



Homily of Bishop Serge Poitras

Votive Mass in honour of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha
July 14, 2021
Cathedral

Over the past weeks, First Nations, Canada and the Catholic Church have been almost daily in the media. Indeed, the recent discovery of numerous anonymous graves on the sites of the former residential schools has drawn particular attention and highlighted the abuses of all kinds that have occurred in these institutions and more broadly towards First Nations in general.

Faced with this, some demonstrated in front of religious buildings; others expressed their desire to leave the Catholic Church; some even went so far as to burn down churches.

The intensity of these reactions reveals the height of people's expectations towards believers: they admire Jesus and his message for a better and more fraternal life, but when his own disciples misbehave, Jesus' whole message can be rejected.

Saint Paul has very strong words, that I would like to quote. In the letter to the Romans (2, 21-24), he says:

You, that teach others, will you not teach yourself?

While you preach against stealing, do you steal?

²² You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery?

You that abhor idols, do you rob temples?

²³ You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?

*²⁴ For, as it is written, "**The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.**"*

Thus, because some of the faithful, even religious men and women did not lived according to the Gospel, people are drifting away from God and his Church.

As disciples of Jesus, we must find in our faith light and strength in order to get through these difficult times and their challenges.

1- Prayer is essential. This is why I asked each parish to pray and, especially, to celebrate a votive mass in honor of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha:

- a. Her official liturgical feast in Canada takes place on April 17th. But it is quite difficult to celebrate her on that very day because it occurs often during Holy or Easter Weeks; in that season too, it is not easy to organize gatherings. In order to properly honor this saint, I chose to take the date used in the United States, which is July 14.
- b. Saint Kateri lived in a territory that covers part of present-day Canada and United States.
- c. She is an example of integration and an inspiration.

Indeed, because of her origins, she unites two heritages: a Mohawk father and an Algonquin mother. Languages, cultures...

She showed openness to Catholic faith, since she was attracted by the message and the testimony of the Jesuit missionaries.

She kept the spiritual preparation drawn from her own culture: for example, the awareness of the mystery of God, known through creation, as evoked in the first reading; she was also fascinated by the mystery of the Eucharist, God who, according to the words of St. John, wanted *to pitch his tent among us* (Jn 1:14), God dwells in the tabernacle, which is strictly the tent of God's presence.

On a tree, in the forest, she fixed a cross, to contemplate regularly how far has gone Christ's love for humanity. This tree can be related to the image of the vine that Jesus uses in today's Gospel (Jn 15:1-8): with its invisible roots, its solid trunk, its branches, leaves, and fruit. This evokes the union with Christ, the relationship among believers who become brothers and sisters, his life that circulates in the hearts.

Her name Tekakwitha means: *'the one who walks groping'*. This is an inspiration for us: in fact, we do not see clearly the mystery of God, we do not answer perfectly to his love; in faith, *"we go forward groping"*. Saint Kateri can help us to move forward, to grow in our faith, even if our understanding and our love are not perfect; the important thing is to move towards Christ and towards each other, even while "groping".

2- In addition to her example and her intercession, in the difficulties that First Nations and the Catholic Church are currently going through, we are called to follow the path traced out a few years ago by the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*: we have to look at the reality as it was, recognizing the abuses that some have committed, identifying those responsible, accompanying those who suffer, and repairing what we can. This is a fundamental and urgent mission.

3- In this search for truth, certain historical elements can also be useful to understand what happened through the system of Residential Schools:

- a. Residential schools were a widespread practice all over Canada, not only among Aboriginals; for example, in my hometown, I attended the Petit Séminaire de Chicoutimi.
 - b. These kind of schools were primarily intended to offer education to young people who lived far from large centers, in small isolated villages; in fact, after the primary studies available in their villages, young people faced two possibilities: to stop their studies, or to move to larger cities where there were better organized schools, with teachers trained in various topics; as the distances made it impossible to travel morning and evening, these young people had to reside in these schools; thus they could study, prepare themselves for a profession in accordance with their talents.
 - c. There were also some common practices for people living together: for example, everybody was given a number, especially for the laundry, in order to have their clothes back after they have been washed; visitors were allowed only on Sundays; as in many families in that time, bath or shower was possible only once a week.
 - d. While the attendance of these schools was voluntary for the Canadian students, the Aboriginal youth were taken away from their families and were required to attend these schools. There was no respect of their own will.
 - e. Furthermore, the aim was their integration and even their assimilation to Western society. These schools were not adapted to them in any way. We can easily imagine the problems caused by the gathering of children, coming from different places, missing their parents, speaking different languages and having different cultures; living in a closed milieu, they were exposed to the spreading of illnesses; they had to eat unknown and sometimes insufficient food; there were also abuse of many kinds. Hundreds of children died: the causes must be sought. This is a fundamental mission: to find the truth.
- 4- With the search for truth about the past, with the identification of those responsible for the abuse that occurred, we must look to the future, and work for Reconciliation: we must move forward together.
- a. To this end, a few years ago, *'listening circles'* were set up here and there, to express the sufferings and to listen, but everything was delayed because of the pandemic;
 - b. Several months ago, preparations were also made for a visit to the Holy Father by some First Nations representatives; again, everything was suspended because of the pandemic. A meeting is now scheduled with the Pope in Rome next December: The Holy Father wants to listen personally to the sufferings of people.
- 5- As true disciples of Jesus, we are invited to live both steps of truth and reconciliation.

- a. The faults of religious men and women have tarnished the face of the Church; we must support the efforts to see what really happened, with the historical information available.
- b. We have to bring Jesus' teaching on the unworthy behaviors that occurred. In the Gospel of Saint Matthew, Jesus says: (Mt 13)

²⁴ "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷ And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?'

²⁸ He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹ But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers: Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

In his explanation of the parable, Jesus precises:

*⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and **all evildoers**.*

- c. Evil is present in the world and in the Church, which is the Kingdom of God that begins on earth:
 - The Church is not a gathering of the pure: Cathars
 - She gathers saints and sinners.
 - Evil is also present in each of our hearts: us of all need conversion.

The disciple of Jesus is not surprised that evil is still present: he knows that there will be evil until the end of the world.

However, he does not resign himself to it: with Jesus, he tries to make it go away in his own life, in his own environment.

- d. Another passage seems to me to be very enlightening, again in Saint Matthew: Mt 18 6-7: the scandal

If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. ⁷ Woe to the world because of

stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!

What a message and what a responsibility! By our behavior, we can lead others to evil, we can lead them away from God!

We are thus invited to measure the consequences of our actions!
We are invited not to put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in Jesus!

Some, in the past, seem to have forgotten this terrible responsibility!

7- Let us work together for truth and reconciliation. We have to:

Acknowledge the wrongs done.
Identify the guilty.
Accompany those who suffer from the effects of the war.
 Listening circles.
Repair what is in our power.
Reconcile for the present and the future:
 listening to each other,
 authentic benevolence, fraternal look
 commitment.

8- Jesus is the vine:

We must remain united to him: he offers us the sap of eternal life
The life of Christ comes to us through his Church: let us keep our link
Some branches wither: we must cut them off.
Let us be transformed: *what would Jesus do*.
Go forward even while groping;
 Following the example of Saint Kateri
 Asking for her Intercession
 Growing in our love for the Eucharist, true food.

Kikawi minakimik Kishi Manitou ! (The Holy Spirit will look after you)