

# Canada's First Nations leader hopes meeting with pope is turning point

OTTAWA - When Canada's aboriginal leaders meet with Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican April 29, they hope to turn the page on the tragic legacy of Indian residential schools.

"This meeting has the potential to be a historic and momentous occasion for First Nations, (abuse) survivors, Canadian Catholics and indeed all Canadians," said Assembly of First Nations National Chief Phil Fontaine at an April 15 news conference. "I am both honored and excited to have this opportunity to meet with the pope to discuss this important matter and to move forward to work toward real reconciliation."

"The pope is a bridge-builder," said Archbishop V. James Weisgerber of Winnipeg, Manitoba, president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. "For that reason, he has invited us to visit him in Rome, in a gesture of reconciliation and healing."

Archbishop Weisgerber and leaders of the religious communities that ran schools also will meet privately with the pope after the regular weekly general audience.

The archbishop told the news conference about the "close association" between the Catholic Church and Canada's indigenous peoples that goes back 500 years to the earliest Catholic settlements.

"Most of this history has been a wonderful sharing of faith and witness, but there have also been moments of sorrow," he said, describing the former Indian residential schools as "among the greatest disappointments."

Though many Catholics dedicated their lives to provide a good education in these schools, they faced “terrible challenges” that included cultural differences, inadequate funding, human failings and “instances of exploitation and cruelty,” the archbishop said.

Mr. Fontaine also spoke of the healthy relationship that existed with the Catholic Church before the “terrible policy of the federal government” designed to “eradicate any sense of Indian-ness” fractured it. Various church denominations and Catholic religious orders and dioceses ran schools for the government, which forced native children out of their homes and communities. Some have argued the schools were a form of cultural genocide because they separated the students from their families, their communities and their languages.

Archbishop Weisgerber said he met with Pope Benedict last November and told him about the “great suffering of the aboriginal community in Canada.” He said that in order for the Catholic Church to be able to help the legacy of the residential schools needed to be addressed.

The pope understood “very quickly,” he said.

“Aboriginal peoples continue to be marginalized and impoverished in our country,” the archbishop said.

“Their social, economic and cultural needs are in fact so urgent today that all Canadians need to make new and sustained efforts to collaborate with the indigenous people in order to assure them of respect, acceptance and equality,” he said.

Last June, Canada’s prime minister apologized on behalf of the government of Canada for the schools that Mr. Fontaine said were designed to “kill the Indian in the child.”

The Anglican, United and Presbyterian churches all have issued formal apologies for their role in running the schools.

In interviews before the press conference, Mr. Fontaine said he hoped for an apology from the Catholic Church that would “close the circle” and begin the path of reconciliation. He pointed out that various Catholic entities – dioceses and religious orders – ran 75 percent of the government residential schools.

However, at the news conference he avoided using the word apology. Fontaine said he hoped for something like the statements the pope made during visits to the United States and Australia about regret for the sexual abuses of priests. He stressed that he is as interested in a commitment to rebuild a positive relationship.

“Thousands of individuals were harmed in the residential schools here,” he said. “In whatever language, however it’s expressed, the hard work lies beyond us; after this particular audience is done, we have to move on.”