Catholic Dioceses Investigate Their Role in Boarding Schools for Native Americans

Inquiries include searching for evidence of students who might have died at the institutions.

St. Patrick’s boarding school in Anadarko, Okla., in the early 1900s; the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City has launched listening sessions with families of former Native American boarding-school students.

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By Dan Frosch  Follow  and Ian Lovett  Follow  
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Catholic dioceses across the U.S. are beginning to investigate their role in operating boarding schools for Native American children in the late 1800s and 1900s, including searching for evidence of students who might have died at the institutions.

The inquiries under way at numerous dioceses follow an Interior Department investigation launched in June into the institutions, which were set up by the federal government to assimilate young Native Americans. Native students sometimes faced physical and emotional abuse, and thousands might have died from accidents, disease and other causes. Most of the schools were shut down by the 1970s.
In recent weeks, leaders of four Minnesota dioceses met with tribal leaders to determine how best to investigate several now-closed boarding schools affiliated with the church. The effort will involve reviewing records at places like St. Paul’s Industrial School in Clontarf, Minn., where at least 14 students died of tuberculosis in the late 19th century, said Jason Adkins, executive director of the Minnesota Catholic Conference.

“At minimum, we want to assist the tribes in accounting for those who attended the schools and identify whether there are any remains that can be brought home to reservations,” he said.

The Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States in December hired a researcher to look into the religious order’s history of Native American boarding schools in the U.S.

Ted Penton, secretary of the order’s Office of Justice and Ecology, said the order ran Native American boarding schools from the 1830s to the 1970s, mostly in the Great Plains, Rocky Mountains and Alaska, but the order didn’t know how many, when they operated, or whether any had cemeteries where students might be buried. The order plans to inventory its archives and aims to make them public, he said.

The Jesuits’ investigation was prompted, in part, by the urging of Native American staff at one of its schools, the Red Cloud Indian School, on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, Mr. Penton said.

In November, two leading bishops in areas with large Native American populations—Gallup, N.M., and Oklahoma City—sent a letter to fellow bishops, urging them to examine
the history of the boarding schools in their areas and to comply with the Interior Department investigation.

The federal probe was initiated by Interior Secretary Deb Haaland and is seeking to determine how many students died and where they are buried. The investigation was prompted by the discovery of unmarked graves of indigenous children at a church-run boarding school in Canada in May.

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More than 100,000 Native Americans attended at least 367 boarding schools, according to scholars and the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. Christian denominations operated nearly half of the schools, with the Catholic Church operating an estimated 84 of them, according to the Coalition.

Native American advocates said the letter from the bishops signaled that the U.S. Catholic Church was for the first time officially urging local dioceses to examine their role in running the boarding schools.

“It is imperative that the Catholic Church and other denominations do the hard work to locate and share their records,” said Deborah Parker, director of policy and advocacy for the boarding school healing coalition.

The group “has been calling for churches to share their records for years, and there cannot be any further delays,” she said.

Part of the challenge, church officials say, is that the schools often fell under the aegis of local parishes and religious orders that kept their own records. In other cases, documents might be elsewhere.

The Archdiocese of Oklahoma City has launched listening sessions with families of former Native American boarding-school students. It also recently joined with a researcher at Marquette University, which houses a significant trove of records on the church-run schools, to dig through its archives.
Michael Scaperlanda, the archdiocese’s chancellor, said research will include investigating whether children are buried at any of the school sites in the Oklahoma region. A report will be issued on the findings, and the archdiocese will determine how to proceed, he said.

“We’ve learned in the past few years that being fully transparent about the good, the bad and the ugly of our past is the way forward for healing and reconciliation,” he said.

Write to Dan Frosch at dan.frosch@wsj.com and Ian Lovett at ian.lovett@wsj.com

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