

“You Possess a Treasure!”

Something that struck me during the Holy Father’s visit to Edmonton was his emphasis on the role of grandparents and elders in our lives and how the Indigenous people really do this well in their culture. It was very fitting that the Pope came for the Feast Day of Saints Anne and Joachim: the grandparents of Christ. During his visit, Pope Francis talked about how we are not brought into this world alone, but surrounded by people to help us, advise us, and love us. He emphasized how vital these people are to learning the faith. This is particularly true for grandparents.

The experience of going to the papal events reminded me of an Aboriginal studies course that I took in high school. During the course, we met with elders and received their teaching. For the Indigenous people, elders in a sense ‘possess’ their teaching. As the recipient, I was told that after receiving the teaching, I should not try to talk about it or share it with others. This approach preserves the substance of the tradition from being lost in translation as others try to express it without enough experience or knowledge of it. This perspective respects the integrity of the thing passed on and shows a deep respect for the wisdom and experience of the elder giving the teaching. This connects to the Pope’s emphasis on grandparents. It speaks of a great respect and reverence for elders that I think western culture could learn from.

The Pope’s words echo this reality of reverence for elders in their tradition especially women elders:

“I am struck by the vital role of women in indigenous communities: they occupy a prominent place as blessed sources not only of physical but also of spiritual life...Faith rarely comes from reading a book alone in a corner; instead, it spreads within families, transmitted in the language of mothers, in the sweetly lyrical accents of grandmothers.” (Pope Francis, Commonwealth Mass Homily, 26 July, 2022).

Because of my role as assistant to the volunteer coordinator, I was able to attend the Mass at the Commonwealth Stadium as well as the Liturgy of the Word at Lac Ste. Anne. An experience that touched me as a volunteer at Lac St. Anne was when I was asked to help a very elderly woman to the washroom. I think in most day-to-day settings there is some respect for elderly people. Yet, I was still very impressed with the way people made room for her walker and let her go first. This didn’t strike me as a culture that would keep their elderly in care homes or offer them a quick end once that life became unbearable.

During the Liturgy of the Word at Lac Ste. Anne, Pope Francis emphasized, “I would like to say to all those families with elderly people at home: you possess a treasure! Guard this source of life within your homes: take care of it, as a precious legacy to be loved and cherished.”

If we take what we can learn from the Indigenous people and the Pope, we can live more in a culture of life: showing respect and love for those who have loved us and guided us all our lives.