

Mi'kmaq Spirituality and the Concordat of 1610

Concordat: a type of treaty which regulates church affairs, signed between the Pope and a government.

For the Mi'kmaq people, government, politics, economy and spirituality are all united. Therefore, the Grand Council has responsibility for the spiritual well-being of the Mi'kmaq people. Many of these spiritual responsibilities are connected with the practice of Roman Catholicism among the Mi'kmaq, including, for example, the celebrations at Chapel Island on the Feast of St. Ann each July. In fact, since 1610, when Grand Chief Membertou was baptized at Port Royal by Father Jessé Fléché, the Mi'kmaq Nation has had a special relationship with the Church. This relationship was spelled out in a *concordat*, or treaty, between the Grand Council and the Pope, in which the Mi'kmaq agreed to protect priests and French Catholic settlers and the Church granted certain religious authority to the Mi'kmaq Nation. Because an agreement of this kind is signed only by a national government, the Concordat affirmed Mi'kmaq sovereignty, and Roman Catholicism became the Mi'kmaq state religion.

The Concordat was recorded on a great wampum belt. On it, the Church is represented by crossed keys (the symbol of the Holy See), a church, and a line from the Gospels written in Mi'kmaq hieroglyphics. (These hieroglyphics, a form of picture writing, were developed by a priest from a system already in use by the Mi'kmaq. He used them to teach catechism and other religious subjects. This has remained their principal use up until the present, although at times they were used for non-religious writing.) The Grand Council is represented by crossed lances, an armed captain, a pipe and arrow, and seven hills (symbolizing the seven districts of Mi'kmaq territory). In the centre of the belt there is a picture of a chief and a priest holding a cross together; the chief has a Bible in his hand.



Design of the great wampum belt recording the Concordat.



Tercentenary certificate commemorating the Concordat.
Souvenir of the Micmac Tercentenary Celebration

Uniquely Mi'kmaq: Three Important Treaties

By Will Basque

The 1752 Treaty, the Watertown treaty signed in 1776 with the new government of the United States (less than two weeks after the Declaration of Independence was signed) and the 1610 Concordat with the Vatican – these are three uniquely Mi'kmaq documents. They are part of our identity as Mi'kmaq people and part of Catholic, British, Canadian and American history. They are all based on international law. The Mi'kmaq Nation – that is, the Grand Council – never surrendered politically or militarily. The 1752 treaty is more than hunting and fishing rights. It gives us the right to call ourselves who we are – Mi'kmaq. We are not simply Indians or Canadian Indians; we have a unique status.

The Concordat was entered into because Pesamoet, the Grand Captain at the time of Membertou, went to France and lived in Paris for a year with Father Fléché. He lived the castle as an honoured guest among the elite of society. He also saw how the rest of the people were being treated outside of the castle – the poverty and disease – and realized it was inevitable that they would come to North America. His worry was if we were overrun, that would be come us, because our way of life was giving and sharing, theirs was taking and keeping. But Pesamoet also noticed on Sundays in Paris everyone would calm down and act like Mi'kmaq people. When they went to Mass, they would talk about giving and sharing and they would behave like civilized people. And one man, named Jesus, was the cause of all this. Jesus was like a Mi'kmaw. Although the French didn't realize it, the Mi'kmaq were practicing Christians before they heard of Jesus. Pesamoet thought that if the Grand Council ever disappeared and we needed to learn how to be Mi'kmaq again, we would have Jesus as an example to learn from. So he made a conscious decision to enter into the Concordat. On the Concordat wampum, the Church has an open window, meaning that you can choose yourself whether to be a Catholic, a traditional Mi'kmaw, or both.

As a result of the Concordat, we had a relationship with the French people as brothers and sisters. When the Acadians were expelled from Nova Scotia in 1755, we had an obligation as fellow Catholics – let alone as fellow human beings – to save as many Acadians as possible. Under the terms of the Concordat we had agreed to protect the Church. So we hid priests and other people, books and so on.

The Grand Council still had a traditional Catholic role as well as a Mi'kmaq role. When the French missionaries first came, in order to talk to us they had to learn where we would be gathering in a large group. Thus was at *Potlotek* [BOHD-loh-deg; Chapel Island]. Before Catholicism, this was already a spiritual gathering, so it was an ideal opportunity for the Church. Both sides were able to integrate the Catholic faith with traditional Mi'kmaq faith.

The Significance of the Concordat

Entering into the Concordat was very important for the Mi'kmaq people. European countries could do business only with other Catholic states; they didn't want to deal with unbelievers. So it was a good opportunity for Europe, and it was good for us, because it was entered into by due process of law. The Concordat was the legal way to get the furs. It recognized us as a Catholic state, as a nation under God.

The Concordat also affirmed our right to use the Mi'kmaq language in the Mass. The priest had to learn to speak Mi'kmaq and read and write it. That was Membertou's command when he became baptized: "Now you go back," he told the priest. "Go back to Rome and bring me more Mi'kmaq-speaking priests, and we shall go out to the Mi'kmaq Nation together and baptize the Mi'kmaq people." And that's what he did. Roman Catholics in other countries, at least until the Second Vatican Council, had to have Mass in Latin, while we were free to speak to God in Mi'kmaq. And we didn't have to go to a building to worship, because everything to us was God's creation. Our ancient religion was everywhere. Being Catholic and being a Mi'kmaw were synonymous, because our culture, our way of life, was based on giving and sharing.

Our place in geography and in history was unique. We were among the first peoples in North America the Europeans dealt with. We're the first chapter in Catholic, British, French, Acadian, Canadian and American history. The Canadian government has tried to dismiss the Grand Council, but the treaties were entered into with the Grand Council and the Grand Council still exists. We are still a sovereign nation. Nothing has been taken from us, but our rights have been violated. Now, to obey the law, the government has to deal with the recognized sovereign government of the Mi'kmaq.

We went for 100 years without a priest after Maillard died. He was the interpreter at the 1752 treaty negotiations. The treaty is a peace treaty; it is not a surrender treaty. It was born out of war. (We were Britain's Vietnam. We were the guerrilla fighters and they only fought in battalion-size formations, which needed big fields. But there weren't any big fields and we knew every nook and cranny of the country. We taught the American Minutemen how to fight the British.)

When Maillard died, the British refused to give us any more priests. The captains had been the priests anyway, before the Church was here. They exercised that role as spiritual persons, as role models – how to be a grandfather, how to survive. After the priests were taken away, the Grand Chief would perform marriages annually at Potlotek. The captains performed baptisms (it is not a Church law anyway that a *priest* has to baptize someone). During those 100 years the Grand Council took on a role – or rather kept on in their role – of being the spiritual leaders of the community clan or district. When the next priest finally came, there had been no conversions to Protestantism. He was amazed that the people still gathered every Sunday to hear the captains read from the book of hieroglyphics. The people would listen to the Gospel and talk about Christ and the Holy Family. They remembered the Concordat.