

Spirits Alight Under Southwestern Skies

St. Francis of Assisi Apache-Mission Church, Whiteriver, Ariz.

By Bethany Noble

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A tiny mission church squats, low and humble, amid the tall ponderosa pines of eastern Arizona's White Mountains. Situated on the Apache Indian Reservation in the town of Whiteriver, the structure reflects the unassuming character of its patron, St. Francis of Assisi.

One recent Sunday morning, my family and I made our way to the site along winding mountain roads that were blanketed in cool shade courtesy of the towering trees. A deep blue sky peeked between clouds above the tips of the trees. The contrast between the bright sky above me and the dark forest around me compelled me to consider the inner darkness we live in when we don't seek the light Christ sends from above.

Four hundred years ago, Franciscan missionaries came to the New World to bring the Gospel to the natives. Today Franciscan Father Edward Fronske continues the work of his forebears, preaching the Good News to the people of the White Mountain Apache Tribe.

When the Spanish-style church came into view, I looked at the simple façade and single bell tower, both bearing a cross. I thought of the Franciscans who first stepped foot in this unfamiliar territory. Their mission was to convert to Christ the hearts of American Indians.

I thought about the chapel in San Damiano, Italy, that St. Francis fixed up with his own hands in the 13th century after hearing a call from God to "rebuild my church, which, as you can see, is falling into ruin." At first, he thought God wanted him to do some home improvements on the chapel. Only gradually did he realize that the Lord wasn't talking about repairing a church but about rebuilding the Church, the mystical body of Christ.

In following through on this divine assignment, which must have seemed an absurdly tall order for one small man to even consider tackling, Francis stepped out of the comfortable and wealthy world he grew up in and entered an unknown world of poverty and service. The Church (and, yes, the San Damiano chapel) would never be the same again.

Eventually, the "rebuilding" would reach the people of the American Southwest.

Stepping inside the Whiteriver church, I immediately sought the flickering light of a tabernacle candle indicating the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. I found it and genuflected.

This tabernacle, I later found out, was built into the church's original altar. It's situated on the front wall, flanked by Mary and Joseph on one side and St. Francis on the other. The walls above are beautified by simple paintings of the death and resurrection of Our Lord.

Apache symbols, such as the feather, also adorn the walls. Father Fronske explained to us the sacred symbols of this fascinating, deeply spiritual tribe and how the symbols can complement traditional Catholic worship of the Heavenly Father.

I was able to get a glimpse of the first Franciscans in the Americas, who surely drew from the mythology of the natives to explain the greatness of the one true God as revealed in Jesus Christ. I began to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be a catholic - and a Catholic - Christian.

God Provides

I learned that, in 1921, the Apache tribe asked Franciscan Father Justin Deutsch to build a parish for them in Whiteriver. The assignment seemed impossible at first. There were just not enough funds or manpower. Yet a plan was drawn up and, after much prayer and hard work, construction started and gained momentum.

The parishioners did not start with all the money and materials needed to build a church that would be both durable against the elements and worthy of the holy sacrifice of the Mass. Yet they stepped out in faith - and found their trust in God well-placed. According to a history of the mission written by parishioners Mary and Mel Wendrick: "Every time the builders needed something, money or materials would appear."

The living quarters and sanctuary were ready for use four days after the Oct. 4 feast of St. Francis. Items such as statues and pews began to come in, donated from unexpected supporters. Construction was completed in December of 1922. The first Mass was said on Christmas Day.

"The time for Father Justin's great adventure and the time for realization of the

Apaches' dream had come together," wrote the Wendricks, "by the call of the Holy Spirit."

Mission Power

After Mass, I walked the peaceful grounds and stopped at a garden sanctified by a small stone statue of St. Francis. Across the way, an apple tree stood, laden with ripe apples. Some of the younger Apache children raced to the tree after Mass to enjoy its sweet fruit.

I watched Father Fronske greet his parishioners with sincerity and enthusiasm. He truly seemed like a shepherd to his people. One parishioner, Michael Stover, shared with me that Father often gets knocks on his door in the middle night from hungry members of the community seeking shelter or a meal. "He will never turn anyone away," said Stover. "Father Eddie says it is Jesus who comes to his door those nights."

The Prayer of St. Francis lingered in my head as I left the mission. Lord, make me an instrument of your peace ...

In fact, it lingers still. "Mission" accomplished.

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