

Retiring Canadian archbishop urges justice for aboriginal peoples

Catholic News Service | Nov. 4, 2013
Ottawa, Ontario

As Archbishop James Weisgerber of Winnipeg, Manitoba, prepares to retire, he remains concerned about justice for Canada's aboriginal peoples.

"I don't think there is any issue facing Canadians more serious than this one," Weisgerber said Oct. 28, the day Pope Francis announced that he had accepted the archbishop's resignation. "And I don't think we're taking it that seriously."

The Canadian government is banking on oil production and building pipelines to transport it across the country and "all of it goes across aboriginal land," he said. "Nobody's talking about the need to negotiate on all of this. I'm not sure it's on the agenda of ordinary Canadians or on the agenda of the church."

A recent violent demonstration in New Brunswick over hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, also represents a clash over resources and land, he said.

Aboriginal peoples have different understandings of the meaning of aboriginal rights, sovereignty and title "that lead to very different conclusions," Weisgerber said. "I feel the church has to be involved, and our people need to be sensitized to the parameters of this discussion."

"My concern has got to do with people we have dealt with badly, that we have mistreated," he said.

Weisgerber was born in Vibank, Saskatchewan, in 1938, and ordained in 1963 in the Regina archdiocese. There, he worked on reserves, where he "got to know aboriginal people and appreciate very much who they were."

In 1990, he moved to Ottawa to serve as the secretary-general of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. He was named bishop of Saskatoon in 1996 and, four years later, he was named archbishop of Winnipeg.

Winnipeg has about 75,000 aboriginal people in the archdiocese, which includes about a dozen reserves, he said. The majority of Canada's aboriginal peoples have been Christian and many of them Catholic, he said.

Francis appointed Bishop Richard Gagnon of Victoria, British Columbia, as the next Winnipeg archbishop. Weisgerber will remain as apostolic administrator until Gagnon is installed later this year or early next year.

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