

*Opening statement to His Holiness by President Chartrand:*


*Holy Father, from the bottom of my heart, I thank you for meeting with us today. The Manitoba Métis Federation is the National Government of the Red River Métis, also known as the Manitoba Métis: la nouvelle nation, the origin, root, and core of the Métis Nation. We are a distinct Indigenous People, whose rights are recognized in Canada's constitution.*

*The Manitoba Métis Federation signed the Manitoba Métis Self-Government Recognition and Implementation Agreement with Canada on July 6, 2021. This was an historic moment for our people. The Agreement immediately recognized the Manitoba Métis Federation as the National Government of the Red River Métis. The Agreement further acknowledges that the Red River Métis acts exclusively through the Manitoba Métis Federation Government.*

*We are a maternal nation and many of us learned our cultural values of 'sharing is caring' from our Mothers. Historically, our community has always taken care of our vulnerable, and it is a value that still resonates throughout the Métis Nation today. From sharing our hunting and harvesting bounties with everyone in the community in the 1800's to our Métis Government covering essential services of health care, medicine, disability aides and education – we have always relied on each other for community support to strengthen the family, the community and ultimately the nation.*

*I know each and every speaker you are about to hear from will share a message directly from their heart on the Church and the role it plays within their family and our community.*

*We are honoured to be the first Canadian Indigenous delegation to be in the Vatican with you after your sincere apology for Canada's residential schools. We approach our journey forward with the Catholic Church as one of ongoing dialogue. The apology you have given to the Indigenous peoples of Canada is very welcome and will help ease the pain of many.*



*Thank you. You are truly a Holy servant of the Church and a Pope of the people. You are walking side by side with us in this journey. We know there is more to be done together as we move from reconciliation to revitalization and renewal.*

*We bring a message of Faith, Hope, and Healing through the Church. God's word is of great comfort for those suffering, together we can bring an increased church presence with a revitalization of faith in our communities. Holy Father, we bring a message to the Church, not to forget or give up on us. We are concerned about the erosion of faith in our Homeland.*


*Our churches are closing and falling into disrepair. Our priests are no longer able to dedicate themselves to a single church. Instead, they must spread the word of God across multiple villages. Funerals, weddings, and baptisms are vital to our communities and they are becoming increasingly difficult to arrange due to the shortage of priests. We are seeing a decline in participation in some communities which has resulted in new challenges facing our churches.*

*Revitalization and renewal are essential. As you have shared, "For the ties that connect the elderly and the young are essential, they must be cherished and protected, lest we lose our historical memory and our very identity. Whenever memory and identity are cherished and protected, we become more human."*

*We need to instill courage and strength in our youth to help them connect to the gospel and have a greater commitment to the Church, as our Elders have taught us.*

*We are called Otipemisiwak by our Cree neighbours and relatives. The word means "the people who own themselves", and we know that our unique and distinct culture and identity stems in part from our relationship with the Church.*

*Some of the individuals you will hear from today have personal experiences of abuse at the hands of people who hid behind the Church while they did terrible things to children. Some delegates will speak on these matters today, but others will not. These are painful recollections and I know that many have devoted years to healing and overcoming these experiences.*



*As a united delegation, we understand that what these individuals did was contrary to the will of the Church and the expectations God has of his shepherds. As you have shared, “the memory of the past must never be sacrificed at the altar of alleged progress.”*

*Despite the negative experiences that a number of our delegates faced throughout their life, not one of the delegates who come before you today have lost their faith in God. Red River Métis Citizens are multi-denominational, but the majority are practicing Catholics who are active in their church and community.*

*While our delegates messages are personal and speak to what is in the hearts and minds of these individuals, we also represent the collective thoughts, hopes and concerns of our Nation.*

*Due to the historic relationship between the Red River Métis and the Catholic Church, we come to you today with open hearts. We hope that you will see that our message is one of faith, based on our desire to remain close to God. We hope you will offer us your compassion, your guidance, and your blessing as we bring you a message on behalf of the Red River Métis. We will carry your words and thoughts when we return to our Homeland.*

*We acknowledge the gifts that God gave the Red River Métis such as the Red River Cart, Red River Métis Beadwork and Sash, Red River Jig and fiddle music, our infinity flag, and our language.*

*Before you hear from the delegates, Elder Verna DeMontigny will say a prayer. It is our custom and our tradition to begin all our important events with a prayer, as we ask God to guide us and make sure we accomplish our work in good ways.*

*Elder Verna is not only a well-respected Elder in our Nation, she is also a cherished resource for our critically endangered language, Michif— a language created by our Métis Nation.*

*It's been called an impossible language by linguistic scholars and there are only a handful of languages like it in the world. It is a language where the nouns are taken from the French and the verbs come from the Cree.*

*Elder Verna is one of our few remaining Citizens who learned Michif as their first language.*

