

The Catholic Church in Canada and Indigenous Peoples

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Canada is home to a large and diverse Indigenous population. Numbering over 1,172,000, Indigenous peoples represent approximately 3.8 per cent of the total Canadian population and speak [50 traditional languages](#). Of the three Indigenous groups in Canada, First Nations people have the largest population (698,025), followed by the Métis (389,780), and the Inuit (50,480). [Approximately 54 per cent](#) of Indigenous people live in the country's major metropolitan centres; the rest live in smaller communities in other parts of their traditional territories. Approximately 25 per cent of all Indigenous peoples in Canada identify themselves as Catholic, and they are found in every diocese across the country.¹

The basic organizational structure of the Catholic Church is diocesan. Each diocese, under its own Bishop, is responsible for its own pastoral outreach and ministry, and each diocese is the essential and primary pastoral agent in the lives of all Catholics, including Indigenous peoples. It is the local Bishop who knows best the needs and situation of the First Nations, Inuit and Métis who may be in his diocese. In addition to the outreach and pastoral ministry by the local diocese, many Canadian Catholic religious communities, men and women, continue to work with Indigenous peoples. Their services have traditionally included education and health care, as well as a pastoral presence.

The Early Days of the Church in the Western Hemisphere

Since the earliest days of the Church in the Western hemisphere, there has been special concern and attention for the Indigenous peoples, many of whom have become part of the Church and given much to it. For example, the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe dates back to the year 1531, when the Virgin Mary appeared to a Mexican Aztec, [Saint Juan Diego](#), in the traditional symbols and colours of his culture and asked that a church be built for her Son. Many other Indigenous people have also served as powerful witnesses and played important roles in the early Church in North America, such as Joseph Chiwatenhwa,



Saint Kateri Tekakwitha and Grand Chief Henri Membertou, who became the first aboriginal leader to be baptized by the French, as a sign of alliance and good faith in 1610. His entire family also received Baptism at the same time. As soon as he was baptized he was eager to become a committed Christian. On his deathbed in 1611, he charged his children to remain devout Christians. It is this faith that has been passed on to the descendants of the Grand Chief and this faith that continues to inspire the Mi'kmaq People who live throughout the Atlantic provinces.

It is truly remarkable that through the Grand Chief and his Grand Council, the longest form of government in North America, the Mi'kmaq people have willingly followed the footsteps of Jesus Christ since the Baptism of Grand Chief Membertou. The descendants of Grand Chief Membertou well understood the Christian message of hope and peace as being very compatible with their early traditional beliefs. They embraced the Christian faith as an experience of a deepening of some of the beliefs that they already had. They nourished their faith and protected it in their own beautiful language, even in spite of the efforts that sometimes tried to prevent this. Within their culture, they appreciated their faith to such an extent that virtually each Mi'kmaq person continues the tradition of being baptized. The Mi'kmaq people are truly the first Roman Catholics in this land and their descendants practised the Christian faith even before the arrival of any permanent European settlement.

Catholic Missionaries from the 17th to 19th Centuries

Throughout the 17th century, in what is today Canada, many Catholic missionaries dedicated their lives to minister to Indigenous peoples. They include the Canadian martyrs, [Saints Jean de Brébeuf, Gabriel Lalement, Antoine Daniel, Charles Garnier, Noël Chabanel, Isaac Jogues, René Goupil and Jean de Lalande](#). All eight were killed while serving the Huron people in the 1640s. [Blessed François de Laval](#), the first Roman Catholic Bishop of New France, showed great concern for the spiritual and human welfare of the diverse Indigenous population of his vast diocese, seeking for example the end of the [traffic of alcohol to Indigenous peoples](#). [Bishop Frederic Baraga](#) wrote dictionaries and hymns in Indigenous languages, as many other Catholic Bishops and missionaries have also done. [Blessed Marie de l'Incarnation](#) and [Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys](#) established schools for Indigenous children as well as for the children of the colonists.

This tradition of Catholic service was carried north and west across what is now Canada. It is exemplified by the commitment of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in their ministry to the people of the Northwest and the Arctic. [Father Albert Lacombe, O.M.I.](#), for instance, helped broker a peace agreement between the Cree and the Blackfoot, as well as serving as an intermediary between the Canadian Pacific Railway and the Blackfoot. [Bishop Vital-Justin Grandin, O.M.I.](#), the first Bishop of the West, was assisted in his early work among Indigenous people by the Order of Sisters of Charity of Montreal, commonly known as the [Grey Nuns](#).

These are prominent examples among the many Catholics, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who have served and continue to serve in hospitals, schools and other forms of social services.

Contemporary Reflections

Today Catholics, like other Canadians, are becoming more aware of how their relationships with Indigenous peoples have often been marked by imperialism and colonialism. This changing awareness is evident in following contemporary reflections:



An evangelizing process uneven and limited

“The story of Christianity in the Americas is not a *leyenda negra*, a ‘black legend’, but neither is it an impeccable tale of glory. Indeed, as Pope John Paul II has noted, the evangelizing process over the years was uneven and limited. If there were bishops and missionaries championing aboriginal rights, there were also theologians and Church leaders defending colonial

exploitation. While some missionaries

attempted to protect and understand native cultures, others failed to value native beliefs and customs as seeds of the Word of God. There were popes and missionaries who attacked the slave trade, while other Church leaders and religious were prepared to accommodate slavery” ([CCCB Statement on the 500th Anniversary of the Evangelization of the Americas](#)).

A memory never abandoned by the people they served

“There were always those missionaries who established relationships with Native Peoples that were marked by profound respect and mutuality as well as dedicated service. While some of their actions may be criticized today in the light of new understandings, they were first and foremost men and women of the Gospel who, within their human limitations, tried to act with love and compassion. Their memory has never been abandoned by the people that they served.

“However, it must be acknowledged that the missionary endeavour was deeply marked by the prevailing attitudes of the superiority of European culture. When this conviction was translated into social action in the 19th Century, it manifested itself in a paternalistic model of charity which at times expressed itself as protection of Native rights and freedoms and at other times took the form of coercion and control.”

Walking a difficult journey together

Despite these struggles, “the Church has walked with Aboriginal Peoples, shared their joys, their sufferings, and their aspirations, and supported their struggles for recognition of their rights for personal and collective growth. Then and now, the Churches provide a place where Native and non-Native Peoples may find common ground. Non-Native Church members have accompanied

Native Peoples on their journey – sometimes leading, sometimes following, sometimes side-by-side” (CCCB Brief to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, [Let Justice Flow like a Mighty River](#), 1995).

[In his address to the 2008 Plenary Assembly](#) of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB), the then National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Mr. Phil Fontaine, said: “I don’t want to look at the hurts of the past ... I want to recommit ourselves and to talk about the future. So much in the past was also good and healthy, and we can build on this and learn... This will be a difficult journey, because too many Canadians do not believe in us, the Aboriginal Peoples.”

¹ 2001 Census - Statistics Canada

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