

Monument to St. John Paul II nears completion

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Bronze likeness of the Pope who visited Vancouver in 1984 will be positioned early next year

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Caption: Louise Weir stands on a stepladder next to a clay figure of the Polish Pope, which she has been working on since March. It stands about 10 feet high and weighs 2,000 pounds. Agnieszka Krawczynski / The B.C. Catholic.

Numerous historical figures are memorialized in bronze on various Vancouver sites. Soon a 10-foot likeness of Pope St. John Paul II will join them.

"In Poland, we have a lot of statues of John Paul II, but there are only a few in North America," said Krzysztof Olendzki, Consul General of Poland in Vancouver.

He and about two dozen donors filled a small downtown studio Oct. 30 to see an unfinished clay figure of the man who led the Catholic Church from 1978-2005.

Archbishop J. Michael Miller, CSB, praised the tight-knit community that came up with the idea of commemorating the Pope this way.

"This is a wonderful testimony to a very great and very holy man who has probably had, in some way, an influence in all of us," he said. "Certainly it's made all of us proud to be Catholics."

He commissioned artist Louise Weir to sculpt the monument in March.

"It's such a wonderful honour," she said as she thanked the guests. "This is the first monument that I've ever made, and it's been quite a learning curve for me."

Weir climbs stepladders and bars to work on the larger-than-life figure, which already weighs 2,000 pounds. She hopes to finish the clay model by the end of November.

Workers from InBronze foundry in Langley will then come to her studio and create a mould in sections. It will be used to make a wax statue, which Weir will touch up before it is cast in bronze, welded together, and polished.

That process is expected to take about four months. The finished work will be raised early next year at the entrance to the new John Paul II Pastoral Centre, which is currently being built on 33rd Avenue near Willow Street.

"The statue is only the beginning," said Don Vicic, chairman of the fundraising committee. "It is going to be the energy and the catalyst for something much more important: promoting Catholic higher education."

Vicic explained statue costs have already been raised, with the exception of some unforeseeable transportation and installation bills. The committee is still accepting donations, and all funds not used for the statue will start off a John Paul II Catholic Higher Education Fund.

"There is a great need for this," and a saint who had a special passion for young people is the perfect candidate to propel it, Vicic said.

The Pope will be immortalized in his early 60s, to look the way he did when he visited Vancouver in 1984.

"I'm overwhelmed at how marvellous it is. Of particular interest to me is how it's captured St. John Paul's vigour," Archbishop Miller commented.

"It gives also a sense of movement; you can see it in the bottom of his cassock, that he's being blown by a Pacific wind, and in his own movement, that this was a man who was striding across the world."

The world-travelling saint, who made 104 pastoral visits outside Italy and 146 within it, is portrayed standing on a dome, which will look like a world map.

More information on the statue and making donations is available from Brett Powell, 604-683-0281, and through www.rcav.org/statue.