

## Indigenous Catholics long to return to church family and sacraments

Listen to your kokum. Trust in your Creator.

For months now, Cecilia Nepoose has – like many of us – struggled with COVID-19 restrictions to contain the spread of the virus. The 72-year-old Cree elder hasn't seen her children, two grandchildren and four great-grandchildren in person since March. And she hasn't been able to attend Mass regularly to receive the Eucharist at Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples, where she's heavily involved as a volunteer.

"I was sad at first, but I'm trusting in God that He's going to keep his promise that He's going to protect me. I believe in that. I trust in Him. He didn't say that for nothing," Nepoose said.

"For me, I'm thinking that this is a time for the people to come together and pray. It is hard that they can't receive Communion, but there is spiritual communion. There are prayers that people can say together as a family. And I really miss my church family. I feel for them."



Cecilia Nepoose is a Cree elder and longtime member of the Sacred Heart parish community. Courtesy of Cecilia Nepoose

Nepoose's church family got bigger, however briefly, when Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith was the guest celebrant for May 20 at [Sacred Heart church](#). It was a Mass primarily, but not exclusively, for Indigenous people. Nepoose is part of the music ministry for daily Mass from Sacred Heart church, which is now livestreamed on Facebook due to COVID-19 restrictions.

In the same way that we may be saturated by the difficult words surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to hear the words of Jesus calling us to a changed way of life, Archbishop Smith said in his [homily](#).

"When Jesus admits that his words are hard to bear, he is implicitly acknowledging that rejection and persecution will accompany those who do accept them. Fast forward to today, to our world in which we have many competing words coming at us through TV, Internet, radio, social media and so on, words that promise an easy life; that seem very enticing.

"In this context we can be mightily tempted to turn away from the strong words of Jesus, with all that they imply, to listen instead to messages that are more to our liking, and will bring us worldly acceptance if we follow them."

The Mass with Archbishop Smith was viewed live by 1,920 users, with more expected to view it in the coming days.

It came exactly two months after Sacred Heart parish began [livestreaming Mass](#) daily and regularly reaching more than 1,000 viewers. Many of them indicate online that they live in remote areas across Western Canada where Mass is difficult to access, regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Sunday Mass can reach more than 3,000 viewers.

"What I take from that is there is a thirst for spiritual connection, spiritual resources, spiritual enrichment," said Rev. Susai Jesu, the pastor of Sacred Heart Church, noting that every day many viewers are online waiting well before the livestreamed Mass even begins.

"They say it really helps them during this pandemic. Even though they don't receive Communion, this is fulfilling for their spiritual journey. During this pandemic, what helps them is them to get connected with one another. That helps me to say, 'Amen. OK. God you gave this opportunity to connect and give them spiritual nourishment which uplifts their soul.'"

Father Jesu said the message of Archbishop Smith was clear: I am with you in faith.

"I thank God for technology that we still can keep in touch with each other," said Nepoose, part of a small group of parishioners who had coffee with Archbishop Smith after Mass. "They're really wanting to come back, wanting to know when are the churches going to open."

To that end, Alberta's bishops are working to determine how and when Mass can

safely return. They will present a plan to Dr. Deena Hinshaw, Alberta's chief medical officer of health, for feedback, and also take into consideration a telephone town hall with Hinshaw and Premier Jason Kenney set for May 21.

Thirty-three new cases of COVID-19 were reported for a total of 1,004 active cases in Alberta as of May 19. The Alberta government reports there have been 125 deaths from COVID-19. Sixty-one people are in hospital, eight of them in intensive care.

While Nepoose said the parish community was honoured to have Archbishop Smith as the celebrant, watching a livestreamed Mass is just not the same as being there in person and receiving the Eucharist.

Nepoose has been a parishioner at Sacred Heart off and on since 1989, alternating between St. Joseph's Basilica and St. Andrew's. For the two years, Sacred Heart has been her home parish. She volunteers her time cleaning the church and rectory. She is involved in the music during Mass, praying the rosary and the Chaplet of Mercy.

Nepoose is also a Eucharistic minister, bringing the sacrament to shut-ins and seniors.

Being apart from her church family – and her immediate family – has been difficult, although she talks to them regularly through texting and videoconferencing. And both families make a point of praying together.

"We're praying against this virus so that it will be over so that the people can start coming back to church again and see our families. I text every one of them that's really struggling right now. Prayer. We pray. That's all we can do right now."