

# St. Francis Xavier Relic attracted nearly 80,000 pilgrims

Nearly 80,000 people across Canada thronged to see the relic of St. Francis Xavier that made a coast-to-coast pilgrimage Dec. 26-Feb. 3.

Angele Regnier, co-founder of Catholic Christian Outreach (CCO) who accompanied every step of the pilgrimage, said the local bishops and priests were astonished by numbers.

“There’s a lot of hope that’s been inspired through the pilgrimage, especially the faithful, the priests, the bishops, seeing so many thousands of people come,” Regnier said.



**D'Arcy Murphy was the guard for the St. Francis Xavier Relic pilgrimage in Canada**

The right hand and forearm of the Jesuit missionary who baptized and blessed tens of thousands returned to Rome Feb. 4 with Ottawa Archbishop Terrence Prendergast and a delegation from CCO, including Regnier, her co-founder husband André, CCO president Jeff Lockert, D'Arcy Murphy, who served as the “Arm Guard” on the pilgrimage and others.

On the evening of Feb. 4 , Archbishop Prendergast celebrated a Mass of Thanksgiving at the Church of the Gesù in Rome where the relic is usually housed in a side altar opposite the one housing the remains of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus

“I’ve been blown away; it’s hard to put into words,” said Murphy, a University

of Ottawa student who took a semester off to accompany the Relic. "I have so many stories. It's going to take years and years of my life to actually process everything, to understand all of these graces the Lord has been pouring out."

The pilgrimage cost an estimated \$230,000, said Archbishop Prendergast, though final costs are not in yet, nor are all the donations. He expects any loss or surplus "will be minor."

On Jan. 21 and 22, more than 10,000 pilgrims – including many from Edmonton and northern Alberta – stood in line outside two Calgary churches to venerate St. Francis Xavier. Calgary was the closest city for northern Alberta pilgrims.



The right hand and forearm of St. Francis Xavier has been returned to Rome. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

Though exhilarated at the response the relic pilgrimage received, from the warm welcome of the local bishops to the positive news coverage in the mainstream media starting with an pre-tour interview on CBC Radio's *As It Happens* with Regnier, the pilgrimage was a lot more work than expected, with a few unexpected glitches, such as finding out insurance costs for the priceless relic, were going to double, the archbishop said.

Overall, however, even the weather cooperated, so despite some severe storms in parts of Canada, the pilgrimage travel went relatively smoothly, he said.

The relic's pilgrimage culminated at Ottawa's Notre Dame Cathedral Basilica Feb. 2, with a special Mass for the Feast of the Presentation during which Archbishop Prendergast consecrated a new marble altar.

"By his life and zeal to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth, Xavier challenges us to do the same today, to become what Pope Francis challenges us

to be, 'missionary disciples' who learn from Christ each day and share what we have come to know of Him and the Kingdom with others," the archbishop said in his homily.

Since the trip was co-sponsored by CCO, the Jesuits of Canada and the Ottawa Archdiocese, the "rule of thumb" for deciding on the stops were either a Jesuit or a CCO presence, the archbishop said.

They stopped in 15 cities, but made an exception for Cornwall, Ontario, since Archbishop Prendergast is apostolic administrator for the diocese, and for St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, N.S.

"Everybody's told me they were pleased with what happened," the archbishop said. "People are very happy about it. Any disgruntled people have not said very much."

Regnier said their expectations were "pretty high," because they had received some advice from Fr. Carlos Martins of the Companions of the Cross, who asked her to envision what the pilgrimage would be like when they were in the planning stages.

"Initially I thought it would be 500 people in a city," she said. But Fr. Martins told her, "no, it would be more like 3,000."

Archbishop Prendergast also expected big crowds because of the reception the relics of St. Therese of Lisieux in 2001. For that pilgrimage, an estimated two million Catholics came, according to the CCCB website.

"In Quebec for example, they chose the largest churches and they weren't big enough," Archbishop Prendergast said. "St FX doesn't have the same cachet as the Little Flower, but once the story gets out, his Relic is fascinating."

"Every single place we've gone to has under-estimated the size of the crowd," Regnier said. "Whatever the local people told us, we just put a zero after it."

"In Quebec City, they told us 100 and we got 1,500," she said. "In St. John's they predicted 150; we had 1,800."

In Antigonish, a priest told them he expected 60 people. "We had 1,200," she said.

What proved to be a huge blessing also ended up creating the biggest challenges.

Sometimes, because the local people underestimated the size of the crowds, there weren't enough volunteers, or enough food and water for the team. Regnier said the experience reminded her of the Gospel story about fishnets almost

breaking because the disciples caught so many fish.

But local organizers, realizing “an amazing thing has just happened” were saying, “we didn’t know people would respond like this,” and this “filled them with hope,” she said.

“St Francis Xavier has been on a mission in Canada for sure,” she said. “He’s doing amazing things” whether to the individual person who is wandering in, the person leading worship up front, to the bishop of a diocese, “they’re having an experience of their faith being rejuvenated.”

“It’s been just amazing,” she said.

In a number of places, churches ran out of Hosts for the Mass, she said. “There were so many people at Mass, they had to break the Eucharist into multiple pieces because they didn’t anticipate the number of people who would come.”

Local Catholic priests and bishops were inspired by witnessing so many people who are “searching spiritually,” and “not just coming to see an artifact,” Regnier said.

Ensuring people would have opportunities to pray with St. Francis, to ask for specific intentions, and to deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ was “intentional” and aided by the materials prepared for the pilgrimage, the way CCO volunteers greeted people and conversed with them afterwards, Regnier said.

In preparing for the pilgrimage that began at CCO’s Rise Up conference in Ottawa, the organizers sought three specific graces: the conversion of hearts; the creation of missionary disciples; and healing.

“We’ve had a lot of feedback and a lot of fruit,” Regnier said. Though they can’t quantify results yet, many indicated on the prayer cards given with the explanatory materials and prayers what they were praying for.

Many have also written about their experiences with St. Francis, she said. The cco.ca website has a special “Glory” section featuring testimonies from across the country.

“The missionary zeal is really showing through in all the events,” she said. People are “desiring to lead bible studies and to invite their friends more than ever before.”