



Sacred Covenant Signing – Address by Archbishop J. Michael Miller, CSB

March 31, 2024

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For all of us, tonight marks a significant, indeed historic, milestone, as we sign the Sacred Covenant. It forges a new relationship between the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc Nation, the Archdiocese of Vancouver, and the Diocese of Kamloops.

We are here because two Elders, former Chief Manny Jules and former Assembly of First Nations Chief Phil Fontaine, had the idea, in late 2021. They wanted to bridge the wide gap that had developed between First Nations and the Catholic Church.

They saw the understandable wave of grief unleashed because of the reports out of Kamloops. Together they made the hard decision to welcome Catholics into the healing journey that each Nation was navigating. For their openness to the Catholic Church in this matter, I am very grateful. Chief Manny Jules has often and wisely stated that “One cannot reconcile without the other.”

On behalf of Bishop Joseph and the Catholics we together represent, we thank you for welcoming us here today.

We are also here because T'Kemlúps Chief, Kúkpi7 Rosanne Casimir, seized an opportunity for further healing. She was invited to the Vatican to meet with Pope Francis in March 2022. She then met with him again when he visited Canada in July of that year. I daresay she has spent more time with Pope Francis than most Bishops in Canada.

Kúkpi7 Rosanne has forthrightly and passionately articulated the need for the Catholic Church to be transparent, accountable and ready to listen and learn. We are here today as a sign of our willingness and our commitment to do just that.

Consequently, I would like to share an unambiguous message that I am aware of, and deeply sorry for, the tragedies that flowed from the Residential School System. In my 2013 Expression of Apology and Hope before the Truth Reconciliation Commission meeting in Vancouver, I acknowledged that the Archdiocese of Vancouver played a lamentable role in implementing a “deeply flawed policy” which “led to unbearable pain and suffering” and “in supporting a policy aimed at suppressing Aboriginal cultures and languages.”

Since then, having met with more survivors and heard even more first-hand accounts, I can state even more clearly just how aware the Church is of the damage done to former students and their families, and how destructive the system was to being able to maintain community. While we cannot undo the past, as Catholics we can do more to show our respect and our desire to serve.



On this Easter Sunday, the greatest Christian day of hope, I would like to share a few thoughts about the Sacred Covenant that stand out for me.

The first is the opening section which clarifies Catholic teaching regarding First Nations rights, which follow from respect for the dignity of the human person. I'm aware that what is often referred to as the "Doctrine of Discovery" enabled certain exploitive European explorers to do great damage to the rights and title of Indigenous populations around the world. As this Sacred Covenant states, highlighted in bold and italics in the original, lest we miss their importance, the Doctrine of Discovery consisted of a series of confusing and political documents written by Pope Alexander VI in the late 1400s.

I'm very thankful to the drafters of this Sacred Covenant that they were able to show that, about 30 years *after* the Doctrine of Discovery was first made known, Pope Paul III published official Catholic teaching on the contested claims. From his document, I cite Paul III:

all other people who may later be discovered by Christians, are by no means to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, even though they be outside the faith of Jesus Christ; and that they may and should, freely and legitimately, enjoy their liberty and the possession of their property; nor should they be in any way enslaved; should the contrary happen, it shall be null and have no effect.

This teaching was known by Catholic explorers, but in far too many cases, they ignored it. For their part, many early Catholic missionaries did to serve Indigenous people. But numerous Catholics still chose to participate in implementing government policies, including those establishing the system of Indian Residential Schools.

As many of you know, a significant number of early relationships between our peoples showed great promise. The Sacred Covenant highlights one particularly adventurous friendship. That friendship is beautifully captured in the photograph you may have seen here tonight.

In 1904, Chiefs Louis Clexlixqen of Kamloops and Johnnie Chilleheetsa of Douglas Lake accompanied Father Le Jeune, an Oblate priest, across two continents to meet Pope Pius X in Rome. There they advocated for the rights and title of First Nations people in this region, and they showed how their work together had advanced language and trade. While in Rome, Chief Johnnie and Chief Louis, took part in an exhibition of stenography, at which they received three gold and five silver medals.

