



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC VISIT TO CANADA

RADIO AND TELEVISION MESSAGE OF POPE JOHN PAUL II TO THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF CANADA

Aeroporto di Yellow Knife - Martedì, 18 settembre 1984

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus,

I know that you all would understand the suffering that I feel at this time, the suffering of keen disappointment. With these sentiments I wish to read you the message that I have prepared for you for my visit.

"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 1, 2).

1. From the bottom of my heart I want to tell you how happy I am to be with you, the native peoples of Canada, in this beautiful land of Denendeh. It is, indeed, an honour for me to be invited to join with you in this deeply moving spiritual celebration, in which many of you taking part are not Catholics.

In you I greet, with esteem and friendship, descendants of the first inhabitants of this land, who have lived here for centuries upon centuries. To greet you is to render respectful homage to the beginnings of human society in this vast region of North America. To greet you is to recall with reverence God's plan and Providence as they have unfolded in your history and brought you to this day. To greet you in this portion of your land is to evoke the events of human living that have taken place on the scene of God's original creation of majestic nature in these parts. At the same time my coming among you looks back to your past in order to proclaim your dignity and support your destiny.

I realize that many of you made this pilgrimage from all parts of Canada - from the frozen Arctic

and the prairie plains, from the forests and the lakehead regions, from the great mountains and coastal waters - from East and West, North and South. I am very pleased that nothing has deterred you from coming to this meeting.

I understand that the major aboriginal organizations - the Assembly of First Nations, the Native Council of Canada, the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, the Métis National Council - collectively decided to plan this spiritual event in this northern homeland setting. This kind of cooperation, given the diversity of cultural and religious traditions that exist among you, is a sign of hope for building solidarity among the aboriginal peoples of this country.

You have chosen as your general theme for this celebration: "Self-determination and the rights of aboriginal peoples". On my part I am pleased to be able to reflect with you on issues that so closely touch your lives.

2. My presence in your midst today is intended to be another expression of the deep interest and solicitude which the Church wishes to show for the native peoples of the New World. In 1537, in a document entitled *Pastorale Officium*, my predecessor Paul III proclaimed the rights of the native peoples of those times. He affirmed their dignity, defended their freedom, asserted that they could not be enslaved or deprived of their goods or ownership. At the same time my presence marks yet another phase in the long relationship that many of you have had with the Church. It is a relationship that spans four centuries and has been especially strong since the mid-nineteenth century. Missionaries from Europe, not only from the Catholic Church but from other Christian traditions, have dedicated their lives to bringing the Gospel message to the aboriginal peoples of Canada.

I know of the gratitude that you yourselves, the Indian and Inuit peoples, have towards the missionaries who have lived and died among you. What they have done for you is spoken of by the whole Church; it is known by the entire world. These missionaries endeavoured to live your life, to be like you in order to serve you and to bring you the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Whatever faults and imperfections they had, whatever mistakes were made, together with whatever harm involuntarily resulted, they are now at pains to repair. But next to this entry, filed in the memory of your history, is the record, with endless proofs, of their fraternal love. Jesus himself tells us: "A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends" (*Jo.* 15, 13).

The missionaries remain among your best friends, devoting their lives to your service, as they preach the word of God. Education and health care among you owe much to them, especially to devoted women such as the Grey Nuns of Montreal.

That marvellous rebirth of your culture and traditions which you are experiencing today owes much to the pioneering and continuing efforts of missionaries in linguistics, ethnography and

anthropology. Indelibly inscribed with gratitude in your history are names like Lacombe, Grollier, Grandin, Turquetil. The list is long.

3. Today I wish to pay a special tribute to Bishop Paul Piché, who celebrates this year his twenty-fifth anniversary as Pastor of this vast Diocese. Bishop Piché, the Church thanks you and your confreres - as do your people - for the communities that you have built by the word of God and the Sacraments. Through you I thank all the heroic Oblate missionaries whom the love and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ inspired to serve the peoples of the North.

Yes, dear Indians and Inuit, the missionaries have always shared in your cultural and social life. In keeping with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, they have striven with greater awareness to show you, as the Church earnestly desires, ever greater respect for your patrimony, your language and your customs (*Ad Gentes*, 26).

4. It is in the context of esteem and love that they bring you the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, along with its power to solidify your traditions by perfecting them and ennobling them even more. Their evangelization brought with it the proclamation of "the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God" (Pauli VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 22).

It was the Church herself who sent the missionaries to you, so that you might receive the life-giving and liberating message of Jesus. This message has taken root in your hearts and become incarnate in your society, just as Christ himself has become Indian and Inuit in you, his members. I spoke about this important topic last week, both at Ste. Anne de Beaupré and at Midland.

As they preach the Gospel to you, the missionaries desire to remain close to you in your struggles and problems and in your rightful striving to obtain the full recognition of your human and Christian dignity as aboriginal peoples, as children of God.

