
'The Church Must Change Its Thinking about Indigenous People'

An interview with Harry Lafond on what it means to
be both Cree and Catholic.

By Elaine Enns and Ched Myers
Photographs by Tristan Talalee





In April, Pope Francis made a long-awaited apology to a Canadian delegation of Inuit, First Nations, and Métis leaders at the Vatican for the “deplorable” violations children suffered at Catholic-run Indian Residential Schools for more than a century. The pope committed to come to Canada in late July to make his confession personally to residential school survivors and their descendants for “the abuse and disrespect for your identity, your culture, and even your spiritual values.”

In this historic apology, Pope Francis stated, “Clearly, the content of the faith cannot be transmitted in a way contrary to the faith itself.”

This watershed moment comes 25 years after Harry Lafond—a Catholic and then-chief of the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation in Saskatchewan—raised issues of Indigenous faith and culture in a historic audience with Pope John Paul II during the Vatican’s 1997 Synod of the Americas. An educator and Catholic deacon, Lafond and his ancestors have a long history of building bridges between settler and Indigenous communities. J.B. Lafond, Harry’s great grandfather, was a spokesperson for Chief Keetoowayhow at the sixth of the 11 numbered treaties signed by First Nations with the Canadian Crown between 1871 and 1877. At the Treaty 6 table in 1876, J.B. Lafond negotiated with a British colonial government for relief from the flood of encroaching European settlers on the prairies. The parties were trying to avoid the violence waged against the Lakota, Dakota, and Cheyenne to their south. Though traditional Muskeg Lake Cree territory covered hundreds of square miles, Treaty 6 allotted a reserve of only 42 square miles.

Harry Lafond’s family has lived on the Treaty 6 reserve since then. He and eight of his 11 siblings attended nearby St. Michael’s (Duck Lake) Indian Residential School, run by the Roman Catholic Church.

In 1975, after marrying Germaine Laplante, a former Catholic sister of Métis (mixed European and Indigenous) heritage, Lafond worked as an educator and then served for a decade as chief at Muskeg Lake. Later, he directed the Office of the Treaty Commissioner of Saskatchewan, formed to bring Indigenous views of treaty covenants to the wider settler community. His tenure coincided with the years of Canada’s groundbreaking Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

In 2015, after six years of gathering testimony from across Canada, the TRC issued 94 calls to action to repair past and continuing damages wrought by the residential school system as an instrument of colonization. These included 10 calls directed toward churches, one of which demanded an apology from the pope on Canadian soil for abuses—which is being realized this summer, thanks to seeds planted by leaders such as Harry Lafond.

Today, Lafond continues to foster dialogue about what it means to be both Cree and Catholic. He works to renew Cree language and traditions among his people, while accompanying settlers interested in restorative solidarity. In May, the first federal study of Native American boarding schools in the U.S. identified more than 400 Indian Residential Schools and more than 50 associated burial sites. We interviewed Lafond in March and May 2022 by Zoom and email about his journey toward restorative justice and how the church might be replanted in Cree culture and land.—**Elaine Enns and Ched Myers**

Elaine Enns and Ched Myers: How did you feel when you heard Pope Francis’ apology in April to the First Nations delegation?

Harry Lafond: Pope Francis is an exceptional man with a very strong instinct to find the right path to the hearts of his visitors. I felt great hope and comfort that together we will find our way to *wahkohtowin*, Cree law for making relatives. And I recognize that it is an event that should have taken place 500 years ago.

What was the life journey that took you from Muskeg Lake Cree Nation on Treaty 6 territory in Saskatchewan to the Vatican in Rome in 1997? How is Catholicism rooted in the history of the Muskeg Lake Cree?

My mom and dad were visibly Catholic in their spiritual practices. My mother would turn on the radio every afternoon to the French channel to pray the rosary. Cree and Michif [the mixed Cree and French language of Métis] were spoken at home; Mom didn’t speak English, and Dad only had enough to function outside the reserve. They were very Cree in how they raised us, allowing us total freedom to explore the world. I learned about myself—about independence, taking care of the Earth, and spirituality—from being out among trees, plants, and animals. But going to residential school at age 7 changed all that.

