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**Title**

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**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7q30j2w8>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 23(2)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

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**Publication Date**

1999-03-01

**DOI**

10.17953

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## **“He Stood for Us Strongly”: Father H. Baxter Liebler’s Mission to the Navajo**

**ROBERT S. MCPHERSON**

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The San Juan River was still running deep that July of 1943. The cottonwood leaves trembled slightly in the midday heat, with an occasional breeze snaking its way along the dirt road that ran beside the red rock bluffs north of the river. Ada Benally remembers shading her eyes and looking across the brown, roiling water at the approaching dust cloud that billowed above the far bank. The hum of vehicle engines stopped, the opening and closing of truck doors sounded in the distance, and the dust began to settle. Ada wondered what was happening. The sights and sounds came from a section along the river where Navajos and Utes had traditionally picked sumac berries, wild spinach, and herbs. Perhaps these people had come for that purpose. She decided to wait and see, since the river was too high, too fast, and there was no boat to take her across.<sup>1</sup> Had Ada been able to ford the river, she would have witnessed the establishment of the Saint Christopher’s Mission, located two miles outside of Bluff, Utah. Ada would also later be counted as one among several hundred of the mission’s future baptized members.

But that was in the future. At this point, the cassocked Father H. (Harold) Baxter Liebler, the director of this Episcopalian mission, stepped out of his vehicle to begin his life-long work among the Navajo. He had come from Old Greenwich, Connecticut, leaving behind a well-established parish to pursue a boyhood vision he considered his destiny. At the age of fifty-three, Father Liebler set out to fulfill his dream of a mission to the Navajo. He selected an isolated part of their reservation known as the Utah Strip with the hope of finding a group of people least touched by earlier inroads of Christianity. Saint Christopher’s was the ideal spot for this undertaking. The site was geographically central to the Utah Navajo population living on the northern boundary of the reservation. The vast majority of the people lived in hogans south of the river and came across on horseback or in wagons occasionally to

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trade; a general store and a twenty-home Mormon community comprised the city of Bluff.

Father Liebler wrote extensively of his experiences encountered during the next twenty years in a book entitled *Boil My Heart for Me*, which is still in print.<sup>2</sup> Beneath the fascinating story of his and other people's efforts to bring Christianity to the Navajo, there lies submerged the even more important tale of how this message was received. Often discussions concerning Christian missionary efforts to the Indians tend to be one-sided—whether they be about Roman Catholic priests in the wake of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, Jesuits accompanying traders into the pine forests of Canada, or Protestants establishing farms and missions in the American West. Only a handful of these missionaries paid much attention to understanding the cultures they proselytized and even fewer cared about preserving what they encountered. At the same time, little has been recorded about the Native American's philosophical reaction to what was taught. Even those books written recently that try to integrate an American Indian perspective speak of a historic time, when those who received the lessons of Christianity have long since died.

This article is somewhat different in that much of it is based on oral interviews with Navajo people who embraced this missionary experience from their own traditional perspective. Thus, it is an examination of the meshing of Episcopalian doctrine with Navajo traditional beliefs as they met for the first time on the San Juan River that July day. It is the story of a dedicated priest who was willing to go more than halfway into the Navajo world in order to bring them partway into his. It is a story of trust and respect that bridged both worlds. And it is a story told from two views that speaks of a common humanity.

Long before those first vehicles ever clanked into sight or a tent was ever pitched, Father Liebler had carefully laid the mission's philosophical foundation in his mind. As a young boy, he read the romantic writings of James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking* tales, the story of *Hiawatha* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and the more realistic works of Henry Schoolcraft and George Catlin. Yet no one had more of an impact on his interest in Indians than did Ernest Thompson Seton, a naturalist who wrote and lectured extensively on woodcraft skills as well as Native American philosophy. When Seton learned that the young Liebler had formed his own "tribe" of "woodcraft Indians," he invited the boy to join him and others in annual camping events that promoted understanding of Native American ways. This simpatico relationship with the "chief" and others interested in Indian beliefs lasted for years.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it was a lapse into this romantic past that encouraged Father Liebler one time, long after the founding of St. Christopher's, to again don breech cloth, leggings, moccasins, and war bonnet, then whoop his way from Navajo campfire to campfire asking if the people at a local Enemy Way ceremony needed anything. Everyone appreciated the gesture, but probably no one more than the bedecked priest.<sup>4</sup>

Liebler referred to the early part of his life as a "pagan boyhood," since by the age of four he had rejected Christianity. Indian lore replaced Episcopalian doctrine in guiding the beliefs of this young man until he was reconverted during his freshman year at Columbia University. His thoughts now centered

on traditional Christian values, though he maintained his interest in Indian practices.

For twenty-five years, Father Liebler labored at St. Saviours' Church in Old Greenwich, Connecticut. His philosophical background developed from two converging streams of intellectual tradition—Native American and Episcopalian beliefs. There should, however, be no misunderstanding of his intent. He was, first and foremost, an Episcopalian priest who taught the doctrines of his church as explained in the American Missal. This "high" form of church utilized the vestments, ritual, and service that lay closely akin to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Why Liebler chose this approach will be discussed later, but the fact that he was devoted to his beliefs cannot be questioned.