*I hope you enjoy hearing our language as we ask God to let his light shine on this encounter.*

*Closing statement to His Holiness by President Chartrand:*

*Holy Father, you have heard from just a few of the many who suffered harms and who are now prepared to begin healing. I hope this allows you to capture the essence of who we are the proud Red River Métis of Western Canada.*

*We thank you for your apology, for your acknowledgement of the harms done to our people, and for asking for our pardon. As I shared in my letter to you, our connection to the Catholic Church is historic. However, we know Canada and individuals from the Church did harm our people. These wrongs were never forgotten by our survivors, their families, or our communities.*

*We also recognize that the Red River Métis were just one of the Indigenous peoples who were harmed. While some Red River Métis attended residential schools, many attended day schools. The number of our children harmed in the residential and day school system may be smaller than the First Nations children who suffered, but I don't believe you can compare numbers when talking about pain in a child's heart.*

*I am certain, Your Holiness, that as you embrace the message of those who spoke before you today, that you hear the pain, you hear the loss, and you also hear their search to end that pain and that sorrow. Yet you can also hear that not one of them has given up on God or the Catholic Church through all the hardships.*

*This is the collective position of the Red River Métis.*

*I will not linger long on my own experiences. They took place after many residential schools began closing, the nuns and priests who worked in those institutions came to the schools in our communities. There, I was punished for the simple act of speaking Saulteaux by being whipped on my wrists or made to stand at the chalkboard on my tiptoes with my nose in a circle. My calves would be whipped if I dropped my nose. I was also humiliated for having long hair. The teacher, who was a nun, put what seemed to be 100 rubber bands in my hair and sent me home. I ran home down a different path, so my classmates could not see me and tease me further.*


*My mother, who was a devout Catholic, but did not speak English, simply cut the bands out of my hair and made sure it was short. When I cried and asked her why the nun was so mean to me, she simply said "mano".*

*In Saulteaux, mano means "let it go". She said "let it go" not because my feelings were not justified, but rather because she had a great deal of respect for the church. I hope that we never need to hear "mano" again.*

*In my earlier remarks, I spoke about our longstanding relationship with the Catholic Church, and I would like to share more of our history, so that you might see the sincerity of our commitment to an ongoing dialogue.*

*The Catholic Church is still as paramount and vital today as it was when it first came in. We need to understand that in your journey to Canada, others will be working around the clock to figure out how your journey will be laid out. You will be pulled from every direction, whether it be to mass gravesites or residential schools, different Indigenous peoples will be pulling you to their communities.*

*The Red River Métis know our history as a People very well. At the time of Manitoba entering Canada's confederation in 1870, there were ten thousand Métis people*




*in the Red River Settlement. We were the dominant force of the Northwest. We willingly chose the Catholic Church to be our allies, partners, and spiritual guides since our request in 1817, as we built our Nation and our community. We could have turned to other means for this guidance, but we didn't. We chose the Catholic Church.*

*As you now know, the Church played a major role in the development and existence of our Nation. We organized our lives, our homes, and our culture around the Catholic Church. It is one of the reasons why so many villages and communities across western Canada were given the names of saints, to honour our parishes and reflect our faith.*

*Along with shepherds of God, we also built many shrines, grottos, and chapels within our parishes. One of them is on the timeline you have in your possession, which speaks about an open-air chapel built by Father Ritchot in homage to Mother Mary. In her hand is the scales of justice. On these scales, the cause of the Red River Métis outweighs that of Canada, which emphasizes Father Ritchot's sympathy for the justness of the Métis cause.*

*As you heard earlier, we are also working toward the repair of Our Lady of Lourdes Grotto and Shrine in St. Malo, Manitoba. The statue of our redeemer, Jesus Christ, was damaged by time and weather. The Manitoba Métis Federation has commissioned the creation of a new statue from Jordan and will have the statue blessed with the waters of the River Jordan, where Jesus Christ himself was baptized. I know you visited the River Jordan in 2014 and blessed the waters, calling it a "place of witness". I hope that this connection between your blessing of the waters and the new statue in the grotto provides additional comfort for all Catholics who visit the shrine for peace and contemplation.*

*I cannot say I have told you of our history with the Catholic Church if I did not share with you a little bit about our great leader, Louis Riel. Riel was a strong Catholic. In fact, he was to be a priest, sponsored by Catholic churches within what is now Manitoba, to gain his priestly education in Montreal. Riel went east with this destiny in mind, but instead, through God's will, he found another path had been chosen for him.*



*Instead of continuing his studies for the priesthood, he went on to gain knowledge of the law. We still believe today and will always believe that God guided him to this education, because his people needed him. Our Nation would not exist today without Louis Riel, his faith, and his knowledge.*