There was a strong influence in our community of Métis coming westward from Manitoba; they were Roman Catholic because of French colonization. My great-grandfather J.B. Lafond was Métis and married into a Cree family. In 1881, our headman, Pihtikwakew, asked the bishop of Prince Albert to have a Catholic priest reside in Muskeg Lake. He believed a priest would help our people’s economic and cultural transition from hunting-gathering to surviving as agrarians on a small reserve. The priest set up a small school in the community and began teaching the children to read and write, but that was short-lived, as he was reassigned to the new residential school in 1894 in nearby Duck Lake.

You discerned a vocation to the priesthood with the Oblate order as a young man but decided to walk a different path of leadership, eventually becoming chief of your band. How did you hold together these very different forms of leadership?

As a little boy, I was attracted to church as something my parents valued. My dad was

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an alcoholic, but hungover or not, every Sunday morning he'd hitch up the horses and we'd all go to Mass. My mom laughed about how I would round up my cousins to “play church,” me as priest, my little brother as server. Then I became an actual server in church. In the eighth grade, I decided to attend St. Thomas College [run by the Oblate order in North Battleford, Sask.] for boys rather than stay in the area for school.

After two years of formation with the Oblates, I realized that important things in my life were telling me not to step into priesthood. I finished a B.A. at Carleton University in Ottawa in the early 1970s, and in the nation's capital a lot of protests were taking place. The Quebec government was pushing a huge hydroelectric project, and the James Bay Cree were struggling against it, saying, “We are our own people and can take care of ourselves.” This was considered very radical talk. South of the border [in South Dakota], things were happening, like the Wounded Knee [Occupation]. These inspired me to ask many questions about us as a Cree people.

A friend and I hitchhiked to Alberta to attend the Indian Ecumenical Conference, which was one of the first times I experienced a pipe ceremony and the drums. We also encountered the American Indian Movement there, and it was like putting fertilizer on a garden. The Holy Spirit was pushing me to grow.

After graduating from Carleton, I went up in the Northwest Territories, where Dene people were in the midst of hearings about the land and their right to self-govern. Sitting with people in their villages was a great education. Then I worked for a very special artist named Sarain Stump, whose dad was Cree-Shoshone. Sarain, after whom we named our first son, challenged me to speak for myself and took away the fear of being Indigenous. Sarain taught me to question institutions.

In 1988, the Oblates suddenly pulled out of Muskeg Lake. I experienced a real

sense of betrayal. I had walked with them, knew their story and their vision of serving among the poor. “You came here and changed everything,” I told them. “Some of your priests were very controlling in our community, then, without warning, preparation, or transition, you just leave?” I was angry for a long time.

Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit was working overtime. I had just started a teaching job, and a friend came to the classroom door one day and asked me—in front of the kids—if he could nominate me for chief! Germaine and I realized it would be a big sacrifice—I had a good paying job and a family to support. In those days chiefs weren't guaranteed a salary. But we felt it was the right thing to do—and Germaine was always supportive.

I learned quickly that leadership in the Cree world is about serving people, and elders taught me the importance of deep listening. I was able to get people working together, pooling energy and creative juices to problem-solve. I got the Catholic bishop to hire me as part-time coordinator for his work with Indigenous people so that I could have a salary. Through church work, I had amazing opportunities, such as going to Guatemala to meet with In-

igenous people there and visiting John Paul II in 1997.

What was your message to Pope John Paul II? What was the message of the Canadian delegation of Inuit, First Nations, and Métis leaders in 2022?

First, the Catholic Church needs to change its thinking about Indigenous people. We are not the objects of their saving ventures. They need to see the gifts that come out of our spirituality and find where the intersections are with the teachings of Jesus—never mind the European structures! I find complementarity between the two belief systems every day, as do others. We are a beautiful people and want to share who we are and what we believe; let's build a relationship on that basis.

My second emphasis was our own form of spiritual leadership, which has been neither recognized nor embraced by the church. On every reserve I see elders and other spiritual leaders doing a lot better job than priests who spend only an hour a week in our communities. We work daily at relationship building, supporting needy people, helping to deal with grief and pain but also joy! When Christ chose






EVERY HUMAN STANDING FOR EVERY HUMAN




his disciples, he didn't send them away for seven years to be indoctrinated at a seminary; they were local people, and he brought them into the work.

Personally, I feel a real connection with John Paul II since meeting him. Cree are very much aware of the presence of our ancestors, and he was a *kilci kehtiyinew*, a revered holy man, a grandfather, who was the first pope to visit Indigenous people in North America. A year ago, I was in the hospital feeling isolated because of COVID-19 and not knowing if I would make it out, and I felt his presence; he has become an ancestor friend.

