be "fully initiated into the 'mysteries' of the work." Once he was removed to the "happy hunting ground" or "relegated to some obscure work," Ketcham believed the young priest would be "ready for Elijah's mantle."<sup>7</sup>

Apparently, Hughes had some reservations about the plan which Ketcham had to overcome. First of all, he did not relish the thought of leav



Springfield dioceses, and also made successful inroads into the Albany and Scranton dioceses. The following year, he canvassed the dioceses of Hartford, Baltimore and Brooklyn.<sup>12</sup>

Despite his success, Hughes ceased his BCIM work in 1915. Perhaps, it was not enough to satisfy his ambition, and certainly, the demands of the job took a toll on him. Moreover, he desired to return to California and to his own parish, voicing his position in his January 24, 1916, letter of resignation. "Among the many discouragements of the Bureau work," he wrote, "the position of being removed from contact with



The conflict over Pueblo land rights and the Advisory Council's inability to alter Indian policy set the stage for a wider struggle. In their push to "civilize" Native Americans, government officials and missionary groups tried to stamp out Native dances and other customs that impeded the Indians' progress. Collier and his cohorts objected that the policy ignored the religious nature of Indian dances; thus the government and missionaries were religiously persecuting the Indians. Hughes refuted the charges in the July 26, 1924, issue of the Sacramento Bee. He insisted that the Catholic missionaries had the complete confidence and affection of the Pueblos and that Commissioner of Indian Affairs Charles Burke was a true friend of the Indians. The government, he added, did not persecute the Indians for it allowed Native parents to decide the religion of their children, even if it was a "pagan" religion. Then Hughes turned the tables, claiming that the pagan or reactionary Pueblos were instead persecuting the Christian or progressive Indians because they refused to take part in heathenish ceremonies. The "autocratic" pagan rulers, he asserted, cried persecution "to distract attention from their own acts of misrule and persecution and in order to maintain that misrule."<sup>18</sup>

Despite Hughes' defense of government policy, the criticism mounted. Throughout the decade, it became increasingly apparent that Native

respect all religious practices, even traditional Native rites. He also pushed through legislation to share jurisdiction of Indian programs with the states. But his most cherished goal was to reverse the damaging effects of the allotment policy. In 1934, he developed a legislative package (called the Wheeler-Howard [or Indian Reorganization] Act) which reestablished the right of tribal self-government, appropriated funds to promote the study of Indian culture and arts and crafts, abrogated individual allotment, returned "surplus" lands to the tribe and also set up a special Indian court to adjudicate cases based on Native traditions. Congress watered down many of the provisions, eliminating the tribal court for example, but passed much of what Collier wanted.<sup>20</sup>

Collier's efforts and the Wheeler-Howard Act we



