

National Catholic Register, January 9, 2025

Indigenous Rosary walks reconciliation path

[Anna Farrow](#)

For over a year, Canadian Catholic Indigenous faithful have been gathering online each month to pray the Rosary in the different Indigenous languages of Canada.

The National Indigenous Rosary initiative emerged from a September 2023 summit of Catholic Indigenous leaders. The focus of the meeting at the Galilee Centre in Arnprior, Ont., was a shared concern about *The Catholic Register's* coverage of unmarked burials at former residential schools.



Graydon Nicholas, Wolastoqey Indigenous elder, chancellor of St. Thomas University and former Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick, was a participant at the 2023 meeting. Nicholas told the *Register* the leaders felt some “articles were kind of negative about Indigenous people and the relationship between the Church and our people.”

The leaders said, “We’re all Catholics, we’re all involved in the Catholic Church at different levels, let’s see what we can do to try to promote a better relationship.”

In response to the question “What could we do at a national level to promote our faith?” Nicholas proposed a monthly recitation of the Rosary in the Indigenous languages of Canada.

The idea first occurred to him during a 1987 trip to Lourdes. It was in the French Marian pilgrimage town that Nicholas and his wife Elizabeth witnessed the daily recitation of the Rosary during which each Hail Mary is said in a different language.

There are over 70 Indigenous languages in Canada, and Nicholas felt it should be feasible to find speakers of at least 10 of those languages to complete each Rosary decade.

“That was the goal. Unfortunately, we’ve only got seven languages now participating, but we’ve also included non-Indigenous friends.”

Among the languages prayed are Mic’Maq, Anishnaabemowin, Cree, Wolastoquiyik, Dene, Mohawk. The two official languages of Canada, English and French, are also prayed.

Nicholas, a member of the Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle, has a deep devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe and it is from that commitment that he derives his instinct to turn to Mary in the pursuit of truth and reconciliation.

He points out that when Juan Diego first encountered Mary on the morning of Dec. 9, 1531, she appeared as a *mestizo*, someone of mixed European and Indigenous heritage, and spoke his Indigenous language.

“When Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego, she didn’t speak to him in Spanish. Even though Juan Diego could speak Spanish, she decided to speak his Indigenous language, and she appeared as an Indigenous woman. To me, that’s the relevance right there of the Blessed Mother to Indigenous people,” he said.

“Who doesn’t appeal to their mother? Let’s face it, you never appeal to your father. You always appeal to your mom. It is the survival instinct. So, the Blessed Mother for us is really our mother in that sense.”

The first National Indigenous Rosary took place one month after the Galilee Centre meeting and Gerry Kelly, manager of spiritual programs at the centre, has served as host and facilitator from the outset.

At some sessions, there have been more than 80 participants. It is a number that includes well-known Catholic Indigenous elders like Rosella Kinoshameg of Manitoulin Island, Deacon Rennie Nahanee, Squamish First Nation, and Priscilla Solomon, an Ojibway of the Anishinabek Nation and a Sister of St. Joseph of Sault Ste. Marie.

Several religious communities, including the Sisters of St. Joseph, regularly take part. Nicholas says it is fitting that the sisters join in the prayers as, in addition to parents and grandparents, “they’re ones at the very beginning of Catholic schools who taught us to pray. Almost every day in class it started with prayer.”

News of the project has been spread by what Nicholas laughingly said was once referred to as the “moccasin telegraph,” a way of “one Indigenous person communicating to another.”

Nicholas has encouraged his biological brothers and sisters and members of his spiritual family, Christian Life Community, to participate.

“There are different ways of expressing the name Jesus and Mary. It’s beautiful to hear all these expressions in our Indigenous languages,” Nicholas said.

“It’d be great if we can get more people to join us, for sure. Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. So that way within our Catholic faith, within the hierarchy of the Church, they can appreciate how our people have adopted the Rosary in our languages.”

Nicholas even dreams of the expansion of the initiative beyond Canada.

“I’m hoping in the future our American cousins across the border will also do a similar thing because they have all kinds of languages, different tribes in the United States.”