The steady beat of drums and chanting floats through the air as the procession of multi-colored regalia, vestments, and flag-bearing veterans begins to move. It is time for the annual Coeur d'Alene Tribe Pilgrimage and Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary to commence. This outdoor mass and celebration is like no other in the state of Idaho or the Pacific Northwest. It is one of the many traditions continued after the Jesuit Missionaries (blackrobes) and Coeur d'Alene people (schitst'umsh) met in 1841. The coming together of two religious beliefs and cultures created an intriguing part of Idaho history, and built Idaho's oldest standing building, the Cataldo Mission.

Interpreting religion, particularly one that is not your own, can be a bit challenging and different in many ways. At Coeur d'Alene's Old Mission State Park in Cataldo, Idaho, the park is owned by the Coeur d'Alene Tribe and managed by the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation. The Cataldo Mission was built by the Jesuit Missionaries and the Coeur d'Alene Tribe starting in 1850 and finishing in 1853. Religious ceremonies such as christenings, baptisms, weddings, funeral services, and mass are regularly held throughout the year. The building is also open year-round for daily tours to park visitors, groups, and school children.

A good beginning point to Coeur d'Alene's Old Mission State Park visitor center and Cataldo Mission is home to the "Sacred Encounters: Father DeSmet and the Rocky Mountain Indians" exhibit. Interpreting a religion is for a person to understand the meaning of religion—whether or not they consider themselves religious. One's religious beliefs are singular to that person. As interpreters, we do not know a visitor's particular belief or how they view organized religion. We can only help them understand what religion means to our particular site.

For instance, about 150 years before the Jesuit Missionaries met the Coeur d'Alene people, Circling Raven told his people of his vision about a man with a white face dressed in a black robe, a black hat, and necklace with a cross. This man was coming to tell the Coeur d'Alene people...
about the Great Spirit, and they were to watch for him. Many years later, the tribe met the blackrobes and embraced a new religion and melded it with their own beliefs.

At Coeur d'Alene's Old Mission State Park we talk about religion daily, something that probably most parks or sites consider off limits and do not discuss. At this park you can't talk about the history without the religion; they are deeply intertwined. We do so in a fashion that is respectful of others and of the site.

I am not Catholic or a member of the Coeur d'Alene Tribe, but I can appreciate the history and value the religion of past and present. As interpreters, we should respect the history and know that some things or sites are sacred and not talked about. No matter how many times you ask, it is still going to be sacred and not talked about outside of the tribe or religion. Respect that. It may also be that certain tribe stories are only told or related during specific times of the year and can only be told by certain individuals.

Interpreters take the opportunity to learn. You don't have to be a religious person to learn about another religion or culture. Learn from others of the same religion and get to know some of the local tribe members. Be genuinely interested as you are inquiring, don't be an intrusive questioner. When possible, involve tribe members as much as you are able. Be honest up front, admit your limitations, and convey a message that you would like to learn. Sometimes finding the right person who is able to share history, skills, or information may take some time. Just like yourself, others want to know that you are genuinely interested before teaching or sharing. There are so many talented, bright, gifted, capable, skilled people within the circle of the tribe or religious groups. When those moments are available, take and seize the opportunities to learn, you will be a better person for it! You may also take a few hard hits. Be prepared for it. Just remember that not everything on the internet is true.

If possible and available, learn from the local tribe's website, and attend a religious ceremony open to the public. But most importantly, listen. You can learn a lot by listening.

I can honestly say that the first Catholic mass I attended by myself was a bit confusing. I didn't understand most of the language or what the officiants were doing. I learned by listening and asking appropriate questions. The first outdoor mass I attended for the Feast of the Assumption at this park left me asking more questions. It was amazing the things I learned. I learn more each year. I can now impart knowledge and help others understand when they have questions. That is one of the reasons we are here: to help others learn and find the relevance to themselves in what they are learning so they can have a meaningful experience. We are all about experiences and learning at this park.

One of the tools we have is a 5,000-square-foot exhibit that tells the story of the coming together of the blackrobes and the Coeur d'Alene people. Not every site has an exhibit, but you can begin with a self-guided tour, a guided tour, a display, an interpretive sign, or a small brochure. Start with the top five things that you want people to learn or remember.

For example, our site is unique to northern Idaho in various ways. The Cataldo Mission is listed on the National Register of Historic Buildings. There are only three in Idaho and the mission is the only one located in the northern part of the state. Father Cataldo served as superior to the Rocky Mountain mission and used our site as his headquarters. The name of Father Joseph Cataldo may not be familiar.

Coeur d'Alene Tribe dancers celebrate at a mini powwow after the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
to you but you may have heard of the university that he founded, Gonzaga. What makes the mission building special in addition to being constructed by hand by two different religious groups and cultures? It was built without nails. Ever heard of a mortise and tenon joint? Did you know that huckleberries were used to paint the interior ceiling of the mission? Imagine how many Coeur d'Alene Tribe members and priests it took to pick all of the huckleberries: they are smaller than a blueberry and have a short season. Who likes to make mud pies? The mission walls were fabricated with mud using a technique known as wattle and daub. There are handprints of the original builders in the mud that was spread over the grass and saplings to create the walls. It was 15 years before the wooden siding was placed on the outside of the building. Can you imagine maintaining a building with mud walls? Remember we are located in the Pacific Northwest and it does tend to rain a lot.

I enjoy working at my park and have quite a bit of enthusiasm for the work that I do. While I am listed on paper as a park manager, I am also an interpreter. Unfortunately, there are no official interpretive positions at the park so all park employees, in combination with their daily park duties, become full-time roving interpreters. Our annual visitation is around 100,000, plus an additional 4,000 school children that visit the park as part of spring and fall field trips. As staff interacts with visitors, they have the opportunity to help someone learn as often as they learn from the visitor something to share with someone else. Even if you only have a few facts to share, your enthusiasm for the information shines through and is contagious. And your enthusiasm could lead to visitors wanting to learn more!

Throughout this article I mentioned the following words: respect, learn, listen, and experience—these are essential in interpreting not just religion but any subject matter. You will be a better interpreter if you cultivate those four words, with the addition of enthusiasm. As they become ingrainned in you, they become an integral part of who you are as an interpreter.

This year we commemorate the 84th consecutive year of the Coeur d'Alene Pilgrimage and Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. (Yes, there were a few times in the 172 years of our site history that did not allow for this event to take place.) The general public, along with the Coeur d'Alene Tribe and members of the Catholic Church, celebrate the coming together of two religious beliefs and what it is means today bringing it full circle. The site is sacred to many different people for various reasons. This event is a reminder of those who blended their religion, language, and culture to create and build a unique part of history that continues today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
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