

ST. AGNES SCHOOL OF THE CHOCTAWS

By Velma Nieberding

KATEKISMA

*Na-Ponahle. Kuts kosà chikdi tok?**Ansupa-Palano. Chikowa yak osà sakdi tok oke.¹*

The story of the establishment of St. Agnes Mission School at Antlers, Indian Territory, in 1897, is essentially an account of the heroism of a young, convert priest, sent as a missionary to the Choctaws.

On November 23, 1896, the Right Reverend Theophile Meerschert, Vicar Apostolic of the Indian Territory (later Bishop of Oklahoma) assigned the Reverend William Henry Ketcham to the mission of Antlers.²

The only priests who had previously visited this spot in the Choctaw Nation were Father Michael Smyth of Fort Smith and Father T. Campbell of Paris, Texas. Father Ketcham had visited Antlers during his Muskogee pastorate, saying Mass in the railroad section-house.³

During his stay in Muskogee from 1892 to 1897, Father Ketcham had established the missions of Sapulpa, Lenapah, Claremore, Miami, Wyandotte, Cayuga, Webbers Falls, Okmulgee, Checotah, Wagoner, Quapaw, Vinita and Tulsa.⁴

When Father Ketcham went to Antlers he faced a most unusual missionary situation. St. Agnes was begun with two baptized persons, one Indian boy and one white boy. Altogether there were not more than six baptized Catholics in the town and none of these were fully instructed in their religion.

Moreover, the young priest had been assigned the post among this large and important tribe of the Civilized Indians as a kind of challenge from his Bishop. He had twenty-five dollars with which to begin his missionary work. The complete story of the

¹ Translation from this Choctaw text: "Q. Who made you? A. God made me." From the *Katekisma* (Catechism) translated into Choctaw by Father William Ketcham.

² Father Ketcham's first assignment was Muskogee and Mielona, 1892. See Velma Nieberding, "St. Mary's of the Quapaw," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXX, No. 1 (Spring, 1952); Sister Mary Urban Kehoe, C.D.P., "The Educational Activities of Distinguished Catholic Missionaries Among the Five Civilized Tribes," *Ibid.*, Vol. XXIV, No. 2 (1946).

³ From the Historical Records in the files of Dr. Urban de Hasque, Historian, Diocese of Oklahoma.

⁴ *Ibid.*

poverty and hardship endured during the beginnings of St. Agnes Mission will probably never be told. For the first two months he lived in the section house and took his meals with the section hands. Had it not been for the assistance of the late Mother Mary Katharine Drexel, who for thirty years contributed to the Antlers mission, Father Ketcham's work among the Choctaws would have been immeasurably hampered by the handicap of poverty.⁴

"If ever there was a class of true mendicants upon this earth, Indian Missionaries are certainly that evangelical class," wrote Father Ketcham when asking for funds:⁵

Your kind and encouraging letter containing the two cheques—one for \$2500 and one for \$90.00 has been duly received. I left Muskogee, now a pleasant mission indeed, and came away down here about the first of the year where I have been struggling against the most extreme poverty, sometimes living on fifteen cents per day. You were my only hope and I prayed fervently that you might be able to help . . . the Choctaw mission now becomes a reality . . . just as soon as possible I will go about the building. . . ."

Early in 1897, Father Ketcham had built a small cottage in a beautiful little grove on the outskirts of Antlers. Plans had been drawn for a frame building that would serve the double purpose of a school and chapel. Arrangements had been made for the Sisters of St. Joseph to take charge of the school. This group of diocesan Sisters with Mother Virginia Joyce as Superior, had begun teaching in Nazareth Institute, Muskogee, and had helped to establish the first Catholic school among the Quapaws in 1894.⁶

But on April 6, 1897, Father Ketcham in an apologetic letter to Mother Katharine Drexel, advised her that he had met with financial misfortune: "Now it is not safe to keep money around my place as it is not a good policy anyhow, neither could I carry any considerable sum on my person for fear of being murdered or robbed, which indeed is not uncommon here at all."

