

# Phil Fontaine listens to the Pope speak on Wednesday.

Assembly of First Nations National Chief Phil Fontaine said it was a "significant gesture" Wednesday that Pope Benedict XVI acknowledged the suffering of thousands of aboriginal Canadians in residential schools run by the Roman Catholic Church.

"We are very pleased with what we heard from His Holiness," Fontaine said following a private meeting with the Pope in Vatican City. "We were hoping for a significant statement on the role of the Catholic Church and the residential school experience. We received that."

Fontaine said the fact the Pope never used the word "apology" during the 20-minute meeting, which also included the Most Rev. James Weisgerber, president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, and several B.C. aboriginal leaders, did not diminish the impact of the statement.

"What mattered was that we were present at his private audience," he said. "We heard some significant words that described how His Holiness feels about this tragic experience. He made it very clear that it's intolerable and unacceptable to have abuse in its many forms perpetrated on innocent children. He talked about the anguish. In my view it was an very important statement."

The Vatican released a communique shortly after the meeting. "His Holiness recalled that since the earliest days of her presence in Canada, the Church, particularly through her missionary personnel, has closely accompanied the indigenous peoples," the statement began.

"Given the sufferings that some indigenous children experienced in the Canadian residential school system, the Holy Father expressed his sorrow at the anguish caused by the deplorable conduct of some members of the Church and he offered his sympathy and prayerful solidarity.

"His Holiness emphasized that acts of abuse cannot be tolerated in society.

"He prayed that all those affected would experience healing and encouraged first nations peoples to continue to move forward with renewed hope," the statement said.

Fontaine, one of the abuse victims, said he hopes this will allow aboriginal Canadians and the Catholic Church to begin "healing and reconciliation."

"We now may close the circle," he said. "It takes us to the place now that we need to be and to be able in our own right to express forgiveness to those people that harmed us."

Grand Chief Ed John of the B.C. First Nations Summit, who also attended the meeting, said he was heartened by the Pope's declaration and also not concerned that the words "sorry" or "apology" weren't used.

John said the statement is an important step in helping troubled community members deal with the psychological damage caused by their residential school experience.



*Photograph by: Max Rossi, Reuters, Canwest News Service*

"I don't know what magic words you're supposed to use, but I thought that was a very important statement from the Pope," he said. "What he said was in many ways more profound" than an apology.

Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, president of the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, called it "an incredibly historic moment for the aboriginal people of this country and, more specifically, the Indian residential school survivors."

"This expression of sorrow and regret on the part of Pope Benedict is, in a very significant way, going to contribute to the ongoing healing and reconciliation of our people," said Phillip. "And that's the important issue."

But Hereditary Chief Bill Wilson said Wednesday he was angry the Pope did not take direct responsibility for harm caused by the schools experience.

"There is no apology," said Wilson from Musgamagw Band on northern Vancouver Island. "He says he has great sorrow.

"Well, it's one thing to have sorrow for tragedies that happened in the world. It's quite another thing to accept responsibility for causing them. And the Catholic Church caused a great deal of misery and suffering in this country. And it's not apologizing for anybody."

Wilson said Fontaine was "duped" and that the pontiff's statement was "hollow" and "just words."

"What [the Catholic Church] should do is open the vaults, the hundreds of billions and trillions of dollars that it stole from North, Central and South America, and make the lives of aboriginal peoples better. The lives that they ruined," he said.

The Catholic Church operated about 75 per cent of the residential schools in Canada through most of the 20th century.

Native leaders have complained that the Catholic Church has not followed other denominations that apologized during the 1990s.

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