



INDIGENOUS VOICES OF FAITH

FR. CRISTINO BOUVETTE

Interview by Andrew P.W. Bennett
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CARDUS
PERSPECTIVES



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Introduction

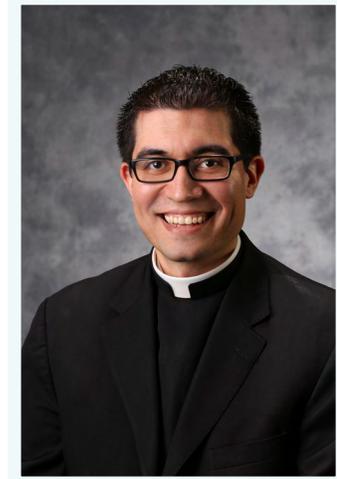
Indigenous Voices of Faith is a series of interviews conducted by Cardus in the fall of 2022, in which we asked twelve Indigenous people in Canada to tell us about their religious faith and experiences. Since 47 percent of Indigenous people in Canada identify as Christians, Christian voices are the primary 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 Father Cristino Bouvette in Kemptville, Ontario, on September 9, 2022.

Interview Transcript

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Father Cristino, please introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your Indigenous background.

FR. CRISTINO BOUVETTE: My name is Father Cristino Bouvette. I was born and raised in Medicine Hat, southeastern Alberta, very close to the Saskatchewan border. Both of my parents eventually found their way there. My mother was born in Calgary to her Italian immigrant parents who arrived in Canada in the late 1950s and settled in Calgary and eventually moved to Medicine Hat for work. My father was born to his Métis and Cree-Ojibwe parents in the 1960s, but then as a teenager moved to Medicine Hat also looking for work. There he found my mother, and as they say, the rest is history. So, my Indigenous background comes through my father's side.



My father's mother was born to a long-time member of the Saddle Lake First Nation, which is a Cree First Nation by origin except that over time others of different Indigenous backgrounds had entered their community. And so my great-great-great-grandfather was actually from the area around Lake Simcoe in southern Ontario, and an Ojibwe man. Having moved out west, he met his eventual wife at Saddle Lake, a Cree woman. And so in my lineage through my grandmother's side, I have Ojibwe, I have Cree, and then I have also the fact that her mother was a British woman. And so there's British and Welsh through that side. My grandfather is Métis, and in a certain sense you could say properly Métis in the traditional meaning of the word. His father was from Quebec and his mother was a Cree and Sioux-Dakota woman from down in North Dakota. They met and moved up into central Alberta, where they homesteaded. And so that's where my grandfather was born and raised.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Tell me about your Christian faith, what it means to you, and how it shapes your life.

FR. CRISTINO: Well, I think I could begin by saying that my faith means everything to me. My faith truly defines who I understand myself to be. This is because faith uniquely transcends all of the various parts of what make us who we are, both informing and being informed by them. I find faith in my life and experience to be a unifying factor of all the other varying and contributing parts that make up who I am. But it is my faith that holds them all together and really gives them the fullness of their meaning. And so, being a Roman Catholic is the most important part of who I am and how I understand myself to be. Of course, as a Catholic priest I must take that one step further, in that I don't see my priestly ministry and identity as simply my job or career choice. It is the essence of my identity as the outcome of my faith.

My faith has inspired what has led me to choose this path. Indeed, those two things together, my faith and my vocation, truly fulfill the essence of my being. I believe the many other features of who I am are interwoven with those realities. After ordination I was first assigned to the Tsuut'ina Nation, where I served in a parish community on the southwestern boundary of Calgary. There I had the opportunity to serve not only in what I guess you could say was a standard city parish in southwest Calgary but also having the opportunity to go routinely out to the reserve that we also had the pastoral care of. It gave me an opportunity from day one of my ordained ministry to be

