



# ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS BULLETIN ASSEMBLÉE DES PREMIÈRES NATIONS

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## **AFN National Chief Says Private Audience with Pope Benedict XVI in Vatican City “Closes the Circle” and Enables Work Towards Reconciliation for Residential School Survivors**

(Vatican City) – Assembly of First Nations National Chief Phil Fontaine and a delegation of First Nations Elders, residential school survivors and Aboriginal leaders met with Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican today in what is the first ever Private Audience between a Pope and a delegation of First Nations from Canada. The purpose of the audience was to discuss the legacy of the Indian residential schools era and the need for reconciliation.

“As we approach the one year anniversary of the Government of Canada’s apology on June 11, this visit with the Holy Father closes the circle of reconciliation. In the past, we received apologies from the Anglican, United and Presbyterian churches and the Government of Canada for the residential schools. Today’s expression of understanding, acknowledgement and emotion by His Holiness on behalf of the Catholic Church closes the circle,” stated the National Chief.

Assembly of First Nations National Chief Phil Fontaine and the delegation of First Nations Elders, survivors, Chiefs, women and youth attended an outdoor general audience in St. Peter’s Square. Included in the delegation, at the invitation of the National Chief, were Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami President Mary Simon and Métis National Council Vice-President David Chartrand.

Following the General Audience, the National Chief Fontaine and four AFN delegates, as well as five representatives of the Catholic Church, met the Most Holy Father in a private meeting that lasted approximately 20 minutes.

In this historic meeting, the National Chief stated, “Our struggle has reached a decisive moment. While the past must never be forgotten, our destiny lies in building a future with enduring foundations, the cornerstone of which must be forgiveness.”

The delegates presented His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI with a number of gifts that symbolized the diverse culture and spirituality of First Nations peoples: an eagle feather, traditional beaded moccasins and gloves, a porcupine quill box designed with the AFN insignia, a bible translated into the Dene language and a silver crucifix specially designed and commissioned for the occasion that symbolizes reconciliation between First Nations and the Catholic Church.

In his statement, the Holy Father expressed his sorrow at the anguish caused by the deplorable conduct of some members of the Church and he offered his sympathy and prayerful solidarity. His Holiness emphasized that acts of abuse cannot be tolerated in society. He prayed that all those

affected would experience healing, and he encouraged First Nations peoples to continue to move forward with renewed hope.

The National Chief stated in reply: “Most Holy Father, we offer our hand in friendship, reconciliation and yes, hope; hope that we can work together to shape a new Canada for our people.”

The National Chief stated that the meeting was a moving and extraordinary moment for all involved, and is a highpoint of his own lifelong work to bring resolution to the legacy of the Indian residential schools.

The Catholic Church operated approximately 75% of the Indian residential schools in Canada. The National Chief worked with the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops to make today’s meeting a reality, and he thanked the organization and particularly its President, Archbishop Joseph Weisgerber, and legal counsel to the Catholic Church Entities Pierre Baribeau for their support.

The text of the National Chief’s statement and a picture and description of the silver crucifix presented to Pope Benedict XVI by National Chief Fontaine is available upon request.

The Assembly of First Nations is the national organization representing First Nations citizens in Canada.

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