

Lac Ste Anne Pilgrimage cancelled for first time in century

The Lac Ste Anne pilgrimage, an annual tradition that attracts thousands of people and dates back more than a century, has been cancelled this year as a precaution against the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus.

“For the first time in living memory the pilgrimage is cancelled,” Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith said in a video message announcing the decision by the board of trustees that governs the event.

“This is a very sad and difficult decision obviously, but we also realize it’s a necessary one. After all there are not many gatherings larger than the annual Lac Ste Anne pilgrimage ... We simply cannot hold this event when we know that doing so would risk the health and possibly the life of the people who participate.”

Each year, an estimated 35,000 people from all over Canada attend the July pilgrimage to Lac Ste Anne, west of Edmonton, for four days of worship and spiritual and physical healing. Pilgrims set up tents and motorhomes on the site, and wade into Lac Ste Anne, renowned for its healing waters and for its spiritual significance to Catholics and Indigenous people.

The Alexis Nakota Sioux First Nation call it Wakamne, or “God’s Lake,” and to the Cree it’s Manito Sakhahigan or “Spirit Lake.” Rev. Jean-Baptiste Thibault, a priest and missionary, dedicated the lake to St. Anne, the mother of Mary and Jesus’ grandmother.

The cancellation of this year’s event comes after a March 24 teleconference between 300 faith leaders from across province and Dr. Deena Hinshaw, Alberta’s chief public health officer. Hinshaw recommended the cancellation of large events in an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19.

“The advice we received was clear,” said Archbishop Smith, who participated in the call. “Since there is no expectation that a vaccine for the virus will be found before the summer, it would be prudent to take steps now to cancel summer events that draw together large numbers of people.”

Both the board of trustees that governs the pilgrimage site and the company that organizes logistics for the event recommended the cancellation. Many of the pilgrims are elderly or in poor health as they seek out the healing waters of Lac Ste Anne.

In his video message, Archbishop Smith prayed for the intercession of St. Anne herself.

"She has a special love for us, and we for her. Our tradition of going to her in prayer when we need healing dates back generations. Let's ask now for her intercession that this pandemic come to an end, and that God's blessings come upon all who are ill with the virus, their families and all who care for them."