He added that he had kept the cheque sent for the school until plans had matured for its building. Needing cash he went to look for a safe bank and since the nearest was Paris, Texas, he deposited the cheque in the Merchants and Farmers Bank there, "having ascertained after diligent inquiry that it was the most reliable bank."

But soon thereafter, the bank suspended business, due to the failure of a Cotton firm which had borrowed from it, and because of a run on it by depositors. Father Ketcham was told that he

⁴ 1864.

⁵ From the archives of the Convent of Sisters of Blessed Sacrament, Convent of Holy, Pennsylvania. Mother Mary Katharine Drexel, the foundress of this order and great benefactress of Oklahoma Indian Missions, died on March 3, 1955 at the age of 96. She gave her entire fortune to Indian and Negro Missions throughout the United States. It was said of her that for over sixty years she gave over \$1,000 a day to this cause.

⁶ "St. Mary's of the Quapaws," *op. cit.*

could draw on another bank in Paris for one-half the amount of his deposit but suitable security would have to be furnished before he could be advanced any more money. He hesitated to go ahead on such an insecure financial foundation but the Sisters of St. Joseph had asked the advice of Muskogee bankers and they believed it would be safe to proceed with the building of the school.

Apparently a plan was worked out with Mother Katharine whereby any considerable amount of money for the building would thereafter be sent in small cheques. It was decided that \$1500 would cover the cost of the school, although the building would not be as large as originally planned.

It was at this time that Father Ketcham asked for a conveyance of his own. "This is a hard country to travel over; it is a very rough and mountainous country and is full of wild animals and some very suspicious looking people. In my five and one-half years of mission work, I have been able to get along without one [a team] but it will be very hard to do so here."

It must be remembered that within a year's time after being sent to Antlers that Father Ketcham had established missions among the Choctaws at Poteau, Cameron, Howe, Wister, Fanshawe, Talihina, Tusshoma and Albion.⁴

The Sisters of St. Joseph having come to the Territory from eastern states were handicapped by the barrier of language. But they began teaching St. Agnes School in the fall of 1897. They adapted a kindergarten system to the needs of their little Indian pupils which was quite successful. In addition to teaching, these Sisters did real missionary work, caring for the sick, visiting Indian parents in their homes and otherwise winning the friendship of the Choctaws.

Father Ketcham early realized the need for the missionary to be able to talk with the Indians without an interpreter; for them to be able to read the prayers and hymns of the Church in their own language. Heretofore, ministering to eleven tribes in the north-eastern part of the territory, it had not been possible to study all of the languages. But at this mission his work was among the people of one tribe. He began to study Choctaw and as early as 1899, he set to work translating the prayer book and catechism into that language. It was a slow, laborious work and destined not to be finished for several years.

He was assisted in the translation by Peter Hudson, Victor Locke, Ben Henderson, George Nelson and Bailey Spring. Victor Locke, one of Father Ketcham's first converts, was later quoted as saying that it was quite the purest Choctaw he had heard.⁵

⁴ Records of Dr. Urban de Haeger.
⁵ 1862.



Group, left to right, Miss Etixabeth Test, Teacher Wyandot and Shawnee Missions; Myra Esther Frye Bartlett, Kickapoo girl; Miss Lina B. Hunt, Teacher, Iowa Mission.

Friends' Mission Churches: Upper Shawnee Mission, two miles south of Shawnee; Lower Shawnee Mission, Big Jim Dand, about sixteen miles east of Norman, (Lower) Kickapoo Mission, two miles north of McLand.

On January 5, 1899, Bishop Meerschaert paid his first episcopal visit to Antlers. On January 9, Mrs. Mary Berry, Victor M. Locke, Elizabeth Robinson, Benjamin J. Locke, Roy J. Easton, John Henry Linn, all converts, made their first Communion and were Confirmed by the Bishop. Mrs. Mary Berry was the first white person in Antlers to be baptized by Father Ketchum, and Victor M. Locke was the first Indian.¹⁰

On October 6, 1899, Father Ketchum wrote to Mother Katharine Drexel that on account of the transfer of Sisters and some necessary additions to the school building, extra expenses had been incurred, and he asked for an addition to his quarterly allowance.

