



INDIGENOUS VOICES OF FAITH

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG

Cardus Faith Communities
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CARDUS



About Cardus Faith Communities

The Cardus Faith Communities program conducts research and promotes understanding of Canadians' freedom of religion and conscience, the place of religion in the public square, and the ways in which faith congregations are active contributors to our common life.



Cardus is a non-partisan think tank dedicated to clarifying and strengthening, through research and dialogue, the ways in which society's institutions can work together for the common good.

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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 the majority 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 Rosella Kinoshameg in Wikwemikong, Ontario, on October 11, 2022.

Interview Transcript

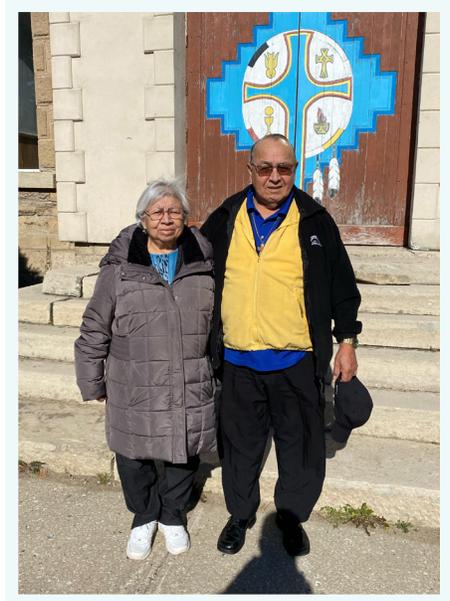
FR. DCN. ANDREW: Rosella, to begin, why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself and the community you're part of here, and a bit about Wikwemikong?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Well, I've lived here most of my life. I lived in the south end of the reserve in South Bay. I did go to residential school, because we didn't have a school bus. So my sister and I went. We came back after they got the school bus, and then the Pontiac School here in Wikwemikong was opened. Then we moved here and went to school here. They had high school till grade 10 at the time. Then I went to North Bay, where the nuns used to run the St. Joseph's College, for grades 11 and 12, and did some of my 13. I missed out on a couple of subjects, so I did those at night school later.

Then I applied to a nursing school. I applied both in North Bay and Sudbury and got accepted at both. I chose Sudbury, because it was closer and I could go home on weekends. So I went there for three years, graduated, worked in Sudbury for a year, got married, and my husband wanted to go to University of Windsor. So we moved to Windsor in September, but I was pregnant, and so I had my first baby in January in Sudbury. Then in May of that year, I applied at a couple of hospitals in Windsor. I got a job at Hôtel-Dieu on the psychiatric unit and was there for three years. By this time my husband finished his course, and he moved, he got a job in Ottawa. So we moved to Ottawa, where I did the post-RN program, and then when I finished, I guess they were looking for nurses for here. So I put in my application, and I got the job in Wikwemikong as a community health nurse. So I came home, and by this time I had three children.

So I was here maybe a total of eight years or nine years, and then I quit. And then I got a job in Little Current, covering the other reserves with another nurse for another eight years, nine years. And then I worked in Nipissing First Nation for a total of seventeen years, before coming home again as health manager. When they say "interim" they don't mean it: it turned out to be a whole year. And then I said, "Well, I was supposed to be retired." But anyways, so I came home, and then I got another call: Could I come and do another interim position? And then COVID came along.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And now here you are.



ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: And here I am. When I came back as a nurse, these ladies in the community said, “What if we should make you parish council president?” What? I’d never been in the back of the church. I didn’t know what was there. So I had to learn everything myself to know what’s there, where do they keep this, and just look at everything and find out where all the things were.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: But this is the parish you grew up in, of course.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Over there. Our Lady of Grace.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Tell me about your faith. Tell me how you live out your faith and why it’s important to you.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Well, I suppose as children, we learned our prayers in the [Algonquian] language. And my father played the organ in church all the time. He took us to church every Sunday. Or maybe not every Sunday, but when the priest came. Sometimes it was once a month in the summer. We used to go by boat. We’d take our food and go by boat along the shore and go to the church, have something to eat, and then come back. In the winter, I don’t know if we had any winter Masses. If we did, we went by horses.

But I remember coming here once to Wiki; we came by horses all the way from South Bay, which is about twenty kilometres. And it was in a wagon, and we were well covered with hay and stuff. I remember coming, I think it must have been for Christmas Mass. After I came back from residential school, I guess my dad taught us all how to play the organ. I think I was twelve years old when I first played the organ. So we got started that way. And, well, of course when we went to residential school we had to get up for Mass every morning, going to chapel. We would go across the road on Sundays to the boys’ school that had a bigger chapel. And that’s where we went.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Right. And where was the residential school you were at?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: In Spanish.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And where’s that in relation to Wiki?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Oh, if you come through Espanola, you keep going straight west and it’s about maybe an hour from there. I was just thinking about my grandson. They just had a baby this morning.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Oh, congratulations!