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ministering among people who I felt a special and unique closeness to because of my own Indigenous heritage. This was to my advantage from the very beginning. I think any time, for those people in particular, when someone new comes, they're especially cautious being on the outskirts of the city. They don't have at Tsuut'ina a properly defined national identity, if you will, as some of the other First Nations experience, given the remoteness of their community, and so they're cautious about who this person is walking into their community. So there was an instant removal of that barrier, not due to my priestly identity but the fact that I was one of them, culturally speaking. That built a bridge which then facilitated the exercise of my priestly ministry. It was a beautiful experience for me to see just how complementary these realities could be. I saw

myself first and foremost as the Catholic priest who was coming to minister to these people, but it was in fact through my Indigenous identity that my priestly ministry was allowed to flourish and I could serve them fruitfully.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: In speaking of that cultural reality, you prompted a little thought in my mind and that is about the enculturation of the gospel. Could you speak a little bit on your understanding of that, because there are certain narratives out there today that would see that as being somehow inauthentic.

FR. CRISTINO: The entire purpose of the gospel is for the sake of being appropriated by the people who receive it. If the people who hear the gospel believe it's their responsibility to turn the gospel into something culturally familiar to them, then they have not received this living word of God, this proclamation of good news. They're rather imposing something upon it. It has to be understood in the reverse: that the gospel is brought to and announced to a group of people who pre-exist that gospel and then who receive it or reject it. In receiving the gospel, the only way we can be guaranteed its ability to be understood and to be related to is if it's delivered in a manner that we could say is enculturated.

I worry about what I see happening in our more modern times, not exclusively now but for maybe several generations. It is the idea of there needing to be some kind of a reversal, where our cultures are imposed upon the gospel in such a way that we now think it will be relatable. In actual fact, it was using cultural expressions to the advantage of those who first came to proclaim the gospel that made it understandable to them in the first place. That's what gives them freedom. That's what allows them



now having been able to clearly understand what is being presented to them, in language familiar to them, in a way that looks familiar and acceptable to them, to accept or reject it. It honours their freedom for the gospel to have been enculturated for their sake. But, it is a contradiction to imagine that we have to make the gospel our own. We should not impose upon it how we think, or how we live, or what we believe, in order to make it relatable.

If it's not relatable as it's presented to you, the failure is on the part of the one trying to do the presenting, not in the content of what's being presented. This is a distinction that has not been clearly understood more lately. In the early proclamation of the gospel, at least here in Canada, very sincere efforts were taken to make it clear that this is the gospel that is being proclaimed, and we will do everything in our power to proclaim it in a way that you will be able to receive it, and then you will accept it or reject it.

The overwhelming majority of Indigenous people in Canada accepted it. Most Indigenous people in this country would in their present state or in their family's history be recognized as Christians, and I owe a debt of gratitude to my Indigenous grandmother, who I always called kokum because she insisted on reminding us that we did not have the gospel imposed upon us. We did not have Christian faith imposed upon us because of her time in the residential school or her father's time in the trade school that he was as sent to. No, it was because our family freely chose to receive the saving message of Jesus Christ and lived it and had continued to pass it down.

That is an authentic acculturation of the gospel. And so I think it's important that we keep clear in our mind which direction the enculturation is going, so that it's actually at the service of people's freedom and not people transforming what has been the immutable message of salvation promised in Jesus Christ for two thousand years.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: So, what you're saying is that the gospel is not just for the apostles sitting in the upper room on the day of Pentecost?

FR. CRISTINO: That's exactly right. They had to find a way to proclaim it, and it was manifested in Pentecost itself. They were made capable of communicating the gospel in a way that people who first heard it could understand it. That is always how the gospel needs to be proclaimed. If it was just meant to stay with the apostles and then everyone else got to turn it into whatever they wanted, there'd be no church.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: What would you say is your view on how your faith as an Indigenous Christian is understood by others?

