



DIOCESE OF FAIRBANKS

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OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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A Message of Reconciliation and Healing to Our Native Alaskan Peoples

In the past few weeks, news outlets have begun reporting on the discovery of large, unmarked graves near Catholic mission sites across North America. These graves contain the remains of hundreds of indigenous children who were cared for by the church's boarding schools in the past century.

I know these news stories are disturbing and that for some Native people, they have triggered renewed sorrow and anxiety about their own trauma. Sadly, the Church's missionaries did not always respect the inherent dignity of the indigenous people they encountered. In our own diocese, Yup'ik, Athabaskan, and Inupiat people were at times subjected to what is best described as ethnic abuse, in which their Native language, culture, and traditions were vilified and suppressed. The damage was especially devastating when visited on children, who were taught to hate an essential part of themselves at the same time they were told how much God loves them.

Abuse of any kind is always wrong because it violates the inherent dignity God has stamped into every person, that makes each of us sacred and filled with His beauty, goodness, and truth. I have met many individuals who suffered abuse from those in the Church, who have shared that the deep wounds followed them their whole lives and created serious if not insurmountable barriers to a trusting relationship with Christ and His Church. It has been so tragic to witness the effects of abuse on very real people in our diocese.

I am coming up on seven years as the Bishop of the Diocese of Fairbanks. I have had the honor of visiting 37 of our remote parishes located in Native Alaskan villages. This has been a great blessing and clearly has helped me grow to understand the Native Alaskan cultures. During these travels through a network of river systems, it was pointed out to me where small communities used to exist decades ago. As we know, in many of these places, the grave markers, wooden crosses, have deteriorated by weather over time. The current dialogue is a reminder that we increase our care and concern for sacred burial grounds.

During my travels throughout Northern Alaska, I have come to know and love a culture that has persevered in some very challenging Arctic conditions for centuries. This resilience is alive today and is very much embedded in the fabric of the culture of our Native Alaskan peoples. I personally recommit myself and the Diocese of Fairbanks to walking side-by-side with our Alaska Native communities as they begin to heal from the wounds of the past. We humbly pray that our Native brothers and sisters will permit us to accompany them as we move toward reconciliation and becoming a truly loving family of God. My great hope is that these news stories will not further wound or divide us but nurture a greater awareness of this innate sacredness in every person, especially among those for whom abuse has deeply wounded their self-image.

May God bless each of you, and fill you with his grace, beauty, goodness and truth that lives within you!

Sincerely in Christ,

†Most Reverend Chad W. Zielinski
Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska
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