

HOMILY
DECEMBER 19, 2021
ADVENT # 4
By Fr. Bert Foliot, S.J.
An Encounter - Blessed is she who believed

With haste and with eagerness, Mary set out. “I must tell, I must speak to someone. Elizabeth, yes. Elizabeth will understand. The angel told me that she, an old woman, would have a child. That seems crazy, but *nothing is impossible for God*. I must go and be with Elizabeth. I must have a woman-to-woman, mother-to-mother encounter with her.

With haste and with eagerness a delegation of Indigenous chiefs, Inuit chiefs, Métis leaders, elders or knowledge-keepers, and youth has set out and is right now at the Vatican for an encounter with Pope Francis. They have been with him for the past two days, and they will be with him today and tomorrow. They each have a story to tell him, a story about the lives of their people and their experience with the Catholic Church. This encounter was planned for two years ago, but Covid prevented it happening until now. They believe that Pope Francis will receive their story and will understand it. They believe he will listen to their story with his heart, because he has shown over and over that he understands and cares for hurting people. In Bolivia in 2015, Pope Francis said to all the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, “Many grave sins were committed against the native people of America in the name of God. I humbly ask forgiveness, not only for the Church herself, but also for crimes committed against the native peoples during the so-called conquest of America.” Now, Pope Francis wants to hear their hurts, their anger, their fear and their dreams first-hand – heart-to-heart talking and listening. He wants to be part of their healing. He will hear once again the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Call to Action for him to deliver in Canada “an apology to Survivors, their families and communities for the Roman Catholic Church’s role in the spiritual, cultural, emotional, physical and sexual abuse of First Nations, Inuit and Métis children in Catholic-run residential schools.” No doubt he will seek their advice and discern with them on how best he can respond to their request. He will want to do it right, and sincerely, so it brings true healing and justice. And he will surely express his affection and his prayer for them.

Pope Francis will have read the apologies made by all the Christian Churches and Religious Congregations who operated these schools for the Canadian Government. And no doubt, he will have studied the very sincere *Statement of Apology* agreed upon by all the Canadian Bishops in their plenary session, and just issued this past September. I am sure he is very happy with it. The statement says, “The Catholic Bishops of Canada express their profound remorse and apologize unequivocally.” They go on to say that they are fully committed to the process of healing and reconciliation. They pledge to undertake fundraising in each region of the country to support initiatives discerned locally with Indigenous partners. Furthermore, in this statement they invite Indigenous Peoples to journey with the Church into a new era of reconciliation. They want to listen to the experience of Indigenous Peoples and to teach their clergy and laity to do the same. Pope Francis will surely confirm the commitment of their apology. Pope Francis is most aware of how this land was enriched by the blood of the Canadian Martyrs and by the blood of the many, many Hurons who also died for the Faith. And he is most saddened and angered that it was later desecrated by the horrific behaviour of some priests, nuns and Catholic laity. This caused so much pain and destruction. No doubt, he will ask his visitors, who are so familiar with ceremonies of purification, how he can join them in restoring sacredness to the soil, so that once again Indigenous Peoples and settlers, refugees and immigrants can live on this land we now call Canada together, before the Creator, in respect, harmony and communion.

As we remember the very bad and so destructive encounters the Indigenous Peoples have had with settlers, we notice that God has never abandoned anyone. The Great and Holy Spirit has been hovering over us like an eagle. We are seeing wise, intelligent and very gifted Indigenous men and women taking their rightful place in leadership on this land. One such person is Rose Prince of the Carrier Nation in Central British Columbia. Born in 1915, Rose attended residential school and chose to stay on at the school as a volunteer. Spending almost her entire life there, she is known as a “rather ordinary person who lived her human life fully and her faith life deeply in a rather extraordinary way.” She died of tuberculosis at the age of 34. In 1951 when her grave had to be relocated to a larger cemetery, it was discovered that Rose’s body remained completely incorrupt. This has happened to a few saints in history, like St. Francis Xavier, and this state usually lasts only for a few years, but sometimes much longer. Rose Prince has occasioned many annual pilgrimages to Lejac, west of Prince George in British Columbia. There, Indigenous and non-Indigenous gather in faith and

friendship. In deep mutual respect Indigenous traditions of purification and gratitude are expressed alongside all our Catholic expressions of faith.

There are signs of reconciliation, signs of hope, appearing all over this land. We pray for more such examples. We each commit ourselves to make happen this reconciled life together.

Elizabeth marvels and encourages Mary saying, *Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken by the Lord.* God is gracing both of their lives. God and humanity become one in Christ Jesus. As the encounters take place at the Vatican today, let us pray in union with all our relatives in Heaven, that the Holy Spirit will make the Christ-child leap in the heart of Pope Francis, leap in the hearts of the Indigenous, Métis and Inuit delegates, and leap in the hearts of all Catholics and people of good will. May we all look to a future of mutual respect, justice and peace. Amen.

Outline of points for a homily:

- With haste Mary sets out to speak with Elizabeth. She will understand that nothing is impossible with God.
- With haste a delegation of Indigenous, Métis and Inuit representatives have gone to the Vatican and are with Pope Francis right now. They have confidence that he will listen.
- The Pope wants to listen with his heart, seek their advice, and discern with them a good response.
- Both the Pope and his visitors will delight in the Canadian Bishops' Apology and commitment to fundraise for healing and reconciliation projects.
- Rose Prince was an ordinary Indigenous person who lived her life in an extraordinary way. She now attracts pilgrimages of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to pray and respect each other's religious traditions.
- Let us pray that the Holy Spirit will make Christ leap in the heart of Pope Francis, in the hearts of the delegation, and in the hearts of each of us.