Sandra Garner

To Come to a Better Understanding: Medicine Men and Clergy Meetings on the Rosebud Reservation, 1973–1978. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. Pp. 210. Hb, \$45.

Among the Second Vatican Council's most ambitious reforms was its call for members of the Catholic Church to enter into dialogue with representatives of non-Christian traditions. In a series of encyclicals issued between 1964 and 1965, Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI established the protocols that they believed necessary for fruitful interfaith dialogue to take place. Included among these ground rules were: a respect for one's partners, an openness concerning what they had to say, obedience to truth, and authentic witness and listening. Only through strict adherence to these and other rules, it was held, could any such dialogue hope to achieve its goals of mutual understanding and enrichment.

From the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, the Jesuit-led pastoral staff at the Rosebud Sioux Reservation's St. Francis Mission sought to establish dialogical partnerships with small groups of Sicangu Lakota Catholics among whom they ministered and lived. While these groups had different themes (e.g. liturgical reform, adult catechism), they were all part of a wider, six-year "planning process" in which the mission's clergy and staff systematically attempted to come to terms with the failure of St. Francis's ninety-year history among the Sicangus while setting an agenda for directed change. During most of these years, I served as the mission's volunteer "anthropological consultant." My duties in this role included attending and participating in pastoral staff meetings and presenting occasional talks on both Lakota history and culture and the mission's history among the Sicangus. As defined in consultation with the mission superior Robert Hilbert, the purpose of these presentations was to provide pastoral staff members with a wider, anthropological arena in which they could to reflect on their ministries.

In *To Come to a Better Understanding*, anthropologist Sandra L. Garner examines one of the earliest of these dialogical encounters: The Medicine Men and Clergy Meetings (MMCM) that took place on Rosebud between 1973 and 1978 and involved the participation of close to forty medicine men and a number of the mission's clergy. Organized by Fr. William Stolzman, these colloquies reputedly sought a "dialogic exchange" that would lead to mutual insights concerning the two religious traditions along the lines of the goals set by Vatican II. However, Garner's account of these meetings tells a very different story; one of hidden agendas and an overwhelming failure to communicate.

Garner's description and analysis of the gatherings of Medicine Men and Clergy Meetings is based primarily on the tape recordings of the their

eighty-five meetings. As she sets forth in chapter one, her approach to this material is “indigenous-centric”; in this case, one which seeks to render the “indigenous epistemology from the perspective of a local cultural community of Lakota medicine men and their associates on the Rosebud Reservation” (6). She goes on describe how three primary observations weave throughout and shape her book: first, was the medicine men’s “unwavering commitment to a process of negotiation [...] as [they] sought to articulate their real-life material experienced and advance their worldview[...]. Second [...] the sense, on the part of the MMA’s [Medical Mean Association] participants, that their lives, beliefs, and practices had been rendered invisible on multiple fronts [...]. Third [...] the story they worked to tell about a particular worldview and ethos” (6–7).

Garner does a particularly good job at demonstrating how Stolzman deployed a number of tactics to control the meetings’ agendas and overall direction and the overt and subtle strategies the medicine men used to subvert his control. A perfect example of this dynamic is seen in the priest’s choreography of the group’s earliest meetings. Each gathering would begin with a long prayer by the priest followed by his reading of a “position paper” in which he summarized his understanding of the Lakota concepts to be discussed. As Garner notes, “There was significant resistance by the MMA [...] participants to this practice and Stolzman’s interpretations in particular” (74). At one meeting at which the priest tried to finish his position paper on the history of the Lakota pipe since the time of Christ [...]. Big Crow inquired, ‘Brother Stolzman, what authority are you going by [...]. As the conversation turned to words used by Stolzman in the position paper such as ‘myth’ and ‘legend,’ [...] two representatives of the MMA pushed Stolzman to be more precise with his terminology. They also challenged Stolzman to be more reflexive and about his construction of knowledge (74–75).

Where Garner’s study falls short is in its failure to establish adequate cultural and religious contexts in which to place the tactics that Stolzman and the medicine men employed during the course of the meetings. Very little is said, for instance, concerning the fundamental differences between Lakota and Catholic cosmologies and how inadequate attention to these these differences ultimately served to justify the medicine men’s complaint “You [the priests] don’t understand us.” The same is true of Fr. Demeyer’s accusation that the Medicine Men and Clergy meetings place too much emphasis on the similarities between the two religious traditions while ignoring the differences. On the surface the priest’s outburst might be dismissed merely as a case of Catholic triumphalism, which indeed it was. However, it also reflects most of the priests’ lack of understanding of Lakota verses Catholic concepts of the sacred. It would have been helpful to the readers’ understanding of the challenges

facing the participants during the meetings if the book's earlier chapters contained some information concerning these differences.

Even less is said about Stolzman's approach to missiology that inspired him to organize the meetings in the first place. Granted, Garner is most interested in giving voice to the medicine men whose practices both government and missionary policies robbed of dignity, legitimacy, and expression for a century. However, it would have served to make her case for colonial oppression even stronger if she had elaborated on how Stolzman's particular brand of "fulfillment theology" provided the rationale for him to perpetrate this kind of hegemony once again. In fairness, it should here be mentioned that at the time many members of the St. Francis pastoral staff believed Stolzman's meetings to constitute an inauthentic form of dialogue, thereby anticipating Garner's conclusions by some forty years. Thus, whereas the latter grounds her critique on an "indigenous-centric" perspective, the former formulated theirs on the basis of the Vatican II encyclicals filtered through a skein of 1970s "liberation theology."

Because of the stark contrast between its title and contents, *To Come to a Better Understanding* is likely to leave many readers with a profound sense of sadness. Bungled in their conception and execution, the Medicine Men and Clergy Meetings were most regrettably a missed opportunity for the Rosebud medicine men and clergy to interact with one another on terms they had never experienced before. At its best, Garner's book can serve as a cautionary tale for those interested in pursuing interfaith dialogue.

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