

Canadian Canoe Expedition

Ten days ago, a flotilla of canoes left Sainte-Marie among the Hurons on Georgian Bay. The 850-kilometre, 25-day voyage will terminate at Kahnawake on the outskirts of Montreal. The canoeists will visit the Ottawa area from August 9–11.

More than thirty Indigenous, Jesuit, English-, and French-Canadian paddlers are taking part in the Canadian Canoe Pilgrimage. The men and women participants range in age from 18 to 67. Some paddlers have committed to the whole journey. Others will accompany the pilgrimage part of the way.

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission inspired the canoeing project. The pilgrimage seeks to encourage intercultural-interreligious dialogue and learning.

The paddlers share a common passion. They travel together on a path of healing and friendship.

"We are retracing this historic route on the 150th anniversary of Canada as a nation, but more importantly, we are trying to work for reconciliation," says Erik Sorensen. He is a young Jesuit and the Canadian Canoe Pilgrimage's project manager.

"I am hoping to learn a lot about the cultures that are going to be there," said Andrew Starblanket, of Saskatchewan's Starblanket First Nation. "I guarantee that I'm going to learn a lot about myself and others."

The group is following a First Nations canoe trade route. Early European settlers such as Samuel de Champlain and Jean de Brébeuf travelled the route. The Indigenous Peoples of this land welcomed and guided the Europeans.

The voyage has followed the shores of Georgian Bay from Midland, Ontario to the French River, continuing to Lake Nipissing. From there, the pilgrimage will proceed along the Mattawa River, the Ottawa River, and the St. Lawrence River, to its destination at Kahnawake First Nation, south of the Island of Montreal.

According to Sorenson, the route is similar to the one that 24 young Jesuits paddled in 1967, "We were talking to some older Jesuits who told us about this canoe trip they did in 1967 for the Centennial celebration of Canada and Expo '67. So that's really where our idea for the Canadian Canoe Pilgrimage came from. We

thought that 50 years later, we should redo their trip, but have it focus on a current issue in Canada—our focus being the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.”

Along the way, the Canadian Canoe Pilgrimage is stopping in various communities. On the morning of August 9, they will visit Fitzroy Harbour. There, members of Ottawa’s Catholic Kateri Native Ministry team will welcome the paddlers with First Nations customs.

Later that day, they will land at Gatineau’s Brébeuf Park, where Archbishop Durocher will celebrate Mass. A supper on the shore will follow. Paddlers and support staff will lodge at Carleton University.

On August 10, the canoeists will paddle down the Rideau Canal to Major’s Hill Park. Local paddlers are welcome to join the flotilla. I will celebrate Mass for the delegation at noon in Notre Dame Cathedral.

That afternoon, from 4–7:30PM at the Royal Ottawa Golf Club, KAIROS will conduct a Blanket Exercise. This activity will give participants and supporters an opportunity to learn from the wisdom of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls-to-Action.

This fundraising reception will cover some of the costs of the Pilgrimage. For ticket information, visit <https://tinyurl.com/canoepilgrimage>.

The Canadian Canoe Pilgrimage links cultures in practical ways. It allows young adults and others—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—immersion in each other’s customs and traditions for an entire month. The pilgrimage fosters respect, trust, dialogue and friendship, the building blocks for reconciliation.

The pilgrimage is happening amid the yearlong celebration of Canada’s 150th anniversary of Confederation. It looks forward to a Canada that is reconciled with its past.