

Local First Nations people inspired by Our Lady of Guadalupe

Jules Caisse's heart raced as traditional Indigenous drums beat to the singing of *Hosanna* in Edmonton's St. Joseph's Basilica.

"When they were drumming behind me you could just feel the heart, the beat in your body. It makes me feel closer to God and closer to my people," said Caisse.

He's a member of the choir at Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples, invited to sing to upbeat country gospel music during a Dec. 12th Mass celebrating the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

The Mass was a part of the National Day of Prayer in Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples, which has been celebrated by the Catholic Church in Canada since 2002 in honour of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Patroness of the Americas.

In Edmonton, Archbishop Richard Smith and members of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities have celebrated the feast with a special Mass for the past five years. Over 400 people, mostly Indigenous, came from area First Nations and beyond for this year's Mass.

"It was very powerful. Especially with the drums; I love the drums," said Margaret King, a Dene from the Northwest Territories who is a member of the Basilica parish. "This was my first time ever going to a Mass like this, and I feel honoured and blessed. I really do."

The feast day commemorates the apparition of a brown-skinned Virgin Mary to Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin, an Aztec convert to Christianity, just outside Mexico City in 1531.



Our Lady of Guadalupe Thandiwe Konguavi, Grandin Media

The image of the Virgin was left on the rough fabric of Juan Diego's tilma (cloak), and led millions of Indigenous people in Mexico to convert to the Catholic faith. St. Juan Diego was the first Indigenous saint from the Americas.

"Our Lady of Guadalupe came to the Indigenous people, and I think it's important that we acknowledge that in all areas of the world," said Katerina Rain, a member of Paul First Nation, about an hour's drive west of Edmonton.

"She is the new angel of evangelization in our community of Christians. We need to honour and acknowledge her in whatever way we can, and what better way to honour her than Mass?"

Before the Mass, the decades of the Rosary were prayed in five different languages.

Many were visibly moved by Indigenous aspects of the celebration, which included smudging – the burning of sacred herbs – and a procession of chiefs wearing traditional headdresses.

"It was so amazing to see that it was so accepted in the Church," said Fran Funk. "I love it when we have smudging in the Church, the drumming, the Indigenous languages, because I think it's really important to retain our culture. It makes people much stronger."

The Mass included priests from [Lac Ste. Anne Parish](#), Enoch's Our Lady of Mercy Parish, and Edmonton's [Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples](#). It was hosted by chiefs from the Paul First Nation, Enoch Cree Nation, and the Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation.

Our Lady of Guadalupe is also the patron saint of children and families, and women at the Mass wore colourful beaded necklaces and handbags with her image embroidered on them. Flowers were placed by an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe near the altar.

“As a mother to be – Our Lady of Guadalupe is also expecting in that photo – I prayed for a healthy pregnancy myself, asking the mother of our God to watch over me,” said Katerina Rain, who is expecting her first child in March.

At the same time, First Nations chiefs also acknowledged the effects of the trauma of colonialism.



Chiefs and dignitaries represented several First Nations at the Lady of Guadalupe Mass at St. Joseph's Basilica, held since 2002 in solidarity with First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples. Thandiwe Konguavi, Grandin Media

“A lot of our communities are struggling right now and there’s some generational trauma, struggling,” said Alexis First Nation Chief Tony Alexis, noting news reports of two Indigenous children – aged six months and three years old – killed in an Edmonton home last week.

“We ask for prayers for them,” Alexis said. “We ask prayers for the mother, the families, the babies, everyone, to come back to the circle, find a way to have a relationship with God so we have a better quality of life. Prayers for them and for those who are praying for them, so we never forget anybody.”

Pam Kootenay led the congregation in prayer for First Nations.

“It’s important to always have the Indigenous people included in our prayer intentions, especially on today’s feast day,” said Kootenay, a mother of six. “My hope is that the youth come back to the Church and that they put their faith into our great Church, so they can carry it on.”

In his homily, Archbishop Richard Smith said the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe conveys joy and encouraged those filled cynicism and despair to let the joy of the Gospel be "imprinted deep within and shine forth to others."