

She:kon Kahnawake.,

The Church Committees of the Catholic Church in Kahnawake -St. Francis Xavier Mission/Shrine of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha- want to share with Kahnawa'ker:non our experiences over the last few months, how they have impacted our congregation, questions we have and what we have learned, so far. We appeal to everyone's good mind and hope this contributes to a shared understanding.

We were sickened by the discovery of children's remains at Indian residential schools operated by the government and the churches. For some of us who were residential and day school survivors, it opened old wounds and for others it caused us to feel shame and question not our faith but our confidence in our church's leadership.

While still reeling from the discoveries, we were dealt a second blow when the allegations were made against a revered pastor as many of us or our family and friends had benefitted from his good works. We are not saying the allegations are false, just that we are having difficulty believing because our personal experiences and knowledge of Father Léon Lajoie do not correspond to what is being alleged. We understand many of the younger people never knew him and have only allegations on which to judge him. We would like to share our experiences of him and hopefully you can understand our difficulty.

- He baptized many of us, was there for first communion, confirmation, blessed our marriage vows, conducted our families' funerals, attended family functions; special times in our lives and as a result became part of our family.

- Through the years he spent long hours advocating for our community and those in trouble with the law -always without judgement. He counselled and helped those suffering addictions, losing loved ones, coping with illness, dealing with family violence, losing jobs, living in poverty and suffering depression. For many he was a rock.

- Along with the late Mary Cross he provided the first social services in the community. When invited to our homes for meals he would eat with his coat on, as he was often called away to minister to someone in need before he could complete a meal. He never complained or refused someone help.
- He worked with all in the community and with other churches, the longhouses and community groups to promote peace, solidarity and encouraged us to seek out our language and culture to reconnect with it.
- Along with Sister Sarah Comeau he ran a youth group for several years always ensuring chaperones were present in all our activities. He worked to develop youth leadership for the community and a safe place for teens to hang out; and was instrumental in establishing the Kahnawake Boys & Girls Club, now called the Youth Center.
- A staunch supporter in helping our native women acquire their rights back when others in the community chose to harass them for advancing their cause.
- He supported political growth in the community and advocated on our behalf with the outside justice and political system, when and where he could. His father was a judge and had many political connections, so he placed our leaders in contact with other political leaders and got out of the way so we could forge our own relationships and spheres of influence.

*We believe everyone should be afforded due process, this means you are innocent until proven guilty, allegations should be treated seriously with proper and meaningful investigation. Many of us have lived with and continue to work towards healing from multigenerational trauma.*

- Those coming forward should be provided support and offered services.

- As soon as we received the letter making the allegations, we brought it to the bishop for investigation and informed the protesters of this. We have no control over how the Investigation proceeded yet we were the weekly targets of the protestors misinforming the community that there had been no response to their complaints, stirring more resentment in the community.
- An investigation was conducted into the allegations. We encouraged everyone to cooperate and participate when asked for interview.
- A proposal was made by the Jesuit Order to exhume and move Fr Lajoie's remains to the Jesuit cemetery before completion of the investigation, this was made Initially to the Mohawk Council of Kahnawake (MCK) who relayed this to our congregation. It was presented to them and the decision taken at the time by the congregation was to await outcome of investigation, share results with community before deciding on exhumation.
- Father Lajoie's death was sudden so the decision, to bury him here (Church garden), was made emotionally by people and a community grieving. It was a big loss; he was family to many of us. His brother made the request, sharing how much he loved Kahnawake. In hindsight we all recognize the decision was made in haste and without proper consultation with the community or the congregation. We cannot undo the past, but we can learn from it. From what we were able to put together there was unanimous agreement to the request to bury him here by the Church Committee, the MCK and the community seemed to be okay with it as there was very little protest at that time and since then.
- There was never any hint of abuse by Father Lajoie during his years in the community. Usually, we hear things. We wondered why this did not surface when his burial took place as there was some protest and usually this type of information surfaces in these Instances. It didn't.

- Exhumation does not promote or foster healing.
- Exhumation is not part of our ways either traditionally or in the catholic faith, so most of our congregation is not in favor of it.

