



All CCS and Cross-sectoral Cultural Heritage & Museums Advocacy Initiatives Canada Heritage

## Pope to Return 62 Cultural Heritage items to Canada's Indigenous

Following decades of Indigenous advocacy, Pope Leo XIV proceeds to seal the work of Pope Francis towards reconciliation over Colonialism's historic wrongs and Catholic Church's contribution to the sufferings of Canada's Indigenous communities. The artefacts are expected to reach Montreal on the 6th of December.

On Saturday 15 November, [Pope Leo XIV](#) took a step to give back as a 'gift' to the Indigenous communities of Canada 62 items of cultural significance.

Pope Leo XIV 'desires that this [gift](#) represent a concrete sign of dialogue, respect and fraternity,' reads the joint statement by the Vatican and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB).

The heritage items include an Inuit kayak, war clubs, wampum belts and masks, exhibited among others at the Vatican Museums' Ethnographic exhibitions.

The artefacts were not directly delivered to the Indigenous representatives. They were handed over to Canadian bishops, who "[are committed to ensuring that these artefacts are properly safeguarded, respected, and preserved](#)".

[Negotiations](#) on returning the items had been accelerated following the Indigenous leaders' visit to the Vatican in 2022. During their visit about receiving the Pope's apology on the Catholic Church's contribution of children's suffering in

Canada's residential schools, the Indigenous were shown the artefacts and asked for their return. The items had been in Vatican for around 100 years, since the 1925 exhibition "Anima Mundi" under Pope Pius XI's. The 1925 exhibition included more than 100.000 artifacts, which had been sent from missionaries to Rome allegedly as 'gifts' to the Vatican by the Indigenous, critics doubting this characterisation given the [power relations at the time](#).

Standing in favour of a case-by-case basis on the return of these and other artefacts kept in the Vatican collection, [Pope Francis had said](#) "In the case where you can return things, where it's necessary to make a gesture, better to do it," including thus the term 'return' in his words.

Arguably, presenting as a 'gift' the 'return' of Indigenous artefacts, while stating their "[belonging to the ethnological collections of the Vatican Museums](#)" and following a "[church-to-church](#)" procedure, allow space for further criticism.

---

During his trip to Canada in 2022, Pope Francis had made a [historic statement of apology](#), asking forgiveness for the "[deplorable](#)" abuses that Indigenous children had suffered at [Catholic schools of the country](#).

The apology came following a "long advocacy" on behalf of survivors, as stated by Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada at the time, and after the publication of reports shocking the public opinion revealing among others electric chairs, children's rapes and hundreds of unmarked graves, marking the ending of the stories of "[stolen children that never came home](#)".

---

Find more [here](#)

Image by [Edgar Beltrán, The Pillar, CC BY-SA 4.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons.

