

## WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2023

### “DO GOOD AND SEEK JUSTICE” (Isaiah 1:17)

*I acknowledge that I live, work and gather in the traditional land and some unceded territories of the Indigenous peoples (Inuits, First Nations and Metis) of the Turtle Land known as Canada now.*

This year’s theme and the materials for the Week of prayer for Christian Unity are prepared by the Minnesota Churches. We thank and appreciate them for their hard works. The Canadian Ecumenical council invites us to reflect upon the history, stories, visions, spiritualities of our

Indigenous brothers and sisters.

For the past one and half years I have been working and walking with the Anishinaabeg First Nations Peoples of North-West Quebec. It has been a true blessing and beautiful learning process. They have taught me to be humble, resilient, patient and more connected with life, nature, God and others. Kitchi Meegwetch! (Much thanks).

At the very outset let us be aware of our feelings and emotions, thoughts and behaviours? Am I happy to receive this message? Am I ready to learn something

new? Am I ready to welcome any changes in my thoughts and behaviours that I need to make for going forth? Let us move on.

The theme is taken from the first chapter of the book of prophet Isaiah. Isaiah lived and prophesied in Judah during the eighth century BCE and was contemporary of Amos, Micah and Hosea. This was towards the end of the period of great economic success and political stability for both Israel and Judah, due to the weakness of the ‘superpowers’ of the time, Egypt and Assyria. However, it was also a period when injustice, inequity and inequalities were rampant in both kingdoms. In this period the expression of belief in God concentrated on Temple offerings and sacrifices. The power was centred on the King and temple priests. The rich and those made



many offerings were considered to be good and blessed by God while the poor who could not contribute were understood to be wicked and cursed by God. The poor were often denigrated for their economic inability to fully participate in Temple worship.

I invite as all ask the question, what is our Canadian context, what is the context in Quebec? What is the context in Sherbrooke and Abitibi-Timiskaming? Think for a second. What are the three most important pressing issues that we do to address as citizens and people of God in our cities and villages?

We are in a post Covid era. As humanity, we are trying to find ways out to move forward from this deadly pandemic. Is there disparity between rich and poor, haves and have nots? Do we treat migrant workers as equals with dignity? Do we appreciate and encourage youth? Do we listen to the cry of the earth and the poor? Does everyone have a place to sleep, something to eat, a support person to share her story? What is the plight of the itinerants in my cities? The Big question that I would like to ask is: What about the Indigenous peoples? As Canadians we are seeking a way forward as we reflect on the 94 Calls to Action from the TRC. We are asking ourselves how to implement the UNDRIP (the United Nations Declaration on the Right of Indigenous People) principles, officially passed into law by Canada in June 2021. We as people are haunted by the Residential Schools legacy, recently discovered unmarked graves and by the horrors examined by National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

Let us be aware of these questions, situations, contexts and take them into our hearts and ponder them with honesty, openness and sense of truth, purpose and hope. There are many things I can share related to this topic and indigenous peoples but I will stick to some elements which could bring us an awareness and awakening in our mind and heart.

I would like to offer you my reflections on three elements: 1. Experiences; 2. Encounters; and 3. Engagements (commitments).

### **1. Experiences**

We human beings have a lot of personal, interpersonal and God experiences. They are sacred because they help us to be in touch with ourselves, our meaning and purposes, our deepest longings, desires, values and expectations. Experiences teach us lessons and make us wiser. Are we ready and willing to look at the experiences of Indigenous peoples of this Land? How much suffering and pain they have been undergoing for the past two to three centuries? How can we engage in dialogue, increase awareness, understanding and insight about lived experiences?

Let us ask the honest and deep question: what are the lived experiences of our Indigenous brothers and sisters in this country? What does it mean to present apologies for cultural and ethnical genocide inflicted upon them by governments and churches?

Quebec has 11 First Nations living in 55 communities or reservations. The largest reserve is Kahnawake First Nation reserve close to Montreal which has a population of 11, 000 people.