In reading the accounts of that trip, what strikes me the most is the profound friendship that existed between these men. This picture, which I really enjoy, also conveys a deep sense of respect, coupled with determination. They are equals and friends. They're together on a journey to promote and defend the rights of all of the people they represented and served.

Father Le Jeune had a deep sense of admiration for your ancestors, and even though I'm a very small part of this process, I can see why. Father Le Jeune wrote often in the newsletter Kamloops Wawa, talents of the local people. He loved Indigenous languages and was said to have become proficient in



more than twenty! In fact, Father Le Jeune once told a gathering in Kamloops that he could “swear in twenty-two languages”: no mean feat!

Chief Louis, in his 1915 *Kamloops Standard* obituary, was called “a man of keen intelligence, who was very diplomatic in all business connected with the interests of his people.”

Today we are called to honour these men and their extraordinary spirit of collaboration.

Described in the Sacred Covenant are several commitments to which I would like to draw your attention:

1. We want to help in any way we can, with the ways you decide to honour and memorialize former students of the Kamloops Residential School and other Residential schools that you and your ancestors attended.
2. While volumes of historical information have been shared, our researchers, archivists and historians are ready to work with yours, with the goal of creating more easily searchable tools that can help answer any questions you have.
3. We have retained scientific experts who have worked around the world on similar challenging situations. They are ready to serve you and to assist your teams in ensuring that the best technology is available to help you get the answers you deserve. We respect that you have so much work to do within your communities to comfort Elders and must decide prudently when and how to proceed. We stand ready to follow your lead.

The Sacred Covenant establishes a shared path to truth and reconciliation, and it reflects a mutual conviction that honour, truth, justice, and healing are necessary to guide us together into the future.

Lastly, I would like to share a brief thought regarding the difference between a contract and a covenant. The document signed today is not transactional in nature. It is relational. This difference is significant.

A covenant involves people committing to a way of caring and communicating. A covenant also entails a profound and significant undertaking, not a trivial matter. In our case, the Sacred Covenant involves the honouring of your ancestors and the children who died or endured great suffering during their time in a Residential School.

On behalf of the Catholics whom Bishop Joseph and I represent, I pledge that we intend to continue to learn from you, to listen to your experiences and to find new ways that can serve you and advocate for your interests.

This Covenant isn't just a local initiative. It can have ramifications that potentially will reach far and wide. Tonight, I am pleased to bring you a message from Pope Francis, prepared especially for this event. Although protocol dictates that it is addressed to me, in fairness I think it should be considered a message to Kúkpi7 Rosanne:

HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS SENDS CORDINAL GREETINGS TO ALL WHO ARE PRESENT FOR THE SIGNING OF A COVENANT BETWEEN THE TKEMLÚPS TE SECWÉPMC NATION, THE ARCHDIOCESE



OF VANCOUVER, AND THE DIOCESE OF KAMLOOPS. IN LIGHT OF THE SUFFERINGS OF THE PAST, HIS HOLINESS HOPES THAT THIS GENEROUS GESTURE WILL BE A FURTHER STEP ON THE PATH TOWARDS TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION. INDEED, TODAY'S GATHERING RESPONDS TO THE CALL OF POPE FRANCIS DURING HIS APOSTOLIC JOURNEY, WHEN HE SPOKE OF THE NEED FOR THE CHURCH AND THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF CANADA "TO WALK TOGETHER, PRAY TOGETHER, AND WORK TOGETHER" (MEETING WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES: FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS AND INUIT, 25 JULY 2022). UPON THE ORGANIZERS AND ALL TAKING PART IN THIS EVENT, THE HOLY FATHER WILLINGLY INVOKES THE ABUNDANT BLESSINGS OF ALMIGHTY GOD.

CARDINAL PIETRO PAROLIN
SECRETARY OF STATE

Thank you again for allowing us to join this part of your healing journey. We are honoured by this opportunity, and we are ready and willing for the hard work that lies ahead.

Just as on that very first Easter, when something totally unexpected and absolutely novel took place, this Sacred Covenant launches a truly new beginning, and one that I trust the Creator will bless as we continue to walk together in hope.

✠ J. Michael Miller, CSB