Nonetheless, at the same time, Father Liebler maintained his interest in Native American philosophy. Before he ever arrived in Utah to face the full-blown, intact religious system of the Navajos, he had already decided not only on which side of the fence he belonged, but also the color and construction of that fence. He wrote, while still in Connecticut, that the religion of the American Indian had many "harmless pagan practices which were not inconsistent with belief in the True God, and where such has been the practice, the Indians have been happy to adopt and make part of their spiritual lives the revelation of God in his Divine Son."<sup>5</sup>

Father Liebler recognized the wisdom of building upon what was already in place rather than tearing down the entire social and religious fabric of a culture. He knew that to the Indian, religion was "life itself . . . [and] a very real thing."<sup>6</sup> He believed that symbols such as the Sioux sweat bath and the sacred pipe held intrinsic values similar to baptism and the Eucharist of Christianity, an understanding that missionaries to those people had mistakenly tried to erase. Thus, the challenge lay in retaining and blending these concepts, since "God is a respecter of human personality, and that no good is accomplished by forcing an immortal soul's decision on so important a subject as religion. . . . A far more wholesome attitude would be the recognition that the Indians are different from ourselves. Why not let a Higher Being decide which is better?"<sup>7</sup>

Yet the reality of missionary efforts still necessitated change. Liebler looked at what had been done elsewhere and found it doctrinally inflexible, unsympathetic, and consequently unproductive. He drew upon his experiences with Seton and a talk by Canon Douglas given in theological school and concluded that the current methods of the Episcopal Church missed the real spirit of true missionary work. The "clean slate" approach that advocated wiping out "pagan religion" before "teaching the true religion, true faith, and adding to it all of the cultural fringe benefits of Christianity" was wrong.<sup>8</sup>

He held to this judgment until 1953 when he attended a National Council of the Episcopal Church. With ten years of experience under his cassock, Father Liebler braced himself for an unpleasantly ethnocentric meeting, but found instead a far more sympathetic audience comprised of many religious leaders traveling their own "St. Christopher road."<sup>9</sup> By this time, there was no arguing with the success he engendered through his efforts. While he had not started out as a "maverick" priest doing everything his own

way, he did believe that the rules established by the Domestic Mission Board of his church were too rigid. Armed with permission from his bishop in Salt Lake City, Liebler skillfully laced Episcopalian and Navajo practices into his services. The fact that various bishops visited St. Christopher's often to confirm newly baptized members, and that in 1972 he was seated as an honorary canon in the Episcopal Church, testifies that his efforts met with both official and unofficial approval.<sup>10</sup>

His different perspective included not falling into the same trap in which other missionaries had plummeted. For example, he did not believe in the "fringe benefits of Christianity," such as giving rides, handing out clothing, and fostering dependence; in this there appeared no firm philosophical ground to stand upon. These problems were part of the inevitable challenge that came with living in the midst of a materially impoverished population. The worst possible scenario occurred when Christian missions of various denominations vied for "customers" who wanted material benefits from any and all. The religious confusion that arose from Navajos accepting various faiths for material rewards, or "making the rounds" as Liebler called it, resulted in a muddled understanding about the basis of life. In later years, Liebler recorded this befuddlement when he wrote of an apparent conversation with a Navajo who had experienced this problem.

I do not believe the old stuff any more. I do not believe the things my father and my mother believe. I do not believe those gods any more—I still think there are ghosts; I still think there are things we should be afraid of, but I do not believe in the things that they [the parents] have to do all the time. I do not know what to believe because one missionary says one thing, one says the other thing. All say, "do not go any other place, just come to my church," and I do not know what to do.<sup>11</sup>

To summarize Father Liebler's philosophical background on the eve of his departure from Connecticut, one finds a priest whose idealism bordered on the romantic, yet who was ready to experiment in new ways to bring the gospel to the Navajo. The underlying tenet of his approach was to include rather than exclude new religious possibilities, which was a basic tendency already existing in Navajo religion, much to the frustration of missionaries with more rigid views.<sup>12</sup>

To prepare for this experience, he began a course of study that continued until his death. The winter before he arrived in Utah, he ventured for the first time into the Navajo language under the tutelage of Gladys Reichard, a leading anthropologist in the field of Navajo studies. Both teacher and student realized the impossibility of gaining any kind of fluency in such a short time, so Reichard decided to work on pronunciation, hoping that ease of speaking would come later. Liebler believed she did too good a job, because when he first started to converse with a Native speaker, he or she assumed by the priest's pronunciation that everything in the conversation was understood.<sup>13</sup> The truth lay far from it.

Perhaps of even greater long-range significance was the fact that Reichard understood Navajo traditional beliefs. At least part of the contents of her book,

*Navaho Religion—A Study of Symbolism*, must have been available to Liebler during these sessions, and certainly in its entirety when it reached the press in 1950.<sup>14</sup> Reichard published a number of other substantial works concerning Navajo religion and culture based upon her extensive fieldwork. No doubt her thoughts helped mold part of Liebler's understanding of ceremonial lore.<sup>15</sup>

There is also no doubt as to the impact of the Catholic Franciscan missionary, Father Berard Haile, and his associates stationed at Saint Michaels, Arizona. Haile had studied and written about Navajo beliefs and Christian doctrine as the two faiths encountered each other in the early 1900s. Haile worked among the Navajo for sixty-one years, continuing an exhaustive study of their language, customs, and religious philosophy. In addition to assisting in the production of *An Ethnological Dictionary of the Navajo Language* (1910), he labored for thirty-five years to develop a Navajo orthography and published numerous monographs on religious aspects of their culture.<sup>16</sup>

Although Father Liebler never met Haile, he tells of heavy dependence on these works. Especially at the beginning of his ministry, while his language was impoverished, he put together basic sermons derived from the Franciscan catechism. Six weeks in the creation, six minutes in the delivery, Father Liebler's first text was an amalgam of Christian Bible stories and doctrine that he read to his small congregation.<sup>17</sup> He did not give a second sermon until Easter, more than three months later. But from the writings of the Franciscan Fathers, Liebler eventually derived twenty-five doctrinal discourses that fit the appropriate religious season of the year. As his fluency increased, his dependence decreased, but rarely did he slacken his attempt to fortify his Navajo vocabulary and usage.

In the summer of 1942, Father Liebler began his search for a place to establish a mission. A train brought him to New Mexico where he started from Carson's Post, then wended his way on horseback through the Four Corners region. Assisted by a compass and a general knowledge of the land, he traveled through Farmington to Teec Nos Pos, through Monument Valley, Utah, to Mexican Hat. Near that small community, he tells of lying on his back, head propped against his saddle, and watching the shifting shapes of clouds in the azure sky. Eventually, in "stark clarity" he saw in "pure white against the blue, arms spread in blessing over Navajoland, the unmistakable form of the Saviour, vested in alb [a ceremonial robe worn by priests]. . . . From that instant there was never a doubt in my mind that all that had ever happened to me was a preparation for that which lay ahead."<sup>18</sup> He rode on to Bluff, convinced that he had been guided by Saint Christopher, the patron saint of travelers. The mission, founded the next year with the help of five other people, bore witness through its name of this belief.

