

Lavoie encouraged people to get involved at local level

By Karin Tate-Penna

PRINCE ALBERT -- The ability to encourage people to take ownership and get involved at the local level is just one of the traits that will stand newly ordained Coadjutor Archbishop Sylvain Lavoie in good stead, according to longtime friend Harry Lafond.

Lafond, who along with his wife, Germaine, is director of the First Nations Circle for the Prince Albert Diocese, has known Father Sylvain since 1969, when they were in the novitiate with the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Arnprior, Ont. Not much more than acquaintances while in the novitiate, Lafond nevertheless remembers Lavoie as someone who took his studies seriously but also knew how to draw the community together.

"He always showed a certain amount of leadership with the group," Lafond said. "He used his music and his guitar to rally people to enjoy one another's company through song."

The two men kept in touch and their friendship grew. Father Sylvain was present when Lafond got married, and the Lafonds attended his ordination in 1974. When they began working in the Prince Albert Diocese, the two found they worked well together. They gave workshops on social issues such as alcoholism and abuse, and conducted sessions on First Nations spirituality.

"We complemented each other quite well and enjoyed working with each other," Lafond said. "I like him because he's honest and straightforward. If he thinks something needs to be reconsidered, he's not afraid to tell you that, in a gentle way. I always found him to be very open and I like his way of pushing to get things done. He confesses to be a workaholic and that's true, but I think in a good way."

Asked how well Father Sylvain has integrated into the First Nations community, Lafond remarked again on his openness. "I think Father Sylvain has always acknowledged that he can learn, he can experience, he can benefit from those experiences, but he'll never be First Nation. It's just the reality. This cross-cultural experience has encouraged him to become grounded in his own French-Canadian culture. He's gone almost on a search in the last 10 years to really accept and acknowledge that he's a French Canadian and that's his culture and he's richer for it."

The fact that Father Sylvain has spent years learning Cree and can celebrate mass and preach in that language is significant, Lafond pointed out. "It opens doors. People really appreciate that you made the effort to know them better at their energy level."

Most importantly, Lafond said, the new coadjutor archbishop is deeply spiritual, and has a commitment to growing spiritually that will serve him well.

"I think that's what has made his life balanced," Lafond said. "I think people see it and feel it. They draw their own strength from that encounter."

The truth of this observation was driven home for Lafond this summer at the annual pilgrimage at Lac St. Anne, just north of Edmonton, an event in which many from Keewatin-Le Pas take part.

"I watched him at Lac St. Anne, and it just amazed me how many people came up and were almost ecstatic he was going to be their new bishop," Lafond said. "Old people, young people, I witnessed a very warm welcoming. I think he's going to be good for that diocese, and vice-versa. He'll gain a lot."