

CATHOLICISM AND NATIVE AMERICANS

Bill Donohue comments on Naomi Schaefer Riley's blog post on today's *Washington Post* site:

Naomi Schaefer Riley posits a "Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde thing" in which Catholic schools in North America, after a sordid history of "physical, sexual and emotional abuse" of Native American children, are now finally trying to do them some good. The piece is woefully lacking in both supporting data and context.

Riley cites apologies by Popes Francis and Benedict XVI for mistreatment of Native Americans. This is in the Church's long tradition of humility and asking forgiveness for sinful behavior. But she ignores the rest of what Pope Francis said in that 2015 statement: that it's also important to remember the many bishops, priests and laity who were often 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. (To read my account of his life and work, click [here](#).) This is another part of Catholic tradition that Riley ignores: the natural law tradition that finds the Church consistently upholding the sanctity and dignity of every human person.

Riley substitutes carefully selected anecdotes for any real documentation of systemic abuse, and offers no context comparing treatment of Native Americans in Catholic schools with their treatment in society. For example, she blames Catholic schools "at least in part" for suicides among Native

Americans, without examining how mistreatment in the wider culture may have contributed to making suicide sadly endemic among Native Americans. And she distorts 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? It is insulting to suggest that they would.

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