*We believe each person's choice of faith and practice should be respected; a person should not be persecuted for what they believe in or pressured to stop practicing their faith, this is wrong.*

> Since the discovery of the children's graves, we have suffered threats of disrespectful exhumation, vandalism of our church with broken windows and hate graffiti painted on doors, walls and sidewalk, threats to burn it down, threats to demolish it, threats to repurpose the church without any consideration or respect for those who continue to practice our faith there.

> We are the targets of weekly harassment by protesters who are present when we go for our Sunday mass, they are not there for the rest of the week. We had the protesters dump ashes from their fire pit on the walkway outside the church and when our elderly left the church, they noticed their feet getting hot, there was still embers in the ash. These types of actions put our elderly handicapped members in danger.

> Harassment/threats on social media was/is occurring, directing people to drag us out of church, harassment in the form of being told to go practice our faith at outside churches suggesting we do not belong in Kahnawake our community.

> People driving by during funeral service yelling offensive comments with no consideration for the grieving family.

> We were never consulted or asked if the shoes or mementos could be placed in front of our Church. We would have agreed and worked with organizers to ensure our elderly and handicapped members would not have to be burdened by having their handicapped parking areas taken away by placement of the shoes and the protesters.

Further it was misrepresented that we were trying to get rid of the shoes, stirring further resentment in the community.

> The protesters have taken our attendance at mass and indicated that there is only about 25 of us, so our numbers do not warrant consideration by the community.

> We have a larger congregation, some are afraid to attend because of the vandalism and the weekly protests, some due to Covid, others are being pressured by friends and family, others just want peace and to avoid the hassle while others still struggling with the discovery of children's remains are taking a time-out, not sure when they will return.

> Kahnawake and Seigneury were established for our people who wanted to practice the catholic faith in safety because they could not do it in their communities. Is Kahnawake becoming an unsafe place to practice your faith? That is what it feels like as some of our members have shared. Faith is a personal decision and serves the person practicing it. It has carried many through very tough times, we hope we can continue to respect each other in whatever beliefs we practice.

#### ADDITIONAL FACTS

1. St. Francis Xavier Mission has petitioned the Pope for a formal apology from the Catholic Church for the harm caused by religious orders operating Indian Residential and Day Schools.

2. We have offered support to those First Nation communities who are involved in the discovery of children's remains at Indian residential schools.

3. We were advised by the Jesuits that the Pope has instructed the Jesuits to audit their files in preparation for what they anticipate will be an edict directing all diocese and religious communities to publish the names of priests with credible allegations. Upper Canada is

complete, French-Canadian province is not complete as the archives were closed due to Covid in 2020 and have just reopened. The Conference of Catholic Bishops has not agreed to do this yet some dioceses have proceeded anyway.

4. We requested a copy of the list to determine whether any of the priests who served in the community were on the list as we believe the community should be made aware of this. To date we havenot received the list.

5. We were informed that a review of the Jesuit archives shows there are no records of any reported abuse or conduct violations by Father Lajoie. We were informed a priest was removed from the community by Father Lajoie for inappropriate conduct and boundary violations and was disciplined. The Jesuits are investigating this as well and we hope will share the results with the community.

6. The investigation process outlined to us by the Jesuits' representative follows:

*a) "Ordinarily, when a complaint is made, the victim contacts the Delegate for Conduct. Depending on the circumstances, the delegate will either meet with them or assign an Examiner to take a statement. If the situation is serious, and there is no way that a personal one on one meeting is possible (such as our present case) the Provincial will retain an Investigator. We use a man named Brian King. Grand Chief Sky-Deer believed that an independent third party such as Mr. King might be preferable to a Church investigator, or the Police/Peacekeepers. Ordinarily, they will work with the parish and the community to ensure that the investigator is able to interview everyone that he requires. This requires a private, confidential location where the complainant feels safe, and there are health supports present. This is not a short process and can easily take a year or more for a fair and balanced report to be generated. It is not binding in a legal sense, although these reports are given some weight by judges. It will also require the co-operation of people who are*