This mystical, supernatural intervention was one of a number of such incidents experienced by Father Liebler during his ministry. Interestingly, the Navajo speak of having similar manifestations forewarning his arrival. Randolph Benally, who lived next to the mission, told how one night, after the children were asleep, he and his wife were in their hogan getting ready to retire when a "strange little woman" appeared by the doorway. She announced that "There is a white man coming who will stay here for a few days and then will go

away. A year later he will come back with others to do you good. Listen to what he says." She then disappeared. Randolph picked up a flashlight to track her outside, but there was no trace to follow. Similar reports came from Navajos living across the river and from people to the west.<sup>19</sup>

Another man, Dan Benally, explains how he understood Father Liebler's arrival. He said the priest told how he came from "under where the sun rises" to "tell the people about the Holy One and maybe they will understand it." Father Liebler then "talked to people as he walked about . . . but at that time, older men and women asked many questions" such as "Why are you walking here amongst us? Maybe you are a spy' [referring to witchcraft] . . . He told them that this [Christianity] was his work, that he was a priest. So at length, the older men and women as well as the younger people started to think of him in a different way. He was telling the truth. 'This thing is good for us, the telling of the Holy One.'"<sup>20</sup>

One of the first steps in establishing an identity was handled through keen Navajo observation. For better or worse, a person often becomes known by a physical attribute—a habit, an incident, or membership in an organization—and is labeled accordingly. In Father Liebler's case, he received a number of names from different people. His most common title, translated as "The-One-Who-Drags-His-Robe-Around," was a general name given to priests who wore a long cassock as part of their vestments. To distinguish him from other clergy, he was also known as "The-One-With-Long-Hair-Who-Drags-His-Robe-Around," which at times was shortened to "Long Hair" in reference to his Navajo hair bun tied at the back of his head. Because so few white men adopted this hairstyle, he was also called "The-One-Who-Wears-His-Hair-Tight."<sup>21</sup>

He also picked up a name or two he would have liked forgotten. Not that he was in any way being abused. Indeed, in all of the interviews and research conducted for this article, there were never any negative feelings expressed, by Anglo or Navajo, for Father Liebler.<sup>22</sup> This is a great testimony in and of itself. But Navajos were observant and recalled that during his reconnaissance in 1942, he drank by mistake some alkali water. For a number of days he suffered from this dietary indiscretion, giving rise to the names of "Priest-With-Sore-Guts" and "The-One-Who-Soils-His-Robes."<sup>23</sup>

Father Liebler was not the only one to be named. He brought with him or had join him over the years, a staff of faithful helpers who assisted in making the mission a success. Without going into detail about these individuals, their Navajo names help to paint a picture of some of their prominent characteristics. Brother Juniper, for instance, was an easy one, since his name translated directly as "Juniper Tree." He was also called "Baggy Pants." Catherine Pickett, a nurse whose eyesight was exceptionally poor, was called "Eyeless," because of the thick glasses she wore, while Helen Sturges, a teacher at the mission, was called "The-Woman-Who-Teaches-School" or "The Counter." Joan Liebler, helper and later wife to Father Liebler, assumed the epithet of "The-Woman-Who-Cries-a-Lot."<sup>24</sup> Yet most often, traditional Navajo kinship terms denoting "my older brother," "my older sister," and "my father" or "my grandfather" were used. Accompanying the use of these terms came implied familial responsibilities and relationships customary in Navajo society.

An important part of Father Liebler's plan to integrate Navajo and Episcopal doctrine hinged upon being taught by the local community's repository of traditional beliefs, the chanters, more commonly known as medicine men. He believed a helpful approach in bringing the gospel to the Navajo lay in the "cooperating medicine man, the simplicity of surroundings, together with a scrupulous observance of traditional details of ceremony."<sup>25</sup> He spent hours and hours visiting with medicine men or traditionalists like Shoodii, Hastiin Yazhi, John Antes, Tse K'izi, Hash'kaan, and Randolph Benally to observe their ceremonies, discuss beliefs, and take notes in his ever-present binder. He questioned the men, clarifying details, and became immersed in the teachings, songs, and prayers of the Beauty Way ceremony. One man said, "They told him the way Navajos pray and from this he understood how to do it."<sup>26</sup> Fernandez Begay recalls, "This person Shorty, with his Beauty Way ritual tools, used to perform for him [Liebler]. He performed by singing his Beauty Way songs . . . [and] spoke in our Navajo language, our way of praying. That is where he learned from. It was 'beauty behind me, beauty above me, below me and around me, in beauty I will walk.' That is how he prayed."<sup>27</sup> And that was how Father Liebler would often close his services.

Prayers are the core of Navajo ceremonial belief. They are perceived as being alive, strong, and powerful when performed properly. They serve as a literal shield of protection from evil powers that could otherwise harm a person. Thus, an individual is admired for his ability to converse with the Holy Beings through prayer and may be invited to participate in blessing, healing, and protecting a person if he has the appropriate knowledge. Father Liebler gained that status. Dan Benally, speaking of Liebler's ability, said:

For me, I walk behind this priest's teachings. He starts his ceremony by praying. He pleads with the Holy One, who is all around us. He says the Holy One is in heaven and he holds his hand up to heaven. This is how he prays. He teaches in this manner and pleads in this way with the bread [sacrament]. This is how Father Liebler prayed and conducted his ceremony.<sup>28</sup>

Many Navajos told Liebler that he had "good, strong medicine" and that when they went to his church they felt like "the real Holy One is here in some way, that he isn't any other place. This is what we call good strong medicine. This is what we want."<sup>29</sup> One person noted that "when someone has done wrongfully, he [Liebler] would pray for that person. . . . Because of him helping with this, his prayers were holy, were good, were nourishing. . . . He stood for us strongly."<sup>30</sup> Another remembered how he prayed for the soldiers in World War II and "because of these services, I returned unharmed, the bullets missed me."<sup>31</sup> Jessie Shorty added her evaluation, saying that she noticed "He performed good services. . . . It was done in the right manner . . . and he prayed for us very well."<sup>32</sup>

