



ced school closings, funding shortages and strained relations with the Tekakwitha Conferencenz was born on Dece

mber 15, 1925, the second of six sons of Raymond and Aimee Lenz. He spent his early life in his hometown of Gallitzin, Pennsylvania, and attended the public school there. He attended Altoona Catholic High School and graduated in 1943. He then matriculated at St. Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. In 1946, he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in philosophy. For quite some time, Lenz had considered joining the priesthood. For a while, he even thought he might join the Maryknoll Society to do missionary work. But his plans changed when his father passed away in 1944. Lenz still wanted to become a priest, but he decided to join the diocesan clergy so he could remain close to home and help his mother. Consequently, he began his studies for the priesthood at St. Vincent's Seminary in Latrobe. On April 2, 1949, Bishop Richard T. Guilfoyle ordained Lenz in the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament in Altoona.¹

For the next twenty-one years, Father Lenz occupied a variety of positions in the Altoona-Johnstown diocese. His first assignment was as Assistant Pastor at St. Patrick Church in Newry. He served in that capacity until 1951, when he became the administrator of St. Monica Church

A drastic change in Monsignor Lenz's life occurred in that year. He thoroughly enjoyed working within the Altoona-Johnstown diocese, but he yearned to do missionary work. A good friend, Bishop Jerome Pechillo of Paraguay, further stirred Lenz's dream. For years, Monsignor Lenz had raised funds for missions in Bishop Pechillo's diocese, but Pechillo also asked Lenz to come to Paraguay and establish a mission there for the Altoona-Johnstown diocese. By 1970, Lenz was ready for a change. He asked and received permission from his bishop to go to Paraguay and serve as a missionary in the Prelature of Coronel Oviedo, another close friend. This was Monsignor's first encounter with Indian people, and the situation in Paraguay was radically different from that in Pennsylvania. The mission to the Guarani Indians was located in a remote jungle region of Paraguay, about 140 miles from the capitol of Asuncion. There was no plumbing or electricity, and the area was accessible only by dirt roads.³

Beyond the primitive conditions, Lenz, his fellow missionaries and, especially, the Guaranis had to contend with government harassment. Under the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner, military officials constantly mistreated the people. According to Lenz, the only one to raise a voice of protest on the Indians' behalf was the Catholic Church. As a result, some government officials tried to intimidate the Catholic missionaries. One event in particular stood out in Monsignor Lenz's mind. The Guaranis raised tobacco as a cash crop, and the Catholic Church loaned substantial amounts of money to the Guaranis for fertilizer and other helpful items. In February 1972, the national price of tobacco rose, but a new regional governor arrived at that time. He seized an opportunity to defraud the Indians out of millions of dollars: he told the Guaranis that he would buy all of their tobacco but at the previous year's price. The situation was an "economic disaster" for the Guaranis. The people tried, but failed, to protest to other government officials. The Catholic Church, however, managed to air its grievances against the governor. In retaliation, the governor had Lenz and the other missionaries rounded up and imprisoned for a week. Because the missionaries were American citizens, they were not physically harmed, but the episode illustrates the extent the government would go to abuse the Guarani Indians and their supporters.⁴

Despite the hardships, Monsignor Lenz cherished the four years he spent in Paraguay. He loved the people and the challenges he faced. To enhance his missionary skills, Lenz learned to speak Spanish fluently and picked up enough of the Guarani language to "offer Mass, hear confessions, defend...myself."⁵ Lenz hoped to spend the rest of his life in Paraguay, but once again, circumstances altered those plans. In 1974, a good friend of Lenz's, the pastor of St. John the Evangelist Church in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, died suddenly of a brain tumor. Bishop James J. Hogan asked Lenz to return home and become the parish's new pastor. Reluctantly, he agreed. After a year in Pennsylvania, Lenz "realized that [his] heart was still in Paraguay." Bishop Hogan

March 1976, Bishop Hogan informed Cardinal Cooke that Lenz was ready and willing to assume control of the BCIM, but his parish would "sorely miss him." Hogan also offered his own assessment of Lenz's suitability for the position. Monsignor Lenz, he wrote, was an "exemplary priest by any standard. In particular, his experience with the Propagation of the Faith Office, together with the practical tour of duty-three years with Bishop Pe

book on John Courtney Murray. Pelotte so impressed Cardinal Krol that he joined Monsignor Lenz's campaign. Finally, in 1986, Pelotte was named coadjutor Bishop of Gallup. Two years later, Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M., a Potawatomi Indian, became the second Native American bishop when he was assigned to the Diocese of Rapid City, South Dakota.¹⁵

In his efforts to bring Native Americans closer to the Church, Monsignor Lenz set his sights even higher. Shortly after becoming director, Lenz launched a crusade to have Kateri Tekakwitha promoted to sainthood. As a young girl, Tekakwitha was the first of her Mohawk tribesmen to convert to Catholicism. Many other Native Americans added their voices to Monsignor Lenz's in calling for Kateri's canonization. The first step toward that goal was reached in June 1980 when Kateri was beatified. To celebrate the occasion, Lenz organized two pilgrimages to Rome, enabling many Native American Catholics to meet with Pope John Pa

the second-class treatment which the government and the general public historically accorded Native Americans. But he was not simply foisting blame on others. He acknowledged that the Catholic Church was equally guilty. But, he wrote, "thanks to God, things are changing and the Church on all levels is trying to be supportive." Similarly, he noted that there had been improvement on the government's part, but "the proper and right consideration is dreadfully slow."¹⁸

In certain respects, Monsignor Lenz's defense of Native traditions and religions may seem to be a complete repudiation of historic Catholic missionary work, but such is not the case. In 1982, he emphatically stated that the "Church must never apologize for bringing Jesus to the Native American peoples. The Church must never compromise Jesus or His Word or sacraments in order to accommodate to old Indian religions." He admitted that the Bureau should strive to preserve the cultural heritage of Native Americans and that there was "so much good, so much truth about God and His creation in these old religions." But, he added, Native religions were "incomplete in themselves, devoid of God's ultimate revelation of Himself and His plan for His people in Jesus." To Monsignor Lenz, there was no conflict of interest between Catholic evangelizing and respecting Native religions. In many ways, the two were compatible. Years later, Monsignor Lenz commented that several Native American rituals had been incorporated into the Church's liturgy.¹⁹

In this regard, Monsignor Lenz displayed the characteristics, which have truly revitalized the Bureau. By steadfastly upholding the traditional precepts of Catholic missionary work, he demonstrated firmness and a strength of conviction. Yet, he also evinced a flexibility and a willingness to adapt by integrating Native American rites into the Catholic Mass. Those qualities will be absolutely critical as Monsignor Lenz and the BCIM encounter new challenges in the twenty-first century.

¹⁸Interview with Monsignor Lenz; *BCIM Newsletter* (April 1986).

¹⁹*BCIM Newsletter* (September/October 1982); Interview with Monsignor Lenz.