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Ottawa*Watch* 263: Brother Andre and the PM

By Lloyd Mackey

Some 12 years after this piece was written, I still receive the daily releases from the Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery. As an honorary gallery member (bestowed in 2013, just before we moved back to the west coast) I “negotiated” the promise to be sent the releases – telling Terry Gullion, the gallery chief at the time, that despite being so far from Ottawa, I would still be maintaining a keen interest in The Hill. He graciously accepted my argument.

So, the Olympics are over and, even 2,500 kilometres away, Edna and I felt a slight letdown, as everything returned to normal.

www.canadianchristianity.com has had much coverage on the faith-linked aspects to the Games. I encourage Ottawa*Watch* readers to check out those stories.

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As a member of the Parliamentary Press Gallery, I receive daily news releases from both opposition and government politicians, with announcements, attachments, photos and other paraphernalia. Their intention is to encourage the 400 Gallery members to use those releases as bases for stories about what they (the politicians) are doing in the political sphere.

A fair number of those releases come from the prime minister’s office. Often they are announcements that the prime minister is commending people on special achievements.

Occasionally, the achievement is somehow related to a religious expression which may or may not fall within the purview of Stephen Harper’s own particular faith.

Most days, I receive from 75 to 100 such releases. I look at all the headings and usually check out a dozen or so for closer attention.

On February 19, I was surprised to get a personal note from Sara MacIntyre, the prime minister’s associate press secretary. (Most people who pay attention to these things will have heard of Dimitri Soudas, who runs the PM’s press “shop”. MacIntyre reports to him.)

Her message was simple: “I just wanted to make sure you receive this statement this morning.”

The background to that note was my first meeting with MacIntyre, when about 100 members of the Gallery were invited, shortly before Christmas, to 24 Sussex Drive, PM's residence.

MacIntyre's line of questioning established, for her, that most of my journalism is done for Christian faith-based publications and websites. So, two months later, she did her job and, as a result, my readers are learning the following, from Harper:

"I join Catholics in Canada, as well as Quebecers and all Canadians, in welcoming the news that Brother Andre will be officially declared a saint. His canonization confirms the devotion of the countless people who came to him for help during his life, the million who attended his funeral and the two million who visit St. Joseph's Oratory every year.

"Brother Andre's life shows us the power of faith and the importance of concern for the sick and others in need. In this solemn act, the Roman Catholic Church is honouring a Canadian who achieved greatness through humility, determination and service to others.

"Brother Andre's devotion to St. Joseph, the patron saint of Canada, led to the building of the magnificent oratory on Mount Royal. Today's news heightens the inspiration we feel on seeing that religious landmark, a symbol and centre of faith in Montreal and all of Canada."

Edna and I were two of the two million in 2002 who visited St. Joseph's. It is a towering edifice built on several levels rising to a spectacular dome, under which is an imposing chapel/concert hall able to seat, I would estimate, about 1,000.

To this observer, there are two striking and contrasting features about the Oratory. The first is the series of steps up which praying pilgrims ascend, kneeling, to the first level. The other is the showcase hallway in which are displayed hundreds of crutches rendered useless and left behind by people who could not walk unaided when they arrived at the shrine.

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This prime ministerial statement, welcoming Brother Andre's canonization, is typical of his quiet habit of encouraging constructive faith wherever he finds it. It does not mean that he personally endorses the Catholic view of sainthood, but he respects it. More than that, he understands the context from which it comes, which is the healing aspect of the Christian gospel.

I am given to understand that the next few weeks could be tumultuous, at times, on the Hill. Hopefully, the prorogation will have provided the breathing space and relational healing necessary to keep the tumult somewhat at bay.

Stay tuned.

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