



CONFÉRENCE DES ÉVÊQUES CATHOLIQUES DU CANADA  
CANADIAN CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

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January 9, 2013

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper, P.C., M.P.  
Prime Minister of Canada  
Office of the Prime Minister  
80 Wellington Street  
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A2

National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo  
National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations  
Trebla Building  
473 Albert Street – Suite 900  
Ottawa, Ontario K1R 5B4

Dear Prime Minister Harper and National Chief Atleo,

On behalf of the Catholic Bishops of our country, I wish to assure you, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, the Honourable John Duncan, and the delegation of First Nations leaders of our prayers and encouragement for your upcoming meeting on January 11. We trust your discussions will contribute to a process that will address the concerns of all Indigenous People in Canada – First Nations, Inuit, and Metis.

We hope your meeting and any eventual process will find support from all Canadians and political leaders, as well as from the members and leadership of Indigenous communities. This is an important moment for building on the goodwill and efforts of the past, in order that our country can work together in finding constructive ways to resolve the major underlying issues. Current concerns about education, housing, safe drinking water, access to health care, and land settlements, while critical and pressing to the First Nations, are symptomatic of deeper economic, political and social questions among all Indigenous People. The daily sporadic demonstrations taking place across our country by members of the First Nations are a sign not only of how opportune your meeting is, but also encouraging evidence of renewed determination among Indigenous People to be a major part of the solutions to their challenges and frustrations. It is of fundamental importance that Indigenous People and their leaders remain engaged as active and responsible agents of their own cultural, economic and social development.

The Catholic Church has worked alongside Indigenous People since the very beginnings of our country. As Bishops, we are on record in our determination to assist in the conversations and collaboration that must be part of ensuring and protecting the rights and responsibilities of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis. Our history in relating with Indigenous communities, and our ongoing concern for their wellbeing and their right to self-determination, are outlined in the 1994 submission by our Conference to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, *Let Justice Flow like a Mighty River* (available on our Conference's webpage for Indigenous People). Over the past 20 years, our nation and our Church have witnessed and participated in many positive changes in the situations facing Indigenous People. Yet a number of major questions still need to be resolved, especially in the areas of self-determination and of authentic social, economic and constitutional development. Pope Benedict XVI, in his Message for the 2013 World Day of Peace, identifies our current challenge in these words: "the duty and right to an integral social and communitarian development" is "part of God's plan for mankind" and thus "a fundamental moral principle" (*Blessed are the Peacemakers*, n. 1, January 1, 2013).

Mr. Prime Minister, you have shown creative leadership in renewing our country's partnership with its Indigenous People by means of your momentous apology of June 2008 on behalf of the Government of Canada to former students of Indian Residential Schools. Prime Minister Harper and National Chief Atleo, you both participated in the January 2012 historic Crown - First Nation Gathering. The Catholic Bishops of Canada encourage each of you, and all levels of government in Canada, as well as civil, social and cultural institutions, together with the Assembly of First Nations and all Indigenous leaders and communities, to make the most of this present moment in renewing and concerting efforts for the human and social development of the First Nations, Inuit, and Metis. Many promises have been made over the past generations, and the outstanding issues which are key to future progress have already been identified by the Royal Commission as well as by Indigenous, federal and other agencies. What is needed now is for these many undertakings "to be sustained by fresh thinking and a new cultural synthesis so as to overcome purely technical approaches and to harmonize the various political currents with a view to the common good" (Pope Benedict XVI, Message for World Day of Peace, 2013, n. 6).

For Catholics, the canonization this past October of Kateri Tekakwitha, the first Indigenous woman from North America to be recognized as a Catholic saint, is a sign of how special a moment this is for our country and our Church in renewing and deepening the relationship and partnership with Indigenous People. May her example,

as "Protectress of Canada", who lived at a time of tension and misunderstanding, help inspire and encourage respect, dialogue and patience in your January 11 meeting, so it may bear fruit in real hope for the future.

With the assurance of my prayers for God's blessings upon your work and witness, I am,

Yours sincerely in Our Lord,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Richard W. Smith". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

+ Richard W. Smith  
Archbishop of Edmonton and  
President of the Canadian Conference  
of Catholic Bishops

c.c.: The Honourable John Duncan  
Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development