

Reverend Randolph Graczyk: PRESERVING THE CROW INDIAN LANGUAGE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS



Father Randolph and his collaborator, Joyce DeCrane.



Marcus and Leo peruse the "Grammar of Crow."

Growing up in Milwaukee in a Polish family and parish didn't lend itself to much cross-cultural interaction for Father Randolph Graczyk, but when he entered seminary in 1965, and began making summer work trips to the Northern Cheyenne and Crow Indian reservations, he discovered that he had a passion to learn as much about these Native people and their language as he could.

Graduating from seminary in 1970, he requested assignment to the Lodge Grass Parish on the Crow reservation. To his dismay, he soon discovered that he was sidelined from many conversations because, culturally, Crow Indians must speak the language to one another when conversing. But this handicap also gave him the impetus to begin what would become his life's work, to preserve the Crow language.

At that time, Wycliffe Bible translators were just beginning to develop a Crow alphabet and were happy to collaborate with Father Randolph as he formulated a plan to learn the language.

The more he studied, the more he realized that to really learn Crow he would have to obtain additional training. In 1982, he enrolled in the Linguistics Department of the University of Chicago. One might logically ask who in that setting would know anything about the Crow language. As Father Randolph explains it, "Crow belongs to the Siouan family of Native languages, and the linguists at the university have the tools to analyze most any language they come across."

Montana, and continued his independent work to learn the language. He was fortunate to be among a number of fluent speakers who were willing to help him with his work. But, once again, he felt he needed more formal training to enhance his linguistic skills.

In the late eighties he returned to Chicago and completed his Ph.D. in 1991. Armed with his degree, he returned to Pryor and resolved to produce materials that would preserve the language, which was beginning to suffer a decline, especially among young people.

The result is *A Grammar of Crow*, not so much a textbook but rather a reference book for Crow speakers and future researchers who will build on Father Randolph's work to keep the language from dying out. That has become a very real concern as tribal languages in the United States and all around the world continue to be lost, some say, at the rate of one a month.

Father Randolph wishes to thank many Crow people who have assisted him with his endeavor. First, are his adopted parents, Bernard and Gloria Cummins of Lodge Grass, who spent many hours answering his questions and helping him with pronunciation. The late Mary Frances Flat Lip, secretary of St. Charles School, Larry and Gwen Plain Bull, Dorothy Spotted Bear, and Joyce DeCrane also devoted many hours encouraging him to complete this formidable project.

Joyce DeCrane observes enthusiastically, "Father's book is very informative, and Crow speakers will cherish it because it will preserve our language."

Joyce began working as a teacher's aide at St. Charles in 1982, the year Father Randolph began his master's work in linguistics.

Some may wonder why Father Randolph is trying to preserve a language that is falling into disuse. He is quick to respond, "When Crows hear the Gospel proclaimed in their own language, it has a great impact. Suddenly all the little background noises at Mass completely stop...."

Two of Father Randolph's eighth grade Crow language students also weighed in on the subject. Marcus says the book will help the young people in the future preserve their culture. He also pointed out that only three of the 135 students in the school speak fluent Crow.

Leo agrees that the book will be useful for future generations of young Crow Indians. He also declares, "If our language goes out, I will buy the book." He then adds with a mischievous grin, "I just wish he would have written a kid's version."

A Grammar of Crow, certainly a fine academic accomplishment, is also Father Randolph's labor of love on behalf of the Crow men, women, and children he has served for nearly forty years. In the meantime, he continues to compile a Crow dictionary which will be another important tool in the quest to keep this Native language vibrant and useful.



Pastor and scholar, Fr. Randolph at Ash Wednesday service last year.

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