FR. CRISTINO: Well, I was alluding to it I think already in my previous response, because there is the latent assumption that if Indigenous people are Christians, it's because they were coerced or forced into being Christians. I find that incredibly insulting to Indigenous people's intelligence and freedom. My grandmother was not tricked into becoming something that she didn't want to be, and then tricked into staying that way for ninety-nine years and eleven months of her life. She was a Christian from the day of her birth, and she remained a Christian until the day of her death. And so that was not by the consequence of some imposition. I really think that we are moving in the direction of having this assumption that if someone is a Christian and an Indigenous person, it's surely not because they want it to be, and if there are some, they're a rare exception. Perhaps we are now in a time when it's a rare exception that there are Indigenous people who want to remain Christians, and they're free to reject it and they will bear whatever consequence that comes from that decision. But it was their decision to make, and it was always their decision to make, because faith is not faith if it's not free. If you are not choosing this, then whatever it feels like or whatever you think it is, it's not what we understand faith is supposed to be from a Christian perspective, from the Christian tradition.



I do believe that probably the majority of Canadians at this time, out of some mistaken notion of guilt for whatever their cultural or ethnic background is, think they are somehow responsible for Indigenous people having had something thrust upon them that they didn't want. But I would say, give us a little more credit than that and assume that if there is an Indigenous person who continues to persevere in the Christian faith it is because they want to, because they understand why they have chosen to in the first place, and they remain committed to it. We should be respectful of that.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: What do you think is the particular role of Indigenous Christians in the process of reconciliation today in Canada? We hear a lot about the role of the churches, the government, and Indigenous leaders, but what about the people who are in the pews? What is their role in this process of reconciliation and, by extension, forgiveness?

FR. CRISTINO: I feel badly to put it in such blunt terms, but I believe that Indigenous Christians in this country right now are living in the time of new martyrdom. I highly doubt it would ever be the martyrdom that costs them their physical mortal life, but they are ostracized and humiliated sometimes within their own communities if they openly express their Christian or Catholic faith. I have dealt with a number of Indigenous Christians who are very faithful in the practice of their respective Christian denomination who are insulted by their fellow band members and on the reserves on which they live. Sometimes even threatened that they have betrayed their people.

That is so sad and so shocking. Yet their steadfastness and their ability to persevere in the face of being slandered or threatened I think serves as a witness to all of us, not even just other Indigenous people but for the entire country to see. For the rest of you running around apologizing for everything nowadays, the apologies that you're making on behalf of Indigenous people who shouldn't be Christians fly in the face of these people who are willingly remaining Christians despite the personal affronts that they suffer. We should be coming to their aid with our support and our thanks and our recognition of their good example and therefore our encouragement. And I think that those who refuse to see it in those terms, or perpetuate this anticolonial perspective that anyone who's a Christian is just a victim of colonization, are overlooking, as I said earlier, the intelligence and the competence of their fellow brothers and sisters who were capable of making this decision.

If there's going to be reconciliation, it's going to have to come from individuals who remain hurt, choosing to move forward in a path of forgiveness if they feel that they can. And they will be immensely helped along that path of personal liberation and healing by looking to the example of brothers and sisters of theirs who have already found their way much further down that path. For so many of them, they would say it's to their faith that they attribute the most assistance in having made that decision in the first place. Thus reconciliation is very much bound up in individual decisions to forgive. Otherwise, we are just repeating from a nicer perspective the imposition of the church upon people, but now saying, "We will be reconciled." Well, that's not anyone else's decision to make except the individual's. If we're going to honour the individual, they have to be free to choose. And I think a great contribution toward their decision to choose that forgiveness and healing and reconciliation will be the example of their Indigenous brothers and sisters who have already chosen that.



FR. DCN. ANDREW: Thank you. Is there any other thing you'd like to say or comment on before we finish the interview?

FR. CRISTINO: Well, only just that conversations like this, I think, help inch us ever closer, and I hope that they continue.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Thank you, Father Cristino.

FR. CRISTINO: Thank you.

Photos provided by Rev. Fr. Cristino Bouvette.