Others reserves are small and the population may vary from 400-1,000 peoples. According to statistics 50 % live in reserves and others in urban cities or municipalities. According to the 2016 census, the greater Montreal area had more than 33, 000 First Nations members and the Quebec City region had more than 11, 500. The Indigenous presence is significant in many other cities, such as Chibougamau, Joliette, La Tuque, Maniwaki, Roberval, Saguenay, Senneterre, Sept-iles, Sherbrooke, Trois-Rivieres and Val-d'Or. This migration can be explained by factors such as education, occupation, the lack of available housing and First Nations identity. Something that is unique in the legal situation of First nations in Quebec is that, until recently, the provincial government has refused to acknowledge the existence of Aboriginal rights and, as a result, to sign treaties. The settlement of First Nations in Quebec occurred gradually, with the colonization and assimilation process continuing with the creation of reserves, and the way of life of the large majority of First Nations in Quebec underwent a drastic change. In 1955, in Abitibi-Temiscamingue, the massive clearing of the territory and the creation of the Saint-Marc de Figury residential school significantly altered how First Nations people lived and led to the permanent adoption of a sedentary way of life.

Quebec's coroner's office was mandated to study five deaths that occurred at Uashat mak Mani-Utenam over a period of six months. The coroner's office looked into the causes of a collective of systemic racial discrimination and segregation and recommended an end to this apartheid. There is violence and domestic abuse in indigenous communities. But we cannot forget the root cause of the intergenerational trauma, i.e. cultural and spiritual genocide through various means especially through residential school system, creation of reserves, systemic racism and discrimination and foster homes. When it comes to health the non-indigenous peoples of Canada rank 6<sup>th</sup> in the world whereas the indigenous peoples of this land ranks 66<sup>th</sup> in the world. What a gap, inequality and disparity? It should make us all feel ashamed at the same time hopeful for creating a better future for everyone with dignity and equal resources. We cannot forget the tragic and traumatic death of 37 year old Atikamek woman Joyce Echaquan on 28 September 2020. We rejoice with the election of Kateri Champagne Jourdain, the first indigenous woman to Quebec's parliament and named later as Minister for Employment. Are we aware that the article 21 of UNDRIP is a law in this country and do we question if the governments try to implement it or not? What does it say: Indigenous peoples have the right, without discrimination, to the improvement of their economic and social conditions, including, in the areas of education, employment, vocational training and retraining, housing, sanitation, health and social security.

Thinking of education, I am reminded of this young adolescent Cree First Nation girl, named Shannen Koostachin, who fought for proper education and school building for her community in the beginning of new millennium. But unfortunately, she was killed in a car accident at the age of 15 in 2010.

These are some of the realities and experiences of our Indigenous brothers and sisters. They consider themselves as guardian of waters and lands. Are we ready to collaborate with them in their fight for their dignity, for their lands and rights?

## 2. Encounters

From birth to death our life is filled with lot of encounters. The change starts with starts with an honest, compassionate, respectful and open encounter. The example of having authentic and life giving encounter is Jesus himself. He had life changing and challenging conversation with people whom he met. He looked at people with love and compassion; he healed their physical, mental and spiritual infirmities; he delivered a message of hope filled with courage and enthusiasm; he was ready to change his own perspectives and ideas; he cared for the sick, lonely and oppressed. Encounters can change us and challenges us; encounters can discourage us and encourage us; encounters can be awakening or awkward; encounters could be life giving or life destroying; encounters may feel like attacks or liberating force;

What is important is looking forward and longing for encounters because any change happens in the society with solid and good relationships; honest and authentic partnership;

