Mr. Phil Fontaine  
National Chief  
Assembly of First Nations  
1 Nicholas Street  
Ottawa, ON  

Dear Chief Fontaine:

In 1975 the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, through its Publications Service, commissioned works of art by 20 Canadian artists, of whom eight were members of Aboriginal Nations. Among them was Mr. Stanley Peters of Whitehorse, an Athapaskan of Tlingit origin, who carved in poplar what he titled the *Totem Cross / Croix totémique*, measuring $9\frac{1}{2} \times 6\frac{1}{2}$ feet.

Mr. Peters has written the following description of this work, as cited in the booklet published by the Conference, Art Collection / Collection d'art (Ottawa, © 1976, p. 22):

*God's eyes watch from the four directions, from above and below, from both wings, saying that God is all around us at all times. All races, black and yellow, red and white, are represented in the four colours taken from nature and found in the earth-circle and all over Thunderbird. Christ-as-Thunderbird, in dying for us, restores happiness and understanding; he fills us with new dignity and great richness.*

*The chip marks all over remind us of the old days when axes were not known and ivory and stone were used instead. The black colour comes from the charcoal of campfires; the white from volcanic ash; and the red from the clay of the riverbank.*

Among the Aboriginal Nations of the Pacific Coast, a totem pole is a testament to the ancestry of a family clan, depicting its dignity and accomplishments as well as rights and prerogatives. In Quebec and Europe, a wayside cross marks a place where the members of a community gather to meet and pray, and often commemorates an important moment in their communal history.
On the occasion of the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Totem Cross is a fitting testament to the ancestry and dignity of Aboriginal Peoples, and a sacred reminder of their accomplishments, rights and prerogatives. It marks the ongoing encounter in the journeys of two great spiritual traditions - the aboriginal and the Christian - that come together in reverence and homage before the One who is within all yet surpasses all, who comes before all and who summons all to come forth.


The totem poles of the Pacific Northwest sometimes remind visitors of . . . roadside crosses. . . . Combining the two, Stanley Peters locates a totemic Jesus on a cross to communicate the mystery of Christ as truly the Man Who Belongs to the World.

When proclaiming the life-giving and liberating Good News of Jesus Christ, our European ancestors used an approach that was sometimes narrow and severe. In their efforts to safeguard the light, they occasionally failed to insist enough that "the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true" (Ephesians 5.9). This unfortunately happened also in their dealings with Aboriginal Peoples. On the eve of the 2000 anniversary of the birth of Christ, his cross reminds every generation that the mystery of the Word becoming flesh remains God delivering us from death to life, from evil to good, from weakness to strength, from fear to hope, from sinfulness to grace.

During his 1984 visit to Canada (his address at the Martyrs’ Shrine, Huronia, Ontario, September 15), Pope John Paul II reminded us of

. . . the part the Native Peoples
play, not only in the multicultural fabric of Canadian society, but in
the life of the Catholic Church. . . . Thus the one faith is expressed
in different ways. There can be no question of adulterating the word of
God or of emptying the Cross of its power, but rather of Christ animating
the very centre of all culture. Thus, not only is Christianity relevant
to the Indian peoples, but Christ, in the members of his Body, is himself
Indian.

Soon the world will be invited to pass through the Holy Doors into a new millennium. This Totem Cross
is a sign before the Great Spirit of the hopes and prayers that we cherish as members of the
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Assembly of First Nations. May the presence
of the Holy Spirit make this exchange of ours today a common pledge to begin a new moment
in what the Memorandum of Understanding refers to as "our conversation and collaboration"
.

Chief Fontaine, with God’s eyes watching from the four directions, I present to you, on behalf of
the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, this reproduction of the Totem Cross / Croix
totémique , sculpted by
Stanley Peters and photographed by Thomas E. Moore of Toronto.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

Gerald Wiesner, OMI
Bishop of Prince George
President
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops