

Message of support from  
*Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle*  
on the occasion of the  
*United Nations 2019 Year of Indigenous Languages*



*Our Lady of  
Guadalupe Circle*



Christi Belcourt, Métis, born 1966. *The Wisdom of the Universe* (detail), 2014. Acrylic on canvas. Unframed: 171 × 282 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario. Purchased with funds donated by Greg Latremouille, 2014. 2014/6 © Christi Belcourt.



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-Swampy Cree as translated by Mike Metatawabin

*Promote and Preserve  
Indigenous Languages*

## Open Letter to All Canadians

As the members of the Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle, we welcome with gratitude UN Resolution 71/178 which, at the request of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Rights, proclaimed 2019 the Year of Indigenous Languages. This is an important step in



2019 | INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF  
**Indigenous Languages**

the process of affirming the major significance of language in the revitalization of Indigenous cultures. We write to express our thanks and to state that we are committed to finding ways to support this vital aspect of reconciliation.

The Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle is a Canadian Catholic coalition of Indigenous people, bishops, clergy, members of lay movements and male and female institutes of consecrated life. Motivated by the love of Christ and attentive to the Holy Spirit's action in the world, the Circle seeks to renew and foster relations between the Catholic Church and Indigenous Peoples in Canada. To view the Circle's fourfold purpose see: [www.ourladyofguadalupecircle.ca/who-we-are/our-mission](http://www.ourladyofguadalupecircle.ca/who-we-are/our-mission)

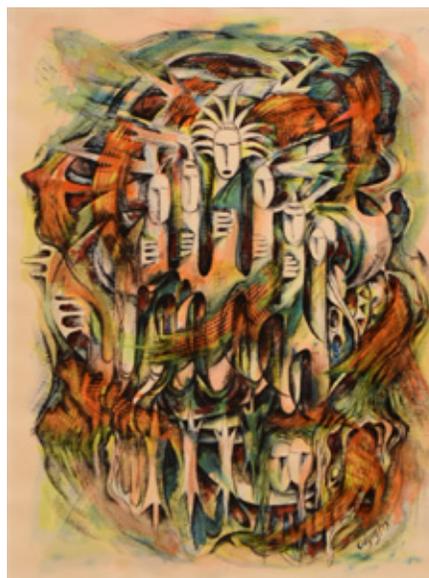
Churches in Canada and Canadian society as a whole are growing in awareness of the impact their actions

**CHURCHES IN CANADA AND CANADIAN SOCIETY AS A WHOLE ARE GROWING IN AWARENESS OF THE IMPACT THEIR ACTIONS AND ATTITUDES HAVE HAD ON THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF THIS LAND: FIRST NATIONS, INUIT AND MÉTIS.**

and attitudes have had on the Indigenous Peoples of this land: First Nations, Inuit and Métis. This includes misguided efforts to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into European ways and failure to recognize the value and richness of Indigenous cultures and spiritual beliefs. From 2008-2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada endeavoured to reveal and record many of these ills, and in particular, those of the Indian Residential Schools. In its Report were 94 Calls to Action addressing every form of legal, educational, social and economic structures and systems that were designed to assimilate Indigenous Peoples.

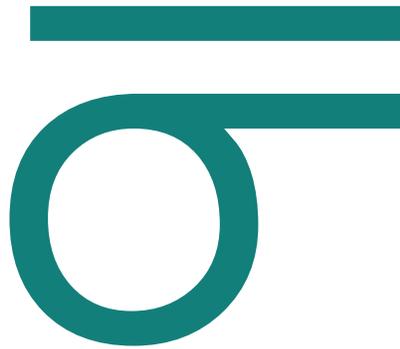
### Language, Culture, and Identity

At Pentecost, the apostles were "filled with the Holy Spirit" and enabled "to speak in other languages" so people from many lands from all over the region could receive the Gospel, "each of us, in our own native language". (Acts 2:2-12) This action of the Holy



