



On Smudging, COVID-19, and Hope **A Conversation with Deacon Michael Thibert**



fears regarding COVID-19.

Michael Thibert is a Spiritual Cultural Care Provider with Indigenous Health whose office is stationed within St. Boniface Hospital. Ordained a deacon in the Archdiocese of Winnipeg, the Metis of French/Irish and Cree/Ojibwe ancestry also provides cultural care for people of Indigenous ancestry within the WRHA region. In this conversation, Deacon Michael talks about how he provides care for Indigenous people, and shares his concerns about working on the front line during a pandemic, in spite of his

You provide spiritual support to everyone, but especially to Aboriginal people...

Michael Thibert: I work in hospitals, emergency and tertiary care units, as well as a few personal care homes. In these various places, a patient can experience a very wide range of reactions, from a mild insecurity about the uncertainty of his or her health to a full blown existential crisis. As a Spiritual Cultural Care Provider, I listen, and take note of certain verbal and nonverbal signs that could indicate a sense of loneliness, isolation and anxiety, or a sense of loss of control or guilt in the face of behaviours that could have worsened a patient's health. I

journey with the patient to find meaning in his or her particular situation, to find what's positive about it and even to help him or her see cause to hope.

According to his or her spiritual tradition...

Right. For many Indigenous people, being a patient in Winnipeg is exacerbated by the fact that he or she is almost literally parachuted into the city. If you're from a northern First Nation or Inuit community, you're flown in. In a very real sense, patients are torn from or separated from their community for an extended period of time. I provide them with the emotional, mental and spiritual support that those of us within Winnipeg take for granted. Once in Winnipeg, many Indigenous people who may speak English need an interpreter, because English is far from being their first language.

Not to mention the history of systemic racism has had on the relationship between Indigenous people and Western society. Many Indigenous people are residential school survivors or descendants. As a result, the likelihood of suspicion, mistrust, fear, and uncertainty towards receiving treatment can result in lengthy stays, non-compliance, and elevated emotional and spiritual issues.

What role does Indigenous spirituality play for a patient?

Ideally, it prepares patients to deal with hospitalization and treatment by connecting them to culture, the medicine wheel and its teachings, and familiarity, and allows them to find strength and serenity through a relationship with their Creator or source of strength. For instance, access to ceremony, especially smudging, before surgery brings great benefits. Of course, in a hospital, we are not allowed to burn the sacred medicines. Tobacco, sage, sweet grass, and

cedar are the most commonly used, but are not the only ones. So when I am unable to accompany the patient to a ceremony room or outside, I use Sweet Grass Oil (SGO). This is gifted to Indigenous Health by an Elder in the community whose son received a teaching from the ancestors as a way to provide access to ceremony outside the traditional way. The ceremony follows the same format except instead of watching the medicine over oneself with the smoke, an individual is given a small amount of SGO in their palm. They rub their hands together, and proceed to rub the medicine on their body to cleanse the negative energy from themselves and allowing the positive presence of the Creator's energy to strengthen their medicine wheel.

Success is difficult to measure and I believe is a Western goal methodology. Success has a lot of factors. How much trust does the patient have with me as a person and a Spiritual Cultural Care Provider? Are they willing to engage in the conversation? Some people won't want to talk to me. Others are very happy that I'm there. One of my challenges is not to assume that this or that situation will be easy or difficult. After doing this for many years, I have come to learn that what I think, feel, or believe has been a success is just my internal hope, ego, or desire. What I thought was good, may not have been at all, but what I thought may have not very good, may have been really good.

There is also the family...

I have seen dying people who are completely serene and ready to embark on their journey to the spirit world. But their spouse or their children? That can be another matter entirely. Ceremonies can, however, help families to let go, and to accept their loved one's preparation and transition to the Spirit World. A serene

dying person can make a significant contribution to this journey of assuaging the fears and anxieties of family members.

You provide spiritual support to Indigenous people and you are a Catholic deacon. Is that a contradiction?

No. At least I do not think so. Metis, I pay tribute to my Indigenous and European heritage in my indigenous spirituality and my Catholic faith. I even received the Spirit Name *Two Suns* in a naming ceremony from an Elder during a Sweat Lodge ceremony. The teaching that I received with the Spirit Name was just as important as the Name. A Spirit Name does not identify you as an individual like Michael identifies me as a person. But a Spirit Name pushes or pulls you to explore your medicine wheel. It addresses all that encompasses you, putting your life in a context of culture, time, space, and situation. I understand my Spirit Name as a journey through the four directions to integrate what it means for me to be Metis (Western French Catholic and First Nation Cree/Ojibwe).

I recognize, however, that not everyone will be comfortable with this way of looking at things, both Aboriginals and Catholics. And that's okay, because we are all on our journey together and apart – on with All our Relations.

The two traditions do have a degree of compatibility...

Yes, in a very real sense. It all begins and ends with the love of the Father-Creator. On the ritual side, burnt sacred medicines can be compared to incense. The two have similar functions. At every smudging ceremony, for instance, there are prayers of thanksgiving and pleas for healing. And in the rituals of both traditions, matter is very present. The spiritual is incarnated.

The Seven Sacred Teachings in Indigenous spirituality can also be reconciled to the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Indigenous teachings on humility, which are inspired through the teaching of the wolf, inspired me enormously in my work as a Spiritual Cultural Care Provider, Chaplain and Deacon. Being of the Wolf Clan, I try to walk with humility. I recognize the love of the Father-Creator and the importance of serving others.

Those are the types of connections we can make between the two. Of course, it's not possible to make direct connections between all aspects of the two traditions. Still, Christians and Indigenous people can draw from both to pray to the Creator.

It can't be easy being a Spiritual Cultural Care Provider, especially in 2021, in the middle of a pandemic...

At St. Boniface Hospital, patients can no longer receive visitors unless they are dying or giving birth. Their anxiety is much higher than usual. So hospital staff has to focus on their morale. Front-line workers give much of themselves for their patients, but they are human beings. They need to look after their own health and manage their own anxiety. As a result, our presence is all that more important in the overall sense. Spending more time and attention to staff's emotional needs is crucial to the well-being of the patients and their families, whether that care takes place in the hospital or by phone.

It's easy to see how the pandemic can even affect hospital staff...

COVID often gets in my head. I think of my own health, sure, but I also often worry about my wife, my daughters and my four grandchildren, my son-in-law, my son and his fiancée in Lethbridge (our oldest son lives with us). The idea of

potentially infecting my family weighs on me. Just as it weighs on all essential services people. Saying no to your two-year old grandchild to coming over to visit is difficult. It's also been a while since I visited my parents. I'm comforted that I can talk to them on the phone. It's not quite the same, but it lifts all of our spirits.

In the meantime, I know I offer an essential service. And that's a big part of how I am answering my vocation. God has placed me in this environment where I can bring the comfort of Christ and the Creator to those in need. I do feel blessed.

Interview by Daniel Bahuaud, Communications Coordinator at the Archdiocese of St. Boniface