
First Nations Chiefs: "Historic event, but it does not stop there. This is just a beginning"

"It is an important, historic event for the survivors of the residential school system, in light of the damage caused by the Catholic Church. We have all been adversely affected by that system, directly or indirectly. These apologies are an acknowledgement of our ordeal and provide an opportunity for the Church to mend relations with indigenous peoples around the world. There is much more to be done. This is a first step." One by one the chiefs of First Nations, Ermineskin Cree Nation, Louis Bull Tribe, Sioux Nation, took the floor for the first time on Canadian soil, ahead of Pope Francis' visit. The elders and survivors of the residential schools were also present at the meeting with the press. The first speaker is **Grand Chief George Arcand Jr. of the Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations**. Their statements were released to the press by the Canadian Bishops' Conference. **Pope Francis' trip to Canada - from July 24 to 30 - will be a 'pilgrimage of penance' to the sites of human suffering**, to land of the 'residential school system', regrettably also subsidised by the Catholic Church. The Pope is scheduled to attend numerous meetings with indigenous peoples. In **Maskwacis**, a parish in central Alberta about 70 km south of Edmonton, Francis will meet with the First Nations, Métis and Inuit indigenous peoples, whose representation was received at the Vatican from March 28 to June 1. **He had promised them he would travel to Canada to express his personal apologies and to promote a path of reconciliation**. In the Archdiocese of **Quebec** the Pope will meet with a delegation of indigenous people from the French-speaking city for approximately one and a half hours. The Pope will then depart by plane for **Iqaluit**, the capital of the Canadian territory of Nunavut, south of the Arctic Circle. Here Francis will visit a local primary schools for a private meeting with a group of former residential school pupils. An estimated 150,000 First Nations, Métis and Inuit children were forced to attend one of 139 schools distributed throughout the country from 1883 until the 1960s, which severed their ties with their families, language and culture. The decision formed part of the assimilation policy. At least 4,000 of these children died as a result of disease, hunger and cold. **"Many members of our community have asked the Pope to visit our lands and offer an apology", said Grand Chief George Arcand Jr.** "This gesture is a significant step in their healing process." "They bear the burden of inconceivable trauma. And for many of them, the acknowledgement of that hurt is an important step towards reconciliation." The Grand Chief said he had the opportunity to meet with many survivors of residential schools. Listening to their stories and the suffering they experienced was very painful. Sadly, many of them were prevented from returning home. Many unmarked graves of children were recently uncovered, sending a wave of shock and horror across the world at their discovery. "Although this harm will never be undone, I believe that in order to forget, there must be forgiveness," said the Grand Chief. Canadian peoples are eager to move on but they are also aware that "only through forgiveness can we build new bridges and rebuild our communities." **Chief Randy Ermineskin, of the Ermineskin Cree Nation, demands justice.** The nation will receive the Pope in his visit to Maskwacis. "Even though it took far too long," he says, "we are grateful that this day has finally come and that it will be held in our community." Remembering will be painful. "As a survivor, I know what will happen, it will hurt. Seeing the pictures of the schools, remembering the corridors, the classrooms, how we were treated, is painful enough." "What is justice?" he asks. "We want the truth about what happened in these schools to be shared with the general public. Everyone needs to know what happened to us so that it may never happen again." **Desmond Bull, chief of the Louis Bull tribe**, is a survivor himself. "I was stripped of my native language, which I am now slowly relearning," he said. "Next week's events could be painful and open old wounds. I call on the survivors to be strong." "Some among our People have mixed feelings regarding Pope Francis' visit," explains **Chief Tony Alexis of the Sioux Nation**. "Some First Nations Peoples are practising Catholics and they see this meeting as a time of celebration and recognition. In contrast, some members of the community are upset and are still

struggling. They have no intention of forgiving the Church because its actions have irreversibly altered the course of their lives. For others, the apology marks the beginning of their healing process, helping them to put a much needed seal and move forward." "It is my hope that Pope Francis' apology will ultimately provide healing for the survivors and their families. They represent an acknowledgement of the Church's role in the hurt and pain caused to indigenous peoples living in Canada." "They tried to rob us of our spirit, the very thing that makes us strong," says elder and survivor **Rod Alexis, of the Sioux First Nation**. "I am a practising Catholic and I regularly attend Mass. But sometimes I ask the Creator, 'God, can you hear me? Why are we treated like this? What have we done wrong? We opened our hearts when they came to this land, we showed them how to survive, but in return they have shown us something different.'" "I am grateful to the Pope for wanting to be amongst us. He carries with him the weight of the Catholic faith, but those who harmed us are the ones who came before him, in the name of the Catholic faith. This nation needs not to be stripped of our spirit, our tradition and our souls. That is what they have done to us. They tore away our spirit. We need to heal'. **The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops announced a few days ago that the Indigenous Reconciliation Fund has already collected \$4.6 million from Catholic dioceses across the country**, as part of a nationwide commitment to raise \$30 million over the next five years. The Fund, the bishops assured, has been designed to meet the highest standards of transparency and good governance and is overseen by a Board of Directors made up of Indigenous leaders across Canada. Graydon Nicholas has recently joined the Board. Mr. Nicholas was the first Indigenous person in Atlantic Canada to earn a law degree and has served as counsel on many important cases involving the rights of Indigenous people. The Fund serves to support and advance healing and reconciliation initiatives, research efforts in cemeteries on former residential school sites, along with the promotion of educational and cultural initiatives.

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