Daphne Odjig  
(1919-2016)  
*Tribute to the Great  
Chiefs of the Past,*  
1973  
Acrylic, graphite  
on paper  
50.5 x 37.7 cm  
Laurentian  
University Museum  
and Arts Centre  
Collection, Art  
Gallery of Sudbury,  
(86.006).  
Photo credit: Art  
Gallery of Sudbury  
© Daphne Odjig

Spirit highlights the crucial importance of speaking and hearing one's language. It is a universal phenomenon, common to all living things; yet so distinctive to individuals in each species that a mother animal is able to find her lost offspring in the midst of a vast migrating herd. While human language may take a variety of forms, words give a unique worldview and precision to the desired communication. The diversity of spoken languages, developed over time and in various locations, is both opportunity and challenge. When a language is translated nuances of meaning are often lost and subtleties of thought may be misunderstood.



## Nuheyatié basí sughá núlth'er kúlí, bórenihahíle sá hadátoníltén ha

—Dene as translated by Rosalie Tsannie-Burseth

### *Opportunity and Challenge*

The link between Indigenous languages and a distinctive world view, rooted in the stories of ancestors and the environment, was clearly recognized by The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. In its 1996 Report, the Royal Commission considered these languages as a “tangible emblem of group identity” able to provide the individual with “a sense of security and continuity with the past.” It went on to affirm: “maintenance of the language and group identity has both a social-emotional and a spiritual purpose.”<sup>1</sup> In his 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis, affirmed and stressed the importance of cultural ecology stating:



“The disappearance of a culture can be just as serious, or even more serious, than the disappearance of a species of plant or animal.”<sup>2</sup>

### **A Tragic Loss**

In light of the centrality of language to culture and identity, its loss will have a serious impact on a sense of personal self-worth, spiritual and mental wholeness. Students in Indian Residential Schools who were denied access to and respect for their languages and cultures often became estranged from their families, their communities and even themselves. Not fully belonging

**UNLESS WE TAKE IMMEDIATE ACTION, GOVERNMENT STATISTICS INDICATE, THAT ONLY THREE INDIGENOUS GROUPS WILL “HAVE A CHANCE TO SEE THEIR LANGUAGES SURVIVE IN THE YEARS TO COME.”<sup>6</sup>**

to either Indigenous or non-Indigenous communities, many experienced a disorientation which would lead to multiple social challenges. The National Commission into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls identifies the loss of language and culture as a key factor in this Canadian tragedy and includes specific steps to ensure their revitalization and restoration among its Calls for Justice.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to seeing language loss as a personal tragedy, its impact on the worldwide human community is also tragic. Indigenous Peoples make up the greater part of global cultural diversity and speak the majority of the world's 7000 languages. In its 2016 Report, the UN's Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues recognizes that 40% of these languages are under serious threat of disappearing. Since Indigenous languages are responsible for most of the world's linguistic diversity, their loss puts the rich tapestry of global cultural diversity at risk. Without them, the world will be a poorer place. Celebrating the UNESCO 2019 Year of Indigenous Languages will help promote these languages, and improve the lives of those who speak them.

### **An Urgent Concern in Canada**

In Canada, the loss of Indigenous languages stems from systemic colonizing<sup>4</sup> efforts to eliminate them. Indian Residential and Indian Day Schools, for example, prohibited Indigenous students from speaking their languages. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission states:



# Tentitewake Rakwe Onkwehonwe Onkwawenna Sona

–Mohawk as translated by Alma Ransom & others

*We Will Resurface it / make it float  
Mohawk People / people of the flint  
Languages / plural*

Many of the almost ninety surviving Aboriginal languages in Canada are under serious threat of extinction. In the 2011 Census, only 14.5 per cent of the Aboriginal population of Canada reported that their first language learned was an Aboriginal language... in the 1996 Census, the figure was 26 per cent. This indicates a drop in language use and transmission of nearly 50 per cent in the 15 years since the last residential schools were closed.<sup>5</sup>