Bishop Meerschaert had, in 1898, requested that the struggling community of St. Joseph Sisters affiliate with the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet in St. Louis. Sisters Theophila, Aloysius Hurley, Anna Fidelis and Agnes Xavier went at once to this Motherhouse. The remainder of the Sisters, including Mother Virginia Joyce, went to Dallas to work in that diocese.¹¹

Father Ketchum, in a letter to Mother Katharine Drexel (October 8, 1899) stated that the school was expecting twenty boarding pupils (girls) and that the Sisters would have to board, teach, clothe and bear all expenses for them at \$10.00 per month capita. There were sixty day pupils attending the school and the Choctaw Nation paid two dollars per capita per month for these.

In this letter Father Ketchum speaks of the good that could be done if a group of Catholic lay men and women in the East could collect good and usable clothing and send it to him for distribution among his little flock. "Nothing seems to please these Choctaws so much" he added, "as to give them articles of clothing and indeed, many of them are sadly in need of wearing apparel, especially during the winter."

He said that many of the Indians visited his house, especially on Sunday and "this of course necessitates hospitality on my part. I divide the bread with them but the housekeeper is praying that St. Bridget may keep the meal-bag full!"

On April, 1900, Father Ketchum asked Mother Katharine Drexel to allow him \$12.00 per month for ten months of the year in order that he might send some of the Choctaw boys away to school. There was no provision at St. Agnes School for boarding boys, although the priest kept a few in his house while they attended school. How many boys were actually placed in other schools is not known to this writer. However, in September of that same year, Father Ketchum writes of one boy being placed with the Benedictines in Arkansas.

¹⁰ Parish Records, St. Agnes Church, Antlers.

¹¹ Sister M. Aloysius Hurley, is at present living at St. Joseph's Home for Girls, Kansas City, Missouri.

One of the Choctaw boys, an orphan, won Father Ketcham's heart to such an extent that he adopted him. Tom, or Thomas Simpson Ketcham, was the son of Isaac and Martha Simpson and was born near Carthage, Mississippi, on October 6, 1886. Tom was legally adopted by Father Ketcham on April 11, 1901.¹²

Meanwhile, the work of Father Ketcham among the Indians of the Territory had been noticed by the Catholic Bureau of Indian Missions in Washington, D. C. In 1900, he was called to be assistant to Monsignor Stephan, the Director of this Bureau. Bishop Meerschaert granted the request for a leave of absence from the diocese with some reluctance. He at last consented if Father Ketcham would provide a missionary to take up his work in Antlers.

Father Ketcham again writing to Mother Katharine in the latter part of 1900, reported that "I find it difficult to get anyone to fill my place here. No one seems to ambition it." He mentioned that Tom Ketcham was an elegant Mass Server and that he believed the boy would be a "drawing card" if he could accompany Father Ketcham when appeals were made for funds by the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions. He also disclosed his plans to put the boy in an Eastern school if his health permitted. When Father Ketcham left Antlers in 1900 there were one hundred Catholics in the town of which seventy-five were full-blood Choctaws.¹³

The Reverend Aloysius Hitta, a Benedictine, succeeded Father Ketcham and remained until 1901. In this same year Mother de Sales died and since there was no replacement from the Motherhouse, the Sisters of St. Rose of Lima prepared to return to Texas. New arrangements had to be made with a large Community of teaching Sisters. In 1901, the Sisters of Divine Providence of San Antonio, Texas, were entrusted with the charge of St. Agnes School.¹⁴ Sister Mary Antoinette, Sister Mary Bridget and Sister Mary Anastasia were the first Sisters in charge. The enrollment in 1902 numbered sixty-six pupils. In 1904, there were 90 boarding pupils at St. Agnes and by 1905 four Sisters were teaching and the number of boarding and day students was 127.¹⁵

The records show that five Sisters were required for teaching for the years 1908-1913; six Sisters were employed from 1913-1917, when the number of Sisters was increased to seven. Later, in 1934, ten Sisters were needed for the work.

