



THAT WE MAY WALK TOGETHER

PASTORAL LETTER TO THE FIRST NATIONS

WALKING TOGETHER ON
THE PATH OF TRUTH, JUSTICE,
HEALING, RECONCILIATION,
AND HOPE.

By the gift of God, our Creator, a series of historic encounters took place in 2022 between Pope Francis and First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. First, in March 2022, survivors, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and youth travelled to the Vatican, where the Holy Father invited them into his home. This historic event was marked by a warm and welcoming spirit, deep listening, honest sharing, and gift exchanges. For years to come, Pope Francis' words, spoken to the Indigenous representatives who were present, will resonate deeply in our hearts: "Listening to your voices, I was able to enter into and be deeply grieved by the stories of the suffering, hardship, discrimination and

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POPE FRANCIS

various forms of abuse that some of you experienced, particularly in the residential schools. ... I ask for God's forgiveness and I want to say to you with all my heart: I am very sorry. And I join my brothers, the Canadian bishops, in asking your pardon. ... In a fraternal spirit, I encourage the Bishops



WALKING TOGETHER MARCHER ENSEMBLE

Image: Papal Visit 2022, Maskwacis, Alberta
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and the Catholic community to continue taking steps towards the transparent search for truth and to foster healing and reconciliation.”

A few months later, in July 2022, the Holy Father travelled to Canada, as promised, to meet with Indigenous Peoples on the land of our common home. During those memorable days, which Pope Francis described as a “penitential pilgrimage,” the Holy Father reiterated on Indigenous territory his profound apology for the harms caused in residential schools by members of the Catholic Church and, with humility and remorse, begged for forgiveness. We, the Bishops of Canada’s Catholic dioceses and eparchies, following the example of the Holy Father, and in keeping with the apology we offered with one heart and voice at our Plenary Assembly meeting of 2021, renew our profound sorrow for past harms and recommit ourselves to finding new ways to accompany Indigenous Peoples in their pursuit of justice, healing, and reconciliation.

The Apostolic Visit was planned on a very compressed timeline, which meant the planning process placed intense demands on staff, volunteers, and partners – Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike. We recognize that the breadth and depth of

consultation with First Nations leaders fell short of what many desired and expected, but we appreciate the patience, collaboration, and dialogue of the many Indigenous partners who supported the planning of this historic visit. The many hours of encounter and dialogue with Pope Francis remain of enormous significance and hope to all those engaged in our shared pilgrimage towards healing and reconciliation. The Holy Father spoke of Indigenous traditions and values as “precious,” underscored the commitment of the Church to partner with the Indigenous Peoples in support of their rights, and stressed the contribution of Indigenous culture and wisdom to our future life in Canada. As Catholic Bishops, we ask you to continue to walk side by side with us along the path of hope. In addressing this letter of invitation to you, we extend our hand in friendship and respect, hopeful that we may be united as ambassadors of reconciliation, reaching out not only to members of the Indigenous community, but also to all non-Indigenous persons, forming ever wider circles of mutual understanding and healing.

In communion with Pope Francis, each of us, as leaders of our dioceses and eparchies, pledges to walk with you into a new era of reconciliation. The pathways that lead to mutual understanding and respect are many. Having heard from you and with readiness to continue learning from your wisdom, each of us wishes to work with you, particularly at the local level, on the following commitments, even going beyond them wherever possible:





- Continuing our dialogue. As we worked together on the delegation to Rome and the subsequent papal visit, we enjoyed many occasions of respectful and fruitful dialogue with your representatives on the national, regional, and local levels. The Bishops are committed to working with you to discern the most effective mechanisms by which these dialogues can continue as the basis of our walking together.
- Supporting Catholic educational institutions, seminaries and religious houses, as well as programs of pastoral formation in their efforts to foster a greater understanding of Indigenous cultural, linguistic, and spiritual traditions and to include opportunities for encounters with Indigenous communities as part of their programs. Important will be the opportunities to hear about the history of this land from an Indigenous perspective, attentive to your experience of colonization and residential schools. As part of these efforts, we hope to learn more from you about treaties, in terms both of the history of their formulation and the abiding relevance they have as the foundation of strengthened relationships.
- Accompanying you in the pursuit of justice for your Peoples, in the spirit of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and of Catholic Social Teaching.
- Standing in solidarity with you in your stewardship of the land and the goods of Creation, the gifts of the Creator.
- Joining you in tackling social challenges, such as addictions, suicide, violence, poverty, and incarceration, especially as these impact young people.

- Working with future generations. Having heard from you of your abiding concern for your young people, we stand ready to support the development of resources for youth to help them in their search for meaning and hope.
- Engaging new areas of responsibility within the Church, to which you, especially Elders, might be called and mandated, in keeping with the *Brief to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, which stated the intention “to call Aboriginal Peoples to leadership in their Church communities.”
- Working with you and other Christian Churches to foster healthy and supportive relationships in the communities.
- Fulfilling the pledge made by all of Canada’s Bishops in 2021 to provide funding in support of local initiatives discerned and led by Indigenous partners through the Indigenous Reconciliation Fund (IRF) over a five-year period.

The journey towards reconciliation is underway, and many positive steps have already been taken. It is a path that can only be travelled by walking together. As former Chief Harry Lafond noted in his Intervention at the Synod for America, “we must lean on one another as we journey.” The Creator walks with us and asks us to walk together in right relationships.

Moved by the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, and under the guidance and protection of Our Lady of Guadalupe and Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, we, the Catholic Bishops of Canada gathered at our 2022 Plenary Assembly meeting, desired to make these thoughts known to you in this letter, so that you may be assured of our individual and collective commitment to continue walking with you on the path of truth, justice, healing, reconciliation, and hope.

8 February 2023

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