

Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops of Saskatchewan on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

June 7, 2012

Dear Catholic faithful of Saskatchewan,

From June 21st to 24th, Saskatoon will host one of the seven national gatherings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). We are writing to invite you to give serious attention to this gathering and its aims.

As many of you are aware, the Government of Canada organized ‘Indian Residential Schools’, most run by Christian churches, from the 1840s onward, with the last school closing in 1996. Not everything that happened at residential schools was negative, and many people worked there with good will and generosity. However, the schools were a part of a policy of deliberate cultural assimilation of Aboriginal peoples, and over the decades, much abuse took place at these schools. As the Catholic Church in Saskatchewan, we were involved in the residential schools and we recognize a moral responsibility and obligation to be involved in healing and reconciliation efforts.

In recent years, apologies have been extended by Catholic religious communities involved with the schools and by groups of bishops and church leaders. We also apologize for the abuse which took place at those schools, and for our part in the suppression of First Nations and Métis culture and language. In 2009, in a meeting with First Nations leaders, Pope Benedict XVI “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” with those negatively impacted by the Residential Schools. But we also need to move beyond apologies. The apologies are the seeds which we hope will lead to a bountiful harvest of reconciliation and healing.

We cannot change the past, but it is for us to work together with Aboriginal communities in building a shared future of mutual respect. The Truth and Reconciliation gathering is an event which holds great opportunity, as it is geared towards a new future, arrived at by honestly dealing with the past. Aboriginal leaders and elders have shown an openness to engage with the people of Canada, and with the churches who were part of the residential schools. An invitation is being extended to engage in a relationship building process. As Director of the Office of the Treaty Commissioner, Harry Lafond, recently put it, “We are looking for representatives of the Church willing to walk with us on our journey, so that it becomes a reciprocally beneficial relationship. The TRC is an invitation to come and experience the story of the people; not to be a spectator but to be a participant. Those who have been willing to engage deeply have also learned and received in the process.”

A large number of former students of residential schools, and their descendants, live in Saskatchewan. The Gospel we proclaim calls us to actively address the legacy of the assimilation policies, and the larger cluster of issues relating to colonialism, racism and prejudice, and the rupture with traditional Aboriginal ways of life. These are not 'Aboriginal issues' but issues for all of us. This is about our communities, our province, our church.

The TRC will eventually come to an end, but the Church will continue to walk with Aboriginal people. The canonization of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha in October will be a celebration acknowledging the greatness and holiness of a young First Nations woman. Marking that tremendously important event in the life of our Church will be a way of strengthening ties with Aboriginal communities. Walking closely with our Catholic Aboriginal brothers and sisters will open doors, and teach us how to walk together with Aboriginal communities as a whole. This will continue to call forth an ongoing exchange of cultural and spiritual gifts. There are also many ongoing issues beyond residential schools which our parishes and our dioceses are challenged to address. These needs impel us to walk with our Aboriginal sisters and brothers in advocating for justice and healing in our society.

One initiative which the Canadian Catholic Church has undertaken, consistent with the TRC, is the Moving Forward Together campaign. This campaign has drawn together Catholic faith communities across Canada to support initiatives in our local communities, and on the national scene as well. Information on Moving Forward Together will be distributed in your parishes soon, and we would welcome your support for that campaign.

In closing, we strongly encourage you to attend the TRC, even for a few hours, more if you are able, to learn about this part of our past, and to prayerfully reflect on ways in which we as individuals, parishes and dioceses, might more effectively be the artisans of healing and reconciliation which Christ our Lord has called us to be.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

Most Rev. Daniel J. Bohan,
Archbishop of Regina

Most Rev. Albert Thevenot
Bishop of Prince Albert

Most Rev. Donald Bolen
Bishop of Saskatoon

Most Rev. Bryan Bayda
Ukrainian Eparchial Bishop of Saskatoon

Most Rev. Sylvain Lavoie, O.M.I.
Archbishop of Keewatin-Le Pas