Not only did he pray well, using Navajo patterns of thought, but he also encouraged Navajo ceremonies to be performed on or near the mission grounds. In one woman's eyes, "He liked their traditional ceremonies so that



is why they followed him."<sup>33</sup> He would sit in on parts of a five-day rite, attend a puberty ceremony for a young woman, participate in a Beauty Way, encourage participants of an Enemy Way ceremony to hold part of their activities nearby, and, when asked, contribute material means such as firewood, water, and herbs. From a purely practical standpoint, the priest considered it to be "good publicity."<sup>34</sup>

The people felt that Father Liebler believed in these ceremonies. From the Navajos' perspective, his actions meant acceptance, especially when "he took part in the taking of corn pollen. He did what the Navajos did while he was sitting in there. He said, 'I will not talk against this. I am already a believer. . . . This is why the Navajo ceremony and the ceremony that I hold are one.' This is what he said. . . . 'With this we will be one.'"<sup>35</sup> John Shorty remembers how he "prayed along with the ceremonies," "respected them," and "believed in the ritual tools."<sup>36</sup>

Yet Liebler's goal was to teach Episcopalian doctrines that ranged from the creation and the fall of man, to Christ's life, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension.<sup>37</sup> He realized that the Navajos viewed healing, death, and spiritual harmony in very different terms, and so he gave much time and thought to placing Christian symbols and values in a context that was understandable. Individual Navajo explanations of what they learned may differ from what was taught, but a glimpse into their perception of Father Liebler's efforts is instructive.

Take, for instance, the sacraments of the church. Navajo traditional view shows great concern that the Holy Beings are able to recognize a person, no matter where he or she might be. Protection from harm is another important concept derived from various ceremonies. These two ideas joined in the service of Mass, where bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. Navajos were impressed that "while he is singing, he places something in your mouth," that "it [the sacrament] is holy," and that "the holiness remains in you."<sup>38</sup> The singing and accompanying ritual appeared similar to the actions associated with the use of corn pollen in traditional ceremonies. One man explained that the sacrament was called "jish" or "medicine bundle used by chanters." "The Holy One set this for us and this is the ceremony that is to be done. The one who has become a priest will perform this ceremony."<sup>39</sup> John Shorty explained his understanding of the Mass by saying,

This bread is Jesus' bread. With this he will acknowledge you and your body will be healthy. You can go anywhere with this bread. . . . It is said that this bread was broken into pieces and it has revived many and that is why we pray with it and place it in our mouth. After that, this is medicine; this is something that grows. . . . The grape juice is the blood of Jesus. All of this will come together and become your blood and that is what is prayed about. He sees you by that.<sup>40</sup>

Father Liebler, with all of his apparent outward acceptance of Navajo beliefs, also struggled within to maintain the purity of his church's teachings. In an article entitled "Christian Concepts and Navaho Words," he bemoaned the fact that the Navajo word for *sacrament* translated roughly as "our mouths into, a thing is put." The emphasis on the physical act detracted from the spir-

itual belief inherent in the gesture. The symbolic meaning of other translated terms likewise could be lost: baptism ("head-top water"), confirmation ("our interior-standing [i.e., soul] being made strong"), penance ("our sins taking-away"), and extreme unction ("holy salve").<sup>41</sup> Christ was called the "Holy One" or the "One-Who-Cannot-Die" and held certain qualities shared by other "Holy Beings" in the Navajo pantheon, although no direct comparison between them was made by Father Liebler.

The possibility of misunderstanding symbols in many respects becomes the crux of the issue in conversion. If a symbol is "an outward and physical sign of an inward and spiritual grace," then one must ask how closely the parallels in belief can be drawn around the physical object. To Father Liebler, "The lines of the life of the Church and the life of the American Indians were parallel lines, but they met in infinity which is God."<sup>42</sup> He believed that in this earthly existence, certain symbols were more of a cultural expression than an eternal verity, but when placed in an appropriate context, they could serve as a bridge between two different philosophies.

Father Liebler used both Christian and Navajo symbols with an eye to narrowing what appeared to many outsiders as a huge chasm between the two faiths. When he arrived in Utah, he introduced the Anglican Missal, an English translation of the Roman Catholic Mass. Liebler wanted this "high" church approach because of the colorful vestments, pageantry, and ceremonies that gave worship a very tangible, recognizable form. The Anglican Missal also contained provision for celebrating more Saints' days and the highly visual ceremonies associated with Holy Week and Easter. Joan Liebler recalls Father Liebler saying, "Whether the Navajos understand the language or not is not important; what they do recognize is what they see. And if they see a service being conducted in a really reverent, worshipful way, they will respect it. But if you start changing it all over the place, they won't react. The medicine men know their job and they don't make mistakes and change things around."<sup>43</sup> At least to some Navajos, the clothing itself "made" a person a priest.<sup>44</sup>

The Christian year, with its many holy days, services, and colorful vestments, followed a recognizable pattern, paralleling Navajo ceremonies that were performed according to season. No direct correlation was drawn between the two, but the notion that "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven" certainly agreed with both beliefs.<sup>45</sup>

The place of worship also needed to be harmonious with both beliefs. Father Liebler realized before establishing St. Christopher's that the door of the church, in order to agree with Navajo practices, had to face east so that the Holy Beings could observe what took place. Anglican and Roman customs also required that the priest face east. Liebler built a free-standing altar so that he could stand behind it and face both east and the congregation at the same time. This was perhaps the first church in the United States to change the location of the altar from its traditional position against the wall of the sanctuary. An additional benefit to this free-standing altar was that the congregation could observe the priest's activities. In Navajo ceremonies, everyone in the hogan is an observer-participant with the medicine man. At Saint Christopher's, the Navajo people could now watch the preparation of the

sacrament.<sup>46</sup> The chapel itself was built in a traditional cruciform shape, but Father Liebler utilized concepts of Navajo etiquette such as never touching both sides of a house or hogan doorway, thus avoiding the entrapment of evil within the building.<sup>47</sup>

