

CATHOLICISM AND NATIVE AMERICANS

In a *Washington Post* blog, Naomi Schaefer Riley wrote that Catholic schools, after a history of “physical, sexual and emotional abuse” of Native American children, are now finally trying to do them some good. The piece lacked both supporting data and context.

Riley cited apologies by Popes Francis and Benedict XVI for mistreatment of Native Americans. But she ignored the rest of what Pope Francis said in that 2015 statement: that many bishops, priests and laity were found “standing alongside the native peoples or accompanying their popular movements even to the point of martyrdom.”

One such person—St. Junípero Serra—was canonized by Pope Francis in recognition of his lifetime of heroic missionary work with Native Americans in California, and his efforts to protect them from the abuses of Spanish colonial authorities. Riley substituted carefully selected anecdotes for documentation of systemic abuse, and offered no context comparing treatment of Native Americans in Catholic schools with their treatment in society. She blamed Catholic schools “at least in part” for suicides among Native Americans, without examining how mistreatment in the wider culture may have contributed to suicides among Native Americans. And she distorted as “forced assimilation” the efforts of Catholic schools to help Native Americans adapt to that wider culture, rather than be destroyed by it.

Riley praises these same Catholic schools for their spectacular successes today in educating Native American children. Which begs the question: Would Native American parents risk sending their children to a school system that they believed had a long history of systemic abuse?