

Following his visit in Maskwacis, Pope Francis ,was enthusiastically welcomed by the 190 people who were hand-picked to participate in a Celebration of the Word at Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples, situated in the heart of downtown Edmonton among the poorest of the poor. A community of faith who, every day welcomes upwards of 250 people who need clothing or a listening ear; people who are hungry for food, for love, compassion, a place to belong. I was one of the ones chosen to be inside our newly renovated Church; a privilege that, until this moment brings tears to my eyes. Even though our family discovered in the past year that we have both Cree and Chipewyan blood coursing through our veins, the invitation to be present in the midst of my Indigenous sisters and brothers left me feeling very humbled and undeserving. I lived a plethora of emotions: gratitude and joy danced within me while, at the same time, I cried almost the entire time as I felt anew the pain, the shame, the abuse- physical, sexual, emotional, spiritual, endured by the children in residential schools-pain which they have carried through 7 generations. Yes, inter-generational trauma is real!

Pope Francis, heard in the core of his being how our Indigenous sisters and brothers were nailed with Christ to the cross. During his message he called us, “to look to Christ, crucified in the many students of the residential schools”. He reminded us that “it is on the tree of the cross that sorrow is transformed into love, death into life, disappointment into hope, abandonment into communion, distance into unity”.

Throughout his time in Canada he reminded us we are called to reconciliation which, “is not merely the result of our efforts; it is a gift that flows from the crucified Lord, a peace that radiates from the heart of Jesus, a grace that must be sought”.

In the midst of the pain, did I experience the beginnings of reconciliation? Yes! As I looked into the eyes of Pope Francis, when he was receiving the symbolic gifts presented to him, I saw Christ, the healer, the reconciler, the Good Samaritan who binds up the wounds of those left on the margins to die. I saw joy, hope and gratitude. I heard in my heart the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, “There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”. Pope Francis, in being among us, laid down his life in order that the very long journey of healing, mercy and reconciliation can be walked.

It was not only in the eyes of Pope Francis that I saw healing love. After he was wheeled outside, I walked up to seven of our elders, seated in the front of the Church, and reached out my hand. Each one looked me in the eyes, took my hand in theirs and smiled, speaking without any words, “We are one; we will ‘walk together’ on the pathway of healing and hope”.

Several people have asked me since then, to describe the experience. Initially, I simply could not respond. My heart was too full. Now that some time has passed, and I enter again into the depths of my heart, the words of Pope Francis help me to voice what I lived. He said, “Here, in this church, above the altar and tabernacle, we see the four poles of a typical Indigenous tent, a teepee... The teepee reminds us that God accompanies us on our journey and loves to meet us together, in assembly, in council. And, when Jesus became man, the Gospel tells us, He literally ‘pitched His tent among us’.” As Jesus pitched His tent among us, may the visit of Pope Francis

empower us, as a Congregation, to “pitch our tent” among the most vulnerable, accepting “ to go through the path of dialogue, forgiveness and reconciliation”.

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