Once the chapel was completed and consecrated in an impressive ceremony by an Episcopal bishop, Liebler invited the medicine man, Shoodii, to perform a blessing on the structure using Navajo prayers and corn pollen, a symbol of peace, fertility, and protection. "In this manner everything will be in harmony and things will come about more easily. . . . A person should not just move into a house because there will be something to harm him."<sup>48</sup> A medicine man "dressed traditionally and carrying his ritual tools" performed a similar blessing on the clinic as others looked on.<sup>49</sup>

Other appeals to the senses came in the form of incense and bells. Although incense is a normal part of a "high" Episcopalian service, to the Navajo it equated with the use of cedar smoke for purification in their own observances. The smoke also carried prayers to the Holy Beings and helped "the people feel good throughout their being. . . . These [incense and smoke] are the same."<sup>50</sup> The bell, on the other hand, summoned the faithful to worship and marked different times of morning, noon, and night. The people were told that whenever they heard it, no matter where they were, they were to cross themselves. By doing so, they would receive a blessing.<sup>51</sup>

Another auditory part of worship included the music sung in services. To the Navajo, the tune and the words are inseparable. Father Liebler started by using other Indian tribes' melodies with hymns and prayers for the service. The "Kyrie Eleison" fitted into part of some Hopi snake dance music, the "Sanctus" into Omaha, and the "Agnus Dei" into a Zuni melody. Eventually, he took part of the tune from the Navajo Night chant and put the "Gloria in Excelsis" to it. He expressed misgivings about doing this because he knew that Navajo thought would automatically revert to the music's previous association. This problem was illustrated during a vesper service held at the mission. The small congregation was singing a hymn, when outside, Randolph Benally, who was passing by with his flock of sheep, joined in. His words were far different, but the tune was the same—that of the Night chant.<sup>52</sup>

A final example of a Christian symbol adapted for Navajo use is the Virgin Mary. In order to make Christmas more memorable, Father Liebler obtained from a priest friend a set of carved figures for a nativity scene. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were dressed in Navajo clothing and hairstyle, but the wise men wore full war bonnets as Comanches, since everyone knew Comanches "came from the east." Father Liebler believed it was one of his most successful efforts to bring home the real meaning of Christmas.

Another friend made a three-foot plaster statue of Saint Mary dressed as a Navajo woman and carrying Jesus in a cradleboard. This was placed in the church and was known as "Our Lady of the Navajo" or "Madonna of the Navajo." Navajo mythology has a comparable deity, Changing Woman, who gave birth through supernatural means to two twin boys. They, in turn, received powerful, sacred weapons used to destroy evil monsters inhabiting the world. Whether or not traditional Navajos made this connection between

Christ's birth and ministry and that of the Twins is unknown, but certainly the idea was not foreign to their beliefs. As a pedagogical device, the statue served to teach of God's involvement with the Navajos, a theme that found its way into the art done by children attending the mission school.<sup>53</sup> The figure's significance increased in 1964; it was one of the few objects that remained unscathed when the original log church burned. To Liebler, "the God of Truth was not going to let the Father of Lies have his way without some witness. . . . She seemed to declare to all who would listen, 'Here I stand. Were I not the Mother of God, you would have no Redeemer.'"<sup>54</sup>

The physical tie between the people of the Holy Land and the Navajo was reinforced in teaching part of Genesis. Father pointed out that when God created man from the dust of the earth, He used the reddish soil in the Middle East which was comparable to that of southeastern Utah, and that the people living in both places had similar colored skin.<sup>55</sup>

Hair was of equal importance to skin. There are many teachings in Navajo society concerning the traditional hair bun first instituted by the Holy Beings. Briefly, this hairstyle is the means by which the gods recognize their people so that no harm will befall them. It serves as a prayer and protective shield from misfortune and as a means of encouraging rain with its fertility when the hair is unbound in ceremonies. Hair hanging down can also symbolize death, since that is how Navajos are buried. To cut the hair causes drought.<sup>56</sup>

There are different versions about why Father Liebler adopted this hairstyle. The most prevalent one tells of how there was no barbershop nearby and so he let his hair grow for some time. But the real reason was that long hair was a sign of virility, and he had started growing it before he came to the West. Just before returning East for a short visit, he was approached by some Navajo men who asked if he intended to open a school. In Navajo thought, haircuts and school, based upon the older boarding school experience, were synonymous. When Father Liebler replied there would be a school and then pointed to his long hair and told the men they need not fear their children being cropped, he convinced them of his sincerity and convinced himself that this hairstyle was an important thing to keep.<sup>57</sup>

Whether he just stumbled upon this idea or it was more carefully planned is left to conjecture. But there is no doubt as to its effect on his parishioners. In their minds he was told that he was no longer an Anglo and that he should wear his hair like the People, for "they will be looking at you. . . . that was the way to be represented as a conductor of ceremonies."<sup>58</sup> With his hair tied back, he "could say his prayers easily . . . [and he probably thought] that way the Lord will know me. With that the spirit of Navajo traditional ceremonies will know me."<sup>59</sup> He was also taught to mix the scrapings of black lichen in yucca root shampoo to make his hair grow fast and prevent it from graying. "He said, 'I remember this and am aware of this.'"<sup>60</sup>

Sometimes the association of Navajo symbols could overpower those of Christianity. In his early struggles with language at Saint Christopher's, he hit upon the idea of using sandpaintings to illustrate gospel themes. One Good Friday, he took colored sands he had collected and created a picture of the crucified Christ, Saint Mary, and Saint John in elongated form before the

altar in the chapel. While he drew this on the ground, he gave fragments of a sermon based on the Franciscan catechism and had Brother Michael and Helen Sturges sing appropriate hymns—all in good keeping with traditional Navajo ceremonialism. At one point in the service, he covered over the sun with black sand to represent the darkness that spread across the land at Christ's death. Many Navajo people were impressed that a white man would even think to create such images.

