

Lac Ste. Anne Pilgrimage goes online for another year

This year's Lac Ste Anne Pilgrimage is going online for the second year in a row.

"This is a very sad and difficult decision to make," Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith, the chair of the Lac Ste. Anne board of trustees, said in an April 23 statement.

"COVID-19 remains with us, now with worrying variants. Furthermore, although the province has begun its vaccine distribution, nevertheless there will not be a sufficient percentage of the population vaccinated by the time of the pilgrimage for permission to be granted for large outdoor gatherings."

As of April 21, there are 177,087 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Alberta. More than 64,000 are in the Edmonton zone.

The annual pilgrimage attracts more than 30,000 people over five days each July. Last year, the in-person pilgrimage was cancelled for the first time in its 130-year history. This year's pilgrimage will again be strictly spiritual and not physical.

The pilgrimage site west of Edmonton is closed. There will be no camping or on-site visits. In previous years, pilgrims would set up tents and motorhomes on the site, and wade into and take water from Lac Ste Anne which is believed to have healing powers.

Instead, organizers hope to keep alive the enduring spirit of the healing and spiritual renewal pilgrimage with a virtual Lac Ste Anne event that includes livestreamed Masses celebrated by bishops from Alberta and the Northwest Territories, video messages, and other programming.

The Lac Ste Anne Pilgrimage website will be the main hub for the online content. More details are expected to be announced as they soon as they are available. Prayer intentions can be sent through the website and donors can also support the pilgrimage financially. Organizers say that support is needed especially during these times.

The Alexis Nakota Sioux First Nation call it *Wakamne*, or "God's Lake," and to the Cree it's *Manito Sahkahigan* or "Spirit Lake." Lac Ste Anne is renowned for its healing waters and for its spiritual significance to Indigenous people well before Catholic missionaries arrived in Alberta.

In 1844, Rev. Jean-Baptiste Thibault, a priest and missionary, dedicated the lake to St. Anne, the mother of Mary and grandmother of Christ. Grandparents

play a significant role in First Nations families, raising children and passing faith and spirituality from one generation to the next.

In 1889, the first annual pilgrimage was arranged by Rev. Joseph Lestanc, who was inspired by a visit to the St. Anne d'Aurey shrine in Brittany, France. The feast day of St. Anne is July 26.

The Lac Ste Anne Pilgrimage is directed and operated under the Lac Ste. Anne Trust of which Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith is chairperson.

Read the Archbishop's Letter