

Catholic Aboriginal Council for Reconciliation Annual Report to the 2007 Plenary Assembly of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

Since the 2006 Plenary Assembly, the Catholic Aboriginal Council for Reconciliation has met three times: November 2006, February 2007 and July 2007. In addition to these three meetings, the Council hosted a second meeting with the partners involved in the *Returning to Spirit* project to finalize the consolidation of that organization, in December 2006.

New Mandate of the Catholic Aboriginal Council for Reconciliation

Since its creation in 1998, the Aboriginal Council has primarily focused its efforts on the funding aspect of its mandate: studying requests and determining which projects come within the guidelines and criteria for the Fund for Reconciliation, Solidarity and Communion. In light of the residential school settlement, the Aboriginal Council was aware that revenues for the Fund from dioceses and religious communities may change over the coming years, consequently meaning an end to the funding aspect of its mandate.

At the same time, the Permanent Council indicated there was work yet to be done with Aboriginal Catholics and asked the Aboriginal Council to submit a proposal for a new mandate. The Aboriginal Council dedicated much of its efforts throughout the past year to this and its proposal was accepted by the Permanent Council in March 2007.

Given its new mandate, the Aboriginal Council will focus on examining and addressing current issues regarding Aboriginal Peoples within the Catholic Church in Canada, particularly studying and analyzing issues related to Catholic Aboriginal spirituality and faith formation. According to this new mandate, the Aboriginal Council “plans to serve as an important link between Aboriginal Catholics and non-Aboriginal Catholics; establishing partnerships that promote and advocate meaningful relationships between Aboriginal Peoples and the Catholic Church at large”. The new mandate reduces the Aboriginal Council membership from eight to six: one from each Aboriginal region of Canada (Atlantic, Quebec, Ontario, the Prairies, British Columbia and the North), plus two Bishops, one from each Sector.

The 2007-2008 program of the Aboriginal Council will include:

- **Diocesan Survey:** to determine what forms of Aboriginal advisory and pastoral councils, if any, are found within each diocese.
- **Eucharistic Congress:** one member designated by the Aboriginal Council and one consultant will work on preparations for the International Eucharistic Congress, specifically in planning and developing a Mass for Aboriginal Peoples during the Congress.

- Saint Anne: the Aboriginal Council will also be collaborating with a number of people to examine and study pilgrimages and devotion to Saint Anne, in view of developing links between Aboriginal spirituality and the Catholic faith.
- **Pastoral Plan for the North:** the Aboriginal Council also plans to collaborate with the Episcopal Commission for the Evangelization of Peoples in its work on the Pastoral Plan for the North.
- **National Aboriginal Day of Prayer:** a consultant has been retained to draft a pastoral letter on behalf of the Aboriginal Council for the National Aboriginal Day of Prayer, 12 December 2007.

Returning to Spirit

The Catholic Aboriginal Council for Reconciliation has been the primary financial contributor for the *Returning to Spirit* program over the past six years. This program continues to offer a series of healing and reconciliation workshops that were originally developed to assist in healing the negative effects of the former Residential Schools that have impacted both the Church and Aboriginal Peoples.

Thanks to the tremendous success of the program, the demand for workshops has far exceeded the capabilities of the organizing body, the Nigann Training Group. The Aboriginal Council took the initiative and hosted a first meeting in spring 2006, uniting representatives from the various stakeholder groups, Aboriginal host communities, the group of 49 Catholic entities and the Nigann Training Group in view of developing an autonomous corporation to manage the growing demand for workshops. Throughout 2006, the Aboriginal Council continued its efforts to consolidate the *Returning to Spirit* program, and in December 2006 the Council, along with the Sisters of Saint Anne, hosted a second meeting reuniting the representatives from the stakeholder groups to complete the work commenced in the spring.

This second meeting resulted in the successful incorporation of **RTS** on 27 December 2006. A board of directors was established and an administrative director hired to manage the everyday activities of the program. The Aboriginal Council agreed to commit a final \$75,000 for 2007, with its financial commitment to **RTS** thus concluding at the end of this year. While the Aboriginal Council will no longer provide funding, it will continue to stay informed of the program's evolution and is honoured to have been able to play a key role in the development of the new autonomous **RTS Incorporated**. We wish the program continued success, in which Bishop Gary Gordon is now involved as part of its leadership team.

Fund for Reconciliation, Solidarity and Communion

The Fund for Reconciliation, Solidarity and Communion was created to help assist projects that promote reconciliation and healing in Aboriginal communities across the nation. Since it began providing financial contributions in 1999 to programs that met its criteria, the Fund has granted more than \$1,250,000, of which more than \$350,000 was for *Returning to Spirit*.

Income for the Fund has been provided on a voluntary basis. In the current year, as of July 2007, 35 dioceses have donated a total of \$94,250. The 2005 Plenary Assembly agreed to invite each diocese to contribute \$3,000 per year for the next two years. The members of the 2007 Plenary Assembly will be invited once again to renew their commitment for another two years, renewable.

Since the 2006 Plenary, the Aboriginal Council has approved \$90,857 in grants for six projects across the country:

British Columbia	1 project	\$3,000
Saskatchewan	1 project	\$4,857
Ontario	1 project	\$4,000
Quebec	2 projects	\$4,000
<i>Returning to Spirit</i>	5 workshops	\$75,000

Diocesan Reconciliation Initiatives

As the Residential School settlement comes into effect, many organizations are examining potential consequences that may arise once the money is released. The Aboriginal Council would like to take this opportunity to encourage the Bishops to work with Aboriginal People in their dioceses to offer them the opportunity to tell their stories, deal with their pain and anger in a positive manner, and determine how best to address the evolving questions surrounding the settlement agreement. The Council believes it would be beneficial for the Bishops to work in solidarity with the reconciliation process, and move beyond questions of litigation and liability.

In conclusion, as the Aboriginal Council embarks on implementing its new mandate, it is filled with new energy and enthusiasm for accomplishing its goals. It would like to thank the Canadian Bishops for the opportunity to continue to assist them.

Council Members: Rev. Mr. Ronald Boyer, Chair (Quebec)
 Ms. Rosella Kinoshameg (Ontario)
 Mr. Harry Lafond (Saskatchewan)
 Ms. Shirley Leon (British Columbia)
 Ms. Melody McLeod (Northwest Territories)
 Sister Dorothy Moore, C.S.M. (Nova Scotia)
 Mr. Justice Graydon Nicholas (New Brunswick)
 Ms. Nicole O’Bomsawin (Quebec)

Bishop Members: Most Rev. Albert LeGatt (Saskatoon)
 Most Rev. Bertrand Blanchet (Rimouski)

Staff: Mr. Benoît Bariteau, Council Secretary
 Mrs. Tracy Blain, Assistant
 Mrs. Monique Chabot, Secretary