

First Nations and Immigrant Peoples in Québec ENCOUNTER ONE ANOTHER FOR REAL

Bernard Ménard, OMI

What happened on May 30–31, 2017?

There were 250 First Nations people, from 11 different Communities, from as far away as Schefferville and Natashquan on the North Shore. For once, we “immigrants” — in this country for 400 years — were a minority: some hundred non-natives participating in the two days of this ENCOUNTER at the Notre-Dame-du-Cap Shrine (Quebec), and having the experience of *living with*; not just *talking about*. In the evening, when we had grown to 700 people, the First Nation rituals and texts enhanced the symbols of our Eucharistic liturgy.

The poster announcing the event describes its meaning: intercultural gathering and inter-spiritual celebration symbolized by the two forms of teepees ... the word ENCOUNTER translated into 14 aboriginal or non-aboriginal languages. In addition, at the four corners, the colours of humans on earth. The oval shape expresses Community, in the forest-green of our great woodlands ... an invitation to universal solidarity.

Genesis of the Project

Such a gathering was born out of a long missionary presence of Oblates: there was a time when we served almost all of the missions among the Inuit and First Nations, often in tandem with women religious from various congregations. Even though our numbers are diminishing, we are renewing our alliance with these peoples. How is that possible? The Oblate provinces from the South are providing us with five young priests to take over.

Since Vatican II, the evangelization approach recognizes the traces of God that were at work long before the arrival of the Europeans. This is a call for mutual appreciation instead of the sense of cultural and spiritual superiority of the past.

On the other hand, we became aware of the plan advocated by the federal government — at one time and in various ways — to exterminate these populations, which included the abduction of young children to “get the Indian out of them.” This led us to make a public request for pardon in 1991 at Lac St. Anne (in Alberta), for our naïve involvement in that scheme. Recently, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission enabled victims of this system to express the serious traumas they suffered, a necessary expression but which has its limits. In addition to giving rise, in certain cases, to falsified accusations, it does not reflect the happy experience of some residents or educators: that is, however, also part of the “truth.”

Faced with these wrenching experiences, the Canadian bishops wrote, in response to the Commission’s report, that we must develop “a culture of encounter.” And the Chief of the Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador, Ghislain Picard, commented on May 30: “This meeting must go all the way to attain communion.” We have a long road ahead of us...

An ENCOUNTER in Four Steps

1. We began by hearing the story of three happy collective experiences: *Missinak*, a home for abused aboriginal women in Quebec City; the *Peace Mission*, a nine-day canoe expedition down the St. Lawrence River from Kahnawake to the Plains of Abraham, carried out for the tenth year; *Kiuna College* in Odanak, where First Nations youth are reintegrated into their culture and receive academic and professional learning.
2. In the evening, in the great “meeting tent” — i.e., the Basilica of Notre-Dame-du-Cap — a celebration of the Eucharist was held, highlighting the eight values that sustain the community, such as the poles of a tepee, prayer in the six directions, singing in Atikamekw.
3. On the second day, four workshops on: ecology, justice-reconciliation, Indigenous and Christian spirituality and the dispossession of ancestral territories.
4. Then, guided by women, we experienced a moment of spiritual healing at the Spring, and we dropped our burdens (and tobacco) into the “sacred fire,” before entering in single file, dancing as we went.

Scope and Future of this Event

We did not want this precious time to be a show, like the opening of a sports competition or a parade. Encountering in a real way presupposes the sharing of wounds, opening up to understanding rather than to exclusion. It also means the sharing of wealth in order to create the necessary solidarity to dream together of a better future for all.

Let us not forget that Ville-Marie (Montreal) was founded by visionaries of a new city “where we will form a single people with the inhabitants of the country.” The King of France himself sent out his people “to make alliances” rather than to conquer. Moreover, the “coureur des bois” engaged, not massacres, but in sexual relations with the local peoples. The history of the Aboriginal peoples and of the French people includes common sufferings under the British regime: houses burnt, deportations, obstacles to speaking their language, etc.

Like them, we must leave behind the victims/oppressors dynamic, and take our destiny into our own hands. Will 21st-century humanity be permitted to leave behind our partitions and establish new spiritual and cultural alliances?

If the future of the Church is in simplicity, the welcoming of differences, the return to the Spirit (the Holy and Great One), and every step towards reconciliation with First Nations is prophetic. If the future of the world is in respect for nature, industrial degrowth, solidarity between peoples, then we have much to learn from the resilience of the Aboriginal Peoples without, nonetheless, idealizing them.

What future is there for the ENCOUNTER? This year's participants made it clear that they want it to continue, even to hold it every year. The event will therefore take place again in spring 2018. If you missed it this year, give yourself this gift next year, at least for the big celebration in the evening. Welcome!