*At the age of 24, he returned to our Homeland and quickly reconnected with the local priests, from whom he sought guidance and wisdom. He, like his friends among the priesthood, saw the way in which Upper Canada ignored, harassed, or outright abused the Métis, which was part of a plan to take the land away from our ancestors. Louis Riel himself said:*


*"... there were two societies who treated together. One was small, but in its smallness, it had its rights. The other was great, but in its greatness, it had no greater rights than the rights of the small, because the right is the same for everyone."*

*There are two relationships that Louis Riel had with priests that I believe are important to share with you. He formed deep and lasting friendships with Father Taché and Father Ritchot. In fact, it was Father Ritchot who represented Riel as he negotiated Manitoba's entry into Canadian confederation and brought the West into Canada.*

*Shortly after Manitoba was brought into confederation, Canada sent armed militia men along with British soldiers to chase us off our land. The promised land for our children was never delivered. That is when we dispersed north, south, and west, to our hunting camps and beyond.*

*According to Riel's records, an entire parish, called St. Louis de Langevin, was sold to settlers. They sold everything including the land intended for the school and church which was being built, as well as the land of 35 families who were living there.*

*Many letters were sent to Ottawa to ask for intervention to stop the invasion and ongoing harassment. I would like to read to you a direct quote from Louis Riel's last memoir that shows how closely aligned our people were with the Catholic Church:*



*The voice of the venerable Bishop of St. Albert vibrated in unison with the beloved people of his diocese. The situation grew daily so deplorable, that the entire clergy felt it had to add its pressing protest to that of the people. The Grand-Vicar of St. Albert diocese, the Reverend Father Leduc even went with a delegation to carry the grievances and the petitions to the capital. The Reverend Father's presentations were not listened to. No answer. No satisfaction.*

*It is only when we had exhausted all diplomatic means of having our needs heard that we went to battle.*

*No matter how many battles we undertook, in the courts or on the plains, whether in Manitoba or Batoche, Riel was asked by our people to lead them because they all trusted and had faith in him. They knew his connection to God.*


*When Riel did go to battle, he did not carry a gun. He carried a crucifix. Yet he was found guilty of treason and sentenced to hang. He forgave all those who spoke against him. He gave his fate to God and wrote about his trust that God would be his comfort and his salvation.*

*There are many who believe that his actions make Riel a saint, this man who believed in God and the Church so deeply. The priests believed in him, and echoed his sentiments about the rights of the Red River Métis. They prayed that Riel would be saved, but God had another plan.*

*Without the support of the priesthood including Fathers Ritchot and Taché and so many other Priests, we are not certain that Riel would have had the successes he did. Father Ritchot, in particular, did honour to our Nation when he represented us with Canada between 1869 to 1870, and we will continue honour Father Ritchot in the coming days.*

*Right to his last breath, Riel believed his actions were guided by God, and that he was given the sacred duty to protect the Métis, our religion, the land of the prairies, and what he called his "little Métis Nation".*





*If you look today, Riel is still alive in our hearts and minds. Although Canada believed they silenced him, they did not. His words still carry weight today throughout our community and government. His words are still spoken and heard today by all leaders. What we have not done yet, Your Holiness, is join with our partners from the Catholic Church to honour him.*

*We have gathered for decades at the gravesite of Riel to honour him every November 16, which was the day of his execution in 1885. We have dignitaries and Citizens come to honour Riel as the Father of Manitoba. But what would really be cherished and deserving, and be felt as a great form of reconciliation, revitalization, and hope, is if you would come and bless his grave.*

