

December 21, 2021

Letter to His Holiness Pope Francis

Firstly, as the Leader of the Red River Métis, and on behalf of my Nation, I would like to wish you a Happy belated Birthday. I would also like to wish you a very Merry Christmas and a New Year for new beginnings and peace on earth. I write to you as the President of the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF) -the National Government of the Red River Métis, also known as the Manitoba Métis -la nouvelle nation -the origin, roots, and core of the Métis Nation.

I would like to say it was both humbling and an honour to have been offered the opportunity to meet with you this December. It is unfortunate that this meeting had to be postponed after having had worked in such close partnership with your Archbishops in Canada over the past years.

Accompanying me on our visit in the near future will be the Catholic Faithful from our new nation, including our Women, Youth and Elders, as well as my elected government colleagues. We were all very disappointed that our trip to the Vatican was once again postponed due to health cautions. We fully understand that the COVID-19 pandemic, especially any new variants, has caused much fear and anxiety. Safety, security and protecting our elders and vulnerable members of our societies must be a top consideration and basis of action.

This was not to be my first visit to the Vatican, but it was to be the first to meet with you with hope and faith as we move into a future of renewal and revitalization. As a strong Catholic, there were both personal, as well as collective reasons, why I look forward to seeing you. Once again, we are pleased to be moving towards confirming a new date for in the new year.


In Peter 5:2, the Rock of the Church, he said "Be shepherds of the flock of God that has been entrusted to your care. Watch over it, not as a duty, but willingly in accord with the will of God[...]." The Red River Métis count themselves among the Lord's flock.

The Catholic Church has watched over and walked alongside this Red River Métis flock -la nouvelle nation -for over 200 years. The Red River Métis are a distinct Indigenous Nation in west-central North America, with our own collective identity, language, culture, way of life, and self-government. Our Homeland includes the Western Great Plains in what is now Western Canada and the northern United States of America.

Our distinct Red River Métis cultural heritage is well known to Canadians: the Red River Jig; the Red River Cart; the Red River Beadwork; the poems, songs and music of our artists; and our language Michif. Our political history includes our National Flag and the struggles of our Ancestors in battle and in the courts.

In June of this year, 2021, Pope Francis you explained that you want to "walk side by side in dialogue and mutual respect in recognizing the rights and cultural values of all the sons and daughters of Canada" The Red River Métis welcome being among these sons and daughters. The Catholic Church's history is closely knit with our Red River Métis heritage and identity.

Together, we - the Church and the Red River Métis - have faced trials and tribulations. We often relied on each other. As helpers, as servants, and as partners. It has been and remains today a journey of faith and hope. The theme for our visit is "Indigenous Peoples and the Church: Walking Together Toward Healing and Reconciliation" is a most appropriate approach to continuing our journey. What follows is a very brief history of our walk.



Through what is called the Red River Resistance - a major event in Canadian history - the Red River Métis became Canada's negotiating partner in Confederation and the founder of the first western province in Canada now called Manitoba. It is the only province to be created by an Indigenous People in North America. In recognition of the Red River Métis creation of the province, and as an honour, we became known after 1870 as the Manitoba Métis.

But our walk with the Catholic Church began long before 1870. Bishop Joseph-Octave Plessis introduced the Church into the Red River territory. This was the result of an 1817 Petition from Red River to the Bishop stating that "with the ministry of a Catholic Priest nothing will be missing[...]" and therefore "asking for "the help of a priest of their Holy Religion[...]." The Church was both needed and welcomed as an integral part of Métis lives and identity.

*In 1856 Alexander Ross, in his book *The Red River Settlement*, while describing the Red River Half-Breeds, also known as the Red River Métis, wrote "All these people of French extraction are of Roman Catholic religion." In describing an earlier 1840 buffalo hunting expedition on the plains Ross, once again in his book, wrote "On [June] 21st, after the priest had performed mass (for we should have mentioned that a Roman Catholic priest generally accompanies these expeditions) [..]."*

Father and later Bishop Louis-François Lafleche, a missionary to the Red River Settlement, was well known to have been one of these priests who travelled with the buffalo hunting expeditions from the St-François Xavier Métis during 1851 to 1852. Subsequent to the direction of Bishop Plessis, the first Catholic Mission in the Western Great Plains began in 1818 by the Roman Catholic Fathers Joseph-Norbert Provencher and Sever Joseph-Nicolas Dumoulin. Subsequently, in 1821, was the establishment of the community at Pembina - an early and prominent centre for the Red River Métis.

Many of our Ancestors are buried in the Pembina North Dakota cemetery on the United States side of the international border. Today, led by our Elders, we continue to show respect by erecting white wooden crosses on the Pembina cemetery to replace those burned, rotted, or damaged.

Among his other contributions to the Métis, in 1823 now as Bishop, Provencher engaged Métis women Angelique and Marguerite Nolin as teachers for the first formal girls' school in the Red River Settlement.

St-Joseph, the Protector of the Church, is also to our people our Patron Saint of the Red River Métis. Sadly, a Métis village in our Red River Country, also on the United States side of the border near Pembina, which once was his namesake, has been renamed to Walhalla, and is nearly forgotten. But today our Elders remain faithful as many that continue today to mark St-Joseph's March 19th feast day.

Bishop Provencher's successor, Bishop Alexandre-Antonin Tache, was a trusted religious leader in the Red River and North-West. He became a central figure in the events of the 1869-70 Red River Resistance and acted as an intermediary between Canada led by Prime Minister John A. Macdonald and the Red River Métis Provisional Government led by Louis Riel. After 1870 he attempted to secure the amnesty for the Resistance leaders - an amnesty promised by Canada.