Unless we take immediate action, government statistics indicate, that only three Indigenous groups will “have a chance to see their languages survive in the years to come.”<sup>6</sup>

and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.”<sup>7</sup>

In Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission identifies the restoration of Indigenous languages as a key element in reconciliation. Among its 94 Calls to Action, Calls 13-17, addresses the importance of language and culture, noting: “We call upon the federal government to acknowledge that Aboriginal rights include Aboriginal language rights.”<sup>8</sup> The text also calls for the enactment of a Bill in support of Aboriginal

**“INDIGENOUS PEOPLES HAVE THE RIGHT TO REVITALIZE, USE, DEVELOP AND TRANSMIT TO FUTURE GENERATIONS THEIR HISTORIES, LANGUAGES, ORAL TRADITIONS, PHILOSOPHIES, WRITING SYSTEMS AND LITERATURES, AND TO DESIGNATE AND RETAIN THEIR OWN NAMES FOR COMMUNITIES, PLACES AND PERSONS.”<sup>7</sup>**

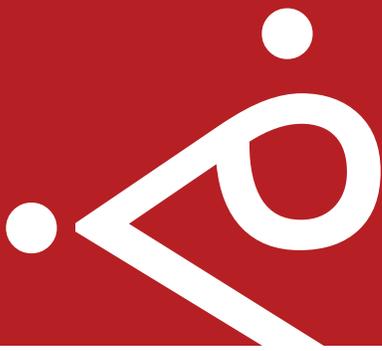
### Restoration of Language and Reconciliation

The United Nations has recognized the right to revitalize and restore Indigenous languages as a vital component of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Adopted in September 2007, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, states: “Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate



Joshim Kakegamic (1952-1993), *Kateri Tekakwitha*, acrylic on paper, 106 x 81 cm, Art Collection of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, Ottawa © Concacan Inc. All rights reserved. Used with permission.





# Tawpitawi weechihiwaytawk li mood Indigenous see lawng iwaw

—Michif as translated by Erma Taylor

*Be proactive in supporting Indigenous Languages*

The use of Indigenous languages in prayer and worship has been shown to be very effective in contributing to their recovery. At the St. Kateri Shrine in Kahnawake, for example, the use of Mohawk in liturgical celebrations has helped to revitalize that language. Indigenous Ojibway language and rituals are part of the liturgies in Wiikwemkoong. Hymn books have been published in Cree by the Archdiocese of Keewatin-Le Pas in 1998 and in Inuktitut by the Diocese of Churchill-Hudson Bay in the 2000's. Bilingual liturgical texts, often with Indigenous pronunciations indicated phonetically, are becoming increasingly common in parish churches. Many have found this practice helpful and encouraging. Prayers and liturgical texts in Indigenous languages may be downloaded from the website of the Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle: [www.ourladyofguadalupecircle.ca](http://www.ourladyofguadalupecircle.ca)

## Taking Action

Since restoration of Indigenous languages is central to the promotion of reconciliation in Canada, the members of the Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle are committed to promoting and encouraging the revitalization of these teachings and languages. We acknowledge the efforts of the early Jesuit, Sulpician and Oblate missionaries who worked with Indigenous leaders to provide dictionaries and translate texts to assist in proclaiming the Gospel in their communities.<sup>13</sup> The Circle will seek new ways to be proactive in supporting Indigenous languages. We pray: May Our Lady of Guadalupe who appeared as an Aztec woman in the symbols and colours of the local Indigenous culture and speaking the Nahuatl language, guide our commitment and efforts to promote Indigenous languages in Canada.

**WE WILL SEEK NEW WAYS IN WHICH WE AS A CIRCLE CAN BE PROACTIVE IN SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES.**



*Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle*

Christi Belcourt  
Métis, born 1966  
*The Wisdom of the Universe*, 2014  
acrylic on canvas  
Unframed: 171 × 282 cm  
(67 5/16 × 111 in.)  
Art Gallery of Ontario  
Purchased with funds donated  
by Greg Latremoille, 2014  
2014/6  
© Christi Belcourt



