

Canoe Pilgrimage: A Unique Journey towards Reconciliation

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The pilgrimage is an ancient spiritual practice that transcends religious and cultural boundaries. People have been setting out on journeys to visit sacred sites for millennia. Individuals and groups have been learning that the journey to the sacred place is just as sacred as the place itself. This summer a group of travellers had the opportunity to learn first-hand this age-old wisdom, that the journey makes the destination.

Our pilgrimage departed from the Canadian Martyrs' Shrine on July 21st and arrived at the Shrine of St. Kateri Tekakwitha on the shores of the Kahnawake Mohawk Territory on August 15th. Along the waterways in between these two sacred places the paddlers were immersed in the journey. Amongst the paddlers were Jesuits, a Sister of St. Joseph, a Xaverian Sister and many lay men and women.

Importantly, there were both Indigenous and non-Indigenous paddlers sharing in this journey. Our journey was about getting to know ourselves and getting to know each other by listening to each other's stories.

Becoming Passionate about Healing

Reconciliation was the theme of our pilgrimage. We set out knowing that this month together would not solve the 500-plus years of colonization, abuse and cultural genocide that has come to characterize the relationship between the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island and the new arrivals from the European continent. However, we were inspired by the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and others to take a practical step (or in this case paddle stroke) towards reconciliation. We implicated ourselves into the ongoing journey towards healing and reconciliation.

How did we do this? Quite simply, we got to know each other. We created a safe space where we could listen and be listened to. In order to be reconciled, we need to know who we are reconciling with and why. For us paddlers, we wanted to become personally implicated in this healing process. It is impossible to be truly passionate about an abstract concept of reconciliation. However, it is easy to become passionate about healing wounds when a friend shares their experience of inter-generational trauma with you.

We started to incarnate the process of reconciliation through talks by several paddlers, such as Sister Eva Solomon, CSJ and Michel Andraos, a theology professor; through participating in the KAIROS Blanket Exercise; through having the opportunity to share in small groups, and most importantly, through individual conversations and relationships that developed during the journey.

These means of promoting dialogue within the group were both structured and unstructured. This was very important because some of the structured moments provided a jumping off place for deeper and more profound sharing among the different members of the pilgrimage. It was in these conversations where long-held perspectives and beliefs were challenged and nuanced, that personal transformation occurred.

Challenges

This is not to say that the entire journey was smooth or easy; we experienced our share of difficulties. The first challenge was the physical one: paddling is tough work; sore muscles, minor bumps and bruises, and exhaustion were all part of our daily routine. Early mornings (4:30am wake ups), long days and tenting on the Canadian Shield tried everyone's patience and ability to cope, but we persevered.

Anytime you bring a diverse group of people together and put them in close quarters there are bound to be some personal conflicts. Our group was no different, but we learned that working through these issues only made us stronger.

Our schedule also provided a challenge for us. As we planned this voyage, we had hoped that during each day there would be time for group prayer, reflection and sharing. However, we quickly realized that after paddling eight to ten hours a day in rough conditions, our group lacked the energy to have prolonged organized activities at the end of each day. We had to become creative about how to fit these activities in the best we could around our constantly shifting and changing schedule. Overall, these challenges only helped bond the group closer together.

Hospitality of Local Communities

As the pilgrimage moved from the extreme isolation of the Georgian Bay and French River towards North Bay and then the Ottawa River, we shifted gears. What we had experienced as a group in the first half of the journey, we had the opportunity to share with the communities we met in the second half of the journey.

From North Bay to Montreal, we were hosted by many parishes, religious communities and towns. At each of these stops, we shared with the local community our experience of pilgrimage. These communities joined us in the pilgrimage by providing for our needs, like food and shelter. The hospitality we encountered at every stop was amazing and provided us with a constant witness of God's providential care for us.

The Journey Continues

Looking to the future, we recognize that we are not done with our pilgrimage. When we arrived at Kahnawake, the band member who welcomed us to the territory reminded us that our journey was just beginning. This pilgrimage is a starting point for us. The paddlers returning to their home communities are sharing their experiences with their friends, families and colleagues.

I know many of us will be looking for more opportunities to continue our involvement on the journey of reconciliation. More concretely, we are looking at how this experience might be shared with other groups in an ongoing way. Perhaps we will see annual canoe pilgrimages in the future.