5. On this occasion, as I extol the missionary contribution that has been made over the years, I appeal to the whole Church in Canada to be ever more sensitive to the needs of the missionary North. The Spirit of God is calling the Church throughout this land to exercise the full measure of shared responsibility for the needs of God's people in the vast region of the North. The power of Christ's Paschal Mystery that has sustained the missionaries of the past and present in total generosity will not desert the young people of today. It is the Lord Jesus himself who is asking the whole Church in Canada to be faithful to her essential missionary character - without which she cannot exist as the Church of God.

I appeal to the youth among the native peoples to be open to accept leadership roles and responsibilities. I likewise appeal to the Catholic youth among you to be open to God's calling to the priesthood and religious life, and I ask all their Catholic elders, leaders and parents to look with

honour upon these special vocations and to support and encourage all those who freely wish to embrace this way of life.

6. Today I have come to the beloved native peoples to proclaim anew the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to confirm its requirements. I have come in order to speak once again about your dignity and to renew to you the Church's friendship and love - a love that is expressed in service and pastoral care. I have come to assure you, and the whole world, of the Church's respect for your ancient patrimony - for your many worthy ancestral customs.

And yes, dear brothers and sisters, I have come to call you to Christ, to propose again, for you and all Canada, his message of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is clear from the historical record that over the centuries your peoples have been repeatedly the victims of injustice by newcomers who, in their blindness, often saw all your culture as inferior. Today, happily, this situation has been largely reversed, and people are learning to appreciate that there is great richness in your culture, and to treat you with greater respect.

As I mentioned in Midland, the hour has come to bind up wounds, to heal all divisions. It is a time for forgiveness, for reconciliation and for a commitment to building new relationships. Once again in the words of Saint Paul: "Now is the favourable time; this is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6, 2).

7. My predecessor Paul VI explained very clearly that there are close links between the preaching of the Gospel and human advancement. And human advancement includes development and liberation (Pauli VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 30-31). And so today, in speaking to you, I present to you the Gospel message with its commandment of fraternal love, with its demands for justice and human rights and with all its liberating power.

Saint Paul wanted us all to understand the importance of Christian freedom - freedom from sin and from whatever would enslave us. It is Saint Paul who continues to cry out to the world: "When Christ freed us, he meant us to remain free" (*Gal.* 5, 1). At the same time both he and Saint Peter propose to us the principle that freedom must not be an excuse for license (*Ibid.* 5, 13; *1 Petr.* 2, 16).

Today I want to proclaim that freedom which is required for a just and equitable measure of self-determination in your own lives as native peoples. In union with the whole Church I proclaim all your rights - and their corresponding duties. And I also condemn physical, cultural and religious oppression, and all that would in any way deprive you or any group of what rightly belongs to you.

8. It is clearly the position of the Church that peoples have a right in public life to participate in decisions affecting their lives: "Participation constitutes a right which is to be applied both in the economic and in the social and political fields" (*Iustitia in mundo*, 1; *Gaudium et Spes*, 75).

This is true for everyone. It has particular applications for you as native peoples, in your strivings to take your rightful place among the peoples of the earth, with a just and equitable degree of self-governing. For you a land-base with adequate resources is also necessary for developing a viable economy for present and future generations. You need likewise to be in a position to develop your lands and your economic potential, and to educate your children and plan your future.

I know that negotiations are in progress and that much good will has been shown by all parties concerned. It is my hope and prayer that a totally satisfactory outcome will be had.

9. You yourselves are called to place all your talents at the service of others and help build, for the common good of Canada, an ever more authentic civilization of justice and love. You are called to responsible stewardship and to be a dynamic example of the proper use of nature, especially at a time when pollution and environmental damage threaten the earth. Christ's teaching of universal brotherhood and his commandment of fraternal love is now and for ever part of your heritage and your life.

10. Chers amis, vous les plus anciens habitants du Canada, tandis que vous réfléchissez à votre histoire, tandis que vous travaillez, en collaboration avec vos frères et sœurs, à modeler votre destinée et à assumer votre rôle pour le bien commun de tous, rappelez-vous toujours que votre relation filiale à Dieu se traduit par l'observation de ses commandements. Ils sont écrits dans vos cœurs, et saint Jean les résume quand il dit: "Voici son commandement: avoir foi en son Fils Jésus-Christ, et nous aimer les uns les autres comme il nous l'a commandé. Et celui qui est fidèle à ses commandements demeure en Dieu, et Dieu en lui; et nous reconnaissons qu'il demeure en nous, puisqu'il nous a donné son Esprit" (1 Jo. 3, 23-24). C'est l'Esprit qui nous permet de croire en Jésus et de nous aimer les uns les autres.

Your greatest possession, dear friends, is the gift of God's Spirit, whom you have received into your hearts and who leads you to Christ and, through Christ, to the Father. With great love for all of you, my Indian and Inuit brothers and sisters, I bless you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.