

Fr. Andre' Poilièvre awarded Order of Canada for years of working with young people struggling with addictions and gang violence

By Virginia Scissons, NDS

SASKATOON – Saskatoon diocesan priest André Poilièvre has been awarded the Order of Canada for his decades of work with youth struggling to overcome addiction and gang violence. The national award recognizes Canadians who have given of themselves for the good of the community and of the country. A date for the award ceremony has not yet been set.

Poilièvre cites three influences that have helped to shape his ministry: the worker priest movement in France (he was a student at the Catholic University in Paris), the Second Vatican Council, and liberation theology.

For Poilièvre, the Second Vatican Council has too often been limited to “in-house” renewal. He says that he couldn't see where we were reaching out to the poor, referring to the people in “our own back yard”. He notes that the worker priest movement in France was squashed and liberation theology has been pushed aside.

After serving briefly as director of the Catholic Centre, Poilièvre spent five years as pastor at St. Michael's parish in Saskatoon. While at St. Michael's, Poilièvre met a First Nations man who shared his life story with him. “I realized there was a whole world out there which I didn't know about.”

Poilièvre says he felt a call to go north as a way to be faithful to the vision of the Second Vatican Council. He was hired to deliver educational programs across the Arctic to Dene and Inuit communities. He also became involved in the development of the cooperative movement in those communities.

After spending five years in the north and some study time at the University of Toronto, Poilièvre spent the next ten years at Joe Duquette High School in Saskatoon working with disadvantaged youth. He describes this time as “the best years of my life” and the youth and staff as “fantastic”.

While working at the school he began visiting students who were incarcerated at Kilburn Hall and later at the Saskatoon Correctional Centre. Upon leaving Joe Duquette High School, Poilièvre was hired as chaplain at the Correctional Centre and remained there for seven years.

Walking with First Nations people has been a constant for him. “I am not interested in conversion”, says Poilièvre, “but rather in helping them to discover what it means to go on a healthy journey in their lives, whatever that means to them.”

Poilièvre continues to walk with young men he has met through the years. "The guys come to me to help them get out of the gangs", says Poilièvre. "Their girl friends get involved and the circle gets bigger".

"Basically, it's about identifying the need and responding to it", he describes. "There is no agenda. I work with them; I walk with them. I don't tell them where to go or how to go".

At 72 years of age, Poilièvre says that he cannot continue this work much longer. Consequently, he has worked with the local John Howard Society to create a program called "STR8 UP", a journey of healing for recovering gang members.

Poilièvre describes the struggle to get out of a gang as a "horrendous journey." Recovery is difficult and painful and takes a tremendous amount of courage, he says. "The gang controls everything and they stay because of the supports. There are no supports for guys wanting to come out of the gangs."

"All have been victims before becoming victimizers", stresses Poilièvre. "Their stories are unbelievable and I stay with them because they are amazing".

The inside panel of a STR8 UP pamphlet reads: "No one knows my struggle. They just see my trouble." Poilièvre says: "I see all of their troubles and struggles and that's why I accepted to honor them and validate them, to let them know their struggles are not in vain" by accepting the Order of Canada.

Poilièvre adds that he is very moved by the unspoken support and respect which he has received from his brother priests as well as from his three bishops.