## ENDNOTES

1. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Report, Volume 3.6.2, p. 572. Volume 3, Chapter 6, Section 2, of the Report, pp. 563-580, includes findings on the importance of language, the current state of Indigenous languages, and specific recommendations to promote and revitalize them. See, <http://caid.ca/RRCAP3.6.pdf>.
2. Laudato Si § 145. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)
3. Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Women and Girls, Vol. 1.b, p. 179. See: <https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/>
4. On his apostolic journey to Ecuador, Bolivia, and Paraguay in July 2015, Pope Francis states: "Colonialism, both old and new, which reduces poor countries to mere providers of raw material and cheap labour, engenders violence, poverty, forced migrations and all the evils which go hand in hand with these, precisely because, by placing the periphery at the service of the centre, it denies those countries the right to an integral development. ... Let us say NO, then, to forms of colonialism old and new. ... here I wish to be quite clear, as was Saint John Paul II: I humbly ask forgiveness, not only for the offenses of the Church herself, but also for crimes committed against the native peoples during the so-called conquest of America." See: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/events/event.dir.html/content/vaticanevents/en/2015/7/9/boliviamovimentipopolari.html>.
5. Quoted in Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, p. 202. The web version is an unofficial plain text extract of the original report: <https://web-trc.ca/#language-and-culture>. See also: Langois and Turner, "Aboriginal Languages and Selected Vitality Indicators in 2011," <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-655-x/89-655-x2014001-eng.htm>.
6. Senator Serge Joyal quotes this statistic in his introduction to the second reading of Bill S-212 which is available at: [https://sencanada.ca/en/Content/Sen/chamber/421/debates/037db\\_2016-05-17-e#19](https://sencanada.ca/en/Content/Sen/chamber/421/debates/037db_2016-05-17-e#19).
7. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is available in PDF format. See: [https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP\\_E\\_web.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf). especially pp. 12-15. Quoting Article 13.1; articles 14.1, 14.3 and 16 endorse the use of Indigenous languages in education and the media.
8. The TRC Calls to Action is available at: [http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls\\_to\\_Action\\_English2.pdf](http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf). See p. 6 for articles on language and culture. The TRC also calls for provision of sufficient funding for the preservation Indigenous languages and the appointment of an Aboriginal Languages Commissioner who would give an annual progress report.
9. The early missionaries utilized a syllabic literacy system that enabled them to become well immersed in the language, culture and well-being among the Ojibway Indians of Northern Ontario, Cree, and Dene Indians, from Alberta to Quebec, and the NWT and also the Inuit of Nunavut and Northern Quebec. Reverend James Evans, a Wesleyan missionary developed a syllabic system using His knowledge of Pitman short-hand writing, created nine symbols that could occur in four different positions. These 36 characters were sufficient to reproduce all consonant and vowel combinations found in the Ojibway language. Despite some criticism from religious authorities who saw literacy as a means to speed assimilation, the use of the system spread rapidly, because of its simplicity and usefulness. Nowadays, syllabics still constitutes the usual writing medium of most Ojibway, Cree, and Dene Indians, from Alberta to Quebec. Along with Inuit from Nunavut and Northern Quebec.  
Louis-Jacques Dorais 1993 - *Literacy and Writing Systems: Writing systems in Canada*  
Part 1 - *Writing in Inuktitut: An Historical Perspective - Inuktitut Syllabics: the Origin* - by Kenn Harper
10. For Senator Sinclair's intervention see: <https://sincmurr.com/2016/11/20/on-aboriginal-languages-in-canada/>.
11. The International Theological Commission issued a paper on Faith and Inculturation in 1988. In article 3, it includes a quote from the 1985 Extraordinary Synod which defines inculturation as "the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity in the various human cultures". See: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_1988\\_fede-inculturazione\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1988_fede-inculturazione_en.html)
12. The text of the homily at the Liturgy of the Word in Huronia, is available at: [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1984/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19840915\\_santuario-huronia.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1984/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19840915_santuario-huronia.html).
13. A CBC media report from 2015 notes that dictionaries and grammars prepared by early missionaries are being used by Indigenous scholars to reconstruct the Huron-Wendat language, not spoken fluently since the 19th century.