



INDIGENOUS VOICES OF FAITH

DCN. RENNIE NAHANEE

Interview by Andrew P.W. Bennett
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PERSPECTIVES



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Introduction

Indigenous Voices of Faith is a series of interviews conducted by Cardus in the fall of 2022, in which we asked twelve Indigenous people in Canada to tell us about their religious faith and experiences. Since 47 percent of Indigenous people in Canada identify as Christians, Christian voices are the primary but not sole focus of this interview series. The purpose of this project is to affirm and to shed light on the religious freedom of Indigenous peoples to hold the beliefs and engage in the practices that they choose and to contextualize their faith within their own cultures.

Father Deacon Andrew Bennett, program director for Cardus Faith Communities, interviewed Deacon Rennie Nahanee in North Vancouver, British Columbia, on November 11, 2022.

Interview Transcript

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Deacon Rennie, it's wonderful to have you take part in this project. Tell me a little bit about yourself, your Indigenous background, your work, and your family.

DCN. RENNIE NAHANE: I am an elder in the Squamish Nation, located in North Vancouver, British Columbia. I'm a deacon in the Catholic Church located on the reserve. I was ordained in 2015, and fortunately I was placed in my home church where I was baptized and had confirmation and was married there. So, that is a great big thing for me.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: That's wonderful. Now tell me just a little bit more about your faith. Tell me about your Catholic faith, what it means to you, how you live it out as a member of the Squamish First Nation and maybe a little bit about your diaconal ministry as well.

DCN. RENNIE: I was born a cradle Catholic. My mother and father went to residential school, and most of my older siblings did too. I went to Indian day school, as it was called. My introduction to the church began when the sister, one of the nuns that was a teacher, asked on Monday morning in our religion class who went to Mass. And everybody put up their hand except me. This went on for maybe a month, and I decided to go down to the church and see what it was all about. It was amazing, because there were elders in my church at that time serving the Lord and very happy with what they were doing. They



were smiling. You could see love in their eyes. And I thought to myself, well, who's going to replace them when they get old? That answer would come many years later.

So, I never went to a residential school myself, and I think I was kind of shielded from all the bad things that happened in residential school. I just grew up in the church, watching my elders, and everything seemed fine. But even when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was formed, I thought to myself, well, I've learned from my elders in my own church, and I will continue the work that they started, and nobody's going to move me from that.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Well, that raises an interesting question. Some in the media or in other elite circles in this country would question whether it's fully authentic for a First Nations person to be a Christian. What would you say to that idea?

DCN. RENNIE: Well, I'm pretty sure we had a belief in the Creator even before the missionaries came to British Columbia.

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And our feelings, our thoughts about Creation, the way that we lived and carried out our everyday lives, and the way that we helped to preserve the land and the animals that we used for food, our spirituality and our culture were similar to the spirituality of the Catholic Church. And I believe that's why our people accepted it. I don't think anybody can separate themselves from God, even though they say so. Otherwise they wouldn't exist. It was God that created everybody, whether they like it or not or they choose to dismiss him. I do not choose that. I have all my trust and faith in the Lord our God, and I serve him. I bow to no man.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Well, tell me about that diaconal service. What does your diaconal ministry consist of?

DCN. RENNIE: Well basically it's assisting at the altar in our church, which I did this morning on Remembrance Day. I also assist the archbishop when he goes and does confirmations or installations or other things. I usually proclaim the gospel. But also I serve when we have our Indigenous Mass on the fourth Sunday of each month. A good portion of the Mass as laid out in the Sunday Missal, which is translated into our language, *Skwxwú7mesh sníchim*, is used on that Sunday. I always like to do the Lord's Prayer in our language, and preaching is in English and our Squamish language. Now that I'm retired, I have been going out to different events in our community and being out there with the people. The last time I saw you, I said I was going canning.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: That's right.

DCN. RENNIE: And I did help with the canning of the sockeye salmon, which they provided. There were fifteen of us. We all had different jobs and, well, we had to filet the fish, which I've never done before. Actually, I've never even canned before. But, fifteen of us made the job quite short, and we got that done in two hours. And they cooked it most of the night, and the next day they said we can come back and take a case home with us.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: A pretty good deal?

DCN. RENNIE: Oh, it's a very good deal.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Now, I remember you telling me that you do some translation work for sacred texts and different liturgical books. Can you say something about that work?

DCN. RENNIE: Yes. So, we hired one of the speakers of our language in the Squamish Nation. His name is Aaron, and he translated the Sunday Missal, including the responses, to fit with the way we would respond to things at Sunday Mass. We cannot translate the readings, because there's too many. There's a cycle of three years [of] readings plus a year with all those different readings. I mean, the costs would be horrendous. And so we just do that in English, and I call that a hybrid Mass, which is suitable for now. But if we get a grant that I'm hoping we will get, I will have a translation of the funeral rites and vigil. And that will be pretty much in the language, with no translation.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: In addition to translating liturgical books into the Squamish language, in what other ways have you integrated particular Squamish traditions that maybe predate Christian mission?

