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Winnipeg archbishop symbolically adopted by aboriginal elders

Isabella R. Moyer | Apr. 16, 2012 NCR Today

"It's been Canada's dirty little secret for 147 years," said Mary Courchene, describing the legacy of residential schools [1], boarding schools for native Canadians that would Christianize them and teach them French or English. She, herself, is a residential school survivor.

The clerical sexual abuse crisis continues to unfold and shock with new allegations around the world. In Canada, a prominent chapter of abuse is woven into a larger story of colonialism and forced enculturation. Our government and churches believed that the best way to assimilate our First Nations people was to remove children from their homes and put them into residential schools. Too often, the children were victims of emotional, physical and sexual abuse.

The result was entire generations of women and men who were no longer connected to their ancestral heritage. Yet they were not fully accepted into the larger society. The residential schools experience has been blamed for many of the present challenges within our aboriginal communities.

Archbishop James Weisgerber of Winnipeg, former president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, has been in the forefront of apologizing for the past sins of the church and society while trying to heal the wounds of division. On April 29, 2009, he arranged for a personal meeting at the Vatican between Benedict XVI and aboriginal representatives, most who were residential school survivors themselves.

On Saturday, Weisgerber was formally welcomed as a brother [2] into the aboriginal community by elders in a traditional adoption ceremony at Circle of Life Thunderbird House. Derek Nepinak, the grand chief of the Assembly of Manitoba, described the importance of the work that has been done: "The church is demonstrating its open heart, and I think the church is demonstrating a lot of leadership in addressing the reconciliation issues."

The ceremony is an important symbolic gesture, but Weisgerber reminds us of the ongoing work of reconciliation: "I believe we have a very long way to go, but the road is worth traveling. As long as it takes to create the problem, it takes that long to heal it, and we've got to persevere."

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Links:
[1] http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2008/05/16/f-faqs-residential-schools.html
[2] http://winnipeg.ctv.ca/servlet/an/local/CTVNews/20120414/wpg_adoption_ceremony_120414/20120414/?hub=Winnipe