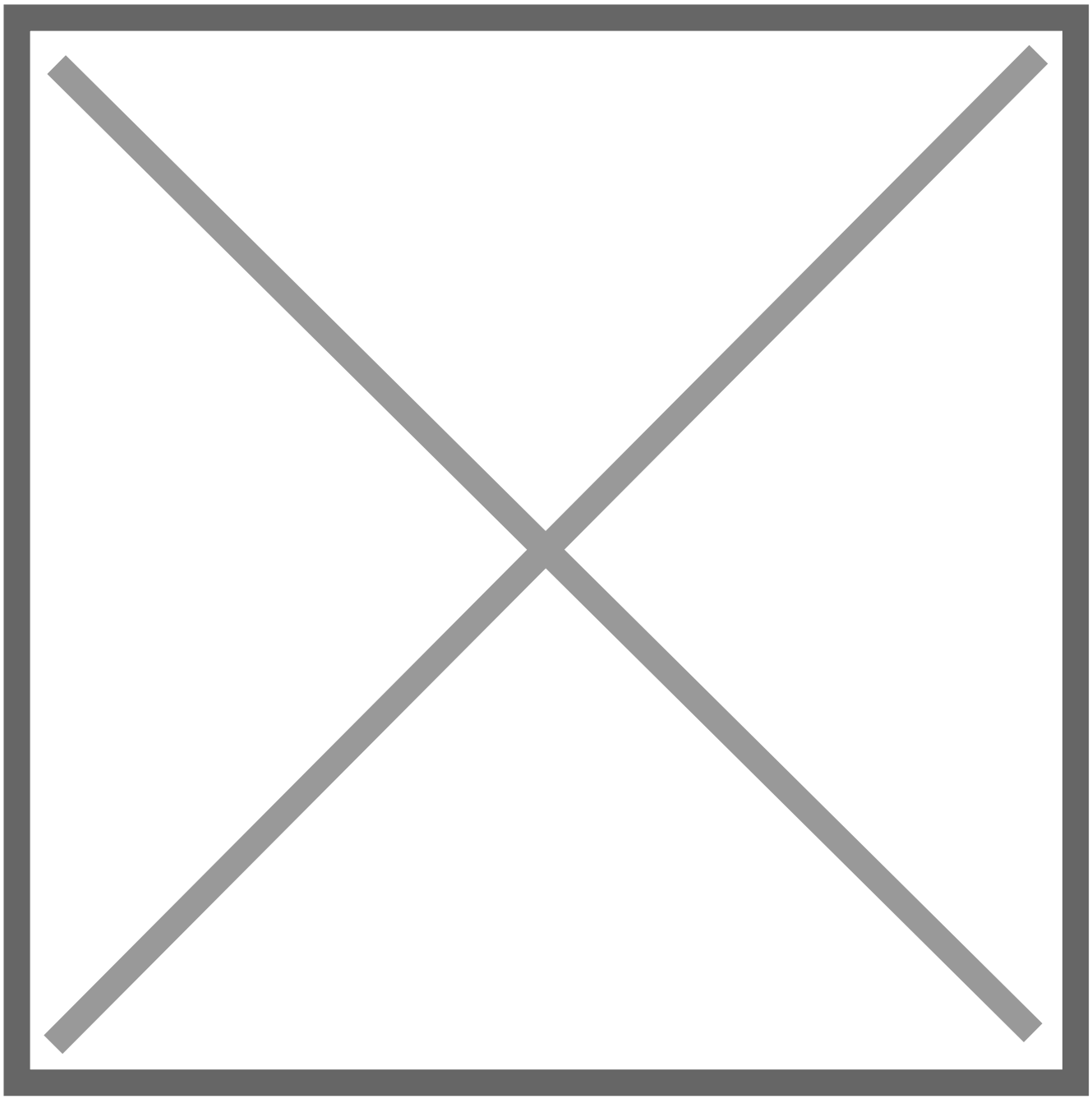
Vatican



Assembly of First Nations delegates walk through St. Peter's Square after a meeting with Pope Francis at the Vatican March 31, 2022. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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Members of Canada's Assembly of First Nations gave Pope Francis a "cradleboard," a traditional baby carrier, and asked him to keep it overnight as he reflected on what happened to Indigenous children who were sent to residential schools and, particularly, to those who never made it home again.

