

Promise made, promise kept: Memories of St. John Paul II visit still cherished in NWT

The memories of the Pope's visit are still vivid for the people of Fort Simpson.

Three decades haven't diminished the thoughts, feelings and details of that day when St. John Paul II made his historic Sept. 20, 1987, visit to the remote town of just 1,200 people and the Dene communities that surround it – in the Northwest Territories.

Fort Simpson is in the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese, which is one of the largest in the world in terms of area but relatively small in population, with about 28,000 Catholics.

✘ John Paul II's visit is permanently commemorated on the Edhaa National Historic Site, featuring a 15-metre teepee, believed to be the tallest of its kind in the world, covering a concrete stage where the Holy Father celebrated Mass.

First Nations, Catholic and community leaders, and local residents gathered for a special service at the site to reminisce just days before the anniversary to reminisce about the visit – which almost didn't happen.

"A promise is a promise," said Chief Jerry Antoine of the Liidlii Kue First Nation.

"Time is not a factor when it comes to memories of that sort," said Bishop Emeritus Denis Croteau, who was head of the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese when the Pope visited in 1987. "It's such a unique experience that today it was like it was 30 years ago . . . the memories are still very vivid."

The Pope originally planned to visit Fort Simpson, about 600 kilometres west of Yellowknife, in 1984. But he was forced to cancel when heavy fog prevented his plane from landing.

Three years later, he kept his promise by making a five-hour detour to visit Fort Simpson during a tour of the U.S.

"It's easy to say 'I'll come back,'" recalled Bishop Croteau. "But the Pope was a man of his word."

In 1984, Andy Norwegian, a Dene linguist, was asked to help the Holy Father with his address in South Slavey, the Dene dialect spoken in Fort Simpson. He was also assigned to a bus with news reporters when the Pope's plane tried to land in the fog.

"I'll always remember we got to the airport quite early. We were all sitting in the bus and we could hear the plane circling the airport, and then eventually we heard that he wasn't able to land," Norwegian said.

✘ "We were absolutely quiet all the way back into town."

Chief Antoine recalls that elders who had come by plane, vehicle and boat from all parts of the North to attend the Pope's Mass took the news in stride.

"The elders were not really the ones who were disappointed," he said. "They're pretty amazing. They let you know things. With that event not happening, they told us that things will work out at the end, and they did."

After the aborted visit, Chief Antoine was part of a delegation that visited Pope John Paul II at the Vatican to persuade him to make another visit – it didn't take much convincing.

"He was right down on the same level with you, the way that he came across," Antoine recalled.

"He said 'Get your people to meet my people.'"

It was agreed that the Pope would fly from Los Angeles, through Edmonton, and arrive in Fort Simpson on Sept. 20, 1987. The date was secure, but local leaders didn't feel completely confident.

"Early in the morning, eight o'clock, it was misty and covered with clouds and I said, 'Oh, don't tell me we're going to go for another one of those events!'" said Bishop Croteau. "By the time he arrived at 10 o'clock, it cleared up, rainbow in the sky, and the plane landed. Perfect."

"Everybody was so happy because we just feared we would go through another catastrophe."

✘ Chief Antoine was among the chiefs who headed to the airport to welcome the Pope.

"When we were driving over there, there was fog. However, there was this special kind of anticipation, something in the air, that things would be OK. When he landed, there was this huge cheer."

An estimated 4,000 people greeted the Pope, nearly four times the population of Fort Simpson. He blessed a monument made of four rocks, representing the four directions, and walked to an altar under the teepee, shaking as many hands as

he could.

“People were just in ecstasy,” Bishop Croteau recalled. “He had touched their hand. For native people to touch the hand of someone, it’s really something, especially the Pope. It will remain in their memory as long as they live.”

The Holy Father celebrated Mass under the teepee – a symbol of the Dene culture – that had been built to mark his visit. The iconic structure is made of 12 red cedar logs, representing the 12 apostles, imported from B.C. because the North has a short growing season and trees can’t grow that big.

Linguist Andy Norwegian was again asked to help with the Pope’s address in the local dialect. But this time Pope John Paul II wanted more than a recording. He wanted a five-minute language lesson.

☒ Alone with Norwegian inside the teepee, the Pope examined the text, pointing out a few South Slavey words that he didn’t know how to pronounce, including a word whose sound doesn’t exist in English.

“I said, ‘What you do is put the tip of your tongue on that ridge behind your upper teeth, force the air over top of it and allow the air to come out the sides,’ ” Norwegian said.

“It was quite a relief when he delivered his message and everybody began to clap.”

☒ Bishop Croteau noted it was important for the Pope to meet with First Nations leaders during his visit, including Chief Antoine.

“After he got to the stage, the native leaders came to sit with him in a circle and he listened to them, to what they had to say, what they expected, what his visit represented,” Croteau recalled.

Thirty years after the Pope’s visit, Chief Antoine said: “The message that he conveyed here really began to enhance what our elders have been talking about, that things are going to work out the way they need to work out.”