The delegation this April to Rome was part of the 94 Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Report, the driving agenda for the reconciliation journey to right the relationship between us. It calls for an apology from the pope on Canadian soil with a process to implement the principles of a resetting of a relationship gone wrong.

In May 2021, archeologists working with First Nations communities discovered unmarked graves of children on the grounds of a former Catholic Church-run Indian Residential School in Kamloops, British Columbia, and similar unmarked graves were discovered in November at the U.S. federal-run Indian Residential School in Genoa, Neb. How should the

Catholic Church and other churches with this type of haunted history respond to such revelations?

The graves at Kamloops have really awakened Canadians and generated renewed interest in knowing what happened. Pope Francis needs to take ownership of the church that has been put in his care in Canada. Our old people see significant symbolism in an apology, but there also must be a substantive process that follows.

Wahkohtowin in Cree refers to building relationships and connections; we have laws of behavior about how to treat human beings. To reset the relationship between the Catholic Church and Indigenous peoples, we have to follow processes that take us there. One of the most important, as embodied in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, is to put everything on the table. Settlers can't show up talking about reconciliation with fingers crossed. You must accept a retelling of the story with all parts and players included, including what went wrong.

In Canada, every bishop must engage in meaningful relationship with the Indigenous populations of his jurisdiction. My fear is that if the pope's apology falls on deaf ears in his court, we may not recover. But I also have faith that if our delegation to the Vatican spoke from the heart, Francis will hear them in a very deep way.

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Let's keep the issue of residential school graves in wider context. For one thing, it wasn't just the schools. Muskeg Lake's graveyard, for example, has many unmarked graves because of actions by a priest who plowed them under. For another, residential schools were but one piece of the larger puzzle of colonization, though heart-wrenching because it stole children and destroyed families. But we need to tell the truth about all kinds of things. Incarceration rates are just as destructive of family and individual health. Another example is child welfare. Canada is finally recognizing how federal and provincial institutions have controlled our children. New legislation affirms the rights of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples to exercise jurisdiction over child and family services and establishes national principles such as cultural continuity and substantive equality.

You build capacity around Cree language literacy in both university and community settings. Has Catholic Mass ever been said in Cree, and is a thoroughly Cree Catholic Church a realistic hope?

Only once have we found a priest who said Mass in Cree. There are few clergy who value our language enough to learn it. But the Squamish in Vancouver just had a first Mass in their language [in September 2021]. I hope the pope will direct his Canadian

bishops to take seriously using our language in Catholic ceremonies. We have the resource people and the language experts to make that happen.

We carry so many colonized beliefs that don't serve us well, which go against the worldviews of our ancestors. We are doing a lot of soul-searching and mapping Cree concepts and laws. Deconstructing colonialism is such necessary work, and you need to be discriminating: “This I keep, that I throw out.” You have to be hard-nosed, and this is a long-term, intergenerational project in our community. Nothing from our ancestors should be discarded just because someone from outside says “you should not do that.” Some Indigenous people in the U.S. are further along that journey.

We are currently trying to find resources to build a space where our knowledge keepers can dialogue, share, develop, and archive their stories and wisdom so that we can leave a legacy for our grandchildren. That's something my generation didn't have. We had to scrounge around and travel many miles to find little kernels because some of our elders did not want to share their knowledge for fear of punishment or misappropriation.

What would it mean to you personally for Pope Francis to offer, on First Nations lands, an apology to residential school survivors and families in Canada?

Pope Francis comes to Canada as a pilgrim and is scheduled to meet Indigenous peoples on their land reserved from Turtle Island by treaties. This action offers two things for me: It affirms my beliefs and my work in the process of reconciliation for the past 65 years, and it gives me great hope that my grandchildren will have an opportunity to believe in the message of Jesus Christ from the context of their Cree worldview.

I have an interest in the Lakota spiritual leader (and Catholic) Black Elk. There is something about his life that makes me think of the prophet Isaiah. The church needs to listen to Black Elk's wisdom and life experiences, just as Jesus told his disciples to listen to the voice of their prophets (Luke 24:27, 44). I believe reconciliation will arise in part from turning attention to the holy people of our land. ❖

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