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Native peoples ask Jesuits to help preserve language

Michael Swan Catholic News Service | May. 23, 2011

TORONTO -- As Canada's Jesuits remembered their first steps on North American soil and the welcome they received from Mi'kmaq people 400 years ago, the Mi'kmaq asked for a favor.

"Maybe it's time for the Mi'kmaq to ask for your help in preserving our language," Grand Keptin Antle Denny told three dozen Canadian Jesuits and about 100 guests who had gathered to mark the 1611 landing of two Jesuits at Port Royal in what is now Nova Scotia.

Denny said about 70 percent of Mi'kmaq speak English and very few young people are comfortable in their own language. Linguists have told Denny the language will be extinct in 20 years.

"We need your help," Denny told the Jesuits.

"We want to be with them in spirit," said the Jesuits' English Canadian provincial superior, Father Jim Webb. "We would be happy to cooperate."

Father Webb told The Catholic Register it's difficult to say what practical steps today's Jesuits could take to help preserve the language, but he noted that work on languages has been part of Jesuit history in Canada. Canadian Jesuits translated Ojibwa stories into English and the Bible into Ojibwa in central Canada. A Canadian missionary to Nepal was responsible for translating the liturgy into Nepali.

"If we could find a way of helping, we would try," said Father Webb.

"Any influence they could have to help us (would be accepted). Whatever is necessary," said Denny. "If there was only one thing that would cure it, we would all be doing it."

Nova Scotia's Lt. Gov. Mayann Francis praised the Jesuits' 400 years of faith and zeal.

"God has blessed us. Let us not squander that in an age of distraction," she said. "Let us embrace those blessings we enjoy in this province."

The reconstructed settlement on the shores of the Annapolis Basin, near the Bay of Fundy, provided a backdrop for a brief dramatic re-enactment of the Jesuits' landing at the site. The original settlement had been built by French fur traders in 1604 but was abandoned to Mi'kmaq control when the Jesuits arrived. It became the base for two years of missionary activity before the Jesuits returned to France.

"Their mission was the Jesuit mission to find God in all things," said Father Webb in a homily at a thanksgiving Mass.

"They recognized the spirit of Christ present among the native people they came to serve," he said. "That's a legacy that continues to this day."

The arduous, expensive and dangerous journey to North America in 1611 was typical of what Jesuits have always done, and still do, said Father Jean-Marc Biron, provincial superior of the Jesuits in Quebec.

"Even in those times, Jesuits had to work to the frontiers," Father Biron told The Catholic Register. "We still, as Jesuits, work on the frontiers -- not just the geographical ones."

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