



# The Holy See

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APOSTOLIC JOURNEY  
TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

**MEETING WITH THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN CANADA**

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II***

*Fort Simpson, Canada*  
*Sunday, 20 September 1987*

*“Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 1, 7).*

*Dear Aboriginal Brothers and Sisters,*

1. I wish to tell you how happy I am to be with you, *the native peoples of Canada*, in this beautiful land of Denendeh. I have come first from across the ocean and now from the United State to be with you, and I know that many of you have also come from far away—from the frozen Arctic, from the prairies, from the forests, from all parts of this vast and beautiful country of Canada.

Three years ago I was not able to complete my visit to you, and I have looked forward to the day when I could return to do so. Today is that day. I come now, as I did then, as the *Successor of the Apostle Peter*, whom the Lord chose to care for his Church as “a permanent and visible source and foundation of unity of faith and fellowship” (*Lumen Gentium*, 18). It is my task to preside over the whole assembly of charity and protect legitimate variety while at the same time seeing that differences do not hinder unity but rather contribute towards it (Cfr. *ibid.* 13). To use Saint Paul’s words, I am “a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart to proclaim the gospel of God” (*Rom.* 1, 1). Like Saint Paul, I wish to proclaim to you and to the entire Church in Canada: “*I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God leading everyone who believes in it to salvation*” (*Ibid.* 1, 16).

2. Je viens donc vers vous comme tant de missionnaires qui l'ont fait avant moi. Ils ont *proclamé le nom de Jésus aux peuples qui habitaient le Canada* - les Indiens, les Inuit et les Métis. Ils ont appris à vous aimer et à apprécier les trésors spirituels et culturels de votre genre de vie. Ils ont montré du respect pour votre patrimoine, pour vos langues et pour vos coutumes (Cfr. *Ad Gentes*, 26). Comme j'en faisais la remarque lors de ma visite précédente, la "renaissance de votre culture et de vos traditions que vous connaissez aujourd'hui est largement due aux initiatives et aux efforts continus des missionnaires" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Allocutio ad autothones Simpsoniae habita*, 2, die 18 sept. 1984 *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, VII, 2 (1984) 593). C'est vrai, "les missionnaires restent parmi vos meilleurs amis; ils consacrent leur vie à votre service alors qu'ils proclament la Parole de Dieu" (*Ibid.*). Moi aussi, je viens vers vous en ami.

3. Such constructive service is *what Jesus wants of his disciples*. That has always been the Church's intention in making herself present in each place, in each people's history. When the faith was first preached among the native inhabitants of this land, "the worthy traditions of the Indian tribes were strengthened and enriched by the Gospel message. (Your forefathers) knew by instinct that the Gospel, far from destroying their authentic values and customs, had the power to purify and uplift the cultural heritage which they had received... Thus not only is Christianity relevant to the Indian peoples, but Christ, in the members of his Body, is himself Indian" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Allocutio ad indianos canadenses in loco v. "Shrine Field" habita* 5, die 15 sept. 1984: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, VII, 2 (1984) 547s).

In that spirit of respect and missionary service, I repeat what I said on the occasion of my previous visit, that my coming among you looks back to your past in order *to proclaim your dignity and support your destiny*. Today I repeat those words to you, and to all the Aboriginal peoples of Canada and of the world. The Church extols the equal human dignity of all peoples and defends their right to uphold their own cultural character with its distinct traditions and customs.

4. I am aware that the major Aboriginal organizations - the Assembly of First Nations, the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, the Metis National Council, and the Native Council of Canada - have been engaged in high level talks with the Prime Minister and Premiers regarding ways of protecting and enhancing the rights of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada in the Constitution of this great country. Once again I affirm the right to a just and equitable measure of self-government, along with a land base and adequate resources necessary for developing a viable economy for present and future generations. I pray with you that a new round of conferences will be beneficial and that, with God's guidance and help, a path to *a just agreement* will be found to crown all the efforts being made.