DCN. RENNIE: So, right now we're borrowing some songs from the canoe journeys, and we're singing their songs at the entrance, as the first song. The people are dressed in regalia, and instead of a Christian song, we have our own Squamish song to welcome people into the church. That's once a month. Eventually I hope it will be maybe two, and then eventually three, possibly four times. So people get an idea of not only our words but our songs. And our songs are just as valid as any Christian song. Now somebody might say, "Well, they're not quite theologically correct," but we get the message as the people, we are hearing it. Maybe we don't speak the language, but we are hearing it in our hearts and our minds. And that is probably something which goes beyond some of those Christian songs.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Tell me a little bit more about the parish there. It's one of the oldest parishes in the Lower Mainland, I think, and the church is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, church. Tell me about the importance of that church within the nation.

DCN. RENNIE: That church was built in 1884, the present-day church, that is. We had one before then, but it burned down, because in those days we didn't have electricity and so they used candles—a very dangerous thing to do. That church has a shared history with not only the Native people in our Squamish Nation, but non-native people that come and choose to celebrate the Mass with us. That shared history exists because it's our people that built that church and our people participated in that church. You know, back in the 1800s or later, it was a little stricter than it is today. Sometimes they'd even go and check people's houses and make sure they're clean and make sure they're not eating meat on Friday, and all those Catholic things.

From that church and the residential school, a number of great things happened. We had our own orchestra, which is about forty people, and all of them could read music. There were actually two orchestras, a large one and a smaller one. We had a choir, and they were very good, they were sometimes put on local radio stations. So you can see the way that our people were attached to that church from a long time ago. And then of course there was the residential school, and when the students got out and married, had children of their own, they still came and helped out at the church. There was no talk of reconciliation and all those other things.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Well, that's certainly a dominant topic within First Nations communities and the broader Indigenous population, but also for so many non-Indigenous Canadians. We have been thinking more and more about reconciliation especially when Pope Francis came on his pilgrimage, as he described it, to Canada in July. Tell me a little bit about how you view that whole process of reconciliation as a Catholic deacon, maybe also in light of the pope's visit.

DCN. RENNIE: Yes, I think the big bang theory, if I could put it that way, was when they discovered the unmarked graves at Kamloops, because the bishops of Canada

were not totally in agreement on inviting Pope Francis. So when they discovered those unmarked graves, not just the Native people across Canada but the non-native people got involved and started asking questions to the bishops of Canada: “What are you going to do? What are we going to do?” And I think that helped to push them to finally unite together and as one, and invite Pope Francis to come to Canada.



I do have some questions about that, because a lot of them are politicians, Native politicians, and, pretty sure, residential school survivors. I'm not sure how many people that are actually still in the church have been there through this whole thing.

When the Vatican did decide the Pope would come to Canada, they chose different sites, I believe perhaps with some guidance from Indigenous people. I was hoping that they would come to Vancouver, but Edmonton was just as well, I guess. I wasn't going to go to that Mass in Edmonton, because I reconciled a long time ago, but God works in strange ways. Prior to all this, one of the staff people in the Archdiocese of Vancouver sent me an email to ask me to fill out this form about being active clergy. This went out to Indigenous people across Canada. I filled it out and never heard anything. And then a week before the event, I got the call from Father Cristino, who asked me if I'd like to tend to Pope Francis at the Mass in Edmonton.

And I was thinking—I should have said, “Well, I'll check my calendar, father, see if I got time.” But I didn't. I said yes right away. Well, then I had to figure out, how am I going to get there? Where are we going to stay, and do we have money? But all that was taken care of. And my wife, Emma, had friends up there that let us stay in their brother's house, fed us, gave us a room. They took us to places for meetings and things like that. And it all worked out. I got to shake the hand of Pope Francis. Before we went there, our Filipino friends said, “If the Holy Father shakes your hand, don't wash it.” In case it can still pass some blessings onto them. And then we got a rosary, a papal rosary. Three Native deacons in the back got that as well as some seminarians, some of which I think might have been from British Columbia, I'm not sure. So that's the highlight of my diaconal ministry, which is now in its seventh year, I guess.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Oh, that's a wonderful blessing. Well, I'm glad you had the opportunity to be there for that Mass. Is there anything further you'd like to say or any other reflections you have on your life of faith and the faith of the community you're in?

DCN. RENNIE: Well, I'm still waiting for some kind of response from the bishops of Canada. They're supposed to collect \$30 million. I don't know how far they've gotten with that. I have my application in to the archdiocese, too, to continue the work that I've started. But the reconciliation is not something that's going to change overnight. There have been five hundred years of occupation, with all the troubles that we've been through. Yet from looking at the footage of the other places that Pope Francis visited in Alberta, there were good signs that some people are ready to reconcile.

When I was up on the stadium at Edmonton and looking out on the people too, I kind of felt maybe the way Jesus felt when he'd seen all those crowds coming towards him: with compassion, seeing that some are smiling, some are happy, some are sad, some are wondering what's going to take place next. But I believe it will happen, because Pope Francis is the last person that anybody can approach, after him is God, and you have to die to get up there and it's a one-way trip.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Well, we can all approach him every day, of course.

