Bishop offers moments of prayer and solidarity for Indigenous communities
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As news this week of 215 unmarked burial sites at the Kamloops Residential School settled deeply in our hearts and filled us with grief, Bishop Christian Riesbeck, CC, of the Diocese of Saint John led two significant moments of prayer, expressing sorrow at these tragic events and affirming his solidarity with the Indigenous people of our diocese.

On Wednesday June 2, the weekly Diocesan rosary (livestreamed via Facebook Live, Diocese of Saint John) was offered for the intention of the children who lost their lives at the former Kamloops Residential School and the Indigenous communities who are deeply affected by this tragic discovery. Bishop Riesbeck echoed the words of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB) statement for the National Meeting on Indian Residential Schools in 1991: "We are sorry, and deeply regret the pain, suffering and alienation that so many experienced. We have heard their cries of distress, feel their anguish, and want to be part of the healing process."

He went on to share the words of Pope Benedict who, in a 2009 meeting with the Assembly of First Nations in Canada, "expressed his sorrow at the anguish caused by the deplorable conduct of some members of the Church," and offered "sympathy and prayerful solidarity, and pray that all those affected would experience healing, and [eventually] move forward with renewed hope."

Speaking from the heart, Bishop Riesbeck offered some words of his own. "I am sorry, and I am deeply aggrieved by the suffering that this recent revelation has caused the families and the communities who are close to these children, especially from the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation," he said. "I cannot even begin to imagine the trauma that is stirred up in residential school survivors every time we hear of such horrific revelations. We pledge our prayers, our accompaniment, and our support to you, and to all those who are suffering deeply in these days."

Former Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick Graydon Nicholas, who along with his wife Beth leads a decade each week in Maliseet, was instrumental in organizing this rosary. "Somebody asked me the other day, 'Graydon, what can we do?'" Mr. Nicholas said. "And I said, 'I think we can pray.' We can pray and petition our Blessed Mother and ask that Jesus bring consolation to many who are affected by what happened."

Mr. Nicholas assembled Indigenous leaders from the Eel Ground, Elsipogtog and Tobique First Nations to lead each decade in either Mi'kmaq or Maliseet. Rosary participants were deeply moved, and Bishop Riesbeck said, "it is a consolation to be leading this rosary together with our Indigenous brothers and sisters, who are understandably profoundly impacted, and with whom we stand in solidarity." While there were no residential schools in our province, many Indigenous peoples in New Brunswick were sent along with others from neighbouring Atlantic provinces to a former residential school in Nova Scotia.

"We are grieving like everyone else, believe me this is very difficult," Mr. Nicholas said. "I know what it's like to lose a child, because my wife and I lost our oldest son in the summer of 2019. No parent wants to see their children die before them, we're no different than anyone else.

And for these children, these infants who died, who were taken to Heaven at such a young age, it's so very sad for us all."

Mr. Nicholas believes in the power of prayer to help move forward. "It's in prayer that we are united to each other, but it's also in praying the rosary that we petition our Blessed Mother to help us."

On Sunday, June 6, the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, Bishop Riesbeck offered a second moment of prayer in the form of a Holy Hour that was livestreamed before the 10:00 am Mass. "We offer this Holy Hour in a special way for those children who died in the former Kamloops Residential School," he said. "The discovery of these 215 unmarked burial sites has caused deep grief and sorrow to the families and communities, especially Indigenous peoples. We pray for them in a special way, and we pray for reparation as well, for the evils committed at all residential schools."

During his homily Bishop Riesbeck said, "it is important to acknowledge and continue to repent of the role that Christian communities, including Catholics, had in the government's policy of assimilation. It's estimated that 3,200 children died in residential schools, although some estimates are as high as 6,000, from disease, neglect, accident, and various forms of abuse."

Recalling the work of initiatives like the Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle (a coalition of bishops and priests, women religious, laity and Indigenous peoples committed to walking together on a path to reconciliation, for which Mr. Nicholas serves as a representative for the Knights of Columbus) and the Canadian Catholic Indigenous Council (which was established by the CCCB to bring together Indigenous people and bishops), Bishop Riesbeck said, "we need to continue to build on these tangible initiatives."

Bishop Riesbeck encouraged everyone to be prayerful accompaniers to our Indigenous brothers and sisters as they grieve and share their stories of pain and suffering. He recalled the words of St. Paul that, "if one member suffers, all suffer together with it" (1 Cor 12:26) and said, "this is especially true of residential school survivors who must often relive the trauma that is stirred up every time we hear of these horrific revelations.".

Calling Jesus our greatest anchor Bishop Riesbeck said that, "in these storms or troubled waters…we need to stay close to him. We need him to guide us together, to bring us to unity in him, and to heal the wounds of broken humanity. Jesus is indeed close, and he can be found in the Holy Eucharist."

For more information about the CCCB Initiatives towards renewing and strengthening relationships with Indigenous Peoples across Canada, visit https://www.cccb.ca/indigenous-peoples/.