*associated with the protestors.*

*b) The police usually will not investigate historical allegations of sexual abuse where the perpetrator is deceased.*

*c) Unfortunately, the publicity associated with an investigation will often lead to lawyers initiating a lawsuit against the parish, the Diocese and the legal community. The claims are reported to the insurance companies, and defense lawyers are then retained.*

*d) There are two circumstances where compensation may be appropriate. 1) If the stories are credible, the Diocese and the Jesuits would be obliged by their Procedures to assist the victims with counseling or a lump sum payment. As you are aware, the Day School claims are currently proceeding, and the model adopted is similar in nature. 2) The second circumstance is where a law firm, often from Ontario or Western Canada, essentially moves into the Community to proceed with a 'Class action' lawsuit. In these instances, a "representative plaintiff" is nominated and approved by the Court. The other victims then are assumed to have suffered the same hardship, to greater or lesser extents.*

*e) The Insurers of the Diocese and the Parish and the Jesuits essentially determine whether claims will be settled or denied. They are the decision makers. "*

7. We were also informed that the Constitutions and Complementary Norms, as well as other documents related to Jesuit internal governance, reference the Code of Canon Law, which reserves the right of Religious Institutes to have their own cemeteries. It has been the consistent practice of the Jesuits since they first arrived In North America that Jesuits be buried together in a common cemetery, whenever possible, on the grounds of or as near as possible to, a Jesuit community. Being buried with his fellow Jesuits is a symbol of his bond to the Society of Jesus and that his membership lasted until this death.

8. The Jesuits shared "*While it is not our decision, the usual custom would be for a Jesuit to be buried with his brothers in the cemetery at St. Jerome*".

9. We wondered why did they not make the request for repatriation before now? The legal heirs and successors determine the burial place of deceased persons, it was his brother who contacted the community to make the request.

10. The request came to Ronald Boyer who contacted Joe Norton -Grand Chief- and he felt Father Lajoie was one of us and he thought it would be supported. The decision went to the MCK, Andrew Delisle Senior and Father Louis Cyr made the formal petition.

11. Although Father Lajoie died In a Jesuit Hospice, there is no record of the decision to bury him in Kahnawake by the Jesuits. The MCK cannot locate records on this as well. The Church committee gave their approval and there is a record of the burial kept at the church.

12. Father Lajoie's History with Kahnawake:

1958 - He came to Kahnawake temporarily before being assigned as the assistant Chaplain of 'le Bon Dieu en Taxi' in Montreal

1961 - Father Lajoie returned to Kahnawake as part of the general ministry

1963 - He became Pastor of the St. Francis Xavier Mission

1990 - Due to illness he retired as Pastor but remained to minister to the community

1996 - He moved to the Jesuit Father's Infirmary in St. Jerome where many of the congregation-maintained contact with him

1997 - He died following complications from surgery and was

laid to rest in Kahnawake

## 2021 - Allegations of sexual abuse are made

We know 20 years have passed since his death, generations of many who knew him well, are gone and newer ones never had the benefit of his good works, but someone in your family may have. Those of us who knew Father Lajoie also believe he would not want to be used in any way to divide the community he loved so much. We beg you to consider members of our congregation will be traumatized by the exhumation if it takes place. They already have been by the vandalism and hate graffiti. More trauma on trauma. More traumas do not support healing. Who will you be hurting? What purpose does this serve?

We are concerned that the anger over the discovery of children's remains is being unfairly directed at Father Lajoie who was never involved in the residential or Indian day schools. Would you want someone else's wrongdoing assigned to you, and become a deciding factor on a critical decision about you? Is this fair? We ask everyone to please try to be fair in coming to whatever decision/vote you will make.

We are so very thankful to the community and leadership who have shown their support during this difficult time, seeking solutions and fostered keeping the peace, especially those who showed up to help clean up the paint and graffiti after the vandalisms. You have no idea how your kind acts and concern helped us through a very difficult time. We are praying for all and hoping for a peaceful resolution.

Skennen –

Mission St Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Kahnawake  
Administrative and Pastoral Committees