Our great Red River Métis Leader, Louis Riel, said "[...] as Archbishop Tache is my great benefactor, as he is my father, I would say because he has done me an immense deal of good, and because there was no one who had the courage to tell him, I did, because I love him, because I acknowledge all he has done for me; as to Bishop Grandin, it was on the same grounds."

The Red River Resistance arose when Canada attempted to unilaterally bring our Homeland into Canada without consultation and our consent. Subsequently

these events resulted in the Canada and Red River Métis creating the province of Manitoba. During this period, Father Joseph-Noel Ritchot was an important advisor and negotiator on behalf of the Métis-led Red River Provisional Government.

As an appointed negotiator, Father Ritchot helped to ensure French language rights and Catholic religious freedoms were included in the Manitoba Act of 1870. He also was instrumental in the inclusion of section 31 of the same Act which promised 1.4 million acres of land for the children of Red River Métis families.

Bishop Tache, Father Ritchot, and the Métis were, ultimately, betrayed by Canadian Prime Minister John A. Macdonald: the amnesty sought was never granted to the Métis leaders of the Red River Resistance; the language and religious freedoms, especially in the areas of provincial governance and education in Catholic Schools, were denied; and the land promises to the children were not kept.

In times of troubles the church was there to help its flock. As Louis Riel spoke in his final statement of the heart-felt compassion of the Fathers often in simple acts: "the Rev. Father Andre has often had the kindness to feed my family with a sack of flour [...]."

In his reflection on the events of 1869-70, in 1885 Louis Riel, the year of his execution by Canada, explained that there were two societies who treated together. One was small, but in its smallness had its rights. The other was great, but in its greatness had no greater rights than the rights of the small [...]."

Reflecting Louis Riel's words, Father Ritchot built a grotto in the Catholic Parish of St Norbert, now a part of the City of Winnipeg. It contains a statue of Mary in which she is holding a balance - the scales of justice - much like those used in law. On the scales the cause of the Red River Métis outweighs that of Canada.

The morality of the Métis claim is clear. As in Isaiah 1:17, "[...] learn to do right. See that justice is done-help those who are oppressed [...]."

It is not surprising that Father Ritchot built the grotto. He was very much involved in the protection of his flock. He had allowed the Métis to assemble inside the parish for meetings towards protecting the Red River Métis lands; he welcomed and accommodated Métis soldiers including leader Louis Riel inside both his home and church.

In November 1885 Louis Riel was executed by judicially sanctioned murder - the dagger of the assassin was hidden in the cloak of the judge. Just prior to his death, he wrote a letter to Father Ritchot explaining "'[...] walking in the footsteps of a man such as you Father, I tried to base my conduct on the one hand on what I am asked to do for others and on the other on what I am obliged in conscience to do for them."

According to reports at the time, in his final hours Louis Riel was accompanied by his confessor Father Andre as well as Father Mc Williams. Newspaper accounts state that Riel's time was "devoted assiduously to prayer." Father Andre, once questioned, stated that Riel "was a fervent Catholic, attending the church and attending to his religious duties frequently." He also agreed that the half-breeds [Métis] were "a people highly religious" and "religion has a great influence on them."

Louis Riel's body was brought home to Red river. The day before his burial, handbills were distributed calling for a "War of the Races" and calling for the "truly loyal" to proceed to St. Boniface and to "pull down the [St-Boniface Catholic] Cathedral down upon the heads of the Tribe that exalt the REBEL, and so blot them from the face of the Earth."

Ever since Louis Riel's death, each and every year on November 16th despite the threats and condemnation of Riel and his people as traitors, the Red River

Métis continue to attend Mass in St-Boniface Cathedral and to gather in solemn ceremony at his gravesite to remember the man and commemorate his life and achievements.

Since our inception and through to today, at the beginning of meetings and assemblies the Red River Métis ask an Elder to give a traditional prayer. The Lord is never forgotten. In quoting the words of the Apostle John, in a message from your Holiness Pope Francis, which apply describes the relationship of the Church with the Red River Métis: "Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and in truth" (1 Jn 3:18).

We ask Pope Francis that the Church continue to pray with us and to work alongside us in our search for reconciliation with Canada and with the Church. We ask that Church please not forget us, and that you please do not give up on us.

Today we see fewer young people attending church. Today some churches are near empty of parishioners, falling into disrepair and, to meet the needs for each Parish, one priest may need to visit up to half-dozen Churches to perform Sunday Mass. We believe outside the traditional needs of our Parishioners, such as weddings, funerals, or baptisms, there is much hope and healing through the Church.

In the sacraments, prayer, protection and love for our community, the Church still has a prominent role for those suffering from health conditions such depression, mental illness, or cancer, as well as from domestic or substance abuse, and for those victims of systemic violence and racism from outside our community. We believe our people suffering from these and other ailments and troubles may be helped by increased Church presence and a revitalization of faith in our community.

I hope you found this brief description of our historical and ongoing relationship - only few pages in length - both informative and useful. Yet, as it provides only highlights, it

does not fully reflect the emotional and spiritual connection between us - the Church and the Red River Métis - and our mutual commitments and undertakings during a long history together.

After more than two centuries of being the object of violence and oppression by the State and others, Louis Riel's people are still here. It has been our faith in the Creator that has kept us alive. As a first step in knowing our past, understanding our people, and building a better future for all, I hope you are able to visit our Homeland and meet me at the foot of Riel's St Boniface gravesite. I look to this opportunity to pray along with you.

We must find ways to continue to walk the path together. We look forward to you, Pope Francis, visiting Canada along with our visit to the Vatican. We look forward to taking first critical steps towards renewal - a true reconciliation - of our spiritual and earthly relationships. In taking these first steps, in truth and in deed, we ask you how we can work with the Church to help our people in their religious and material needs.

Your humble and faithful servant,.....


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