

**Apology to Native Americans for Past Mistakes**  
**By Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, SJ**

It is a great pleasure to be able to visit with all of you this morning and to join in this eucharist at this historical church. It is especially appropriate that we meet here at DeSmet – named after the famous founder of the Western missions among Indian tribes in what was once known as the Rocky Mountain Mission.

The American bishops asked the Society of Jesus to care for the missions to the American Indian tribes at the Second Council of Baltimore, 160 years ago. And so, for a century and a half, the Black Robes and the Indians lived and labored together here in the West.

Together they have built remarkable churches – like the old Coeur d’Alene Mission at Cotaldo, Idaho. From among your numbers you have provided witnesses to the Gospel and prayer leaders from tribe to tribe. You have even hosted our Jesuit seminaries on your reservations. During the 1890s over 40 Jesuits were studying here at DeSmet in our novice and tertian programs. An equal number of Jesuits were studying philosophy at St. Ignatius Mission in Montana.

The last 150 years have not always been easy ones: for you, the Indian tribes, or for us, the Black Robes. In recent years, religious leaders such as the Catholic bishops in the Northwest have publicly acknowledged the ways the church was insensitive toward your tribal customs, language and spirituality. I want to take this moment to add my voice to theirs. The Society of Jesus is sorry for the mistakes it has made in the past.

But we are also happy to have shared with you so much of your proud past and so many of your hopeful plans for an even brighter future as tribal people. Your advances in social, economic and educational development continue to provide opportunities for even more of your people.

In the early mission days, your chiefs and prayer leaders provided most of the spiritual direction and support for your spiritual needs. In the boarding school days, the fathers, sisters and brothers took over more of that responsibility. Today this responsibility of spiritual leadership is passing back to you – in much the same way that your tribes are managing most of their own affairs. I encourage you to participate as much as you can in the spiritual and religious leadership of your people.

Let us remember today that Jesus was himself descended from a long line of tribal people. Your ancestors believed in him and recast their faith in many of their own customs and languages. The Holy Father, Pope John XXIII, encouraged the American tribes to continue to express their faith in their own living traditions. We always remember his words, that through you, “Christ, in the members of his body, is himself Indian.”

I would like to recall a famous old story about the Coeur d'Alenes tribe. In 1870, Pope Pius IX was a prisoner within the walls of the Vatican City. When the Coeur d'Alenes heard of this, Chiefs Vincent and Seltice sent the Holy Father a letter of support with thousands of prayers and a collection of \$110. They also offered to send members of their tribe, called the "Soldiers of the Sacred Heart," to help defend the pope.

On St. Ignatius Day 1871, the pope sent his gratitude in a letter you still honor today, beginning: "Beloved Indian sons of the mission of Coeur d'Alenes."

Today I bring you the pope's blessing once again. Not just to the Coeur d'Alenes, but to all the tribes of the Rocky Mountain missions and to all the members of your tribal communities. I have brought an apostolic benediction from the Holy Father to be taken home to the principal churches of the 10 tribes of the old Rocky Mountain Mission which have gathered here today.

May our common faith in the Lord Jesus Christ always honor the diversities between us and yet always bind us together as brothers and sisters – in him – everywhere in the world.

Thank you for coming to celebrate with me today!

*13 May, 1993*  
*DeSmet, Idaho*

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