

## [News](#)

Gina Christian

[View Author Profile](#)



OSV News

[View Author Profile](#)

## [Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

July 2, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

An Indigenous image of Jesus Christ by an acclaimed iconographer has been removed from a New Mexico church for unspecified reasons, days after the U.S. bishops [approved a pastoral framework](#) for Indigenous ministry.

Painted by Franciscan Friar Robert Lentz, "Apache Christ" is an 8-foot icon depicting Jesus as a Mescalero holy man, with the inscription in Apache "giver of life." Since 1989, it had hung behind the altar of the church under a crucifix.

This image and a painting of Apache dancers by the late Apache artist Gervase Peso were taken down from the interior walls of St. Joseph Apache Mission in Mescalero, New Mexico, sometime during the evening of June 26 and the early morning hours of June 27.

The parish is located on the lands of the Mescalero Apache Tribe.



Parishioners of St. Joseph Apache Mission, a church on tribal land in Mescalero, New Mexico, allege their pastor, with the knowledge of the Las Cruces Diocese, has

removed this icon depicting Christ through Apache culture and removed other liturgical items reflecting their Native culture from the church. (OSV News illustration/YouTube)

The discovery was made by parish staff and volunteers as they opened the church for use in catechetical activities on the morning of June 27, according to two parishioners with whom OSV News spoke. A St. Joseph Parish staffer who did not wish to be identified told OSV News the Peso painting had been mounted in the church's reconciliation room.

In addition, the staffer said the icon's detailed frame, which had been crafted by New Mexico-based wood sculptor Roberto Lavadie, had been disassembled and left in a locked storage area of the church to which only the pastor, Fr. Peter Chudy Sixtus Simeon-Aguinam, had access.

Simeon-Aguinam, who is also pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Bent, New Mexico, told OSV News by telephone July 1 that he would comment next week — a statement he reiterated after OSV News asked if he could in the meantime provide any specific reason for the artworks' removal. An email sent by OSV News to the priest earlier that day went unanswered.

A number of parishioners took to social media to report their astonishment and dismay over the sudden removal — among them, volunteer youth minister and catechist AnneMarie Brillante, who stated on a Google webpage she created for the mission parish that the icon "was taken in the middle of the night while community members recovered" from two major wildfires in mid-June that killed two and forced thousands to evacuate.

"It was a shock to our summer youth catechism teachers and attendees to enter the church and be greeted by an empty space where the 'Apache Christ' icon once stood," wrote Brillante, who told OSV News she is Mescalero Apache and has been a lifelong member of the mission.

Brillante said in her post that "those responsible for the secret removal of the painting include the pastor, members of the Knights of Columbus and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Las Cruces."

OSV News reached out to Deacon John Eric Munson, the chief operating officer and head of human resources for the Las Cruces Diocese who also oversees communications, but has not yet received a response to several phone and email inquiries.

Anthony Salazar, state deputy of the New Mexico State Council of the Knights of Columbus, told OSV News by phone that regarding any Knights of Columbus who may have been involved in the icon's removal, "these gentlemen were acting on their own behalf" and "not ... in the capacity of a Knight of Columbus."

As an organization, the Knights of Columbus — the largest Catholic fraternal organization in the world — has a Native Solidarity Initiative and is involved in promoting awareness about Native Catholics and their traditions through their "[Enduring Faith](#)" documentary and their support for the canonization of [Nicholas Black Elk](#), a Lakota holy man and Catholic catechist. The Knights' Supreme Secretary Patrick Mason is a member of the Osage Nation.

Mescalero Tribal Police told OSV News that they had "taken a report" about the removal of the painting on June 27, and that the matter is under investigation.

On her Google webpage for the parish, Brillante posted an audio recording of a 12-plus minute June 27 phone call she had with Munson, in which Brillante said she had "just [been] made aware that the 'Apache Christ' has been stolen."

"Not stolen, just removed," replied Munson, who advised Brillante that the pastor, "the Knights of Columbus" and the diocesan property risk manager had been involved in the change.

When Brillante asked where the icon was, the deacon replied, "It's not germane."

Advertisement

Brillante countered that "if [the icon] was taken off the reservation, off of federal land, without permission then that's called theft," and that the icon had been "given to the parishioners of the Mescalero Apache Tribe."

Munson said in reply, "There is no such thing as the parishioners owning anything. The parish is a corporation ... and the parishioners are not stockholders in the

corporation," and that "anything that is in that church is the church's ... and the building is the church's responsibility."

According to the New Mexico secretary of state's corporations division, the St. Joseph Mission is a domestic nonprofit corporation created in 1993. Its current officers are all officials of the Las Cruces Diocese, with Bishop [Peter Baldacchino](#) as the chairman of the board.