The Reverend Alfred Dupret served the Choctaws as pastor at Antlers from October, 1901 to September, 1902. Father John Rebers, a Belgian priest, was appointed pastor of Antlers on

¹² Letter from Miss Ella Ketcham, sister of Father William Ketcham, Oklahoma City, January, 1954.

¹³ Records of Dr. Urban de Hasque.

¹⁴ Archives of Motherhouse, Sisters of Divine Providence, San Antonio, Texas.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

September 22, 1902. At the end of 1903, some of the Mississippi Choctaws were given allotments in the Choctaw Nation, and as a number of them were Catholics, two Carmelite Fathers came with them from Mississippi. These were the Reverends August Brock and H. J. Hamers. During the tenure of the Carmelite Fathers in Antlers, Father van Rechem was named pastor of Poteau. In June, 1905, the Carmelite Fathers returned to Holland and Father van Rechem came back to Antlers and remained there until 1910.

During that time he was assisted for his missions in the surrounding territory by Fathers Anthony Lombardi, F. L. Teyssier and Wm. Huffer,¹⁶ and Father L. Cremmel. In 1906, Father Van Rechem built a church with the financial assistance of Mother Katharine Drexel. It was a frame building thirty by fifty feet. While the Sisters were running a boarding school for Indian girls, Father Hubert housed and boarded boys. Later, the Sisters took the boys as well.

Although for many years St. Agnes School was carried on in a very primitive manner in comparison with the schools of today, it rendered it all the more agreeable to the Indian children. At first St. Agnes was a Choctaw "neighborhood" school. The Sisters were employed by the Choctaw government and the work supervised by Choctaw trustees. After the Choctaws ratified the Atoka Agreement in 1898, the tribal schools gradually came under the supervision of the federal Government and St. Agnes was recognized by the Choctaw and the United States authorities as a "contract school."¹⁷

In June, 1910, Father Teyssier succeeded Father van Rechem as pastor of Antlers, and remained there until 1916, assisted successively by Father E. Gyssaert and J. Wagner. In 1916 there were eighty boarders in the school.¹⁸

In 1915-16, the contract was not renewed because of a ruling by the comptroller of the treasury which read: "The tribal funds of the Choctaws and Chickasaws for the maintenance of mission or private schools during the fiscal year, 1916, is unauthorized".

It affected four Catholic Indian Schools (Antlers, Ardmore, Chickasha and Purcell) and four private schools (old Goodland School, Hugo; El Meta Bond College, Minco, Oklahoma Presbyterian College, Durant and the Murray State School of Agriculture,

¹⁶ Rev. William Huffer, a classmate of the late Dr. Urban de Haes, was born in Eupen, Germany, ordained in 1900 and came to Indian Territory as a missionary that same year. He is presently at Corpus Christi Church, Oklahoma City.

¹⁷ Anglo Debo, "Education in the Choctaw Country After the Civil War," explains the Atoka Agreement. *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. X, No. 3 (September, 1932).

¹⁸ Parish Records. St. Agnes Church, Antlers.

Tishomingo). At that time (1915) Congressman C. D. Carter of Ardmore declared that the new ruling "will deprive of school facilities from 1000 to 1600 Indian children." By one stroke of the pen the four above institutions and mission schools were permanently deprived of the \$12.50 a month for board and tuition for each boarding pupil which the Government paid out of the "Educational Funds" of the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations, to be used for tribal and other schools. The intolerant rebuff and set-back of education in those two nations seriously affected the maintenance and progress of the institutions named above, for a number of years.

