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Pope Francis talks with Bishop Raymond Poisson of Saint-Jérôme and of Mont-Laurier, Quebec

Pope Francis talks with Bishop Raymond Poisson of Saint-Jérôme and of Mont-Laurier, Quebec, president of the Canadian bishops' conference, during a meeting with officers of the conference at the Vatican Dec. 9, 2021. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



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A meeting, originally scheduled in December, between Pope Francis and representatives of Indigenous communities in Canada should be held in the spring, said the president of the Canadian bishops' conference.

Bishop Raymond Poisson of Saint-Jérôme and of Mont-Laurier, Quebec, president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, told Vatican News Dec. 10 that the suffering of the Indigenous people of Canada, particularly in residential schools run by Catholic dioceses and religious orders, was the primary topic when leaders of the conference met Pope Francis Dec. 9.

The meeting took place soon after it was announced that the long-planned visit of delegations of the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit and Métis leaders with the pope Dec. 17-20 had been postponed due to COVID-19 travel concerns.

The Canadian bishops also spoke with the pope about his possible visit to Canada as a continuation of the process of healing and reconciliation, Bishop Poisson said.

The meeting came on the eve of the Dec. 12 commemoration of Canada's National Day of Prayer in Solidarity With Indigenous Peoples.

The visit of the Indigenous representatives, accompanied by some bishops, initially was planned for 2020, but was postponed because of the pandemic. It became even more urgent after the discover in May of the remains of 215 children in unmarked graves at the site of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia.

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Bishop Poisson said many initiatives on a local, diocesan and national level are ongoing to foster an understanding of the legacy of the residential schools and society's treatment of the Indigenous people of Canada, as well as to appreciate their traditions and culture.

"In particular," he said, "many cultural elements of the language and traditions of Indigenous peoples are integrated into local liturgies. This is very beneficial."

In October, the Vatican press office said Pope Francis is willing to travel to Canada as part of "the long-standing pastoral process of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples."

While no date for the trip has been announced, Bishop Poisson said he and the other officers of the bishops' conference spoke with the pope about the visit.

The meetings at the Vatican between the pope and the Indigenous delegations and the pope's visit to Canada are important because of the traditional role of the "chief" in Indigenous culture, the bishop said.

"For them, the chief of the Catholic Church is the pope," he said. "For us, he is the great pastor of his people. So, the pope can be the brother bishop with the other bishops of Canada, uniting with them in the same apology or recognition of what has happened."