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Canadian aboriginals hope for papal apology

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Canadian Prime Minister applauds after Canada House of Commons apologized for aboriginal mistreatment in 2008. (CNS photo)

TORONTO

Aboriginal survivors of Canada?s residential school system have been granted a rare private audience with Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican, fueling hope that the pontiff will apologize for abuses in the church-run schools.

The meeting, scheduled for April 29, resulted from more than two years of diplomatic efforts between native leaders and the Catholic Church.

Benedict will express his concern for aboriginal peoples in Canada who continue to suffer the impact of abuse at residential schools, according to the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, and will also present the survivors with a signed declaration of the church?s determination to work toward reconciliation with aboriginal people, the Globe and Mail newspaper reported.

For a century starting in the 1880s, the Canadian government and four churches ran some 130 residential schools. An estimated 150,000 aboriginal children were removed from their homes and forced to attend the schools in an attempt to assimilate them into the dominant white, Christian culture.
Students were prohibited from speaking their native languages and engaging in cultural or spiritual practices. Many were physically, emotionally and sexually abused.

The Presbyterian, Anglican and United churches have apologized for their roles in the schools. The sole hold-out has been the Catholic Church, which ran about 75 percent of the schools. Last June, the Canadian government issued a historic apology.

It?s not known how far Benedict will go in his statement, or whether it will be the full apology that native leaders and elders are hoping to receive.
?We know the pope will produce a text in which he will express his solicitude, recognize what has occurred and manifest regret,? said Gerald Baril, a spokesman for the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

?We?re expecting a clear statement from the pope recognizing the suffering of the aboriginal people of Canada and the role of the Catholic Church in that suffering,? Phil Fontaine, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, told La Presse in Montreal. ?This will be a historic moment for aboriginals, survivors of residential schools, and for Canadian society.?

Fontaine, who will lead the delegation with four other survivors of the schools, said the natives are ?mindful of one thing, and that is traditionally, the Catholic Church does not apologize.

?But we hope and pray that there will be an apology, one that will acknowledge the harms inflicted upon innocent children and an acceptance of responsibility for their role in the tragic experience.?

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