If St. Agnes School was able to successfully ward off the heavy blow it was due to the personal efforts of its founder, Father William H. Ketcham, then Director of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions at Washington, D. C., and of Mother Katharine Drexel and other financial supporters during the following critical years.¹⁹

In 1916, Father Ketcham's *Katiskisma* was published by the National Capital Press, Washington, D. C. It was said that the reaction of some of the Indians who had been doubtful of the Church because of strange tales told about the Catholics, exclaimed in surprise when they read it, "Why those Catholics believe in Christ the same as we do!"²⁰

Reverend Alfred Wright, Presbyterian missionary to the Choctaws, had earlier translated the New Testament and some years later Reverend John Edwards, Evangelist under the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, parts of the Bible into the Choctaw language.²¹

Victor M. Locke, stated that "according to our traditions, with the sole exception of the late missionary to the Louisiana Choctaws, the Abbe Rouquette, who died in New Orleans in 1837, Father Ketcham was the only priest who has acquired our language."²²

Father Ketcham also translated health tracts into Choctaw and distributed them among the tribe, believing that this information was much needed. His adopted son, Tom, had died on April 29, 1906, and it is evident that his death but added concern to the priest's interest in the health of the Choctaws.

¹⁹ Files of Dr. Urban de Hasque.

²⁰ John Edwards, "The Choctaw Indians in the Middle of the Nineteenth Century," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. X, No. 3, annotated by John R. Swanton. (The Rev. John Edwards had begun the translation of the Book of Psalms into Choctaw before the Civil War but language difficulties led him to abandon the work which was taken over years later by the Rev. Allen Wright who completed the translation of the Psalms direct from the Hebrew into Choctaw about 1883. Rev. Allen Wright was a Choctaw and the outstanding scholar of his nation, a graduate of Union College [B.A. and A.M.], Schenectady, New York, and of Union Theological Seminary, New York City [1855]. He was gifted as a linguist with a thorough knowledge of Latin, Greek, Hebrew and English, in addition to his Native Choctaw.—Ed.)

²¹ Victor M. Locke, "The Choctaw Catechism", *The Indian Sentinel*, January, 1922.

The Reverend Charles van Hulse, a pioneer Belgian priest of the Indian Territory, was stationed at Antlers in 1919 and remained until 1925. The school in 1925 was described as having accommodations for some sixty boarding pupils (all Choctaws). It was a frame building partly of two stories, partly of one, irregular in shape but neat looking. The board for the Choctaw pupils was paid out of the tribal funds by the Government of the United States through the intermediary of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions in Washington, D. C.

In the congregation of Antlers that year it was noted that there were sixty-five persons, three of whom were born in Europe and ten who never came to church!

On November 14, 1921, friends of Father Ketchum were stunned to receive word that he had died suddenly while in Tucker, Mississippi. He had spent the preceding four weeks before his death, working in the interest of the Mississippi Choctaws.

Many honors had come to the one-time missionary and priest of the Indian Territory, but his heart had always turned to the diocese for which he had been ordained. "I claim Oklahoma as my home" he had said many times. After his appointment as Director of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions in 1901, he had been able to accomplish much for his beloved Indians. He had visited and inspected all the Indian missions and reservations of the United States. He had been appointed by President Taft as a member of the United States Board of Indian Commissioners. Fordham University had on June 14, 1912 conferred upon him the degree of Doctor of Laws and in 1919 he was created Domestic Prelate by Pope Benedict XV, with the title of Monsignore.

He had promoted through the various dioceses of the United States, the Society for the Preservation of the Faith, a society which became (and still is) a great factor in maintaining the forty-two mission schools which, at the time of his death were not receiving any tribal assistance.²²

He had brought about the abolishment of the Browning ruling whereby the right to choose a school for an Indian child was taken from the parent and vested in the Indian agent; he had defended the right of Catholic pupils in Government schools to attend Catholic instruction and had secured priests for this work. When rations were withdrawn from Indian children because they were attending Catholic schools instead of going to a Government school or staying

²²Today in the United States there are 59 Catholic Mission Schools, of which 17 are boarding schools, and 6 are mixed, boarding and day schools. They care for a total of 8,038 Indian children. Personnel of these missions includes 225 priests, 500 Sisters, 83 Scholastics and Lay Brothers, 37 Lay Teachers and 100 Indian Catechists.—*The Indian Sentinel*, September, 1964. This is the official magazine of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions.