In the past one and half year I had many encounters with our indigenous brothers and sisters wherein I have learned to forgo all kind of stereotypes and prejudices that society and history injects in us, like: they do not pay tax, true but we are living in their lands; they are very much into alcohol and violence, true but who inflicted that intergenerational trauma, and they are trying to liberate their communities from those things, they do not work, etc. Imagine for a moment and put yourself in the shoes of them and we can experience the pain and suffering that they go through every day for their survival and dignity. As Brene Brown says let us learn to be vulnerable and that is what unites us as human beings. Being vulnerable is not a sign of weakness and inadequate rather it is a brave and wise decision for our good and good of others. Because only in being vulnerable we will be able to listen and pay attention to the pains, sufferings and struggles and visions of others. Being vulnerable means learn to speak from the heart and have the courage to know others in what they go through and willingness to open our own wounds and pains. It is the process of sharing our fears, misunderstandings, hopes and intentions. This is the very first good thing that we are invited to do and which is not easy because it invites us to go from our comfort zone. Are we ready for that?

As people of God, we are invited to create spaces for dialogue and encounter in our cities and parishes. Invite indigenous peoples to speak to us, let them share their life stories with us. Let us not be afraid to hear them. History is giving us a gift, yes, we are at a crucial moment in the history of our church and of Canada to support the causes of Aboriginal peoples and to walk with them in a very gentle and humble way. A few months ago, I experienced the exercise of the blanket that made me aware of the different methods of colonization that have been used to take over the lands of Aboriginal peoples and to degrade and hurt their dignity. I cried and was moved. This could be organized in our parishes.

## 3. Engagements

What are our commitments? The prophet Isaias made the commitment and invited his people to do good and seek justice. The Hebrew word *mishpat* is used for justice which means restorative

justice. The Indigenous Health society talks about 4 elements/stages as a part of the Holistic Health, they are: 1. Recognition/Acknowledgement, 2. Restorative Justice, 3. Healing, 4. Reconciliation. The report says we just started the very first stage. Pope's visit last year motivated us to move towards a new and right relationship with our indigenous peoples, yes, to walk together as brothers and sisters. At the same time we cannot forget that we missed a golden opportunity to put the indigenous peoples and their cultures, rituals, liturgies and traditions at the first place. I remember hearing the cry of this Innu woman sitting at the back in the St. Anne Shrine, saying "So, the pope came for whom?". There was a big gap in the organization of the whole event. The priests, religious and lay people who are working with indigenous people were not consulted in organization and preparation of the liturgy and the event which is very sad and makes us to wonder what does mean walking together. So, what are my personal commitments to achieve these goals? What are our community commitments to arrive at true reconciliation? We need to sit down and have a serious conversations with our indigenous brothers because they can tell us what they need. The very first thing that I hear from them is: Please see us as human being and we have our dignity, respect it.

The final report of the Missing and murdered women and girls (more than 4, 000 in the past 30 years), testimony from family members and survivors of violence spoke about a surrounding context marked by multigenerational and intergenerational trauma and marginalization in the form of poverty, insecure housing or homelessness and barriers to education, employment, health care and cultural support. Experts and Knowledge Keepers spoke to specific colonial and patriarchal policies that displaced women from their traditional roles in communities and governance and diminished their status in society, leaving them vulnerable to violence.

So what needs to be done? I believe that our educational system needs to incorporate the true and honest stories of Aboriginal peoples into the textbooks for a fair and objective history education. We are invited to observe, honor and organize activities in our parishes and churches for these important days that are cherished by our Aboriginal brothers and sisters: National Aboriginal Day-June 21, Ribbon Skirt Day-January 4, Day of Truth and Reconciliation - Orange Shirt Day – September 30, Day of Prayer in Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples-12 December.

As the prophet spoke words of hope, let us continue to walk as a people filled with hope for a better future today and tomorrow. Jesus promises his Spirit of Hope to each of us. My children, do good and seek justice, I am with you until the end of time. Remember that the opposite of hope is not despair but apathy, that is, lack of interest, courage, care, enthusiasm and creativity. So let us take care of each other and take care of nature for the glory of the one living God who loves us beyond measure and sustains our efforts and commitments. Amen.

***Fr. Reegan, CMF***