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Once we were going to Sault Ste. Marie, and on the way I had heard they were demolishing that boys’ school. So I told my husband, I said, “Let’s stop and look at where they’re at in this demolition.” So we pulled in to go toward the school. My grandson says, “Where we’re going, Mama?” I said, “We’re going to go have a look at the school, the boys’ school, the residential school.” “Is that where they made you wash and wash and wash until you became white?” he says to

me. I said, “Where did you learn that?” He said, “Somebody came to our school, and that’s what they told us.” I said, “Oh.” So I had to do a little explaining.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wow. Tell me a little bit about your life here in the parish and how you’re living out your faith in this place?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Well, I guess when I became [parish council] president I had to learn lots of things. Before then, I think the only thing that the people were allowed to do was to do the fundraising. They weren’t involved in anything else in the church, just the fundraising. And I thought, “There’s got to be more to the church than fundraising.” And so that’s when I started thinking about spirituality. We lived a very traditional way of life as children. We lived those teachings that they talk about. That’s the way we lived. And so when I got a little bit older, I was thinking, “How come people aren’t living the same way as we did?” That’s what I used to see, the different ways of life such as alcohol and violence and those kinds of things. Our home was a house of refuge for these women that were experiencing violence at home. They would come, and their husbands would never come to our house because they were afraid of my father.

But to believe in the things that I was taught, the traditional things, the way of life and the meanings of these things, and then in a church, well, those things help one another and they make me feel stronger.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: He was a good man.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: He was a good man. He was a very spiritual man. He did all the prayers when somebody died. He went to all the wakes. He did all the prayers and the singing and the playing. That was what he did. But at home we did observe some of the traditional things like offering tobacco and doing smudging. My dad would do that, as well as some other

ceremonies that we became aware of that was happening in the home. But then, when we went to residential school, we never spoke about anything. We never shared anything about how we lived. We couldn’t.

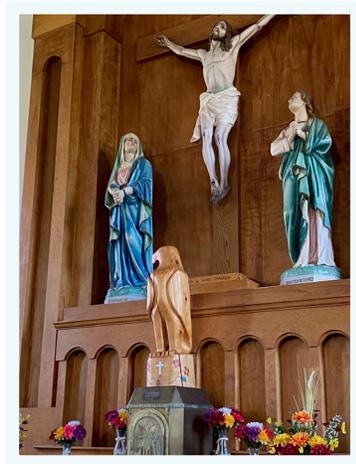
I think that’s what helped me in becoming a nurse. The basic teaching of that way of life that we had kind of helped us. When I did come home, there was this priest who came one day, and we were invited to the church, it became open, and he said, “Bring in your traditions, bring in your culture.” I said, “Oh yeah, we do that.” So we brought in the colours, we brought in the smudging. Mind you, that was very difficult at first. People wouldn’t do it, because they were told this was evil and they would go to hell. I think they had that in their mind, and so I had a lot of explaining to do every Sunday. I would say, “These are the medicines that the Creator gave us to use for purification, to cleanse.” On Good Friday, we set up the wake for Jesus after the three o’clock service. We set up the cross, and then I used to put the smudge bowl and the feather and everything up there. An elderly person who cleaned the church, she was always helping, was against that. She was one of those who was told, “Go to hell if you do this.” Once I was in the back of the church, and she was busy cleaning

around, putting papers and books away. And I was sitting there when all of a sudden I said, “Well, what’s going on up there?” I could see smoke. She was smudging.

I never thought I’d see that day. Yeah.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Tell me more about that, Rosella. Because I think there is this view held by some, I think, in our country, that you can’t be authentically First Nations and be Catholic. Where does that come from? What’s your thought on that?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: I’ll give you an example. I was working at the Wikwemikong Health Centre, and this lady come around just traditional, totally



traditional, not Catholic. Then this was after we introduced the smudging and the colours and that in the church. She came around, and she said to me, “We have to take those things out of the church.” And I said to her, “These are the things that our ancestors did. They used these ceremonies, they used these objects, they used these sacred items and the smudging, the medicines.” I said, “So if I want to smudge as a Catholic, I’ll smudge, wherever, whenever I want. And no one is going to tell me otherwise. No one,” I told her. She went to the chief and to somebody else, who told her the same thing. So then she just kind of backed off, I guess. She wouldn’t speak to me; now she does.

