



**Directors of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions  
5. Reverend John B. Tenny, S.S., 1935-1976**

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it did under its previous directors, became an extension of Tenny's personality. He was reserved, fastidious, bookish and shy, and the BCIM seemed to take on some of those same qualities. Under Tenny, the Bureau underwent a long period of consolidation or entrenchment. It was no longer the politically and socially active organization it had become under Monsignors Ketcham and Hughes. Rather, the Bureau focused entirely on its educational and missionary functions. Tenny worked tenaciously to keep Catholic schools and missions operating, but toward the end of his tenure, his single-mindedness prevented the BCIM from effectively dealing with the wrenching changes which Native Americans faced.

More so than any other director, Tenny's early life is sketchy. He was born in Denver, Colorado, on June 8, 1890 to Robert and Madeleine Tenny. Sometime thereafter, his family moved to Lebanon, Kentucky. Young Benjamin, as he was known, began his seminary studies at the age of twelve at St. Gregory's Seminary in Cincinnati. From there, he studied for one year at the high school at St. Charles College in Catonsville, Maryland. He later studied at St. Francis Seminary in St. Francis, Wisconsin, and at St. Mary's College in St. Mary's, Kansas. After he completed his studies there, Tenny matriculated at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore. At St. Mary's, Tenny displayed an exceptional intellectual capacity, being one of a select group at that time in the school's history to receive perfect marks in theology. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1910 and his Master of Arts degree the following year. On June 17, 1913, James Cardinal Gibbons ordained Tenny in Baltimore's Cathedral of the Assumption.<sup>1</sup>

Though Tenny was slated to work in the Louisville diocese, the bishop at Louisville permitted the new priest to engage in work for



and had serious doubts about his capacity to guide the BCIM. But, he accepted the "laborious position" in deference to the wishes of Cardinal Dougherty.<sup>7</sup>

The new director immediately took steps to sustain the goodwill which Monsignors Ketcham and Hughes had established between the BCIM and the federal government. Shortly before he officially assumed his new post, Tennyly contacted Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier and vowed that he would personally "endeavor to cooperate with the Indian Office to the best of my ability, and hope for a continuance of the present cordial relationship." Tennyly's efforts bore fruit for Catholic Indian missions and schools. In 1937, he happily reported that federal aid for Catholic schools in fiscal year 1938 had increased by \$74,100. As proof of Collier's friendliness, Tennyly noted that President Roosevelt had impounded ten per cent of all Congressional appropriations. Collier and the Secretary of the Interior, however, reduced funding for Catholic schools by only one and one-half percent "as a token of compliance with Presidential Orders." Father Tennyly regarded this as a "considerable favor, for the reduction of 15% which was ordered by the President in the appropriations in the years 1933, 1934 and 1935 was applied to our appropriations during these years."<sup>8</sup>

The amity between the Indian Office and the BCIM continued for many years, but there were other intrusions which greatly affected Native Americans in general and Catholic missions/schools in particular. Hostility toward John Collier and his "Indian New Deal" within Congress and among reform groups had been building for years. Arguments against Collier's Indian policy ranged far and wide. Some opponents believed that the commissioner was trying to promote atheism among the Indians. Others charged that Collier's support of Native communal life was, in

the war, over twenty thousand Native Americans joined the armed forces. Thousands more supported the war effort by migrating to urban areas and working in defense plants.<sup>11</sup> Unlike

this country." The poor land and insufficient rainfall, Tennyly asserted, greatly impeded any hopes of economic improvement and proved the old saying: "Poor land means poor people."<sup>15</sup>

Thus, Tennyly understood why Indians were leaving the reservations, but he had qualms about the trend. He acknowledged that many Indians benefited by moving to the city, but "such a step [was] not of advantage to others either from a material or a religious point of view, and their local missionary will so advise them." What Tennyly feared most was that Native Catholics who moved to the city would not practice their faith. But he recognized that the drift would continue; therefore, Catholic mission schools would continue their efforts to prepare Indian children to fit into the white community "successfully and with no detriment to their spiritual welfare." Tennyly thought the schools were absolutely vital for the Indians' well-being because the "resources of some reservations [were] so limited that even a better educated and better trained new generation will find the making of a livelihood there as difficult as their parents have found it to be." That is why the Catholic missions and schools would try "to help those who wish to go to make the best of the move."<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, Tennyly believed the mission schools were the key to "improving" the Indians. Consequently, the BCIM focused the bulk of its energy on maintaining those schools. Tennyly experienced a great deal of success lobbying Congress for increased appropriations. A number of reasons accounted for this. Firstly, most politicians believed, as Tennyly

are one thing, but the present interests of our Indian mission work are another and much more important one, and that the two are not necessarily compatible in the stormy atmosphere of present public opinion."<sup>18</sup> Tenny's discouragement of Sievers' work was surprising, given the former's academic background, but it indicated how strongly he felt about protecting and furthering Catholic missionary work.

