

At First Peoples church, teepee tabernacle is home to real presence of Christ

Veronica Kennedy kneels when she approaches her latest creation.

The Metis artist gazes at the tan elk hide teepee – embroidered with an icon of a brown-skinned Virgin Mary, eagle feathers, the cross on a medicine wheel, and a heart wrapped in a crown of thorns.



Veronica Kennedy is the artist behind Sacred Heart's new teepee tabernacle. Thandiwe Konguavi, Grandin Media

It is by all accounts beautiful. But it's what's inside that Kennedy reveres.

Her intricate creation is the new tabernacle at Edmonton's Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples, which serves a large indigenous population. Inside it under lock and key is the Blessed Sacrament, the Holy Communion bread that has been consecrated by the priest during Mass.

"I did it for God," Kennedy said. "I didn't do it for recognition or for money."

Kyle Beaudry, whose late mother was a parishioner at Sacred Heart, described the tabernacle's teepee shape as a tangible link between First Nations and the Church.

"It's home as I see it. Traditionally, that is the native home. When the body and blood of Christ is in there, then Christ exists within the home."



Rev. Father Susai Jesu

Rev. Susai Jesu, the pastor of Sacred Heart Parish adds: “We call it a teepee, but any Catholic would know the tabernacle, what is inside, is the body of Jesus.”

The tabernacle rests on a natural tree trunk, meant to be symbol of the traditional home of Indigenous peoples on the Prairies and their lifestyle which is so closely connected to the land.

“If Jesus is born in Canada, it would be different from Jesus born in India,” said Father Susai Jesu, the pastor of Sacred Heart Church.

“Jesus is everywhere, but who is Jesus for the First Nations? He wants to come in their own way, where they dwell, and their own way is the teepee, where they find home. He wants to be born in the culture of the local people.”



Métis craftsperson Veronica Kennedy kneels when she approaches her latest artwork. Thandiwe Konguavi, Grandin Media

The new tabernacle was among the more than \$160,000 in renovation projects in the year since Father Jesu arrived at his new parish last year.

New basement washrooms and windows were added and the church’s medicine wheel,

a First Nations symbol hanging on the wall behind the main altar, was cleaned of dust after years of neglect.

The tabernacle is the culmination of a 10-year journey for Kennedy, since she first felt God calling her to make altar cloths and stoles – the liturgical vestments that priests wear over their shoulders.

Kennedy had sewn before but she had never done embroidery. Kennedy asked God to give her an embroidery machine so she could fulfill that call. About three years ago He did, when a crafts store near her home was closing down and she was able to buy a machine.



The Altar Cloth at Sacred Heart is another of Kennedy's contributions. Thandiwe Konguavi, Grandin Media

The first altar cloth she made in secret, only telling her grandchildren, who helped her sew it. Early one Saturday, she slipped it onto a small altar at her home parish, Our Lady of Mercy in Enoch, about 30 minutes west of Edmonton.

When her pastor, Father Leszek Kwiatkowski, learned she had made the altar cloth, he asked her to make one for the main altar at Our Lady of Mercy. She also sewed another cloth for the altar at Sacred Heart. It's a blanket embellished with flames, a crown of thorns, a sacred wolf, eagle, bear, and buffalo, and the red, white, yellow and black medicine wheel representing all people being a part of one circle of life.

When Jesu arrived to take over as pastor of Sacred Heart Church last year, Kennedy, who is a lay minister and a church secretary at Lac Ste. Anne, welcomed him the best way she knows how: with a handmade stole.

"She made a stole for me, a beautiful stole, white and green," Jesu said. "Everybody started saying, 'She made so many, but made the best for you.'"



The previous teepee tabernacle was water damaged (bottom right) and the leather began to rot and tear. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

Understanding her talent and skill, it was natural that Kennedy be the one to do the work to replace Sacred Heart's tabernacle. The church's old tabernacle was also a teepee, but its hide had started to tear and rot. Jesu asked Kennedy to create the new one so that people would see something beautiful when they enter, and feel at home.

She made the base with rocks sealed together with glue, and her husband collected tree posts to hold the hide in place. It took her about a week to finish.

Kennedy didn't charge the church for her labour and she wanted to remain anonymous, but Jesu encouraged her to let her light shine for others.

"You have a gift and you're hiding it under a bushel," he told her.

"She's really dedicating so much service."

Father Jesu explains that culture, tradition, and language play a key role in expressing faith to God.

And for indigenous people, this is clearly evident in the interior design, artwork and worship at Sacred Heart which was designated as a national parish for First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples in 1991.

"For example, smudging is cleansing of your body and you're healed completely, just like we have holy water," Jesu explained. "Jesus finds them in their own culture so that he can be one with them."

Beaudry said First Nations spirituality and the Catholic faith in Edmonton have both evolved and grown together. Sacred Heart Church was his mother's

sanctuary, where she found the light in a dark world.

“The burning candle or raging sun – each are symbols of the higher power and belief in the light that shines in everybody,” he said.



Rev. Susai Jesu shows one of many beaded Rosaries he has received as a gift.

Over the past year, Sacred Heart Parish has welcomed Father Jesu, who learned to speak Cree while serving in northern Saskatchewan and has served as pastor since September 2017.

Many parishioners missed Jesu’s predecessor as pastor.

But Jesu’s commitment to the parish has paid off. During a Mass earlier this month, seven elders presented him with sweetgrass and the healing feather. They spoke highly of him and how he was able to capture the hearts of the people in the community.

The eagle feather, symbolizing that Father Jesu is the protector, the guard of the people, was the ultimate sign of acceptance.

“That was the biggest honour you could get from them,” said Jesu. “They have seen my love for them, for the church, my generosity. All that I did was to praise the Lord because I really prayed a lot for this parish, and I depended only on Jesus Christ.”