St. Agnes Catholic Church, Antlers, Oklahoma.



St. Agnes Choral School, Antlers, Oklahoma.

at home, Father Ketcham had fought and succeeded in having the rations restored to them. He had in 1912 defended the rights of nuns teaching in Government Indian Schools in the "Religious Garb and Insignia" controversy, maintaining that the Catholic Church was the victim not the author of the Peace Policy of President Grant which gave these schools over to such religious denominations as were teaching them at the time the policy was inaugurated.²³

It was said of Father Ketcham that "he was a priest by vocation and a diplomat by training. He had a facile pen and a fluent tongue both of which he used to excellent advantage in advocating and defending the interests of the Indians."²⁴

When Bishop Francis C. Kelley, the successor to Oklahoma's first Bishop, Theophile Meerschmeltz, went to visit Antlers in 1924, the Sisters of Divine Providence represented to him that it was impossible for them to maintain the school any longer in its present condition; that they would be obliged to give up their educational and vocational work among the Choctaw children unless the old buildings were made more habitable.

The *Southwest Courier* in its July 27, 1929 issue carried an article stating that St. Antlers Indian Mission had been entirely rebuilt. "In place of the old ramshackle structures there stands now a strong, adequate and beautiful building in Spanish mission style of architecture, the finest structure in the city of Antlers and large enough to house 75 Choctaw children. Needless to say the building is filled to capacity."

Funds had been contributed by the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, the Marquette League and personal benefactors of the school, including its first sponsor, Mother Katharine Drexel. Reverend H. B. Mandelurtz was the pastor at Antlers at this time.

The largest enrollment in the school is noted in the years 1910, 1911, 1912, and 1913, when the statistics show 128 pupils attending. In 1932 the enrollment was 114 students dropping to 93 in 1934. In 1936 the rectory was destroyed by fire but rebuilt. However, it suffered great damage as did the church and school when on July 24, 1944, a violent windstorm unroofed the buildings. Father William Hall was the pastor at this time. There were nine Sisters teaching and 91 pupils enrolled in the school.

On April 12, 1945, disaster in the form of a tornado struck an irrevocable blow at St. Agnes School. In the town of Antlers, 62 people were killed and 250 injured. The miraculous escape of sixty school children huddling during the storm in the wrecked and battered school building, will never be forgotten.

²³ "Religious 'Garb' and 'Insignia' in Government Indian Schools," by Rev. William H. Ketcham, Director of Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, 1912.

²⁴ File of Dr. Urban de Haasque.

When Sister Innocentia, the school Superior, heard the heavy, grinding noise of the tornado she led the children into the center hall on the first floor. Here they knelt and prayed the rosary while the storm swirled about them. When the tornado had passed the children, frightened but unharmed, said prayers of thanksgiving and ran outside to a strange world. The rectory and church had disappeared as had many buildings across the street. Only that part of the school where the children took refuge was spared. The only person injured in the school was Sister Mary George who was seriously hurt when a chimney fell on her.

Observers who watched the storm from caves, said that the cyclone lifted the rectory into the air and held it there for seconds. Then it exploded into a thousand pieces. The Church collapsed about thirty seconds after the storm hit and spun around, sailing through the air. Pews were smashed to matchwood, vestments were found draped on trees along the river a mile away, nothing was saved.

The catastrophe marked the dramatic end of St. Agnes Indian School. The Sisters of Divine Providence returned to San Antonio while the parish priest received instructions to reside in Hugo.

Antlers was without a Catholic Church until 1947, when on March 15 of that year, the Rt. Rev. Eugene J. McGuinness Bishop of Oklahoma, dedicated the newly-built St. Agnes Church. It was built under the direction of Reverend Everist Foix who was transferred to Dallas just before its completion.

St. Agnes School had served the Choctaws for a total of forty-eight years. At the time of the tornado it had 75 boarders and 20 day students with five Sisters teaching.