

Chief grandma tells it how it is

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Photo courtesy Marisol Villanueva -- Agnes Baker Pilgrim, seated, is the moderator of the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers. Baker Pilgrim returned in late July from a trip to Rome to try to get Pope Benedict XVI to rescind historical papal bulls.

Reflections on 13 indigenous grandmothers' visit to Rome

GRANTS PASS, Ore. - When Agnes Baker Pilgrim, who turns 84 in September, wakes up each day, she said she's usually grinning.

"People would think I'm nuts if they saw me early in the morning," said Baker Pilgrim, who's believed to be the oldest living member of the Takelma Indian Tribe. "I wake up with a big smile ... because I got another day. I give so many thanks because the Creator gave me another day!"

As the moderator of the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers, Baker Pilgrim returned in late July from a trip to Rome to try to get Pope Benedict XVI to rescind historical papal bulls, which played a role in the genocidal onslaught of indigenous people worldwide. Also on the journey, she and her grandma friends took up a spiritual pilgrimage to Assisi and then went on to Spain to spread more blessings.

Next on her schedule is a trip to New York this fall to attend the grand opening of a documentary focused on the grandmas' journeys since the mid-1990s. Then she's off to Washington, D.C., to draw attention to the increasing desire of some

Natives for a federal apology based on the negative impacts of colonization. Plus, she's always promoting awareness for environmental issues to protect the land and water, no matter where she's at.

And Baker Pilgrim, the oldest of the 13 grandmothers, is keeping up the pace, despite having recently broken her ankle in India and having faced down a couple of bouts with colon and breast cancer throughout her life.

In July, Indian Country Today wrote about the grandmas' visit to Rome and their futile attempt to see the pope, as well as an incident in which Vatican police tried to kick them out of St. Peter's Square during a prayer ceremony. Now home from the journey, in a rare moment of rest, Baker Pilgrim shared her thoughts.

Indian Country Today: You're back. How was it?

Agnes Baker Pilgrim: It was fantastic - and long and hard and hot. But we really feel like we got our message across even though we didn't get to see the pope. But I'm sure he got that message we passed to his helpers over there.

ICT: Do you really think the pope has received your messages, both the written ones you left for him and your spiritual ones?

Baker Pilgrim: The pope has our messages. And he knows what us grandmas want him to do. I believe personally that there's no way in heaven that he couldn't know why we came. We now leave it in the Creator's hands.

ICT: Why was it so important for you to go to the Vatican?

Baker Pilgrim: We went to the pope because of the 1493 edict issued from the Vatican that pretty much said rulers from around the world could search for new lands. And, if the lands were occupied by non-Catholics, the Vatican labeled them pagan and heathens - and said they could be killed to take the land. ... We wanted to tell the pope if he had compassion, and if he believed in equality and justice, that he should rescind that edict. It would truly be a great thing for indigenous people all over the world.

ICT: When you learned the pope was going to his summer residence on the day you had planned to see him, did you think about following him there to Castel Gandolfo?

Baker Pilgrim: I suppose we could have gone there. I really don't think, though, that Creator wanted us to. When the door shut, and we were kind of blocked out, I felt that was a message from the Creator. It was not the right time. The time will come. And I pray that it will happen while I'm still on this earth.

ICT: What was it like when the Vatican police officials asked you all to stop your prayer ceremony, claiming you were acting in contradiction to the church's teachings?

Baker Pilgrim: Well, they threatened to put us in jail if we didn't get our things out of there, saying we were being idolatrous. ... We were in prayer. We were praying. We had put our altar down. I had my condor feathers and my daughter had our condor feathers and eagle feathers, which we laid down on a mat. Another grandma brought her drum; another had her smudging bowl.

Our producer, Carole Hart, who's doing a movie about us, came in and showed them we had a permit that said we were allowed to be there. After the young Lakota dancer who was traveling with us danced, you could feel the spirits lift. It just cleared everything up. We were all right.

ICT: Do you think the pope will ultimately rescind the negative papal bulls?

Baker Pilgrim: We feel that there will be a time. We will get something from him. He will rescind those edicts and give us all equality around the world.

ICT: There has been a movement in Congress to apologize to blacks for past injustices - do you think the U.S. government owes an apology to Natives?

Baker Pilgrim: I do. The president could easily make an apology to that effect. They did it in Australia for the aborigines. Even the pope has made an apology for the treatment of the Jews.

ICT: Why do you think the message of the grandmas is so powerful?

Baker Pilgrim: Because we grandmothers are coming together. We know that just because you're gray-headed, you don't need to go to pasture. ... I have visions of seeing women all over the world empowering themselves and holding prestigious roles. Women are natural nurturers and they will step forward all over the world. And it's happening. Move over, men. It is time for the natural nurturers to get this world back in balance.

ICT: Is it ever hard when 13 strong women get together - do you ever have arguments after spending so much time together?

Baker Pilgrim: [Laughs] Well, sometimes the darkness tries to creep up on the table. And I'm the prayer person, so I'll say, "OK, let's stop - let's remind ourselves that we're spiritual grandmothers." And I pray to keep the darkness back.

ICT: Do you think about your own longevity - in terms of how long you can keep doing all this?

Baker Pilgrim: Getting old isn't for wimps. You've got to be tough. When something hits your body, you have to bounce back up through the power of the mind. I've chosen. I want to live. And I've got a lot of things left to do yet.

