



End-of-Earth People.

This is the name given by Bern Will Brown to Dene People in his last book. And who are the Dene People? Google it my friend! As the youth say!

Dene People is an Indigenous group that inhabits the Sahtu Region: Great Bear Lake¹ in Canada. This is the Mackenzie and Fort Smith Diocese. This Diocese is bigger than Colombia and Cambodia, or Colombia and Thailand together. It has a geographical extension of one million five hundred thousand square kilometres. *If you have a "Missionary Spirit"... you may pray, cry and ask forgiveness*, knowing that there are only three Sisters, one brother, seven priests and one Bishop serving the people of God in this Diocese. As brave as they are... they need help!

Sahtu has 5 communities. The access to these communities during the whole year is only by small air planes. During some months it is possible to travel by small outboard boats or during two months by the winter road, which is built when the Mackenzie river and the Great Bear Lake freeze and the ice is thick enough to support trucks with 30 tons of fuel or supplies for the communities. I visit one community for two weeks and then move on to the next one.

Dene People are Christian Catholics. They have to face the problems that every community of faith faces at this present time. However, their challenge is even greater because since the year 1990 they do not have any Parish Priest serving in these communities. Some priests, like myself, come to serve for a while and then they leave.

Extreme low temperatures, darkness (for instance: today December 3rd the Sunrise was at 10:30 a.m. and Sunset at 03:30 pm) and fog are great challenges for the Missionaries. Deep Spirituality, Ardent Zeal till sacrifice and love for the Gospel and our Ministry is highly required in order to persevere here.

Dene Ethics are beautiful and in accordance with Jesus' Teachings! Their sense of belonging is very strong and so is their sense of Community. They share what they fish and their games. They need each other in order to survive out in the bushes. It reminds me of the Khmer saying:

¹ It is the largest lake in Canada. Third in America and Seventh in the world.

“While at home, we have different Mothers, while in a foreign land, we have ONLY ONE Mother”.

If you are alone outside in the bushes, there is not much chance to survive the grizzly bear or wolves. You need help! The help of the group! The help of the community.

I think that this is true for a Missionary life as well. Many times we refuse to accept the help of our brothers in our community and we think that we do not need anybody “out there”... and we perish! Sometimes our spiritual life, our zeal, our sense of belonging or even our ministry is lost.

Soren Kierkegaard defined purity of heart as the ability to will one thing². Yarumal Missionaries will one thing: the identification with Christ, from which we get the Ardent Zeal till sacrifice. I think that it is honest and intelligent to try to find a place where that identification with Christ is easier to attain according to our own spirituality and personality. Sahtu is indeed one of those places.

I thank the Lord for this experience. I am glad because of these 4 months of service in the Sahtu, and yet when I think that I have to leave very soon there is a dose of bitterness in my heart. Especially when I think about one of the elders who came after the mass, kissed my hand and said: “Thanks father because you come to celebrate the Eucharist for us”. It reminds me of the Kingdom of Cambodia where everyone bows down in front of the King, except the Monks. The King himself bows down in front of the monks! “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news”³. I wish I could be one of those who bring good news to the Dene in the Sahtu... following the example of the Oblate Missionaries or Sister Celeste who has been serving here for 35 years but “how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?”⁴. My mind is clear: I have to leave... but my heart is not. At night contemplating the Aurora Borealis I hear the voice of the Lord as once Isaiah did “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”⁵. «You may say I am a dreamer, but I am not the only one»⁶, as I know that many others are hearing this voice! I pray to the Lord through the intercession of our Founder Father asking: “Lord, please! Do not stop asking this question to me and my Superiors”. Amen

² A History of Christian Spirituality. Urban T. Holmes. Kindle books, Location 408

³ Isaiah 52:7; Romans 10:15

⁴ Romans 10:15

⁵ Isaiah 6:8

⁶ Imagine! The beatles.