



Diocese of Mackenzie-Fort Smith Office of the Bishop

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3rd Sunday of Easter, April 10, 2016

Dear Clergy, Religious Sisters, Lay Leaders, Brothers and Sisters of the Diocese of Mackenzie-Fort Smith:

I am contacting you given the recent statement this past week of 4 Catholic groups in regards to the “Calls to Action” that came out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in June 2015. In particular, Call to Action #48 requested a response by March 31, 2016.

Let me begin by expressing my full support of the statement by the four organizations:

the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB), the Canadian Religious Conference, the Canadian Catholic Aboriginal Council, and the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace. The statement expresses support for the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, and concludes with an "appeal to all our Catholic brothers and sisters -- laity, members of institutes of consecrated life and of societies of apostolic life, deacons, priests, and Bishops" - to make commitments in order to "continue to walk together with Indigenous Peoples in building a more just society where their gifts and those of all people are nurtured and honoured." These include:

- Working with Catholic educational institutions and formation programs in telling the history and experience of Indigenous Peoples
- Working with seminaries and other formation centres to promote a “culture of encounter” by including the history of the Indian Residential Schools and of Canadian missionary work with its “weaknesses and strengths”
- Encouraging partnerships between Indigenous groups and health care facilities
- Encouraging a restorative justice model within the criminal justice system
- Supporting the national inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women
- Deepening relationships, dialogue and collaboration with Indigenous People
- Inviting Catholic parishes and institutions to become better acquainted with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

The statement of the four organizations also reflects on the "Doctrine of Discovery" and the notion of *terra nullius* (no-one's land), and, "...considers and repudiates illegitimate concepts and principles used by Europeans to justify the seizure of land

previously held by Indigenous Peoples and often identified by the terms 'Doctrine of Discovery' and *terra nullius*." The signatories say "that now is an appropriate time to issue a public statement in response to the errors and falsehoods perpetuated, often by Christians, during and following the so-called Age of Discovery."

Given this important benchmark in the TRC process, it would be appropriate to highlight how our northern Catholic community of the Diocese of Mackenzie has aimed to achieve the spirit and pastoral action of the Truth and Reconciliation process. As far back as 1989, and realizing that supporting aboriginal leadership needed to be a priority for this diocese, Bishop Denis Croteau, OMI, called a diocesan synod which began with local and regional gatherings, which culminated in a diocesan assembly in 1991. One of the resolutions was to offer healing programs to former students of residential schools. Following extensive consultation with Dene and Inuit members of our church, our Diocese entered into an agreement with the Nechi Institute to provide church leaders with training so that they would know how to support people in their local communities.

Further consultation with aboriginal leaders led to the creation of "Returning To Spirit." RTS implemented a model that was deemed to be cutting edge in its approach to healing and reconciliation. In those years, the Diocese also employed a clinical therapist who offered counselling services throughout the NWT. RTS had been developed as a result of countless hours of conversation with Aboriginal community members, organizational leaders, delegates of the Catholic Church, Anglican Church. Since 2001, RTS workshops spread across Western Canada. Just last year, aboriginal church leaders expressed at our annual meeting that the diocese now needs to move into further healing and reconciliation opportunities, to build on this legacy of healing.

On May 27, 2009 at Inuvik, Bishop Murray Chatlain as part of an apology stated, "Today I stand before you and say that I am sorry and ask your forgiveness for the sins of our Church." Building on this apology, and in addition to the work done by clergy, religious, and lay leaders in our communities across the north, we continued to offer the following healing programs, which featured: i) '12 Step Pilgrimage', a weekend program for people struggling with alcohol abuse, to address issues prior to their life with addictions; ii) 'Grief to Grace' - a therapeutic workshop for men and women who have suffered abuse. For the past two years, a member supported by our church has worked at the Day Shelter in Yellowknife, being a day-to-day presence and support to people who come to the shelter. Efforts over the last years have been made to provide 'youth ministry' support to communities seeking to develop their own youth programs and activities. Our diocese continues to provide chaplains and support workers to the local corrections centers for adults and youth in Yellowknife.

Of course, there is still much to do and accomplish, but it is important to acknowledge the efforts to date as we continue to plan and act moving forward.

I very much appreciate the recent statements by one of my brother Bishops – Bishop Donald Bolen of Saskatoon - who reflects on the comments by TRC Commissioner

Justice Murray Sinclair, who spoke of the experience of shame that many now feel regarding the residential school legacy. He states: “you should not feel ashamed about this, you should feel committed to doing something about it. Shame will get us nowhere; guilt will get us nowhere.... We must commit to working together to fix this.” Bishop Bolen also reflects that the TRC’s Final Report and Calls to Action do not give up on the churches who were involved with the residential schools. As he states, “Rather, they call us to integrity by owning past sins and mistakes, and to be actively engaged in the process of reconciliation and of building a better future. That approach is laudable and to be welcomed.”

The journey continues as we seek to build on the 2009 apology in our diocese with action. I am very grateful for the work already done in this diocese, under the leadership of Bishop Denis Croteau, OMI and Archbishop Murray Chatlain. Going forward priorities highlighted by various lay leaders and community members include:

- Further healing and support programs and retreats, especially dealing with addiction and grief recovery; partnering with Aboriginal groups regarding wellness and healing programs;
- Further training and support to aboriginal lay leaders in our faith communities;
- Youth and family support opportunities.

These priorities are a further development of the initiatives generally outlined in the recent statement by the four Catholic organizations, which include priorities in terms of education, church leadership formation; dialogue and collaboration; and growing awareness of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

I conclude with sharing a recent experience: last year a university student from the Middle East came to our diocese for a service and inculturation experience. Having attended a TRC event in Vancouver in September of 2013, and then meeting and sharing with people in several Decho communities last summer, he stated, “What is going on here (in Canada) is amazing. This is so needed in the world. We so need this in my own country.”

Perhaps the eyes of the world are on us here in Canada more than we may realize. Along with our efforts, I hope and pray that here in the North, the Catholic community will continue to strive to achieve all that is hoped for and has aimed to achieve in the Truth and Reconciliation journey. Indeed, let us *continue to move forward together!*

With gratitude and the assurance of my prayers, I am

Sincerely yours in Our One Creator,



✙ Mark A. Hagemoen
Bishop of Mackenzie-Fort Smith