

Rediscovering, Recognizing and Celebrating the Spiritual Heritage of Canada's Aboriginal Peoples

A Pastoral Message to the Native Peoples of Canada

As members of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and its Commission for the Evangelization of Peoples, we rejoice with you, the aboriginal people of Canada, in the rediscovery, recognition and celebration of your spiritual heritage. The Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, invites us to join in this celebration, praising what he calls *that marvellous rebirth of your culture and traditions*.⁽¹⁾ In this rebirth, we witness the Spirit of God working through you and among you, bringing about healing for individuals and communities. We also see in this the action of the Spirit contributing to justice and reconciliation among all the peoples of Canada.

As pastors, we have seen how, for many among you, the rediscovery of the spiritual riches of your traditions is an integral part of your own restoration. You are finding new strength in an ever-deepening embrace of the seven spiritual gifts of respect, wisdom, courage, love, humility, honesty, and truth, as expressed in the teachings of the Medicine Wheel. In this way, you reflect ever more clearly your true dignity as Children of God.

We Experience Christ Anew

Our message is addressed particularly to you, our Catholic brothers and sisters. In a unique way, you welcomed the Gospel of Jesus and continue to live as faithful witnesses to your baptism. You are a blessing for the whole Church as you develop a deeper appreciation and understanding of the richness of your own cultures and traditions. Thus, you continue to challenge all Christians at the deepest level of their understanding of the mystery of Christ and their reality as the Body of Christ. Pope John Paul II reminded the Church of its profound debt to aboriginal Catholics and their ancestors in the faith who since the middle of the 17th century have maintained a steadfast love for the Church. Speaking at Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré in 1984, he said,

Your encounter with the Gospel has not only enriched you, it has enriched the Church. We are well aware that this has not been without difficulties and, occasionally, blunders. However, and you are experiencing this today, the Gospel does not destroy what is best in you. On the contrary, it enriches as it were from

within the spiritual qualities and gifts that are distinctive to your cultures. In addition your Amerindian and Inuit traditions permit the development of new ways of expressing the message of salvation and they help us to better understand to what point Jesus is the Saviour and how universal his salvation.⁽²⁾

We rejoice, not only because you have received Christ but also because many Catholics experience Christ anew through you. So it is, at the threshold of the third millennium, we find ourselves in a dialogue that although at times is controversial always offers tremendous opportunities.

A Sign to this Generation

In each generation there have arisen among you men and women who exemplify values that are deeply held in your traditions, values which humanity and all creation seriously need. Even in our own time, many are greatly encouraged in their faith through the heroic life of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha. Indeed, that Child of God, who died so young in the latter part of the 17th century, remains an enduring witness for all Catholics of the great love of God for the poor.

Today, as you experience a steady growth in your population, a stronger sense of solidarity among your nations, renewed opportunities for the just settlement of your land claims, and a greater measure of self-government, you have not abandoned the path of peace.

In defending your identity, your nationhood, your land and our common environment, you challenge all Canadians. A challenge, first of all, to be faithful to the treaties that have been made. A challenge also to be faithful to the truth, rooted in the original creation covenant, commanding all humanity to be stewards of the land and everything that belongs to it.⁽³⁾

In holding fast to your commitment to family and community, in resisting the individualism and materialism of today's society, and in insisting, despite years of suffering, on reconciliation and restorative justice, you are giving courageous witness to a true understanding of healing, based on harmony and balance.

Your actions are evidence of a deep spiritual well that has sustained life and the promise of new life even in tragic conditions. At the threshold of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, you stand out as a sign of hope for all of God's Creation.⁽⁴⁾ We can hear in your best efforts the voice of the prophet, calling humanity to prepare for the "Year of God's Favour" through acts of restoration and renewal.

The legacy of a Deeply Damaged Relationship

Having lived with and among you for generations, as pastors we are aware that the romantic view of your way of life that is embraced by popular culture often does not respect the reality you are living. As the recent Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples has made clear once again, you carry a grossly unequal burden and legacy of the deeply damaged relationship that exists between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people.⁽⁵⁾

We recognize in each spiritual tradition there is a mixture of shadow and light. However, we wish to reaffirm that the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in aboriginal traditions. Moreover, the Church encourages all its members to recognize, preserve and promote the spiritual, moral and cultural values found within your traditions and to work together with you in a spirit of prudent and charitable dialogue and collaboration.⁽⁶⁾

We remember as well, with profound regret, those dimensions of Catholic mission history that were too closely identified with the European forces of expansion and assimilation, and so contributed to your suffering.⁽⁷⁾ Many times in this final decade of the 20th century, the pastors of the Church have spoken about this concern. While we remain grateful to those who have come before us - especially those many bishops, priests, religious and lay workers who gave their lives in loving service - we also recognize the faults, failings, and sinfulness within the Church that have blocked access to the fullness of the freedom that the Gospel brings.⁽⁸⁾ During this examination of conscience, the Catholic Church has been accompanied by other Christian denominations. In profound ways, all Canadian Christians have expressed apologies, which they are now endeavouring to live in acts of reconciliation and justice.

Commitment to Dialogue

Within the Church and the broader human community, people share each other's joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties.⁽⁹⁾ As it has for generations, this bond provides solid

ground for all humanity to build on together.