Grand Chief Mandy Gull-Masty of the Cree Nation of Eeyou Istchee, the Quebec representative on the assembly's delegation to the Vatican, told reporters March 31, "If he is truthful to his commitment to the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island [North America], then he will follow through with our request to return the cradleboard" to the delegation at a meeting scheduled for April 1.

Gull-Masty and other members of the First Nations' delegation had spent two hours with Francis and said that while they shared painful truths, they were strengthened by the sound of their brothers and sisters beating their drums and chanting down in St. Peter's Square.

The meeting took place "in an atmosphere of listening and closeness," the Vatican press office said, adding that Francis would respond to what he heard during a meeting April 1 with members of the First Nations, as well as with delegations from the Métis National Council and the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, who had separate meetings with the pope March 28.

Chief Gerald Antoine, the Assembly of First Nations' regional chief for the Northwest Territories, led the delegation, which also included survivors of residential schools

and two youth delegates representing Indigenous communities from across Canada.

Like the other delegations, members of the First Nations group recounted for the pope their people's experience of being taken from their families as children and sent to government-owned, mostly church-run residential schools as part of a policy of forced assimilation. They were forbidden to speak their language or follow their culture and traditions. And many experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse.

Rosanne Casimir -- the Kúkpi7 or chief of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc, the home community of the Kamloops Indian Residential School, which was the largest school in the Indian Affairs residential school system -- was part of the delegation. More than 200 bodies were discovered in unmarked graves on the site of the school in 2021.

The graves, Antoine said, are "factual evidence that our people were telling the truth."

"This is our collective history," Casimir said. "This is our history that we need to change" to move forward with hope.

"This has been a very difficult time for so many First Nations people as we seek to find the truth of what happened to our children, our loved ones, our family and community members who never returned home from the residential schools," she said.

Antoine also said the delegates asked for a formal repudiation by the pope of the "doctrine of discovery," a phrase that describes a collection of papal teachings, beginning in the 14th-century, that encouraged explorers to colonize and claim the lands of any people who were not Christian, placing both the land and the people under the sovereignty of European Christian rulers.

The loss of the land, language, culture and spirituality of the Indigenous peoples of Canada and the foundation of the residential school system all go back to that doctrine, Antoine told reporters gathered outside St. Peter's Square.

The doctrine, developed "about us, without us," he said, "denied our existence as human beings."

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Phil Fontaine, 77, former national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, also was part of the delegation.

It was not his first time in the Apostolic Palace; Fontaine had led a delegation of Canadian Indigenous to the Vatican in 2009 for a meeting with then-Pope Benedict XVI.

While Benedict had made no public statement, the Vatican at the time said he expressed his "sorrow at the anguish caused by the deplorable conduct of some members of the church and offered his sympathy and prayerful solidarity."

The 2009 visit, Fontaine told Catholic News Service, took place before the discovery of unmarked graves at the site of residential schools and before the publication of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, which called on the pope to apologize publicly to the Indigenous people of Canada and, preferably, to do so on Canadian soil.

But more importantly, he said, this visit was the result of "a very public process of discussions and negotiations between Indigenous leaders and the Vatican and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. The 2009 meeting was a discreet process, and we weren't really involved directly in the discussions that led to our visit here."

Rosalie LaBillois, a member of the Eel River Bar First Nation and one of the assembly's youth delegates, told reporters, "We want our future generations of First Nations people to understand what happened at residential schools, but not carry with them the burden of the trauma residential schools have caused."