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Meeting with the Lakota people, Red Cloud School, St. Francis Mission

I am grateful for the chance to join you this evening to share a meal and also to share what is in my heart.

To share my heart I need to start by telling you who I am. I am not the pope. I am not a politician. I am not a person with riches or power. I am a simple Jesuit who wants to walk with Jesus, poor and humble, and with others like you who seek the reign of Wakhan Tanka, whether in Christian or in traditional Lakota ways.

My name is Arturo. I am from Venezuela in Latin America. I am the eldest of six brothers and sisters. Some of them still live in Venezuela, others have had to leave our country because of its political and economic crises.

As a boy I studied at a Jesuit school in Venezuela. When I graduated I joined the Jesuits. I grew in prayer and in knowledge of myself and of my culture. I grew in gratitude for the overwhelming gift of God's mercy. I grew in confidence, actively embracing a mission of reconciliation and justice. I lived this mission in Venezuela, in social centers and universities, for most of my life. I often had the opportunity to join with others in political action to press the government to assume its responsibilities in promoting justice and peace. Then, in 2016, Jesuits from around the whole world elected me to serve as their Superior General. Most Jesuits are non-Europeans, but I am the first non-European General in the 500-year history of the Jesuits.

I have learned a lot since becoming Superior General of the apostolic body that we call the Society of Jesus. I have visited many countries, all over the world. I have been welcomed into many cultures. I have experienced in a very personal way the joys and the difficulties of meeting with people who

speak languages different from mine, who govern themselves in ways not familiar to me, who have other ways to pray. God finds us in such encounters. And God is present among us here tonight, in this encounter. The God in whose image all women and men are made is here, inviting us into a deeper relationship with him and with one another.

As Jesuits walk with others the pathway to God, as we walk with those whom others have pushed aside, as we accompany the young, as we collaborate in care for our common home, we again and again are invited into an intercultural encounter. We Jesuits do not want ... we have never wanted ... to live in a world that has a single, homogenous, global culture. Nor do we want simply to live side-by-side with people of different cultures. We want a truly intercultural encounter in which each one knows his own culture with its strengths and weakness and from that identity encounters and is enriched by the other.

It has been many years since Chief Red Cloud and Chief Spotted Tail first called the Black Robes to the Pine Ridge and the Rosebud Reservations. Since then we Jesuits have been privileged to walk many miles with the Lakota, and I hope that we will walk many more miles with you. We Jesuits have learned and continue to learn much from you about courage and compassion, about respect and resilience, about strength and generosity, about demanding that civil governments defend the poor and the vulnerable instead of oppressing them. You show us what it means to walk the good red road.

As we look back over the road that we have already traveled together, we find many reasons to be grateful. I have heard about Father Buechel (*Bekel*), who studied your language with great care and produced a Lakota grammar and dictionary. He taught us Jesuits how to hear God speaking to us in the Lakota language. Even more remarkable is the example of Black Elk, a holy man of the Lakota who is now honored by Catholics everywhere as a teacher and model of holiness. I have also been inspired by the changes in the educational and pastoral ministries at Red Cloud and

St Francis over the past several decades, changes that flow from a renewed appreciation of the richness of the Lakota culture.

But when we look back over the road that we have traveled we see that Jesuits also took some very wrong turns, especially by accepting the American government's oppressive educational regulations that took children from their families, from their language, and from their culture. Thirty years ago, when Fr. Kolvenbach, my predecessor as Jesuit Superior General, visited here, he noted how through the process of colonization, the life of the Lakota people was dramatically and harshly disrupted, and how the Lakota people have struggled against and suffered from some of the worst of the many ways human beings can mistreat each other. Fr. Kolvenbach added: "I realize that we, as Jesuits, have at times been the source of some of that pain. For that we are deeply sorry."

I would like to reaffirm those words and sentiments here. On behalf of the Society of Jesus, I apologize for the ways in which St Francis and Holy Rosary Missions and boarding schools were for decades complicit in the U.S. government's reprehensible assimilation policies, trying to eradicate your culture. I ask for your forgiveness for that and for any other abuses that any of you or your ancestors suffered.

I also want to express the support of the Jesuits for the Truth and Healing process that is now underway. Earlier today I met with some of the Lakota participants in that process. I thank them from the bottom of my heart. We want very much to walk together with you toward wholeness and healing.

I also had a good meeting today with leaders from the Rosebud and Oglala Sioux tribes. I was moved as they spoke of past hurts and future hopes. Each tribe also gave me a letter to bring to Pope Francis concerning the Doctrine of Discovery. I told them I will give them personally to the Pope, and also talk with him about what I have learned during my visit with the Lakota these days. They have been days of grace for me, even when facing

hard issues. Let us together pray that God will bind up our wounds, help us to get back on the right road, and lead us forward together.

Looking at the world today we see that there is much to be done, here and everywhere. In these days here in the United States I have heard so much about gun violence, about methamphetamine and substance abuse, about poverty and unemployment, about racism, about the weakening of political action, and about the loss of hope and meaning. Here and elsewhere we hear of war, forced displacement, populism and polarization.

But I have also heard young people speak of their dream of a different future, a future built on the gifts of creativity, compassion, and courage, a future that rejoices in diversity and interculturality, a future in which everyone enjoys the fullness of life in love and service.

It is not only the young who dream this dream. It is also God's dream for us. Let us ask the grace to walk that way together.

Mitáku(ye) Oyásin