

Apostolic Visit to Canada  
Speech of Pope John Paul II  
to Aboriginal and Inuit Peoples

*Saint-Anne de Beaupré Shrine  
Monday, September 10, 1984*

Beloved Brothers and Sisters,

1. I thank you with all my heart for coming from so many regions, including the farthest corners, to give me this opportunity to meet you as I will meet your brothers and sisters in Huronia and in Fort Simpson. You represent the first inhabitants of this vast continent. For centuries you have made your mark in North America with your traditions and your civilization. Other waves of settlers came from Europe with their own culture and their Christian faith. They took their place beside you. The vastness of this continent allowed you to live together in a relationship that, though not always easy, has also had its rewards. God gave the earth to all humankind. Today you have your own special place in this country.

Without losing any of your cultural identity, you have understood that God has sent the Christian message to you just as he did to others. Today, I come to greet you, the Native peoples, who bring us close to the first settling origins of Canada and to celebrate with you our faith in Jesus Christ. I recall that beautiful day when Kateri Tekakwitha was beatified in Rome with many of you in attendance. I have not forgotten the heartfelt and insistent invitations you made then. But I could not visit all of your villages and territories, those of the different Aboriginal nations, dispersed throughout the many regions of Canada, and those of the Inuit whose familiar horizons of snow and ice are near the North Pole. That is why I wanted to meet you here, in Sainte-Anne de Beaupré, on the very spot where you pitch your tents every year. You come here as pilgrims, to pray to Saint Anne whom you so lovingly call your grandmother. Your ancestors have often come here to pray since the Hurons made their first pilgrimage in 1671 and the Mi'kmaq in 1680. They became part of a great popular movement which has made this one of the most visited sanctuaries in North America.

2. On behalf of all pilgrims and in union with the bishops of this country I would like to thank the Redemptorists and their collaborators. Thanks to them, this shrine is still flourishing. Attentive to popular devotion, they have known how to leave room for actions that fully and firmly express faith, prayer and the need of reconciliation. It is thanks to them that many Canadian families still pray to Saint Anne, the mother of Mary.

But we should also give thanks for all those who, out of love for you, came to propose to your ancestors and yourselves that you become brothers in Jesus Christ, so that you too could share the gift which they themselves had received. I am thinking of Jesuits like Fathers Vimont and Vieuxpont who from Fort Saint Anne to Cape Breton brought the word of the Gospel to the Mi'kmaq and helped them to believe in Jesus as the Saviour and to venerate his mother Mary and her mother, Saint Anne.

This brings to mind many other great religious men and women, from the time of the founding of the first religious communities to the present day. I would particularly like to mention the Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate. They took charge of the vast region of the Canadian North. They devoted their lives to the evangelization and the support of many Aboriginal groups by sharing their life, by becoming the pastors and the bishops of those who believed. They were the first Catholic missionaries to go among the Inuit and to stay with them to bear witness to Jesus Christ and to found the Church; the intercession of Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus, patron of missions, helped to

enrich their difficult apostolate.

It must also be said that from the middle of the seventeenth century, the Aboriginal peoples and, in their time, the Inuit, welcomed the news of Jesus Christ. Today, these Christians, full-fledged members of the Church, although not always of society, are actively involved - often as couples - in the teaching of catechism to their brothers and sisters and their children and in leading prayer. They are faithful to the celebration of the Eucharist and often take on responsibilities in pastoral councils. Yes, I am sorry that I cannot visit these places myself to encourage the courageous missionaries and the courageous Christians who have in them the blood and culture of the first inhabitants of this country.

3. Over the centuries, dear Aboriginal and Inuit peoples, you have gradually discovered in your cultures special ways of living your relationship with God and with the world while remaining loyal to Jesus and to the Gospel. Continue to develop these moral and spiritual values: an acute sense of the presence of God, love of your family, respect for the aged, solidarity with your people, sharing, hospitality, respect for nature, the importance given to silence and prayer, and faith in providence. Guard this wisdom carefully. To let it become impoverished would be to impoverish the people around you. To live these spiritual values in a new way requires on your part maturity, interiority, a deepening of the Christian message, a concern for the dignity of the human person and a pride in being Aboriginal and Inuit. This demands the courage to eliminate every form of enslavement that might compromise your future.

