

# Declaration of the English Canadian Region of the Holy Cross Fathers in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indigenous Residential Schools

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## Preamble

*The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established to investigate the experience of those indigenous children in Canada who had attended Residential Schools during a period beginning in 1867 and that did not end entirely until 1996. The 48<sup>th</sup> and 49<sup>th</sup> demands of this commission state that*

*We call upon the church parties to the Settlement Agreement, and all other faith groups and interfaith social justice groups in Canada who have not already done so, to formally adopt and comply with the principles, norms, and standards of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a framework for reconciliation.*

*This would include, but not be limited to, the following commitments:*

- i. Ensuring that their institutions, policies, programs, and practices comply with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.*
- ii. Respecting Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination in spiritual matters, including the right to practice, develop, and teach their own spiritual and religious traditions, customs, and ceremonies, consistent with Article 12:1 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.*
- iii. Engaging in ongoing public dialogue and actions to support the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.*
- iv. Issuing a statement no later than March 31, 2016, from all religious denominations and faith groups, as to how they will implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.*

*49. We call upon all religious denominations and faith groups who have not already done so to repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples, such as the Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius.<sup>i</sup>*

*According to the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the main principle guiding reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and Canadian society is the following : "The Declaration of the United Nations on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is the framework for reconciliation at all levels and in all sectors of Canadian society." (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, pp. 3, 129).*

*According to the Constitutions of the Congregation of Holy Cross,  
As disciples of Jesus we stand side by side with all people. ... Thus, wherever  
through its superiors the congregation sends us we go as educators in the  
faith to those whose lot we share (12) .... Our concern for the dignity of every  
human being as God's cherished child directs our care to victims of every  
injury, prejudice, famine, warfare, ignorance, infidelity, abuse, natural  
calamity (15) .... Our mission sends us across borders of every sort. Often we  
must make ourselves at home among more than one people or culture (17)  
(Constitution 2 – Mission)*

*It should be remembered that our ancestors came to this land as immigrants and that  
all of us live on land that has been occupied since time immemorial by indigenous  
people whose claim to that land has never been renounced. We are their guests, now  
and always. For further reflections in this sense you can consult also the final report  
of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996). Our ministry as Holy Cross  
Fathers in English Canada is rooted fundamentally in this context. Thus it follows, that  
the fate of Indigenous people in Canada and the consequences of the policy of  
Residential Schools is not an "Aboriginal issue" but rather concerns everyone.*

## **Commitments**

1. We adopt the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a fundamental criterion of our activities and our interventions in Canadian society and in the Church in so far as they concern Indigenous peoples.
2. As the English Canadian Region of the Holy Cross Fathers, engaged in pastoral service to the people of English Canada with a spiritual vision favouring peace, justice and the integrity of creation, we commit to:
  - a. Live fully the inter-cultural encounter with Indigenous peoples,
  - b. Allow ourselves to be challenged by the traditions and experience of the Indigenous peoples of Canada on the inter-spiritual religious and ethical level,
  - c. Avoid and refuse any colonialist exploitation of the cultural or spiritual patrimony of Indigenous peoples<sup>ii</sup>,
  - d. Respect and defend the right of Indigenous peoples and individuals to live their cultural and religious traditions as well as to determine the nature of their relationship with the Christian faith and the Churches,<sup>iii</sup>
  - e. In our pastoral ministry, seize the opportunities to concretely appreciate the traditions and spiritual experience of Indigenous peoples,

- f. Cultivate an approach of reconciliation, through concrete moments of dialogue, as a practice founded on justice, peace and the integrity of creation.<sup>iv</sup>
3. We agree to respect and promote the right of Indigenous people to prior, informed and free consent in the preparation of any activity relating to Indigenous peoples,<sup>v</sup>
4. We agree to cultivate concrete partnerships with communities of Indigenous peoples in solidarity with the struggles they choose to carry forward for the recognition of their rights as enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,
5. We agree to pursue a greater awareness regarding the rights of Indigenous peoples among our members and among those we serve.

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<sup>i</sup> This papal doctrine from the 15<sup>th</sup> century declared that lands not already inhabited by Christians could be declared property of a royal expedition that discovered them and established itself there. The doctrine was initially aimed at resolving conflicts within European territories but was quickly used by those exploring the New World. There are several papal documents renouncing this doctrine. Both John Paul II and Francis have spoken strongly against it. However, over the centuries it has become enshrined in international law and is even inscribed in the United States constitution. In an important way it underlies all modern State claims to property over land in the New World where European settlements came to dominate the population.

<sup>ii</sup> The word “colonialist” is important. Thus, the reference is to the use of symbols, rituals etc., in a unilateral way, without consent of Indigenous people and without respect for context.

<sup>iii</sup> This refers especially to elements of enculturation of Christian faith in Indigenous cultural and historical contexts.

<sup>iv</sup> One important example of this is the “Return to the Spirit” workshops that have been offered throughout Canada. It is a process that allows Indigenous and Non-Indigenous persons to work through their attitudes and feelings toward the history of their relationship with the other group. The “Blanket Exercise” promoted by Kairos is another example. It is a 2-3 hour interactive activity that introduces the participants to Indigenous history in Canada since the arrival of Europeans.

<sup>v</sup> This phrase, sanctioned by the United Nations, was applied initially to the operations of extractive industries (mining, forestry, fishing) and to government policies. However, it is now extended to every initiative that will significantly affect Indigenous communities.