

An Apology to Native Peoples

The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Canada wish, after 150 years of being with and ministering to the native peoples of Canada, to offer an apology for certain aspects of that presence and ministry.

A number of historical circumstances make this moment in history most opportune for this.

First, there is a symbolic reason. Next year, 1992, marks the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Europeans on the shores of America. As large-scale celebrations are being prepared to mark this occasion, the Oblates of Canada wish, through this apology, to show solidarity with many native people in Canada whose history has been adversely affected by this event. Anthropological and sociological insights of the late 20th century have shown how deep, unchallenged and damaging was the naive cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious superiority complex of Christian Europe when its peoples met and interrelated with the aboriginal peoples of North America.

As well, recent criticisms of Indian residential schools and the exposure of instances of physical and sexual abuse within these schools call for such an apology.

Given this history, native peoples and other groups alike are realizing that a certain healing needs to take place before a new and more truly cooperative phase of history can occur. This healing cannot however happen until some very complex, long-standing and deep historical issues have been addressed.

It is in this context and with a renewed pledge to be in solidarity with native peoples in a common struggle for justice that we, the Oblates of Canada, offer this apology:

We apologize for the part we played in the cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious imperialism that was part of the mentality with which the peoples of Europe first met the aboriginal peoples and which consistently has lurked behind the way the native peoples of Canada have been treated by civil governments and by the churches. We were, naively, part of this mentality and were, in fact, often a key player in its implementation. We recognize that this mentality has from the beginning and ever since continually threatened the cultural, linguistic and religious traditions of the native peoples.

We recognize that many of the problems that beset native communities today — high unemployment, alcoholism, family breakdown, domestic violence, spiraling suicide rates, lack of healthy self esteem — are not so much the result of personal failure as they are the result of centuries of systemic imperialism. Any people stripped of its traditions as well as of its pride falls victim to precisely these social ills. For the part that we played, however inadvertent and naive that participation might have been, in the setting up and maintaining of a system that stripped others of not only their lands but also of their cultural, linguistic and religious traditions we sincerely apologize.

Beyond this regret for having been part of a system which, because of its historical privilege and assumed superiority, did great damage to the native peoples of Canada, we wish to apologize more specifically for the following:

In sympathy with recent criticisms of native residential schools, we wish to apologize for the part we played in the setting up and the maintaining of those schools. We apologize for the existence of the schools themselves, recognizing that the biggest abuse was not what happened in the schools, but that the schools themselves happened ... that the primal bond inherent within families was violated as a matter of policy, that children were usurped from their natural communities and that, implicitly and explicitly, these schools operated out of the premise that European languages, traditions and religious practices were superior to native languages, traditions and religious practices. The residential schools were an attempt to assimilate aboriginal peoples, and we played an important role in the unfolding of this design. For this we sincerely apologize.

We wish to apologize in a very particular way for the instances of physical and sexual abuse that occurred in those schools. We reiterate that the bigger issue of abuse was the existence of the schools themselves, but we wish to publicly acknowledge that there were instances of individual physical and sexual abuse. Far from attempting to defend or rationalize these cases of abuse in any way, we wish to state publicly that we acknowledge that they were inexcusable, intolerable and a betrayal of trust in one of its most serious forms. We deeply, and very specifically, apologize to every victim of such abuse, and we seek help in searching for means to bring about healing.

Finally, we wish to apologize as well for our past dismissal of many of the riches of native religious tradition. We broke some of your peace pipes, and we considered some of your sacred practices as pagan and superstitious. This too had its origins in the colonial mentality, our European superiority complex, which was grounded in a particular view of history. We apologize for this blindness and disrespect.

One qualification is, however, in order. As we publicly acknowledge a certain blindness in our past, we wish too to publicly point to some of the salient reasons for this. We do this not as a way of subtly excusing ourselves or of rationalizing in any way so as to denigrate this apology, but as a way of more fully exposing the reasons for our past blindness and, especially, as a way of honoring, despite their mistakes, those many men and women, native and white alike, who gave their lives and their very blood in a dedication that was most sincere and heroic.

Hindsight makes for 20-20 vision and judging the past from the insights of the present is an exact and often cruel science. When Christopher Columbus set sail for the Americas with the blessing of the Christian church Western civilization lacked the insights it needed to appreciate what Columbus met upon the shores of America. The cultural linguistic and ethical traditions of Europe were caught up in the naive belief that they were inherently superior to those found in other parts of the world. Without excusing this superiority complex, it is necessary to name it.

Sincerity alone does not set people above their place in history. Thousands of persons operated out of this mentality and gave their lives in dedication to an ideal that, while sincere in its intent, was at one point naively linked to a certain cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnic superiority complex.

These men and women sincerely believed that their vocations and actions were

servicing both God and the best interests of the native peoples to whom they were ministering. History has partially rendered a cruel judgment on their efforts, showing how, despite much sincerity and genuine dedication, their actions were sometimes naive and disrespectful in that they violated the sacred and cherished traditions of others. Hence, even as we apologize for some of the effects of their actions, we want at the same time to affirm their sincerity, the goodness of their intent and the goodness in many cases of their actions.

Recognizing that within every sincere apology there is implicit the promise of conversion to a new way of acting, we, the Oblates of Canada, wish to pledge ourselves to a renewed relationship with native peoples which, while very much in line with the sincerity and intent of our past relationship, seeks to move beyond past mistakes to a new level of respect and mutuality. Hence...

We renew the commitment we made 150 years ago to work with and for native peoples. In the spirit of our founder, Blessed Eugene de Mazenod, and the many dedicated missionaries who have served in native communities during these 150 years, we again pledge to native peoples our service. We ask help in more judiciously discerning what forms that service might take today.

More specifically, we pledge ourselves to the following:

- We want to support an effective process of disclosure vis-a-vis residential schools.

We offer to collaborate in anyway we can so that the full story of the Indian residential schools may be written, that their positive and negative features may be recognized and that an effective healing process might take place.

- We want to proclaim as inviolable the natural rights of Indian families, parents and children, so that never again will Indian communities and Indian parents see their children forcibly removed from them by other authorities.

- We want to denounce imperialism in all its forms and concomitantly pledge ourselves to work with native peoples in their efforts to recover their lands, their languages, their sacred traditions and their rightful pride.

- We want as Oblates to meet with native peoples and together help forge a template for a renewed covenant of solidarity. Despite past mistakes and many present tensions, the Oblates have felt all along as if the native peoples and we belonged to the same family. As members of the same family it is imperative that we come again to that deep trust and solidarity that constitutes family. We recognize that the road beyond past hurt may be long and steep, but we pledge ourselves anew to journey with native peoples on that road.

- This apology was made before about twenty thousand people who had gathered at Lad Ste. Anne, Alberta, for a traditional pilgrimage on July 24, 1991, by Doug Crosby, OMI, then President of the Oblate Conference of Canada.