Your encounter with the Gospel has not only enriched you, it has enriched the Church. We are well aware that this has not taken place without its difficulties and, occasionally, even mistakes. However, and you are experiencing this today, the Gospel does not destroy what is best in you. On the contrary, it enriches from within the spiritual qualities and gifts that are proper to your cultures (cf. Gaudium et Spes, No. 58). In addition, your Aboriginal and Inuit traditions permit the development of new ways of expressing the message of salvation and they help us to better understand to what point Jesus is the Savior and how Catholic or universal his salvation is.

4. This recognition of your accomplishments cannot allow us to forget the great challenges your people face in the current North American context. Like all other citizens, but more acutely, you fear the impact of economic, social and cultural change on your traditional ways of life. You are concerned about the future of your Aboriginal and Inuit identities and about the future of your children and grandchildren. Despite this, you do not reject scientific and technological progress. You perceive the challenges it represents and you know how to make the most of it.

With reason, however, you want to control your future, to preserve your cultural character to establish an educational system where your own languages are respected.

The Bishops' Synod on "Justice in the World" (1971) stated that every people should, in mutual cooperation, fashion its own economic and social development and that each people should take part in bringing about the universal common good as active and responsible members of human society (cf. Proposal No. 8). It is in this perspective that you must be the architects of your own future, freely, and responsibly. May the wisdom of your elders unite with the initiative and courage of your youth to meet this challenge!

This tenacity in safe-guarding your personality is compatible with a spirit of dialogue and friendly acceptance among all those who have come to this country in successive waves and who are called to form the very diverse population of this area as vast as a continent, and to bring to it some form of development.

5. I know that the relations between Native people and white people are often strained and tainted with prejudice. Furthermore, in many places, the Native people are among the poorest and

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most marginalized members of society. They suffer from the fact that recognition of their identity and of their ability to participate in shaping their future is late in coming.

More and more, those who govern this country have your cultures and your rights at heart and want to rectify difficult situations. This is already evident in some pieces of legislation, open of course to further progress, and in the increased recognition of your own decision-making power. It is to be hoped that effective cooperation and dialogue based on good faith and the acceptance of the other in his or her difference will develop. The Church does not intervene directly in civil matters, but you know its concern for you and that it tries to inspire all those who want to live with the Christian spirit.

6. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we know that the Gospel calls us to live as his brothers and sisters. We know that Jesus Christ makes possible reconciliation between peoples, with all its requirements of conversion, justice and social love. If we truly believe that God created us in his image, we shall be able to accept one another with our differences and despite our limitations and our sins.

In seeking a good understanding between the inhabitants of this country, faced with the difficulties of the modern world, it is necessary for you to have complete confidence in what you can do to help one another and to be renewed. Jesus Christ, in whom we believe, can break the chains of our personal and collective selfishness. He gives us the power of his Spirit so that we may triumph over difficulties and realize justice.

7. Assured of the love God has for you, put yourselves to the task; recall without ceasing that the Church of Jesus Christ is your Church. She is the place where the Sun of the Word enlightens you, where you find the nourishment and strength to continue on your way. She is like those "hiding places" that your ancestors constructed all along the route of their travels, so that no one might be caught without provisions. Permit me to repeat this description of the Church in some of your own languages; this will be a way to come closer to you and to express to you my fraternal affection.

The Church is the ASADJIGAN of God for you (Algonquin)

The Church is the SHESHEPETAN of God for you (Montagnais)

The Church is the SHISHITITAGN of God for you (Cree)

The Church is the TESHITITAGAN of God for you (Atikamek)

The Church is the IA-IEN-TA-IEN-TA-KWA of God for you (Mohawk)

The Church is the APATAGAT of God for you (Mi'kmaq)

Now we must say goodbye. In the language of our Inuit brothers and sisters, I would like to assure you that you are my friends, all you who are loved by God! ILANNAARIVAPSI TAMAPSI NAGLIJAUUVUSI JISUSINUT.

I will carry you in my heart and in my prayers. I will entrust you to Mary and to Saint Anne so that you may grow in faith and bear witness, in your own way, to Jesus Christ in this country. In the name of Jesus Christ, I bless you with all my heart.