As bishops, we respect your ancestral customs and spiritual heritage. We also respect those among you who have found in contemporary expressions of these traditions ways to revere the power of God present in all of Creation. We renew our commitment to the dialogue that has begun between our respective spiritual heritages. Following the example of Christ our Elder and Teacher, we do this in union with the whole Church, which *regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many respects, from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless reflect a ray of the Truth which enlightens everyone.* [\(10\)](#)

Through dialogue, persons with solid conviction in their traditions can share with others who are equally grounded in their own spiritual riches their ways of prayer and their means of searching for God. This dialogue, however, requires trust, confidence, utmost understanding and sensitivity toward differences. [\(11\)](#)

Yearning to be Whole

For yourselves, the need to dialogue comes from deep within you and your communities. It wells up from a yearning to be whole and to bring into harmony those elements of religious traditions that exist, side by side, within you. This attitude is especially true for those of you who for years have had to work out in practical ways the answer to the questions, "Can I be both Christian and Indian? or must I choose?" In your own contexts you have led the way in the universal challenge issued by Pope John Paul II: *Each member of the faithful and all Christian communities are called to practise dialogue.* [\(12\)](#)

The Church needs your leadership in this dialogue, if it is to bear fruit in deeper mutual understanding, broader comprehension of the Spirit of God, and fuller inculturation [\(13\)](#) of the Catholic faith. In all of this, the Spirit of God is building among us a Church that never ceases to proclaim salvation in Christ, while also demonstrating in its liturgy, education, pastoral ministry and in the very life of Christians deep reverence and respect for the cultures and spiritualities of aboriginal peoples. [\(14\)](#)

Spiritual dialogue is, finally, more than knowledge and discussion. The end of the spiritual journey is beyond the limits of human understanding, and even beyond that broadened understanding which results from sharing all we know. The point of arrival for every spiritual quest is to share in the holiness of God. As Scripture says, *Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.*⁽¹⁵⁾ Inspired by the memory of Our Lady who appeared as an Aztec at Guadalupe almost 470 years ago, and invoking the intercession of the young Mohawk woman, Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, let us journey together as faithful pilgrims toward the fulfilment of God's promise in humanity.

Members of the Episcopal Commission for the Evangelization of Peoples
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

+Most Reverend André Gaumond (Chair)
+Most Reverend Vincent Cadieux, OMI
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REFERENCES

1. Pope John Paul II, Homily to the Native People at Fort Simpson, delivered at Yellowknife, NWT, September 18, 1984.
2. Pope John Paul II, Homily at Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, September 10, 1984.
3. Cf. Archbishop Peter Sutton, OMI, Intervention at the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for America, November 24, 1997.
4. In his apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, no. 46, Pope John Paul II identifies signs of hope, not as isolated events or phenomena but as part of a cosmic tension leading to new birth. He encourages the Church to prepare for the Jubilee of the Year 2000 by seeking these signs of hope.

5. *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, Volumes 1-5, Ottawa, 1996.

6. Second Vatican Council, Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 2.

7. Permanent Council of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Let Justice Flow Like a Mighty River: Brief to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, November 8, 1993. The Permanent Council spoke in particular of the role of the Church in the Indian residential school system. Here and elsewhere, Catholic Church leadership has apologized for the dimensions of missionary work that reflected a Eurocentric mentality and promoted assimilation.

8. For example, Canadian Conference of Bishops, 1975 Labour Day Message, *Northern Development: At What Cost?*, paragraph 25: "We readily acknowledge that the Catholic Church must also take a critical look at itself. We now see that coming from another culture, the Church may have contributed to the disruptive changes in Northern culture...."

Also, the Permanent Council of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1992 pastoral message, *Towards a New Evangelization: On the Occasion of the 500th Anniversary of the Evangelization of the Americas*: "If there were bishops and missionaries championing aboriginal rights, there were also theologians and Church leaders defending colonial exploitation. While some missionaries attempted to protect and understand native cultures, others failed to value native beliefs and customs as seeds of the Word of God."

As well, *Let Justice Flow Like a Mighty River*: "There is much in the relationship between the Catholic Church and Aboriginal Peoples to celebrate and build on. However, we are currently very aware of what was lost and this is of great importance to us. What was lost or nearly so, was the free expression and celebration of the spirituality of the First Peoples of this land."

9. This list of passions opens *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, issued in 1961 by the Second Vatican Council, linking the journey of the Church in the world with the journey of all people, especially the poor. The same solidarity is described in the reflection put forth in the 1991 reflection *Dialogue and Proclamation* by the Pontifical Council on Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. This stresses the importance of the "dialogue of life" "where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations."

10. Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 2.
11. Pope John Paul II, Address to the participants in the 1995 Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.
12. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 57.
13. "Given that in America, popular piety is a mode of inculturation of the Catholic faith and that it has often assumed indigenous religious forms, we must not underestimate the fact that, prudently considered, it too can provide valid cues for a more complete inculturation of the Gospel. This is especially important among the indigenous peoples, in order that 'the seeds of the Word' found in their culture may come to their fullness in Christ." Pope John Paul II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in America*, January 22, 1999, no. 16.
14. U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *1992: Time for Remembering, Reconciling and Recommitting Ourselves as a People*, December 17, 1991.
15. Leviticus 11.44.