But they were even more impressed with what they considered the results. In the next twenty-four hours, clouds started to build and within two days, heavy, soaking rains pelted southeastern Utah, breaking a lengthy dry spell. Word spread that Father Liebler had strong prayers, could bring moisture to the land through his sandpaintings, and that he had similar powers to heal the sick. The People talked of this event for years to come.<sup>61</sup>

His reputation as a rainmaker preceded him when he opened a satellite mission in Monument Valley. Little Gambler, an elderly medicine man, approached him after Mass and explained that the region was suffering from a major drought, that Father Liebler had the ability to bring rain, and that he should relieve the People's suffering. The priest heard a "voice" that instructed, "You will have rain day after tomorrow," which he repeated to the medicine man. Although he had trouble believing he had said that, Father Liebler stood behind his words and was overjoyed when the expected rains appeared on schedule. Later, Little Gambler offered to go into partnership, suggesting the priest "make the prayers for rain" and the medicine man collect the money.<sup>62</sup>

The sky, however, held more than rain. Father Liebler taught the concept of life after death, using as his springboard the translation of Heaven "at the other side of the sky." Traditional Navajos often held a variety of beliefs concerning what to expect in the afterlife. They generally understood that when a person died, his or her spirit lingered to haunt the living because of loneliness, then traveled on a four-day journey to a dark, drab underworld to the north. Relatives and those involved in the burial needed to take ceremonial precautions to avoid unpleasant experiences with those who had passed on.<sup>63</sup> Thus, fear and avoidance characterized the general attitude toward death.

Christian doctrine encouraged grave-side services, a hope in an afterlife, a judgment based upon earthly behavior, and a future resurrection, all of which was antithetical to Navajo teachings. The Christian concept of sin was also difficult for Navajos to follow, since the gods were more concerned with violations of taboos than personal moral infractions. Father Liebler taught Christian beliefs in relation to a personal harmony and peace between man and God. Penance through confession drove home the necessity of avoiding sin.<sup>64</sup>

Father Liebler, as minister of his faith, saw the world caught in a struggle between right and wrong. This Paulinian duality of light versus darkness, good versus evil, and God versus Satan portrayed a real, tangible battle that took a different form in Navajo beliefs. Liebler referred to himself as a "superstitious son-of-a-gun . . . but the reality of it is that the devil has had a hold on this country for a long time."<sup>65</sup> Father did all he could to combat these forces.

One of the greatest examples of this power was witchcraft, a common form of which involved "skinwalkers."<sup>66</sup> Briefly, the person who wishes to become a

skinwalker learns different ceremonies that turn good power into evil. This is done by reversing what is acceptable such as prayers for harmony and saying them in such a way that the person has the power to perform antisocial activities. Killing a family member, making "corpse poison" from the flesh of the dead, causing sickness and loss of livestock, inflicting misfortune, and inviting sterility and death are all actions attributed to witchcraft practitioners.

Father Liebler at times faced problems because of these Navajo beliefs. He had men come to the mission and ask for baptism, but other members accused them of being witches and would not attend if the accused were present. Since no one ever admits to this activity and a culprit is discovered only through supernatural means of divination, there was no concrete proof upon which entrance into the church could be denied. Father Liebler regretted the fact that the prayers for exorcising evil spirits had been removed from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer in the past. "There used to be real powerful stuff in it," where the spirit was actually commanded to leave the body.<sup>67</sup> He did believe, however, that baptism removed any unclean spirit from a baby, and at the spirit's departure, the infant cried and one could sometimes smell sulfur.

The priest also used holy water on at least one occasion to chase away a skinwalker. A woman in Monument Valley came to him and complained that she was being plagued by a skinwalker that climbed up on her hogan and looked through the smoke hole at the family inside. The priest prayed with her and gave her a small jar of blessed water with the instructions that when she saw the creature peering in again, she should pray silently then throw the water in his face with the words, "Go! Go! In the name of Jesus Christ, go, and never return."<sup>68</sup> She did as she was told and was not bothered again.

Death was often a time of high anxiety for the Navajo people. Burial, when possible, was left to a white man to perform—whether he was a trader, priest, or government employee. Father Liebler tried to explain that once a person was baptized, his or her spirit went to heaven and was not malevolent. In one instance, a man died in a hogan, so, according to tradition, a hole was to be broken in the north wall, the body carried through, and the structure abandoned. The widow, one of Liebler's disciples, explained to family and friends that because the man had been baptized, this act was not necessary. The people agreed and followed Christian burial practices.<sup>69</sup>

As a service to the People, Father Liebler established a fenced cemetery near the mission. This was a welcomed addition that removed the problem of handling the dead, hiding the body, and worrying that it might be exhumed by witches for the burial goods or body parts used in witchcraft. Sometimes, he would just receive word where a corpse was located and would then have to find it, bring it in, clean and dress the cadaver, and then bury it, wrapped completely in a new blanket. The people believed in his prayers, and when he spoke of the remains returning to the land, then sprinkled dirt into the grave, the Navajo approved and quickly adopted the white man's method of burial.

Still, old beliefs persisted. According to some Navajos, Father Liebler had told them to stay away from the cemetery, that evil would overtake them and they would have bad dreams. This seems to be a misunderstanding on their part or an insertion of an earlier understanding quite different from the view

Liebler expressed about death and the afterlife. At any rate, 134 graves comprise the cemetery at Saint Christopher's Mission today, a real service to the Navajo people.<sup>70</sup>

There were many other services, what Father Liebler referred to as "fringe benefits" of Christianity, the recounting of which lies far beyond the scope of this article. Saint Christopher's sprang from one man's dream, was operated by a host of hard working, faithful disciples, and reached into many facets of the Navajos' life in southeastern Utah. Through Navajo eyes, the reason for it was simple—"This Father Liebler could not do any harm;" "He really loved us;" and "They call [him] the missionary that does 'em good—don't just talk."<sup>71</sup>