These endeavours, in turn, were supported by the Catholic bishops of Canada and the leaders of the major Christian Churches and communities. Together, they have called for a "new covenant" *to ensure your basic Aboriginal rights*, including the right to self-government. Today, I pray that the Holy Spirit will help you all to find the just way so that Canada may be a model for the world in upholding the dignity of the Aboriginal peoples.

Let me recall that, at the dawn of the Church's presence in the New World, my predecessor *Pope Paul III* proclaimed in 1537 *the rights of the native peoples of those times*. He affirmed their dignity, defended their freedom and asserted that they could not be enslaved or deprived of their goods or ownership. That has always been the Church's position (Cfr. *Pauli III Pastorale Oficium*, die 29 maii 1537: DENZ.-SCHÖNM. 1495). My presence among you today marks my reaffirmation and reassertion of that teaching.

5. There are *very close links between the teaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and human development*. In his famous Encyclical on the Development of Peoples, Pope Paul VI reflected on this reality against the background of the deep aspirations of peoples all over the world towards freedom and development. In his words, the fundamental desire of peoples everywhere is "to seek to do more, know more and have more in order to be more" (Pauli VI *Populorum Progressio*, 6). Is that not the deepest hope of the Indian, Metis and Inuit peoples of Canada? *To be more*. That is your destiny and that is the challenge that faces you. And today I have come in order to assure you that the Church stands with you as you strive to enhance your development as native peoples. Her missionary personnel and her institutions seek to work for that cause with you.

6. At the same time, instructed by the teachings of Christ and enlightened by history, the Church appeals to all developing peoples everywhere, not to limit the notion of *human progress* to the search for material well-being, at the cost of *religious and spiritual growth*. Paul VI wisely wrote that "personal and communal development would be threatened if the true scale of values were undermined. The desire for necessities is legitimate, and work undertaken to obtain them is a duty... But... increased possession is not the ultimate goal of nations or of individuals" (*Ibid.* 18-19).

There are other values which are essential to life and society. Each people possesses a civilization handed down from its ancestors, involving institutions called for by its way of life, with its artistic, cultural and religious manifestations. *The true values contained in these realities must not be sacrificed to material considerations*. "A people that would act in this way would thereby lose the best of its patrimony; in order to live, it would be sacrificing its reasons for living" (*Ibid.* 40).

What Christ said about individuals applies also to peoples: "for what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?" (*Matth.* 16, 26). What would become of the "life" of the Indian, Inuit and Metis peoples if they cease to promote the values of the human spirit which have sustained them for generations? If they no longer see the earth and its benefits as given to them in trust by the Creator? If the bonds of family life are weakened, and instability undermines their societies? If they were to adopt an alien way of thinking, in which people are considered according to what they have and not according to what they *are*?

The soul of the native peoples of Canada is *hungry for the Spirit of God*, because it is hungry for justice, peace, love, goodness, fortitude, responsibility and human dignity (Cfr. Ioannis Pauli PP. II

*Redemptor Hominis*, 18). This is indeed a decisive time in your history. It is essential that you be *spiritually strong and clear-sighted* as you build the future of your tribes and nations. Be assured that the Church will walk that path with you.

7. By coming among you I have wished to underline your dignity as native peoples. With heartfelt concern for your future. I invite you to *renew your trust in God who guides the destinies of all peoples and clear-sighted* as you build the future of your tribes and nations. The eternal Father has sent his Son to reveal to us the mystery of our living in this world and of our journeying to the everlasting life that is to come. In the Paschal Mystery of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have been reconciled with God and with each other. *Jesus Christ is our peace* (Cfr. *Eph. 2, 14*).

"May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, grant you", the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, "*a spirit of wisdom and insight to know him clearly*. May he enlighten your innermost vision that you may know *the great hope to which he has called you*" (*Ibid. 1, 17-18*).

In the love of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, I bless each one of you, and pray for the peace and happiness of your families, your bands and your nations. God be with you all!