RECONCILIATION: A PRIEST'S PATH ALONGSIDE INDIGENOUS SPIRITUALITY

by Rochelle Ledoux Molgat

As the Indigenous Youth Advocate for Returning to Spirit, I recently sat down with Certified Trainer Francois Paradis. We discussed how he reconciled being a Catholic priest with Indigenous Spirituality during a time in Canada’s history when the truth of the residential school system was beginning to unfold; how he finds inspiration in Indigenous Spirituality; and why he connects so deeply with it.

How were you first introduced to Indigenous People?

Canadian/Indigenous Timeline: In the 1973 British Columbia Calder Case, the Supreme Court held that Aboriginal Rights to land did exist, citing the 1763 Royal Proclamation. Two residential schools operated near the communities where Francois ministered here in Manitoba. Several parishioners were former students. Fort Alexander Indian Residential School in Pine Falls ceased operating as a residential school in 1970 but continued as a day school for several years. Pine Creek Indian Residential School (Camperville Indian Residential School) closed in 1969.

While growing up in Dunrea, Manitoba, there were no First Nations communities close to us. I had an uncle who spent most of his life working with First Nations People. While he did not work in a residential school, he stayed in one. When I was in boarding school, we would have missionaries come from Nunavut. I was drawn to First Nations ministry, but I did not want to become a teacher.

When I was ordained, I requested a First Nations ministry and I was sent to Duck Bay (1974–1981), to Camperville (1978–1981), and then to Sagkeeng First Nation where I served for 17 years from 1983–2000.

In 1975, the Oblates held their first two-week Amerindian Christian Leadership Program in Ottawa that brought together priests/religious community working across Canada with First Nations People as well as lay representatives. We started talking about leadership and the Church, and questions about Indigenous culture started coming up. In the beginning, it was hard for us to understand how Indigenous leadership worked and how it related to Church leadership. Tensions would often come to the surface. During this period, I came to Camperville and the whole question of residential school was thrown in my face. The legacy of the residential school system was present in the brokenness that manifested itself among community members through addictions.

The quest for reconciliation first entered my life when I was involved in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal [a spiritual movement within the Catholic Church that incorporates aspects of both Catholicism and Pentecostalism]. This started me on a journey of healing and reconciliation based on respecting people’s faith and life journeys.

"Colonization came to a real intersection with Residential Schools..."
How were you first introduced to Indigenous Spirituality? Canadian/Indigenous Timeline: Between 1986-1994, The United Church, the Catholic Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the Anglican Church, and the Presbyterian Church all issued formal apologies for their participation in the residential school system. The Aboriginal Justice Inquiry was commissioned in 1988 in response to the deaths of Helen Betty Osborne and J.J. Harper.

Not long after the Amerindian Christian Leadership Program, I arrived in Duck Bay/Camperville, where a revival of Indigenous Spirituality and Ceremonies began to take place. We began hearing about sweat lodges and Sundance. While visiting an Elder in Valley River near Roblin, I encountered two Metis women from Duck Bay who were coming to meet with this Elder, who was a Medicine Man. I just happened to be on the reserve that day, and I was going on a home visit when I came upon them. There had been condemnations and tensions between the Traditionalist group and the Roman Catholic group, but I had not had conversations with Elders about things like sweats and the Sundance ceremonies.

During this time, Joe Couture, a Cree elder and former Oblate from Alberta, was reconciling himself with the Oblates, and he brought us to a better understanding of First Nations Spirituality. He helped us to make the connections that enabled us to respect what was good and to create bridges between Indigenous Spirituality and Christianity. It was in the context of these initial meetings that I had my first traditional four-day fast beside where the Little Red River flows into the Peace River in Northern Alberta, along with other priests and religious sisters. The first year, we fasted together in the same area. By the second year, we each had our own fast Hogan made with willows and a tarp. To make it “easier” on us, Joe had us place a bucket of water in the Hogan, but we were not to touch it. We had a little fire and stayed up from sunset to the first sound of the songbird at dawn. We had to stay up during the night, but during the day, we could sleep. There’s a lot of fear in people going into a fast for the first time, a lot of fear to overcome, because when you’re doing a fast you’re either hungry or thirsty.

When, I first started my journey in dialogue with First Nations’ Spirituality, there was fear: ‘What am I getting into? Is this what God wants? And is my being involved leading a whole group of people astray?” I struggled with these questions for years, because they had not been considered before and there was no one to guide us. My experience was that of walking on the edge, trying out different things and dealing constantly with questions. An Ojibwa and Franciscan priest described to me his own journey struggling between being fully a priest and fully a Medicine Man. His openness in speaking about his struggles led me to see that I was not alone and that there was no predetermined path. Another Oblate in the First Nations community indicated that for one to get to know more about First Nations’ spirituality, one needed to have an Indian name. With the assistance of a Metis Oblate Sister, who spoke the language, I offered tobacco to an Elder and asked for a name. I was given the first of three names: in 1984, “Black Wolf”; in 1995, “White Head Eagle Coming from the East”; and in 1997, my present name “White Buffalo Man”.

A few months later, the same Elder who had given me my name, came and offered me a cigarette. I knew he had a message for me. I accepted the offering. He had a vision of me having a pipe. He gave me a description of it and said that I was to approach a pipe maker. I had my first pipe made. I asked another Elder, the Sundance Keeper, about which clan I belonged to. He said that when I was in the sweat lodge, he had seen an old blue eagle fly and perch on top of an old church steeple. He said that I belonged to the Bald Eagle clan.
A Sweat Lodge experience was offered at the first Manitoba Aboriginal Catholic Conference in Sagkeeng (August 1992). (This became an annual conference for the next 10 years.) I still held some fear about my involvement with Indigenous Spirituality. It was during my de Mazenod experience - a three-month Oblate life formation program in Aix-en-Provence, France - that I had a spiritual experience with the Holy Spirit. One day I was sitting up in the mountains during the month-long silent retreat. I heard an interior voice saying: “Why are you afraid?” “Why are you afraid of going to Sundance? Don’t you know that I am with you?” When I returned to Manitoba, I went to see the Elder, the Sundance Keeper. I asked him, “Do you see me in a Sundance?” He shared with me a vision that his wife had had in which she saw me in my white robe praying over the Sundance. “Well, we have been waiting for you” he says. I shared this with the Bishop, a prayer group and a group of priests. All pointed at YES! When I came out of the Sundance experience, there were some who questioned it. Others spoke about integrating the two. The importance of the message of Christ and of Christianity is to be found in the integration.

When I look back at this time, it was all part of the healing and reconciliation path that I had taken in the aftermath of the Residential School system. My path called for recognizing persons for what they are and being open to their experiences.

Other ceremonies followed like the Eagle Clan Ceremony. The Elder’s wife, who was from the Eagle Clan, gave me my eagle wing saying that I had earned it. Therefore, everything that I have of First Nations, I did not go get it. I earned it. I waited for it, even the big stole given to me at my 25th anniversary of priesthood: each flower was beaded by a different woman; one person cut the moose hide; another beaded the eagle and yet another beaded the edge. My stole really came from the communities.

Where do you find your inspiration? In 2004, Francois completed the RTS reconciliation process and expressed his intention to become a certified trainer. Since then, he has participated in Reconciliations across Canada. The most recent Reconciliation Workshop took place in Winnipeg following the shooting of Red Pheasant First Nations 22-year-old Colten Boushie. This event created a lot of controversy and spiked tensions among Canada’s Indigenous communities and supporters. It also brought to light familiar feelings of hopelessness around the lack of peace between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.