Further evidence of Tenny's single-mindedness can be seen in his reaction to the government's "termination" policy. In the post-war period, the government stepped up its drive to assimilate Indians into American society. The executive branch, Congress and the Bureau of Indian Affairs took steps to terminate the Indians' unique relationship with the federal government, thereby placing them on an equal footing with American citizens. Policy makers hoped to accomplish that goal by transferring several Indian Office functions to other agencies, to the states or to the tribes themselves. Moreover, the government decided to sever completely its connection with the most acculturated tribes.<sup>19</sup> Tenny adopted a distinctly apolitical stance with regard to the strategy. He informed Archbishop John O'Hara that "it might be detrimental to the work of the Bureau for me to undertake to appear before Congressional committees for or against these measures or to take a middle position." There will always be adjustments in putting Indian policy into effect, he asserted. His main business, Tenny claimed, was "to induce officials, as far as possible, to make these adjustments in such a manner that our religious and educational work may be best served. I think that good will towards thplacing tzens.]TJ-J-.inway

away."<sup>22</sup> It was that attitude, rooted in the past, that colored Tenny's perception of the resurgent Indian rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Tenny was aware of the changes sweeping across the reservations, but he viewed those changes within a "traditional" missionary context. In 1962, Tenny noted the several forces--schools, military service, automobiles and radios--which had "broken down the barriers to the outside world." Those forces, Tenny related, encouraged many Indians to improve their situations in the city, but also allowed "distracting and demoralizing influences" to infiltrate the Native community. To counter these influences, Tenny exhorted the missionaries to promote "wholesome recreational and social activities." He noted that some priests initiated Boy and Girl Scout troops, CYO clubs, adult study groups and Alcoholics Anonymous chapters among the Indians.<sup>23</sup>

Native Americans, however, expected more. Beginning in the 1960s, they demanded an expanded role in their own affairs. The Indians' drive for self-determination coincided with other minority groups' push for increased awareness. As a result, government officials disbanded the termination policy and worked to include increasing numbers of Native Americans in the implementation of government programs. The progress made during this time, however, did not satisfy the more militant elements who angrily pointed to the substandard schools, poverty, unemployment, alcoholism and poor health conditions that plagued the Native community. Led by the American Indian Movement (AIM), they utilized more forceful means to push the Indians' plight into the national spotlight. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, embittered Natives staged protest marches and occupied Alcatraz Island as well as the Bureau of Indian Affairs building and Wounded Knee.<sup>24</sup>

A number of Catholic missionaries supported the Indian Rights Movement, but Tenny seemed ambivalent. At the 1973 Tekakwitha Conference, Catholic workers devoted a good deal of time to a discussion of AIM and the Indian Rights Movement. Although most of those who attended questioned AIM's tactics, they clearly favored the group's goals. They asserted that AIM "articulated deep feelings and frustrations which have lain dormant for years and... alerted the white

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awareness of the Indian Situation; most often charity was tendered rather than justice pursued." Rather than establishing a Native ministry, "impersonal agencies of the Church" sent missionaries to serve the Indians. The Conference recommended that the National Conference of Catholic Bishops take steps to create an Office of Bishop for the Indian People of the United States. Father Pius Mardian, Chairman of the Kateri Conference, relayed a copy of the group's annual report to Father Tenny and asked if he might donate some operating funds. The director replied that he read the report carefully, but he did not think it appropriate to "make any comments on it, except to say that you are all entitled to your opinions on Indian problems and those of workers among the Indians in your area." He informed Father Mardian that it was often profitable to discuss differing views and experiences, but Tenny did not think it wise for the BCIM to contribute any funds to the Kateri Conference because it "would seem to be an endorsement of their views and actions, to which I do not think I should commit the Bureau."<sup>26</sup>

Clearly, over the past fort



The greater part of Father Tenny's apostolate was served in an older tradition, yet he accepted change with grace, if not enthusiasm. Yesterday's world was perhaps in many ways a simpler world, and his style was primarily adapted to that world. But