

## **Bishop Jukka Keskitalo's address to Pope Francis at a private reception at the Vatican 17 January 2021**

Holy Father. On behalf of the entire Finnish Ecumenical Delegation, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to meet you in connection with the feast of St. Henry, the national saint of Finland.

This year, a special feature of our delegation is the representation of the Sámi indigenous people. The Sámi are the only indigenous people living in the European Union. The Sámi homeland of Finland is located in the territory of my diocese, which is the northernmost diocese of our Church.

The history of the treatment of the Sámi indigenous people, who have been squeezed between mainstream dominant cultures, is not pleasant. The efforts to force the Sámi people to assimilate to the dominant culture and language have left wounds and traumas lasting generations. Christian churches have also been responsible for assimilation efforts over the course of history.

With this theme in mind, it is worth noting that in the apostolic exhortation letter “Querida Amazon”, which you published 2020 after the Amazon synod, you state that you have four dreams regarding Amazon indigenous peoples: Firstly, you dream that the struggle of indigenous peoples for their rights would be heard. Secondly, you dream that the cultural richness of indigenous peoples can be preserved. Thirdly, you dream that the enormous riches of the nature of the Amazon region could be preserved, and fourthly, you dream that Christian communities would be able to give the Church a new face with Amazon features.

As bishop of the Sámi region, I assure you, Holy Father, that these dreams are also my dreams with regard to the Sámi indigenous people. That is why I think it is very important that a process of truth and reconciliation for the Sámi has begun in our country; it is genuinely aimed at hearing indigenous narratives and seeks truth and reconciliation on the painful issues of the past. The Church will undoubtedly play a role in this process.

Sometimes people say that you cannot apologize on behalf of someone else or for the things of the past. In my view, such a view is based on a postmodern idea of the radical autonomy of the individual, which, in its purest form, can lead to extreme individualism and an atomistic conception of man. The idea is that you cannot be responsible for something if you were not personally involved in it. I do not agree with this thinking.

When a state, church or other entity decides to apologise through a conscious process, it is a liberating stage in the process of healing memories and building reconciliation. Of course, apologising requires both collective preparation and a commitment to the follow-up process. One cannot and should not apologize until the painful issues have been honestly discussed together, and a common understanding of what has happened has emerged.

Our question as Christians and churches is, how do we deal with the painful wounds that have arisen as a result of the actions of a church during previous generations? Openness to dialogue and the ability to listen are essential. Humility and repentance are essential. If God grants His grace and strength for it, this can also all lead to a collective apology.

So I think that as a result of the process underway in Finland, we will also see the day when there will be a need for the entire Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, and other churches, to apologize to the Sámi. Of course, there is no need to apologize for bringing the Gospel of good news to all people. Repentance and possible apologies would be related to past abuses and structural sins that continue to affect people's lives.

I am aware that representatives of the indigenous peoples of Canada have appealed to you concerning similar, even more serious, past abuses, in which representatives of the Church have also been involved. When considering these issues, we are all, as Christians and churches, together before the face of God.

Holy Father, I have wanted to raise these painful questions which we share. At the same time, I am very pleased with the positive steps that have been taken between my own Church and the Sámi indigenous people. For example, I am happy about our wonderful priests who are Sámi people and the thriving worship activity taking place in Sámi languages in our Church.

As a token of this meeting, I would like to present you with a commemorative edition of a new translation of the Bible written in the Northern Sámi language. May it be a sign that our common dream, the dream that the Church will receive more and more indigenous faces, the Amazonians and the Sámi, is coming true.

May God be with you.