For approximately twenty years, the mission blossomed into a sort of headquarters for the Navajo people of the region. Living quarters, a hospital, school, enlarged chapel, well facilities for mission and community use, and several outbuildings for storage and maintenance helped meet the needs of this growing church community. There were also satellite missions in Montezuma Creek and Monument Valley, along with visits to Navajo Mountain. Saint Christopher's continued to provide services until tribal, state, and federal agencies were able to assume the responsibilities of health, education, and welfare. Many Navajo children received their first formal education as well as their Anglo names at the mission school. The twelve-bed clinic, with 5,000 registered patients on its files, served as a birthing center and headquarters in the battle to fight trachoma and tuberculosis.<sup>72</sup> An emergency airstrip, south of Bluff, allowed for evacuation of seriously ill patients. Father Liebler and staff improved the water system from a series of springs at the top of the cliff to drilled wells still used today by local families; the missionaries obtained through political sources a bridge spanning the San Juan River that allowed children to cross to school; mission staff provided rides to Blanding, Monticello, Cortez, or Shiprock when no other option existed; and workers constructed visitors' hogans with firewood and a meal for long-distance travelers. Annual Christmas celebrations drew hundreds of families from near and far to the mission, where they celebrated the season and ate deer and elk meat provided by the Fish and Game Department. Families built their own campfires on the mission grounds, and when the festivities ended, departed with toys for the children and clothing for all, donated by people throughout the United States. Father Liebler also "helped get important papers [legal documents] for us," provided marriage and family counseling, and became an impromptu judge in local disputes. Even when he left Saint Christopher's in 1966 to "retire" in Monument Valley, he just continued his work in a different area for another sixteen years. Old age may have slowed the body, but the vision was still clear.

In November 1982, Father Liebler passed from this life. His death and burial, to some people, was as symbolic as his ministry. His wife, Joan, believes he chose to release his spirit from its failing body only after he had seen his three sons and had received the sacrament for the last time.<sup>73</sup> The funeral services, held in Oljato and the grave-side service at Saint Christopher's, were conducted in both Navajo and English as an estimated 250 to 300 mourners jammed into the chapel, spilled into the courtyard, and joined in the funeral

procession to the grave. His burial was in the site of the original Saint Christopher's chapel that had burned down eighteen years before. Overlooking the grave stood the "Madonna of the Navajo." John Shorty remembered how Father Liebler, when still in his prime, had said, "I am catholic and now I am Navajo. I have joined them and I live among them, and when I die of old age, I will be buried among them.' That is how he talked."<sup>74</sup> His wish had come true.

H. Jackson Clark, a friend and business associate of Father Liebler recalled what he considered an appropriate symbol. One lone cottonwood tree still clothed in the green leaves of summer stood above the grave as a "sentry," while all the surrounding trees had lost their foliage. Only a slight breeze stirred the leaves, but once the casket was lowered and the first shovelful of dirt tossed into the grave, a strong wind blew in, the temperature dropped fifteen degrees, and the green leaves swirled away from their branches, stripping the tree. "The feeling of God's love was almost overpowering. The wind died down in a matter of minutes and all was calm. Father Liebler was at peace with his Maker."<sup>75</sup>

Yet it was not his dying but rather his living for which he had become famous. His acceptance of Navajo beliefs as a compatible expression of Christian values presaged a later view of Episcopalian theology. He dared to challenge traditional convention by using symbol and practice from a foreign Navajo worldview, while emphasizing tangential points of agreement. He consistently preached the doctrines of his church without isolating himself or his mission from the appreciation and acceptance of the People. And as trite as it sounds, to the Navajo he represented a love and kindness that blended both faith and works. There were few Native Americans or Anglos who did not respect the man for his vision.

Today, the San Juan River still courses between its banks, not too distant from the mission. A dozen buildings stand beneath large cottonwood trees, planted at an earlier time for protection from the hot sun. An occasional dust devil swirls around the yard as a pickup truck stops by the well to fill a water barrel. But many of the services that had been part of the mission's daily life are now discontinued. Most of the buildings stand in disrepair, begging a fresh coat of paint and some willing hands to ply hammer and nails.

To many of the older Navajos, Saint Christopher's represents a place of the past instead of a refuge for the present. They recall the sense of community, the Christmas pageantry, and the clinic and school extending arms to bring health and education to the People. The old ones wish a return to simpler times. But most of all they miss Father Liebler, his figure draped in priestly robes, hair in a bun, face lighted with a smile, speaking fluent Navajo. Perhaps John Shorty's recollection portrays best the mental image that older Navajos have of this priest:

He [Liebler] would go to a Beauty Way ceremony and would bring apricots or peaches in a jar. He would sit there cross-legged with the men. And when they prayed, he would take some corn pollen. The prayer to protect would be performed at night and he would be given



an arrowhead just like they give out to the people. He would hold the arrowhead. "Massage yourself with it, that is what is supposed to be done," was said and he would do it. He would take corn pollen and according to [tradition, he would say] "Let there be beauty towards me from the east, from the south, from the west where Changing Woman is housed, and from the north. . . . Let there be beauty for me from every direction. From where the water flows, let there be beauty towards me, under the plants, let there be beauty towards me, where the gods are, let there be beauty towards me. I am your little one, your child, your grandchild, that is why I ask you. Let me walk in beauty."<sup>76</sup>

Father Liebler's life was a thing of beauty, and in beauty it was finished. To the Navajo, "he stood for them strongly."

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Appreciation is expressed for the financial assistance provided by the Utah Humanities Council in supporting the research for this project and for the College of Eastern Utah-San Juan Campus for its encouragement to record oral and written history in the Four Corners region.