Indigenous people in this country have not been sitting around waiting for the church to approach them. Our Native people have found reconciliation through going back to their culture, through their songs, their dance, and their stories, and teaching young children these things.

DCN. RENNIE: Yes. Yes. So I feel very grateful that Pope Francis did come to Canada and did make the apology on behalf of the Catholic Church, because unlike other faiths we do not have a national organization in Canada, like the Anglicans, for example. Although we have the bishops of Canada, they do not represent Canada. They represent their own diocese. So, we'll just see what happens. Indigenous people in this country have not been sitting around waiting for the church to approach them. Our Native people have found reconciliation through going back to their culture, through their songs, their dance, and their stories, and teaching young children these things. They can have some pride in them, in being Indigenous in this country. I've seen it.

I was at a powwow, which may not belong to us as Squamish, but back in the early days, when we were searching for where our culture had gone, we needed to get it back from somewhere. The powwow is like the summer celebration in the sun. And so, I was attending one of the powwows held in the gym just about a week ago. The age group were little tots, and they could barely walk, but they're dancing. Then there were teenagers, all in the regalia, and elders also dancing. So we are practicing our culture. Our language program started in this community in the eighties. We even had a band member, Louis Miranda, who was actually Chilean but he married a Squamish woman. He spoke Spanish, but he also learned Squamish.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Amazing.

DCN. RENNIE: He taught that to the Spanish people. Once for our Remembrance Day memorial, I approached Louis and I said, "I need a name for our cenotaph, and

it has to do with serving our country.” And so I left him with that for a week. I came back to him, and he had a big smile on his face and he said, “We do not have a term for serving your country. Serving, to us, is serving food in the Long House, a place like that.” So he gave me another name: “those who went to war,” in our language, and that is inscribed on the monument today.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful.

DCN. RENNIE: “Those who went to war.” I might have thought I knew everything when I approached him, but he was an elder and he knew better how to express those kinds of things.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And was he also a Catholic?

DCN. RENNIE: Yes. He was Catholic, and he also helped out with the Shaker Church too, which is a Native religion. But his contribution is the language. He and a number of other elders who’ve worked with him have passed on what they learned when they were children. We also have a director of the language program who has a doctorate in linguistics, I think. And so our language now deals with past tense, present tense, and future tense and is continuing to develop. It’s just that we need places to practice that language. And I believe our church is one place that we could practice four days a week and during funerals.



FR. DCN. ANDREW: It’s interesting, I was reflecting with someone else that I was interviewing about the role that those early Jesuits like St. Jean de Brébeuf played in creating a written Huron language, and especially “Jesous Ahatonhia,” that great Huron Carol written in the Huron language.

DCN. RENNIE: Yes.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Do you see the church as being, again, that vehicle through which Indigenous culture can be developed and promoted?

DCN. RENNIE: Well, let me say something about the Huron Carol first, which was the first inculturation of Indigenous culture. “’Twas in the moon of wintertime, when all the birds had fled. That mighty Gitchi Manitou sent angel choirs instead. . . . Chiefs from far before him knelt, with gifts of fox and beaver pelt.” Our culture is in that song. Another deacon

was looking to do a pageant on Christmas Eve, and I said, “You should go with the Huron Carol. It’s only about three minutes. And have people play those different parts in there, in the regalia. I think that would be really cool.” And he didn’t even know about the Huron Carol. He’s not Native, but he sounded pretty excited about it, and I hope he does it.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful.

DCN. RENNIE: Yes. So, with enculturation and the church, the church tends to move very slowly, for me anyway. I watched the Amazonian synod, and Pope Francis wanted the Amazonians to bring their culture into the church. There were people on the other side saying, “Well, we don’t want your culture here. We don’t want these false idols and stuff like that.” That same old junk that we heard a long time ago. Our culture is our culture, and that’s what it is. Pope St. John Paul II, when he came to Canada he said that Indigenous people would have a new way of expressing the gospel message, and that the message does not destroy the culture but it purifies it. I wish more people actually heard that. I’m doing my best to make his words

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come true in my church at St. Paul’s in North Vancouver with our enculturation. Other churches around the world, Spanish churches, the Filipino church, the Korean, the Chinese, they all celebrate totally in their language. And I believe that makes that more fulfilling to them, hearing the Mass in their language. And that’s what I feel needs to happen in our church. And I’m doing my best to make those changes while I’m still a deacon. I don’t know if an ordinary person could do that, who’s not clergy.

So, it may happen someday. We’ve been in operation for over a year now in bringing the language to our church. Over time, I think people will probably accept that. The church is finally speaking our language and allowing our customs and culture to come into the church. When we have funerals, we do our Catholic thing first and then we have the Native thing after. So I’m thinking, why not combine those two together? That’s another thing I have to work on. We’re side by side, but we’re not together. We have to join our hands together.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Well, I wish you many of God’s blessings in that ministry, brother deacon. Thank you again very much for taking the time to speak with me.

DCN. RENNIE: Thank you.

Photos provided by Deacon Rennie Nahanee.