

Encountering Pope Francis

Brief Background:

O, What a beginning, and what an end?

Thanks be to God!



Despite working closely with his grace Archbishop Richard Smith at various levels and through many meetings with Indigenous peoples, I never expected that I would be part of the larger delegation going to Rome to meet Pope Francis. But as my Oblate confreres and the leadership of OMI Lacombe continued to encourage me to go, I felt within a call from the Spirit and began to prepare myself for all that I might encounter during the gatherings planned for December 17, 2021.

During the interval when the meetings were postponed due to the quick spread of Omicron, parishioners of Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples started asking me, “Who is going to represent our National Indigenous Parish?” I responded that Garry Gagnon, who was one of the Metis representatives chosen by the Bishops of Canada, is also a member of our parish. People kept saying that we need you to represent us because you have been hearing our stories. When I shared this with Fr. Mark Blom OMI, he immediately responded that, “You should go so that our parishioners can hear first-hand from you what went on.” I was very happy with his support and encouragement, and was then very humbled by how many people immediately came forward offering to share the cost of my travel. In joyful hope, I asked Archbishop Richard if he would allow me to represent our parish as secondary delegate and he made an extraordinary effort to enrol my name which made my presence in the larger delegation possible.

As a religious, I sought our Provincial Fr. Ken Thorson’s kind permission to leave Edmonton to attend this gathering in Rome. Fr. Ken not only granted permission but also made the necessary arrangements for my lodging at the General House in Rome, which brought my expense down. Thanks to Archbishop Richard and Fr. Ken our provincial for their support and encouragement.

Once I knew that I was going to Rome to represent Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples, I called Veronica Kennedy and asked her to make a priestly stole for me to wear while there. She agreed and made one for me and one for Archbishop Emeritus Sylvain Lavoie, OMI, whose trip was made possible by a good friend, Blaine Favel, former chief of Poundmaker Cree Nation.

Reasons to Go:

My primary reason to participate was to represent Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples, which has connections to so many Indigenous, Metis and Inuit Peoples from around Canada and especially from Alberta. A second reason was to spiritually support the primary and secondary delegates and encourage them by being physically present with them in Rome. A third reason was to carry my own personal experience with Indigenous people, carrying both the sorrowful and joyful stories that I had received during my fourteen years in Canada. A fourth reason was to represent all the Oblates who ever worked among the Indigenous Peoples, and in particular the Oblates who worked in the residential schools.

My experience in Rome:

Each day the whole group met for prayer in the morning followed by Mass. Francois Paradis OMI and Lisa Raven, were invited by Archbishop Albert Legatt of Winnipeg, and led the group in a pipe ceremony on two occasions. I was able to participate in the pipe ceremony for the blessing of the meetings with Pope Francis. After each group met with Pope Francis, there was a media briefing where we listened to their sharing and aspirations. I had ample opportunity to meet with primary delegates to listen to their stories and their expectations of coming to Rome and meeting Francis. One of the highlights for me was to witness the importance of media coverage, after each session with the Holy Father, the delegates would share with media providers from around the world and across Canada what they had just experienced.

Another important moment, was a meal for the Métis and the First Nations representatives, along with a few Bishops, at the Oblate General House hosted by the Superior General Louis Lougen OMI. After the wonderful meal, delegates shared their personal experiences and expressed their gratitude for the Oblates who had accompanied Indigenous and Metis peoples for hundreds of years in Canada. They also made a few requests to our Superior General. There was a separate meeting with the Inuit representatives organised by the Superior General. While I was not part of this gathering, Superior General told us that it was a very good and productive meeting.

During one of the free days, Bishop Sylvain and I were scheduled to tour the Vatican Museum with our group, only to realize the schedule had changed, so we did so on our own. It is an amazing array of thirteen galleries full of amazing art, sculpture, and tapestries. That tour ended up in the Sistine chapel where we gazed on the beauty of artwork that had been expertly restored. A final touch was a private tour of St. Peter's Basilica by a friend, Fr. Michael Santiago, who works in the Dicastery of Inter-religious dialogue. He was able to show us some corners, and paintings that we had not seen before, as well as the original foundation stones of the first basilica built by Constantine. That was amazing.

Significance of April 1st:

Indeed, it was not a fool's day but a real and historical day for all the First Peoples of Canada and for Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples in Edmonton. As usual, after our morning prayer and mass, we began our journey to the Papal Palace to meet our Pope Francis. What an experience to go through the security and finally reach the veranda of the magnificent hall for our final encounter with our Holy Father. In the hour we had to wait, I tried my best to persuade various dignitaries and officials, including Bishop Poisson, president of the CCCB, to find a way to give the meaningful, orange, hand-made stole to Pope Francis. Everyone said that it was not possible for security reasons, and I was not on the list to be near the front. I respected the direction of the officials, understanding that such interventions are not possible at the last minute or without prior clearance or permission. The palatial hall was filled with so many secondary delegates that I knew that Pope Francis would not mix with the people, shaking hands and greeting them. I began to lose hope of being able to personally offer Francis the gift of the orange stole, yet something within was telling me that it may still be possible.

As we entered the audience hall, I was nearly the very last person to be seated. Because there were so many chiefs wearing their feathered headdresses in the front it was difficult even to take pictures. After twenty minutes, I felt within that I should make a move forward and I followed my instinct. I slowly moved to the right side of the hall, near the windows, where a few others were taking photos. As I moved forward, I realized that the orange stole was on my chair. I went back to my place, took up the stole and slowly without disturbing anyone was able to reach further along the wall.

I was feeling great about how close I was getting to the exit where Pope Francis would leave.



After his final blessing in English, he said, "and I am not coming to Canada in winter, eh!" to which we all laughed, then he said "bye bye" and was coming towards the exit doors where I stood. As he approached, I held out the orange stole. Seeing it, he came directly toward me, and I was able to place the orange stole on him. I quickly explained to him the meaning of the orange colour and its significance. I told him that it symbolized the residential school survivors' hurt, reconciliation and peace. He said, "thank you" and I told him that I want a picture with you, as he held my arm and hand I felt as though he completely knew me. I cannot express how it felt to be with him. This encounter happened in a such a simple and wonderful way. Indeed, I owe my gratitude to Almighty God for leading me to this touching moment, a sign for all the people that I carried in my journey and who supported me to make this good and meaningful trip.

What made me so happy was that I was able to explain the meaning of the orange stole and he received it so gracefully. I felt an immense joy and happiness within me. Many delegates, including the archbishops who were there congratulated me and appreciated my daring offering.

Afterwards I witnessed the primary and secondary delegates happiness at Pope Francis' apology, they expressed their joy and delight through drumming, singing and playing the fiddle in front of the St. Peter's Basilica. Thereafter, I attended the media briefing where they shared their joy and invited everyone to work towards healing and reconciliation in terms of practical actions.

In conclusion, this was one of my best experiences while being in Rome. What made me happier was to represent Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples, and all the First Peoples of Canada, in such a meaningful way by offering this orange stole. On behalf of the Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples, I gave a letter to Pope Francis inviting him to come to Edmonton and to bless our restored Church as a sign of a restoration of relationship between the Catholic Church and the First Peoples of this land.

Fr. Susai Jesu, OMI

April 10, 2022