### NOTES

1. Ada Benally interview with Baxter Benally and author, February 2, 1994, transcript in possession of author.
2. H. Baxter Liebler, *Boil My Heart for Me* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994).
3. Liebler, *Boil*, 19–20; H. Baxter Liebler interview by Daniel B. Kelly, June 27, 1972, Southeastern Utah Project, Utah State Historical Society and California State University, Fullerton Oral History Program, 4–5.
4. Marian Huxall Talmadge and Iris Pavey Gilmore, "Padre of the San Juan," *Desert Magazine* 11:10 (August 1948): 8.
5. H. Baxter Liebler, *Moccasin Tracks* (New York: Blackshaw Press, Inc., 1939): 59–60.
6. *Ibid.*, 50.
7. *Ibid.*, 54–59, 85, 94–96.
8. Liebler, *Boil*, 23; Kelly, 6, 15.
9. *Ibid.*, 171–172.
10. Otis Charles, Bishop of Utah, commemorative letter, November 24, 1982, St. Mark's Cathedral, Salt Lake City, Utah, letter in possession of author.
11. H. Baxter Liebler, "The Social and Cultural Patterns of the Navajo Indian," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 30:4 (Fall 1962): 320–322.
12. There have, of course, been other priests who have had similar thoughts and experiences—Fathers Pierre Jean De Smet (Flatheads and Pend Oreilles) and Peter Paul Prando (Blackfeet and Crow), for example. What makes this study interesting is not only Liebler's originality in working with the Navajo, but also the response and interpretation of the people he converted.
13. Liebler, *Boil*, 30–31.
14. Gladys A. Reichard, *Navaho Religion—A Study of Symbolism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950).

15. Joan Liebler, interview by author, March 4, 1994, transcript in possession of author.
16. The Franciscan Fathers, *An Ethnological Dictionary of the Navajo Language* (Saint Michaels, AZ: Saint Michaels Press, 1910); Berard Haile, O.F. M., *Soul Concepts of the Navaho* (Saint Michaels, AZ: Saint Michaels Press, 1943).
17. Kelly, 63–64; J. Liebler; Catherine Pickett interview with author, May 14, 1994, transcript in possession of author.
18. Kelly, 7; Liebler, *Boil*, 23.
19. Kelly, 21–22.
20. Dan Benally interview with Baxter Benally and author, February 2, 1994, transcript in possession of author.
21. *Boil*, 44; Dan Benally; Ruth White conversation with author, March 14, 1994.
22. Obviously, there were many Navajos who met Father Liebler and chose not to accept his religion. No doubt, there were those who may have resented his “invasion” of their traditional beliefs. And as one reads this article, a generally positive view of his work is presented. Yet in all of the interviews I conducted concerning St. Christopher’s, I never heard of any real dissent concerning the man or his mission. Perhaps part of the reason for this is that he did not force anyone to accept things not to their liking; another reason is that he often served as the Navajos’ advocate in the white communities; another is that he often held large celebrations (especially around Christmas time) during which food, clothing, and children’s gifts were dispensed to Episcopalian members and non-members alike; and finally, he provided medical care, education, limited legal and social counseling, and even assistance with burials, to a people who had very few other places to turn for such help. Thus, his brand of missionary work was not invasive, as he consciously worked on social relations as much as he did the more philosophical religious aspects.
23. Liebler, *Boil*, 16, 19; White.
24. Dan Benally; Mary Rose, and John Sampson; Talmadge and Gilmore, 6; White.
25. Liebler, *Boil*, 56.
26. Dan Benally.
27. Fernandez Begay interview with Baxter Benally and author, February 2, 1994, transcript in possession of author.
28. Dan Benally.
29. Liebler, *Boil*, 114.
30. Fernandez Begay.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Jessie Shorty interview with Baxter Benally and author, February 9, 1994, transcript in possession of author.
33. Jessie Shorty.
34. Jessie Shorty; Ada Benally; John Shorty; Liebler, *Boil*, 82.
35. Dan Benally.
36. John Shorty.
37. Liebler, *Boil*, 91.
38. Fernandez Begay.
39. Dan Benally.
40. John Shorty.
41. H. Baxter Liebler, “Christian Concepts and Navaho Words,” *Utah Humanities*

*Review* 2:2 (April 1948): 174.

42. Kelly, 6.
43. Joan Liebler.
44. Joan Liebler; Catherine Pickett; Dan Benally.
45. King James version of The Holy Bible (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, n.d.).
46. Catherine Pickett.
47. Liebler, *Boil*, 197.
48. Liebler, *Moccasin*, 71; John Sampson; Dan Benally.
49. John Shorty.
50. Mary Rose Sampson; Dan Benally.
51. Fernandez Begay.
52. *Boil*, 101–102; Talmadge and Gilmore, 9.
53. Joan Liebler; Talmadge and Gilmore, 6.
54. *Boil*, 62, 122.
55. Catherine Pickett.
56. George Tom interview with author, August 7, 1991, manuscript in possession of author; Ada Black interview with author, October 11, 1991, manuscript in possession of author; Stella Cly interview with author, August 7, 1991, manuscript in possession of author; Ben Whitehorse interview with author, January 30, 1991, manuscript in possession of author.
57. Catherine Pickett; Talmadge and Gilmore, 6.
58. Dan Benally.
59. Fernandez Begay.
60. Dan Benally.
61. Liebler, *Boil*, 67–70; Catherine Pickett; Kelly, 40.
62. H. B. Liebler, *Boil*, 97–98; Kelly, 27.
63. H. B. Liebler, "Christian Concepts," 174–175; see also Berard Haile, *Soul Concepts of the Navaho* (Saint Michaels: Saint Michaels Press, 1964).
64. Joan Liebler; H. B. Liebler, *Boil*, 60–61.
65. Kelly, 43.
66. For easily accessible reading about Navajo witchcraft see Clyde Kluckhohn, *Navaho Witchcraft* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944); and Margaret K. Brady, *Some Kind of Power—Navajo Children's Skinwalker Narratives* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1984).
67. Kelly, 44–45.
68. Clark, 79; Joan Liebler.
69. H. B. Liebler, *Boil*, 189; Joan Liebler.
70. Baxter Benally conversation with author, February 9, 1994; Fernandez Begay; John Shorty; Joan Liebler; Catherine Pickett; Toni Turk, *Rooted in San Juan—A Genealogical Study of Burials in San Juan County, Utah, 1879–1995* (Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1995): 585–601.
71. Dan Benally; Jessie Shorty; Kelly, 26.
72. Catherine Pickett.
73. H. B. Liebler, *Boil*, 205; Joan Liebler.
74. John Shorty.
75. Clark, 82.
76. John Shorty.