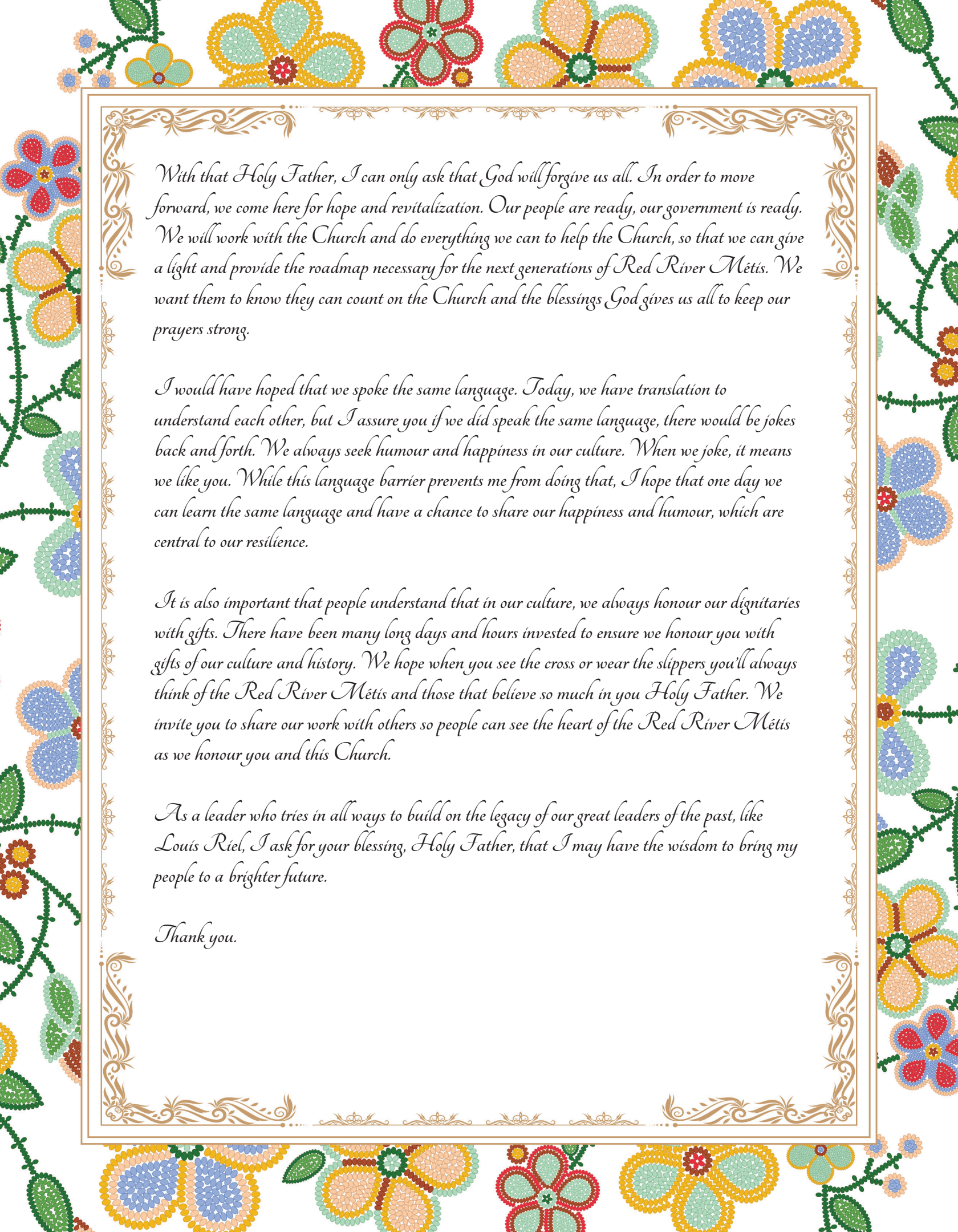
*We extend our invitation to you to join us in the Heart of our Homeland, in what is now Winnipeg, Manitoba, where these great events took place. We will work diligently with the Canadian Council of Catholic Bishops and Archbishops Gagnon and LeGatt, to ensure that the Red River Métis understand the tremendous honour bestowed upon our People.*

*When you make your journey to Canada, I pray and plead with you today that you choose our Homeland - you choose Manitoba, where Riel rests beside St. Boniface Cathedral.*

*As a Nation, we ask for nothing more from you.*

*We ask this and hope you hold it in your mind and heart. I will wait for you. Our Nation will wait for you. Our prayers will continue in the hope that you hear my words and understand the importance of what I ask of you today. I assure you Holy Father that this blessing on Riel would be embraced by our Nation.*

*I know Louis Riel is in a better place now, smiling down upon us, his Little Métis Nation. As a leader, I have an honour and privilege that he could never have dreamed of – to share my heart with you, Holy Father. I know he would have cherished this opportunity and I hope that we have done well by him and his vision.*



*With that Holy Father, I can only ask that God will forgive us all. In order to move forward, we come here for hope and revitalization. Our people are ready, our government is ready. We will work with the Church and do everything we can to help the Church, so that we can give a light and provide the roadmap necessary for the next generations of Red River Métis. We want them to know they can count on the Church and the blessings God gives us all to keep our prayers strong.*

*I would have hoped that we spoke the same language. Today, we have translation to understand each other, but I assure you if we did speak the same language, there would be jokes back and forth. We always seek humour and happiness in our culture. When we joke, it means we like you. While this language barrier prevents me from doing that, I hope that one day we can learn the same language and have a chance to share our happiness and humour, which are central to our resilience.*

*It is also important that people understand that in our culture, we always honour our dignitaries with gifts. There have been many long days and hours invested to ensure we honour you with gifts of our culture and history. We hope when you see the cross or wear the slippers you'll always think of the Red River Métis and those that believe so much in you Holy Father. We invite you to share our work with others so people can see the heart of the Red River Métis as we honour you and this Church.*

*As a leader who tries in all ways to build on the legacy of our great leaders of the past, like Louis Riel, I ask for your blessing, Holy Father, that I may have the wisdom to bring my people to a brighter future.*

*Thank you.*