

Behind the scenes at True Mother's Inter-religious Ceremony in São Paulo, Brazil

Christian Lepelletier
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Allianz Parque Stadium



Cardinal Kelvin Felix receiving the gold medallion and one of the certificates that Christian Lepelletier had scrambled to prepare on time

The inter-religious ceremony in São Paulo Stadium was short and looked simple but was actually beautiful and meaningful, representing the religious diversity of Latin America. Behind these five minutes of inter-religious harmony were hours of stress, months of intense campaigning and years of friendship with Cardinal Kelvin Felix.

The organizers of the August 4 Family Festival in São Paulo decided include an inter-religious ceremony, in which each representative of a religion pours water into a common large container. Just after the Football World Cup ended, on July 16, I received the mission to prepare the list of religious leaders who would have to be onstage. I requested the list of guests coming from the thirty-three countries for the Latin America Summit (LAS) organized by the Universal Peace Federation. I found the names of about forty religious leaders, mostly Catholic and Protestant, plus three Muslims and a Buddhist.

I sent invitations to my inter-religious contacts in São Paulo in order to have greater religious diversity, which represents Brazil's reality. I also received names from brothers and sisters from other regions who had joined a mobilization team at our movement's headquarters in São Paulo. Since the beginning of 2018, several teams have been visiting schools, associations, churches and temples in order to fill the stadium.

Three people confirmed to me that they would participate, and three others to Hector, a brother who was also involved in contacting religious organizations. The rest we would begin confirming from August 2, when the guests of the LAS would arrive at the hotel.

Small details, great anxiety

On Monday morning, July 30, I received a message from the secretary general of the LAS, a new and rather challenging task. "We need two types of frames, five for normal peace ambassador certificates and three for good governance awards, which are much bigger, of the same size as the framework given to the president of Senegal, Macky Sall. We need all that by the end of the LAS, Saturday, August 4."

I rushed immediately to a store to order the frames. The normal delivery time is a week. I had to negotiate and insist on having them ready by Friday afternoon. I also had to go to a printer to see if they could print the large A2 (16.5 x 23.4) award certificates. On Wednesday August 1, at 11:45 PM, I received a WhatsApp audio message: "The three good governance awards will be presented in True Mother's presence on Friday morning. Please manage to bring the three frames for the August 3 session at 10 AM. A new big blow of stress fell on me!"

So, on Thursday morning, the day the LAS began, I had to make several calls to ask to speed the production of the big frames. I asked if I could have them that same evening. This was not possible, but they promised they would be ready the next morning at 7:45 am when the store opened.

That morning at 7:00 am, I asked my son Jocelyn who was on the staff as a translator to help me call an Uber taxi, in order to pick up the frames and be back by 8:00 am in my hotel room, where I already had the printed diplomas. I managed to mount the three big diplomas and bring them around 9:00 am, in time for the 10:00 am session. I then felt relieved of much of the stress. One of the people selected to receive this prestigious diploma was Cardinal Kelvin Felix, who came from Dominica in the Caribbean. Cardinals do not often attend our conferences.



In 1970, 90 percent of Brazilians were Catholic. The 2010 Census shows a decline to 65 percent. Evangelical Protestants or secular non-atheists had risen to nearly a quarter of the population. Numerous other religions are active. In this photograph of the water ceremony, Cardinal Kelvin Felix is at the far left

Gathering the faithful

However, I now had to focus on my very first mission and find religious leaders to come onstage the next day at the stadium. Throughout Friday, I thought of the possibility of inviting the cardinal; I spoke to Rémy Taupier, who knows him well. Nevertheless, it was still a little early to tackle the subject. I had met and invited the Buddhist monk who had come from Japan and Dr. Sima of the Bahia faith who had come from Uruguay. She was very kind and asked me if she would be able to read a prayer, at the end of the ceremony.

The Saturday morning session of the LAS was the inauguration of the Latin American chapter of the Inter-religious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD). The inter-religious ceremony, with the pouring of water, was on the program. Having the cardinal being involved would be great, so I tried to prepare him.

On Saturday morning, after the inaugural session of IAPD, the cardinal was a target of attention from many participants who wanted to take pictures with him. I had to wait for him and inform him that in the afternoon there would be the water ceremony at the stadium and invited him to participate. He agreed.

I then left the LAS and headed to the stadium, with my provisional list, my ticket to enter the stadium, and some cards on which I would write the name of the religious leader and the religion he represents. These I would give to the master of ceremonies onstage at the time of the ceremony.

Physical barriers

I knew the road to the stadium but did not know that once there, reaching the stage was complicated; I did not have permission to pass a barrier a good distance from the stage; only those on the production and media team could. It took me half an hour to find someone to help me enter the VIP area near the stage to get ten badges so that my guests can cross the barrier and reach the stage. In less an hour four hundred VIPs would arrive at the stadium, where we had reserved ten chairs for religious leaders. I met my first

guest, Mr. Afonso, a leader in Spiritism. Afterward, I received a message from Mr. Cristino, an indigenous leader, saying that he had entered the stadium, but we met only an hour later, because of the vastness of the place, the barriers and the impossibility of using phones due to the volume of background music through the sound system.

Gradually, the VIPs, coming directly from the LAS, filled their section. I met the cardinal and I reconfirmed he would participate. Then the director of the company who installed the entire decorative structure for our festival, Mr. Fernando, came to see me and asked, "Do you have someone from Judaism?" I told him no, it's Saturday, their Sabbath, finding a Jew who would accept would be hard. He told me, "I am not a rabbi, but I am Jewish and I would like to participate representing Judaism. I will find a kippah; you can put my name on the list."

An imam came to sit near the cardinal, not the one we had invited, but given the shortage of time, we welcomed him. I was looking for a Protestant. I asked Remy Taupier for help. He asked Juan Edghill of Guyana, bishop of Outreach Ministries in Georgetown, Guyana, who accepted. I was able to fill in ten names on my list. All we had to do was wait for someone to pick us up and get onstage.

The ceremony itself was the easiest part; everyone was sitting comfortably. I gave all the names to the MC, who called the religious figures who poured water into the container one by one.

Rémy Taupier

I will provide a few words about Cardinal Kelvin Felix. Before becoming a cardinal, Bishop Kelvin Felix was the archbishop of Castries, Saint Lucia's capital city. I have known him for a long time. Fourteen years ago, I met him when I gave a PowerPoint presentation for all the leaders of the Catholic Church on HIV/AIDS prevention and abstinence.

We saw each other subsequent occasions. I invited him to international conferences in Korea or the United States. Six years ago, he retired and returned to Dominica, his native country. Four years ago he was named a cardinal by the Pope Francis, an Argentinian. I have been to Dominica several times to help the Japanese missionaries there. Each time we went to visit the cardinal.

In June, Dr. Yang asked me to come to Dominica with him to visit the prime minister. During that visit, we met the cardinal. He was not yet sure that he would, but he was interested in attending the São Paulo conference. To give him confidence, I told him that a person from Saint Lucia that he knows very well would travel with him. That woman is a very good Catholic and her father (who is the same age as the cardinal) is a deacon in the church and a great friend of the cardinal. She is also a good peace ambassador and participated in a UPF International Leadership Conference in Korea seven years ago.