The church was built in 1920 by Franciscan friars and a number of volunteers, replacing a previous, smaller adobe church that had deteriorated. Much of the artwork throughout the cruciform structure reflects elements of Apache culture, and throughout the years the church has undergone upgrades and a recent renovation.

OSV News has contacted Lentz for comment on the icon's removal but has not yet received a response.

However, the friar — who had previously posted a video to Facebook describing the creation of the icon, which included substantial consultation and collaboration with the Apache community — said in a statement posted on his behalf on X, formerly Twitter, that he "GAVE the icon to the Mescalero people, who then commissioned an elaborated hand-carved frame for it."

"What has happened in the past few days reminds me of something from the nineteenth century, when it was not uncommon in New Mexico or Arizona for a posse of white men to sneak up on an Indian village in the dark of night for an ambush," wrote Lentz in the statement. "The 'posse' in this case was made up of men from a conservative Catholic organization in a military town, on the other side of a mountain range, 30 miles from Mescalero. That they were led by the priest currently assigned to Mescalero only adds to the shame."

Lentz, who designed the "Saints of the Americas" altar reredos in Sante Fe's Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi, added that "from 1990 to 2019, bishops of Las Cruces visited the church in Mescalero and gave their tacit approval to the icon. Had it violated Roman Catholic doctrine, they would have asked for its removal. They did not."

At the same time, some of Lentz's work has also generated controversy — for example, his painting of slain politician and gay rights activist Harvey Milk.

Yet any specific concerns regarding "Apache Christ" and Peso's painting were not made clear to parishioners, said the unnamed St. Joseph staffer, Brillante and Brillante's 23-year-old daughter, Gabrielle Brillante, currently a student at Yale Divinity School who assists her mother in parish catechetical ministry.

The unnamed parish staffer pointed to depictions of Christ by European artists, saying, "They painted [him] like themselves."

Gabrielle Brillante told OSV News that when Simeon-Aguinam stated at a June 11 parish meeting the "Apache Christ" icon was problematic for not meeting a Catholic "rubric," she asked him to provide details but he offered no further explanation.

However, one parishioner (who asked not to be named out of fear of retaliation by the priest) told OSV News some five tribal members had heard Simeon-Aguinam declare in a weekday Mass homily during Lent 2024 that "God comes first. You cannot be both an Apache and a Catholic. You have to choose. You cannot be both. ... You have to leave those ways and that way of life behind ... you have to choose."

The parishioner and at least two of the tribal members present were "just quiet, and ... just didn't say anything," with the parishioner telling OSV News, "I just didn't feel comfortable. ... I already know that there will be repercussions."

The parishioner added that "it was widely known and talked about that [Simeon-Aguinam] did not like anything to do with our Native culture." The parishioner stated that with respect to the parish's sacred vessels made from materials prized in Apache culture, the priest "immediately replaced our cups [chalices] and our basket that we bring up the host in," which were of "a Pueblo pottery style, and ... replaced those with brass ... because he didn't like [them]."





The "Apache Christ" icon is seen in the sanctuary of the church in a 2005 photo of the interior of the St. Joseph Apache Mission. (Wikimedia Commons/Dusty Matthews)

The recent incident involving "Apache Christ" follows in the wake of the U.S. Catholic bishops' overwhelming vote June 14 to approve a new pastoral framework for Indigenous Catholic ministry called "Keeping Christ's Sacred Promise" during their [spring general assembly](#) in Louisville, Kentucky.

"Many Indigenous Catholics have felt a sense of abandonment in their relationship with church leaders due to a lack of understanding of their unique cultural needs," says the introduction of the pastoral framework. "We apologize for the failure to nurture, strengthen, honor, recognize, and appreciate those entrusted to our pastoral care."

The five-part framework focuses on calls for healing, mission, reconciliation, holiness and transformation in ministry to the nation's Indigenous Catholics, whose "journey

... in the United States of America has been marked by moments of great joy but also of profound sorrow," the document states.

Nearly two years earlier, in July 2022, Pope Francis made a penitential [pilgrimage to Canada](#) in which he affirmed the importance of the Catholic faith expressing itself through Indigenous cultures, and [apologized](#) for the ways in which "Catholics contributed to policies of assimilation and enfranchisement that inculcated a sense of inferiority, robbing communities and individuals of their cultural and spiritual identity, severing their roots and fostering prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes."

Pointing to the various Indigenous Catholic inculturated art and symbols at Sacred Heart Church in Edmonton, Alberta, he said, "This liturgical symbolism reminds me of the magnificent words spoken by St. John Paul II in this country: 'Christ animates the very center of all culture. Thus, not only is Christianity relevant to the Indian people, but Christ, in the members of his Body, is himself Indian.' "

The unnamed St. Joseph's Parish staffer told OSV News that "the whole tribal community is upset" by the removal of their artwork.

AnneMarie Brillante agreed with that view.

"I would say [the removal] opened up old, old wounds that our ancestors were victims of," she said.