Vatican
News



Pope Francis arrives to celebrate Mass at Commonwealth Stadium July 26 in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Looking on in the background with headdress is Phil Fontaine, former national chief of the Assembly of First Nations. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Edmonton and Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta — July 26, 2022
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Pope Francis on July 26 appealed to Canadian Catholics to safeguard the memory of grandparents and the elderly as a necessary means of preventing the mistakes of the past and for building a better future.

Remembering one's ancestors, said Francis, is a means of building "a future in which the history of violence and marginalization suffered by our Indigenous brothers and sisters is never repeated."

The pope's remarks came during his first public Mass since arriving here on July 24 and one day after he issued a historic apology for abuses at Catholic Church-run residential schools, which for over a century sought to forcibly assimilate Indigenous young people.

Yet despite the solemn nature of the pope's weeklong tour through Canada, on July 26 Francis also sought to cast an optimistic vision of the future, saying that remembering one's roots allows for new fruit to blossom.

"The grandparents who went before, the elderly who had dreams and hopes for us, and made great sacrifices for us, ask us an essential question: 'What kind of a society do you want to build?' " he asked.



Pope Francis celebrates Mass at Commonwealth Stadium July 26 in Edmonton, Alberta. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Since the beginning of his pontificate, Francis has frequently reflected on his own grandparents, particularly his grandmother, whom he has cited as critical to his call to the priesthood.

In 2021, Francis instituted the Catholic Church's first-ever World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly, a now annual celebration on the fourth Sunday of July on the feast of Sts. Joachim and Anne, Jesus' grandparents. The pope's trip to Canada was timed, in part, to coincide with this feast day, which is popular among some Indigenous Catholics known for their reverence of ancestors and the elderly.

"This is the mystery of human life: We are all someone’s children, begotten and shaped by another, but as we become adults, we too are called to give life, to be a father, mother or grandparent to someone else," Francis said to an estimated crowd of 50,000 people at Edmonton's Commonwealth Stadium during his homily. "Thinking about the people we are today, what do we want to do with ourselves?"



A woman holds a rosary as people wait for the start of Pope Francis' celebration of Mass at Commonwealth Stadium July 26 in Edmonton, Alberta. (CNS/Paul Haring)

While Francis celebrated the Liturgy of the Word and offered the homily, the Liturgy of the Eucharist was celebrated by Archbishop Richard Smith of Edmonton, as the pope remained seated during the service due to his ongoing mobility issues due to a knee injury. Both men wore handmade vestments with Indigenous beading.

And in a sense, the 85-year-old pope's remarks were personal, as he sought to underscore that despite age and physical limitations, the elderly still have something to offer the young.

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In looking ahead, Francis pleaded for "a future that does not judge the value of people simply by what they can produce" and "a future that is not indifferent to the

need of the aged to be cared for and listened to."

"Our grandparents and our elders wanted to see a more just, fraternal and solidary world, and they fought to give us a future," he said. "Now, it is up to us not to let them down."

After celebrating Mass in Canada's largest outdoor venue, the pope traveled an hour northwest of Edmonton to the pilgrimage site of Lake St. Anne, home of the largest annual gathering of Indigenous peoples from North America.

There — against the backdrop of a lake where Indigenous peoples have long sought healing and the chance to commune with nature — the pope again paid tribute to the elderly, alongside of the other signature themes of his papacy: care of the environment.

"Here, immersed in creation, we can also sense another beating: the maternal heartbeat of the earth," said Francis. "Just as the hearts of babies in the womb beat in harmony with those of their mothers, so in order to grow as people, we need to harmonize our own rhythms of life with those of creation, which gives us life."

Prior to beginning his remarks, the pope, who has continued to use his wheelchair throughout this trip due to knee pain — prayed on the lake shores, a place Indigenous peoples have long held to have miraculous healing waters.

