



April 29, 2009

Most Holy Father:

Today is a joyous day for the human spirit. It is a momentous day for our people and for our country, Canada.

It is my highest honor as the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations to represent our people in your presence in this awe-inspiring house of worship and grace. Most Holy Father, thank you for receiving us.

The Catholic Church has always played a significant role in the history of our peoples. Priests and nuns were some of the first Europeans to arrive on our shores.

Our ancestors taught the newcomers how to survive the cold, how to live off the land and how to navigate the vast continent. They taught them diverse and beautiful languages, including those of the Mig'maq, Anishinabe, Cree and Dene. In return, missionaries built schools, churches and hospitals – not just in cities but also in remote areas of the country where our people lived.

They acted as intermediaries in treaty negotiations and interpretation and often expressed their serious reservations about the federal government's intentions in the implementation of the treaties.

Many embraced our languages with enthusiasm, wrote them down and created dictionaries, bibles and books of prayers that we still use to this day.

The Catholics recognized the deep spirituality of our peoples and introduced a faith to which many indigenous people devoutly adhere.

What brings us here today, however, was the failure those many years ago, by Canada and religious authorities, to recognize and respect those who did not wish to change – those who wished to be different.

For reasons rooted in imperfections of the human condition, those at the highest levels of authority in Canada came to believe that our indigenous cultures, languages and our ways of worship were not worth keeping and should be eradicated.

To implement this belief, the Canadian government adopted the policy of forcibly removing indigenous children from their families and communities and placing them in Indian Residential Schools under the care and control of members of Catholic entities and other churches.

The Catholic Church entities thus became part of a tragic plan of assimilation that was not only doomed to fail but destined to leave a disastrous legacy in its wake. Many children died in these schools, alone, confused and bereft. Countless others were physically, emotionally and sexually abused. The fabric of family life for thousands of our people, young and old, was shattered.

We suffered needlessly and tragically. So much was lost for no good reason.

The Catholic Church, too, was harmed by the residential school experience. Many good and decent men and women of faith were tainted and reviled because of the evil acts of some. The hundreds of years of good will and hard work by courageous and committed missionaries were undermined by the misguided policy Catholic priests and nuns found themselves enforcing. The reputation of the Catholic Church was impoverished. This, too, was tragic.

But today is a new day. We are here at the Vatican in your presence Most Holy Father, to change this sad history.

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.

Our elders teach us that we have choices in life. We can build up, or we can tear down. We can forgive with generosity of spirit and with the hand of friendship, or we can seek sustenance from bitterness and vengeance.

We come here today Most Holy Father, with the spirit and lessons of our ancestors and elders in mind.

Reconciliation and friendship is what we seek. The time to re-build a better and brighter future together is upon us. The moment to bridge the gap has come.

Healing the wounds of the residential school legacy will take years, perhaps even decades of work. But today marks an important milestone on the road out of darkness.

On June 11, 2008, I spoke to the Canadian Parliament in response to the apology of the Prime Minister and leaders of the Opposition. On that wonderful occasion I said, "This day testifies to nothing less than the achievement of the impossible."

Most Holy Father, I say the same to you today. The achievement of the impossible can only occur when there is hope. We are here because our people never lost hope. And today, together with you, we have merged hope with history.

We will never forget the visit of His Holiness, Pope John Paul II when he came to the Canadian North to visit our people, after bad weather prevented his first attempt. He celebrated mass in our house - a giant teepee - and he prayed with the scent of sweet grass and the sound of beating drums in the air.

The reverence and respect he showed for our culture gave us the hope and strength we needed to pursue our goals, including those that have brought us here today. The co-existence of our unique spiritual values was evident on that day and set a hallmark for renewed respect.

We have learned over the many years of our struggle that none of us acting alone can achieve success like the events of today. So many have worked so very hard over the weeks, months, through many decades and generations to bring the residential school problem to a close. They deserve our deepest and most heartfelt thanks. Our endless gratitude is owed to those brave, fearless survivors who never lived to see this day, but whose contributions to its achievement will never be forgotten.

We offer you, Most Holy Father, our hand in friendship, reconciliation and yes, hope. Hope that we can work together to shape a new Canada for our people - a Canada where racism and discrimination will no longer exist, where the debilitating poverty that plagues us will be eradicated forever, and where our languages and cultures will once again flourish.

Much has been achieved in our struggle for equality and much remains to be done. But now we face the future with the confidence that never again should any Canadian, whoever they are and whoever their ancestors may have been, are treated with disrespect and disregard for their humanity.

Most Holy Father, you have reinforced our belief in justice. You have strengthened our confidence in the nobility of the human soul. You have added to the sum of dignity in the world.

Thank you, Merci, Meegwetch.

Phil Fontaine
National Chief