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Social Justice



Female students show their handiwork at St. Benedict's Mission School on the White Earth Indian Reservation in Minnesota in the 1890s. ("Work room at St. Benedict's Mission School," College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University Libraries, https://csbsjulib.omeka.net/items/show/928)



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This story was updated at 11:50 a.m. Eastern time May 11 with a statement from the Ursuline Sisters of the Roman Union.

A group of archivists, historians, concerned Catholics, and tribal members has published the first comprehensive list of Native American boarding schools in the United States run by Catholic entities.

The Catholic Truth & Healing website lists 87 Catholic-run Native boarding schools before 1978 across 22 states. Seventy-four of those schools were run or staffed by Catholic women religious. Fifty-three different congregations of sisters were affiliated with the schools.

"While there are more steps for the Catholic Church to take to move toward truth, healing, and reconciliation, this list is a powerful step forward," Maka Black Elk, executive director for truth and healing at Red Cloud Indian School, said in a May 9 statement announcing the publication. Black Elk contributed to efforts to compile the list.

More than 400 government-funded boarding schools operated across the country from 1819 to the 1970s; many of those were run by religious groups, including Catholic dioceses and religious orders. In May 2022, the U.S. Department of the Interior released its initial report on the schools, showing they were rife with corporal punishment, including solitary confinement, withholding of food, and whipping and other physical abuse. There are also reports of sexual abuse and the trauma of children being forcibly taken from their homes, having their hair cut, and being prohibited from speaking their native languages.

More than 500 children died at 19 of the schools, according to the government report, and burial sites have been found at 53 schools — numbers that are expected to rise. It is unknown when the next government report may be released.

The schools were part of an effort to eradicate Native American culture — in the words of the system's architect, to "kill the Indian" and "save the man." The government forced the children to attend the schools, where they were punished for speaking any language other than English or practicing Native traditions or religions.

In the announcement of the publication, Jaime Arsenault, tribal historic preservation officer for the White Earth Band of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe and group member, called the list "a significant step toward truth-telling."

"Before there can be truth-telling, there must first be truth-finding," she said in the statement. "Basic information, such as how many Catholic-run Native American boarding schools operated in the United States and where they were located is critical information that must be known for the truth-telling and the reconciliatory process to take place."

The Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia, who ran or staffed nine schools from the mid-1800s to the present, said in a statement to Global Sisters Report that they are committed to investigating their own involvement and working toward reconciliation:

> Today, we are acutely aware that these schools caused much pain to the Native American peoples and their culture. In recent years we have implemented a racism committee that is investigating these past practices to help us deepen our understanding of the hurt that was caused. We will continue to educate ourselves to a deeper understanding as we prayerfully consider and continue to reflect on individual and congregational racism and racial injustice, and what further actions we need to take toward reconciliation. ... On a positive note, we do have one sister currently in full-time ministry with the Native American community in Fort Washakie, Wyoming. This sister, Sr. Teresa Frawley, has worked in this ministry for more than 30 years, and has helped us to better understand the culture and rebuild a relationship that was broken so long ago.

Many congregations worked at several schools — the Ursuline Sisters of the Roman Union worked at 10 — and many schools had multiple congregations that were there over the years.

"The Roman Union Ursuline Sisters of the Western Province have long lamented the suffering caused by Native American boarding schools and the generational trauma that continues to this day. With many others, we continue to take a hard look at the issues of racism in our country and our part in the harm that colonialism played in our own history of boarding schools," the congregation said in a May 10 statement to GSR. "Presently, we are actively working to make the extensive archives of our schools in Montana and Alaska available through the Cascade County Historical Society where the archives will reside and be accessible to all. Our hope is that working with the History Museum in Great Falls and the Historical Preservation Officers of the Montana Tribes, we can take steps in truth telling that will bring some healing."

The list is the culmination of two years of work by a committee of the U.S. Catholic Indigenous Boarding School Accountability and Healing Project. Most of the committee members are archivists for religious congregations or members of orders with archives containing boarding school records.

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But the work isn't over: New editions of the list will be published annually to reflect new discoveries and any corrections.

"We are under no pretense that our list is complete," the Catholic Truth & Healing website says. "We have done our best to offer the most accurate information possible, but we also anticipate future revisions as additional information is obtained."

Congregations of women religious that ran schools acknowledge that the sisters who were committed to ministering to those in need instead were part of a nationwide effort to wipe out Native culture.

"The Sisters of Mercy acknowledge the tragic history of the residential schools and recognize the pain, sorrow and alienation of indigenous children and their families," the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas said in a statement to GSR. The Sisters of Mercy were affiliated with seven schools. "The sisters are committed to learning more about the history of the Native American boarding schools, as they mourn the losses of all who have suffered."

The Catholic Truth & Healing website says the list is meant to help boarding school survivors, their descendants, and tribal nations find records related to the schools, as well as help the Catholic Church navigate its history with the schools. Officials say extensive efforts were made to contact the religious communities or dioceses who appear on the list, and many of them offered confirmation or corrections to the information.

The publication comes less than two months after the Vatican formally repudiated the “Doctrine of Discovery,” church policies and documents used to justify colonial exploitation. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops endorsed the repudiation and said it supports “the ongoing efforts of various Catholic communities to make archival and historical records more easily accessible.”

This list expands and corrects information available about Catholic-operated schools that appear on the list published by the Department of the Interior and an earlier list published by the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. Many of the schools on the Catholic Truth & Healing list do not appear on the government's list.

The new list also provides guidance on where archival material for each Catholic-operated school may be located.

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