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July 12th, 2010

To all the faithful of the Diocese of Antigonish,

On this occasion of the celebration of the 400th anniversary of the baptism of Grand Chief Henri Membertou, I wish to write to all in our diocese to highlight the significance of this anniversary. On behalf of the diocese, I wish to congratulate Grand Chief Ben Sylliboy, the Grand Council and all the Mi'kmaq people for their commitment to the faith over the past four hundred years.

As we celebrate this 400th anniversary, we need to recall some of the dimensions that make this such a momentous occasion for all in this diocese. Grand Chief Henri Membertou became the first aboriginal leader to be baptized in 1610 by the French, as a sign of alliance and good faith. His entire family also received baptism at the same time. As soon as he was baptized he was eager to become a committed Christian. He took on Christian responsibilities and urged the Jesuit missionaries to learn the Mi'kmaq language, for he earnestly desired to be catechized and thereafter be admitted into their apostolate. Before his death, the Jesuit fathers gave him Extreme Unction (as it was known then) as he was dying. On his deathbed in 1611, he charged his children to remain devout Christians. It is this faith that has been passed on to the descendants of the Grand Chief and this faith that continues to inspire the Mi'kmaq People who live throughout the Atlantic provinces but especially on the seven First Nation communities within our diocese – Afton First Nation (Paq'tnekek), Chapel Island First Nation (Potlotek), Eskasoni First Nation (Eskisoqnik), Membertou First Nation (Maupeltuk), Pictou Landing First Nation, Waycobah First Nation (We'koqma'q), Wagmatcook First Nation.

It is truly remarkable that through the Grand Chief and his Grand Council, the longest form of government in North America, the Mi'kmaq people have willingly followed the footsteps of Jesus Christ since the Baptism of Grand Chief Membertou. The descendants of Grand Chief Membertou well understood the Christian message of hope and peace as being very compatible with their early traditional beliefs. They embraced the Christian faith as an experience of a deepening of some of the beliefs that they already had. They nourished their faith and protected it in their own beautiful language, even in spite of the efforts that sometimes tried to prevent this. Within their culture, they appreciated their faith to such an extent that virtually each Mi'kmaq person continues the tradition of being baptized. The Mi'kmaq people are truly the first Roman Catholics in this land and their descendants practiced the Christian faith even before the arrival of any permanent European settlement. Moreover, Chief Membertou's baptism also helped to bridge the gap between the native and non-native cultures which resulted in the establishment of the French settlement in Acadia. In many ways after the expulsion of the Acadians in 1755, the Mi'kmaq people kept the Catholic faith alive and gave support to Father Maillard after all other priests had been expelled from their lands.

Through good times and bad, the Mi'kmaq have been the proud bearers of our Catholic Christian tradition in this part of North America. They are our ancestors in faith, and the people of this diocese have been blessed by their legacy of faith and by their spirit. Even when there was a period of almost a century when no priests were available to teach and to preside over the sacraments, the Grand Council assumed the responsibility of teaching and preserving their Christian tradition. This celebration of the 400th anniversary of Membertou's baptism reminds us of the need to honour our past and to continue to forge new ties of hope for the days that are to come. More than anything else we wish to say: "Thank you, Wela' lin Kji - Saqamaw." We recognize that the Mi'kmaq people are an essential dimension of the fabric of this diocese.

As we celebrate this milestone, we are well aware that these four hundred years include some times when the Mi'kmaq people carried the cross of suffering because of prejudice, intolerance, lack of food, broken

treaties and misunderstanding. We especially recognize the tremendous burden of suffering placed on all of them when their children were taken from them, sent to residential schools and were forbidden from speaking their own language. They also suffered when, in the midst of a policy of centralization, they were removed from the place of their birth and their homes and forced to settle in certain restricted areas. These terrible memories require the dignity of remembrance and a call for reconciliation. They challenge us to seek forgiveness. Indeed as a church, we ask forgiveness for any way that the church has been involved in causing this profound suffering, a suffering that for many Mi'kmaq people has lasted their whole lifetime.

From the Mi'kmaq people, we appreciate their hospitality, which is rooted in their awareness of the oneness of the human family. They recognize that each person bears the imprint of the Creator and is enlivened by the breath of the Creator's Spirit. They appreciate the mystery of the Church, where all are brothers and sisters, all are one in Christ. While we may recognize the mistakes of the past, we must not allow them to hinder the Church's response to the challenges of the present. We need to become more sensitive to those elements within our structures that inhibit the economic, educational, social and spiritual development of all.

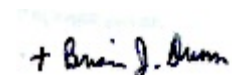
I wish to express gratitude to the Mi'kmaq people for the gracious acceptance and hospitality that they have shown to every priest of our diocese who has had the privilege of serving them in ministry, a ministry that has included baptizing all their children, teaching and proclaiming the Word of God, and sharing with them the "Bread of Life". May the priests who served the Mi'kmaq people be enriched in their lives and deepened in their faith. May the respect that they received from the youngest of the Mi'kmaq to the most senior elder continue to sustain them even long after they left to serve elsewhere.

As we look toward the future, we need to work together to support a variety of leadership opportunities to encourage effective leadership among the Mi'kmaq people. In a particular way, I would like to acknowledge the efforts of the Pastoral Council for the Mi'kmaq people, in unity with the Grand Council, whose members strive "to unify, to empower, to revitalize the spirituality of the Mi'kmaq Nation by deepening and affirming the language, culture and traditional values" (Mission Statement). We need to work together to support groups and associations which provide support for the Mi'kmaq people. We need to make special efforts to foster vocations among the Mi'kmaq people, including vocations to priesthood, to marriage, to religious life and to the single life. We need to collaborate in seeking ways whereby the culture and traditions of the Mi'kmaq people will be fostered and strengthened. We recognize the strength of the liturgical ministries in some of the Mi'kmaq communities. All concerned need to support the enrichment of these ministries at the parish level, so that the Church will truly respect, foster and incorporate the spiritual gifts of various people within the liturgy.

May our entire diocese joyfully celebrate with the Mi'kmaq people as we mark this momentous anniversary. We look forward to the mission on Chapel Island (Potlotek) which begins on Thursday, July 29, 2010 and continues until Monday, August 2, 2010. These missions, begun in 1742, has created a tradition of the longest continuous missions in Canada; they remember the ministry to the Mi'kmaq people by Fr. Maillard (1735-1762). I invite all within the diocese to join the Mi'kmaq people this year as they gather on Chapel Island with His Eminence Marc Cardinal Ouellet, p.s.s., Special Envoy of Pope Benedict XVI, who will preside at the Eucharist on Sunday, August 1, 2010 at 2 p.m. This entire mission will be a sacred time of remembrance, gratitude, and commitment; I look forward to the gathering of large numbers of people.

May this anniversary challenge us to foster a vision for the future that recognizes the great diversity that exists within the unity of our diocese. May it enable us to grow in our appreciation for the Mi'kmaq people and their contribution to this whole diocese.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brian J. Dunn". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned to the left of the printed name below.

Brian Joseph Dunn
Bishop of Antigonish