

Pilgrimage to Lac Ste. Anne

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FOR SEVERAL DAYS each July, thousands of Native Catholics from many tribes gather on the shores of Lac Ste. Anne. They come to visit old friends, to seek healing, and to be renewed in their faith.

This pilgrimage, which began more than a hundred years ago, has become the largest annual gathering of the First Nations people in Canada. This is how it all started and what happens once you get there.

The history of this lake stretches back to the distant past. Here Native families, who in fall had scattered to winter camps and trap lines, gathered in summer for the buffalo hunt. The Crees called the lake "Manito Sakahigan" or "Spirit Lake". Later, white traders referred to it as Devil's Lake, because in storms it could quickly become dangerous.

The mission

In 1841 a Métis name Pich, who lived in the area, travelled to St. Boniface to ask that a priest be sent to live among them. Priests were scarce. Bishop Provencher had only four priests to minister to a territory that stretched from Ontario to the Rockies. Still, the next spring he sent Father Jean-Baptiste Thibault, who spoke Cree, to check things out. Guiding him was Gabriel Dumont.

By 1844, a mission was set up and a shack built to house Fr. Thibault and a young priest named Joseph Bourassa. Fr. Thibault blessed the lake renaming it Lac Ste. Anne, thus fulfilling a promise he had made to give her name to the first mission he would 'father'. This was the first permanent Catholic mission west of Winnipeg.

The Oblates

The Oblates of Mary Immaculate are a society of Catholic missionaries. Founded in France in the early 1800's, they are especially dedicated to preach the Gospel to the poor and to serve in difficult missions.

With the coming of Oblate missionaries such as Father Lacombe, the Mission enjoyed a period of great growth and importance. These men quickly gained a reputation for bravery, goodness and holiness. In plagues, they cared for the sick and comforted the dying, asking nothing in return. They stood between warring parties, with bullets whistling around them, and brought an end to the fighting. They preached the Gospel everywhere, and many came to believe in Christ.

Father Remas especially had a reputation for great holiness. Once, when the men were out fishing on the lake, they were threatened by a sudden violent storm. Their wives were afraid for them and ran to get Fr. Remas. The priest went to the shore and commanded the storm and the angry lake to be still. He sprinkled it with holy water and immediately all became calm.

The pilgrimage

By 1887 the buffalo had disappeared and the lake lost its importance as a gathering place. Most of the population moved away and the mission was almost deserted. Its pastor Father Lestanc, along with the Oblate Council, decided to close the mission. Then, on his first holiday back home to France in thirty years, he paid a visit to the Shrine of St. Anne d'Auray.

While in prayer at this Shrine, God revealed to him, in a powerful way, that he must not close the mission. He must build a shrine there in honor of St. Anne, the grandmother of Jesus. It would be a place for pilgrims to come and receive spiritual help. Fr. Lestanc was deeply moved and, on his return lost no time in carrying out what God had revealed to him.

The first pilgrimage was held in 1889 with several hundred attending. It soon became an annual event, drawing people from all directions and many nations. The lake once again became a place of meeting. Here, once traditional enemies now gathered as friends under the Sign of the Cross.

Today the pilgrimage has grown to a sort of tent city. As many as 30,000 people are camped on any single day. Here the old and the new are blended together. It is possible to see racks of meat and fish drying alongside modern campers and motorhomes. And always in the background, the sound of hymns and prayers and worship.

Saint Anne

Who exactly is Saint Anne? Saints Anne and Joachim were the parents of Mary and the grandparents of Jesus. While they are not mentioned in the Bible, they are referred to in Christian writings which date to early times when memories were still fresh.

As grandmother of the Lord, St. Anne must surely occupy a special place in his heart and that makes her special, also, to us. It is easy to relate to a grandmother's care. Her feast day is July 26th.

The pilgrims

A pilgrimage is an old Christian practice of making a journey in faith to a sacred place to seek some blessing from God.

Most modern pilgrims arrive in vehicles. Still, every year there are groups who make the journey on foot, some walking hundreds of miles. One such group from Saskatchewan travelled for three months to get there, camping and praying along the way.

The most noticeable feature is the huge shrine which seats over three thousand. Here Mass is offered three times a day. There are Masses in Cree, Chipweyan, Blackfoot and Dene as well as English. On the walls can be seen the canes and crutches of some who came crippled and left cured.

Within the holy ground are fifteen stations with paintings by Alec Twinns of Hobbema. They depict the suffering and death of Christ. These are used as aids to prayer and meditation.

The blessing of the lake

In this ceremony the Bishop, surrounded by the priests and people, blesses the waters of the lake. These waters are to recall the new life received in Baptism, and to be a source of blessing for all the people.

After this simple prayer, hundreds of the faithful, from the aged to little children, wade into the blessed water or immerse themselves in it. The occasion is solemn and prayerful and yet filled with the joy of children splashing in the water. Not only is the water seen as a spiritual sign of renewal and life, but many people have testified to having received healing in it as well.

Towards evening, a candlelight procession is held. It is an awesome sight as thousands of pilgrims with lighted candles wend their way from the shrine to the lake shore and back, praying the Rosary and singing the Lourdes' hymn.

The pledge

Another moving event of the pilgrimage is the sobriety pledge. Alcohol abuse has been a cause of great misery for Native People. Father Lacombe introduced the pledge in 1853 to fight against what was a great problem even then.

Those who wished to do so, hold a lighted candle and publicly vow not to drink alcohol for a period of time, usually one year. They ask God's help to be faithful to their promise. This pledge had marked a turning point in many lives, as some movingly testify during the ceremony.

Healing prayer

Lac Ste. Anne is known as a place of healing. Many who come here experience the healing power of God both physically and spiritually.

There is a time of healing prayer at the shrine. The sick are anointed and all who have a ministry of healing are invited to pray for those who ask their prayers.

Priests are available for the Sacrament of Reconciliation every day. Thousands of people take advantage of this opportunity to confess their sins, be reconciled with God, and experience deep spiritual healing.

Camping facilities

Anyone going to the pilgrimage should be prepared to camp. Camping is free and there are food outlets, toilets, showers, and concessions on the grounds. There is plenty of space available as well as water and firewood.

For the elderly and the handicapped a small shuttle makes regular runs between the Shrine and the camp. The RCMP direct security and neither alcohol or drugs are allowed.

The pilgrimage site is near Alberta Beach about 50 miles west of Edmonton, Alberta. There are signs posted directing the way. The pilgrimage is always in July but dates vary each year.