And then there was a little later a young lad who was getting into the traditions, I guess, learning about all these things. He came to us at the church after we were finished one time. He was telling us the same thing, that we had to get these things out of the church. They didn’t belong in the church. Our deacon Gilbert was there too. We listened to the boy. Then Gilbert said, “If you even practice one of those teachings that we have, respect, you wouldn’t be talking to us like this.” Well his tone of voice just changed.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: We were talking a little bit before we began the recording that there’s nothing inconsistent between having Indigenous cultural traditions and the Catholic faith.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: No.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: What would you say to someone from outside the reserve, from outside Wiki, who would question how Indigenous you are because of your Catholic faith?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Well, I can’t change being Indigenous. That’s something that is me. I can’t change that. But to believe in the things that I was taught, the traditional things, the way of life and the meanings of these things, and then in a church, well, those things help one another and they make me feel stronger.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: You had mentioned earlier about how you realize that church wasn't just about fundraising, that there is some spirituality involved. Tell me about how you began to enter into that spirituality. What did that look like?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Well, I think probably it was around the beginning of 1980s, when Anderson Lake [Anishinaabe Spiritual Centre] was being made. So I went there whenever I could. And I really liked that. It's a place of enlightenment. And that's truly what it has been. People like to go there because it's such a peaceful place, a spiritual place, and people like to go for that. Bishop Carter¹ had encouraged the Indigenous part of our culture to be in there. But somewhere along the line that was not there; I don't know what happened. And then I went to a meeting in Winnipeg, and somebody who had been to the Centre was also attending that event said, "There's something missing. You don't have that Indigenous part in that program anymore." Okay, I'll see what I could do.

I became more and more involved with the Centre. So back in 2016, 2015, I think, was when Fr. Peter Bisson was the [Jesuit] provincial. He asked me if I would start up the board. And so with his suggestion, we got some people together and we began the board. That place was built to encourage people to become more involved in the church. And so that's where I've been encouraging, using the traditional teachings to really help people to include both the Catholic and the traditional, to understand the meanings of these things. You have to know why you have the feather. What does it mean? You have to know why we use the medicines. What do the medicines do? Why do we do sunrise ceremonies? Why do we have the pipe ceremony? Why do we do a cedar bath when somebody's dying? That was not done, either, before when I first came here. But the elders of course took me under their wings, and one of them said, "We used to do a cedar bath when somebody died." I said, "Oh, okay, let me see what I could do." I was the nurse, so you can do these things. So I started teaching and talking about cedar baths. That was a long time ago, in the early seventies.

We had had a deacon who went through the program, and his wife. He died in hospital, and they called me to go, and I did the smudging there. Then his wife died just a few years ago, and so the family asked me if I would come to the house. So I went and spoke with the family and did a prayer. One of the daughters come and told me, said, "We're going to give my mother a cedar bath. Have you ever seen that done?" she says to me. I just said, "Yes, I have." Now it's done. Almost every person who dies, the family goes in. We don't have one certain person who does it all, because we have, well, fifty deaths a year here. So it's the family that does that.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And typically that would happen, and then they would be brought to the church for the funeral Mass?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Yeah. Well, if the person is dying at home, they might do it at home as the person is dying, or after they die, and they're in the funeral home. The funeral home is aware of this now, and they'll ask, "Are you going to be

1 Bishop Alexander Carter, 1909–2002. Bishop of Sault Ste. Marie, 1958–1985.

doing a cedar bath?” And then they’ll do it at the funeral home, then they’ll dress the body, and then bring the body home. I’ve tried to help the people to use both traditions: Catholic prayers, and then we have our prayers in the language.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: You are involved in something called Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle. Tell me a little bit about that and its work.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Yeah, I don’t know who, maybe, oh, I think was Ron Boyer who called me as the deacon from Kahnawake. He said, would I like to be on the first Catholic Aboriginal Council? So we had to get approval of the bishop for me to be on there. We were only supposed to be on it for so many years. So my number of years was up, and I told the bishop, “You have to find somebody else.” “No, no, you stay on there,” he said. And then finally I said, “I have to get off now.” But I had to find somebody to replace me. So that’s what I did. And then in 2015, I think it was, before he retired, I got a medal from his ceremonies in Sudbury. I always forget the name of that medal. It’s a merit medal given by the pope. So that’s what I got, and then he says, “Oh, I’ll have to find something else for you to do,” he said. Then the next thing I knew, they were calling me to sit on our Lady of Guadalupe Circle. I said, “Okay.” I was a member, I guess a member at large, because I don’t belong to a religious congregation. For a couple of years Archbishop Murray Chatlain and I were co-chairs of the Circle.