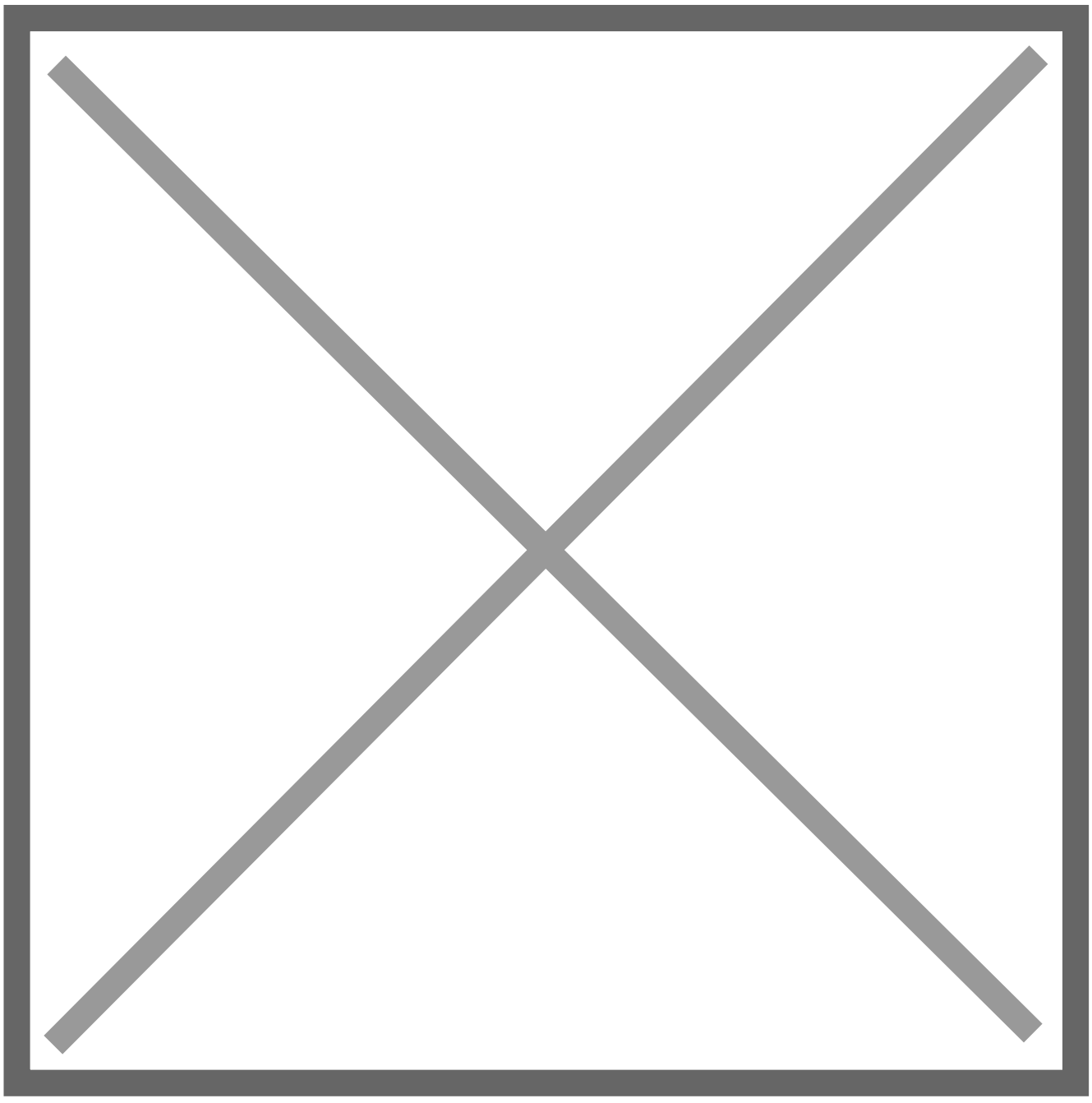
The pope recalled that the setting was not dissimilar to that of Lake of Galilee, where Jesus ministered during the first century and preached the radical Gospel messages of acceptance and nonviolence.

"God chose that richly diverse context to announce to the world something revolutionary: 'Turn the other cheek, love your enemies, live as brothers and sisters so as to be children of God,'" said Francis.

Those same lessons, he said, have been embraced and lived out by the Indigenous who for over a century have gathered at the lake in an "unprecedented proclamation of fraternity."

"Here, on the shores of this lake, the sound of drums, spanning the centuries and uniting different peoples, brings us back to that time," said Francis, surrounded by a crowd of survivors, elders and other Indigenous peoples, many of whom were adorned in traditional regalia.

"It reminds us that fraternity is genuine if it unites those who are far apart, that the message of unity that heaven sends down to earth does not fear differences, but invites us to fellowship, in order to start afresh together, because we are all pilgrims on a journey."



Pope Francis blesses the crowd as he participates in the Lac Ste. Anne pilgrimage and Liturgy of the Word at Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta, July 26, 2022. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

Ahead of the pope's arrival, Greg Stanwood, a Métis pilgrim to the event, told NCR that he believed the pope's presence at the lake was a sign of his "sincerity" to journey together with the Indigenous, but that the real work of reconciliation would begin after the event and the pope's time in Canada comes to an end.

Those sentiments were echoed by Rose Tsannie, who made a two-day road trip from Wallston, Saskatchewan, to bring her 73-year-old mother, a residential school survivor, to see the pope in person in Alberta.

Despite traveling to Lake St. Anne on a regular basis for the past three decades, she said "my heart is just pounding. I've never seen anything like this here."

"My mother does not want to talk about her time in the residential schools or discuss with us this trip, but being here is important for her and us," she told NCR.

As the pope concluded his remarks, he prayed that both the lake and his visit would be a continued means of healing and righting past wrongs against the original inhabitants of the land.

"We bring to you our weariness and our struggles, the wounds of the violence suffered by our indigenous brothers and sisters," said Francis. "In this blessed place, where harmony and peace reign, we present to you the disharmony of our experiences, the terrible effects of colonization, the indelible pain of so many families, grandparents and children."

"Help us to be healed of our wounds," the pope implored.

Francis will continue his "penitential pilgrimage" through Canada on July 27, when he is scheduled to depart Edmonton and arrive in the French-speaking Quebec City.

Related: In Canada, Pope Francis tells Indigenous people he is 'deeply sorry' for abusive schools

***Editor's Note**: This story was updated after original publication to include reporting from the pope's second event in Canada on July 26.*

This story appears in the **Pope Francis in Canada** feature series. View the full series.