FR. DCN. ANDREW: And what’s its role? What does it do?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: We try to meet once a year in person, with two meetings per year. We have a website where we have put our Indigenous prayers. It was a lot of our members from Our Lady of Guadalupe who were involved in the working committees to prepare in different ways [for the papal visit]. I was involved in liturgical preparation, where we were looking at creating prayers like novenas. When they were looking for Prayers of the Faithful, I got a call to write them up, which I did. When I did that, I was thinking about all the reconciliation things that you really want to be prayed for: acceptance, and for people to really come to terms with whatever’s hurting them. All of that is truth and reconciliation and healing. That’s what I was hoping for. I don’t know if those prayers were ever used.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: At least they were written.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: At least they were written, yeah.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Now, maybe just one last question. Give me your reflections on the visit of Pope Francis to Canada.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: When the people were going to Rome, and I was working on those liturgical and the other committees, they said anybody working on those were not being considered to go to Rome to see the pope. And I said, “Oh, okay.” So when they said the pope was coming, I thought, well, there’s no way I’m going to be going to see the pope, because I’m doing all this work. So I was kind of resigned to that. And then I think it was Fr. Peter Bisson who wrote and said, “Okay, would you go to Edmonton?” And I was like, “I don’t know if I want to go to Edmonton.” I said, “Let me think about it.” Ha ha. Anyway, finally I said, “Okay, I’ll go.” So yeah, I was glad I went. We met at the airport, because we were waiting for all the group members to come, because we were all flying together, and it was kind of hard. Then we went to Edmonton, to that Sacred Heart Church [of the First Peoples] for Sunday Mass, and I was thinking about all those prayers I did. So it was hard.



But anyways, so we went to Maskwacis, and I think that was the best day of his visit. That was the best day, because all the Indigenous people who were there. They had the dancing, the drumming, and the regalia, and of course the speeches and the prayers in their language. They speak a different language from us, so I did not know what they were saying. And then to give the pope that headdress, I thought that was great. Whenever somebody comes to visit, we always give them something. Like at home, my mother used to have all these preserves,

and when somebody came to visit she would say, “Oh, I should go down, get the preserves, and give them a jar.”

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Even to watch the pope come down that road in his wheelchair, I could see what pilgrimage it was, because I was also on pilgrimage there. And I thought, “Yeah, that pope has to be very humble.” Because he wasn’t in the wheelchair before, just very recent, eh. It’s the hardest thing to have to rely on something to help you.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: It was definitely a sign of humility.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Very much.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: A very powerful image. Any last thoughts, Rosella?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: When we went the next day to the stadium, I don’t know, I didn’t say anything Indigenous. Nothing. Well, even though Deacon Gilbert was in the procession carrying the [Gospel] book, that was the only Indigenous thing. Prayers, Masses, in Latin? Yeah. I don’t know where that came from. And there was no drumming. They had it really long before, as part of the entertainment, I guess.

When I had asked the bishops [about the Mass,] they told me, “This is not for the clergy, this is for Indigenous.” I said, “Where’s the Indigenous in this whole thing?” We had survivors who were kind of in the back in that stadium, and bishops and priests right up close. It was the same thing in Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré. I heard of Indigenous people wandering in the church, trying to find a seat, who couldn’t find a seat to sit. I said, “That’s not good.” And close up in the front, clergy, dignitaries.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: It leaves a bad impression.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: So I said, “Yeah, people have to know what reconciliation is.” And they said, “This is a good first step. It’s the first step for the pope to come and say what they asked for, make that apology.” And I was talking to somebody who spoke Spanish. And he said, how he said it in Spanish, it gave you that feeling that he was truly sorry. So that kind of made me feel okay, because I couldn’t understand the Spanish language.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Thank you. Rosella. Any last words you have? Any last thoughts on faith?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: On faith? No, I will continue on the way I’ve been praying and hoping that we can even work together here with people who have gone traditional. But I think we are. I was thinking about that young lad who told us, “Get these things out of here.” He has come several times to play the drum. He came in here the one time when he had his hat on. I looked at him, and he took it off. Then when his friend came in, his friend took his hat off.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: That’s in the church?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: In the church, yeah.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Respect?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Yeah. That’s what it is. If we just work a little bit.

That happened at a wake too. I do the prayers, the closing prayers, and then the traditional man was there. And I figured, okay, if I do the prayers in English, then he can close it off by doing the ceremony. That would be the closing. Well, it wasn’t right for his wife, eh. I wish that he should go first, but he was okay with that. Just little by little.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Integration?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Yeah.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful. Thank you. Rosella. Thank you for taking the time.

Photos taken by Rev. Dr. Andrew P. W. Bennett.