

# 2013 Day of Prayer in Solidarity with Indigenous People

## 12 December 2013



### ?ehtseo Erey

This year the Canadian Catholic Aboriginal Council invites all Catholics to participate in this day of prayer. Each year an Aboriginal person is honoured who reflects a great witness of the faith within the Church and within our country. This year --a Dene prophet who preached the Good News of Jesus, is being regarded with great respect.

Join the Indigenous people of Canada on this Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, patroness of Americas.



### Let us pray:

- ❖ for greater recognition, respect, and unity among us all as Canadians.
- ❖ for healing within the Indigenous communities
- ❖ for courage to dialogue, to change and to work together as indigenous & non-indigenous alike.
- ❖ for a greater awareness of Indigenous people in the Americas and world-wide
- ❖ for sustainable leadership among Indigenous people within the Church

*Our Lady of Guadalupe pray for us.*

(?ehtseo means grandpa in North Slavey or Dene Roi. The “?” symbol indicates a pause at the beginning of the word.)

## Message for the 2013 Day of Prayer in Solidarity with Indigenous People

*The National Day of Prayer in Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples is celebrated on December 12 every year, on the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, patroness of the Americas, who appeared to a humble Aztec peasant, Saint Juan Diego, in Mexico in 1531. The Canadian Catholic Aboriginal Council celebrates this day of prayer, solidarity and reconciliation by issuing an annual message honouring Indigenous people who have been inspired by their Catholic faith.*

### **?ehtseo Ereya – A Dene prophet who preached the good news of Jesus**



Ereya was the original Dene name of the prophet now lovingly known as ?ehtseo<sup>[1]</sup> (Grandpa) Louis Ayha. Born in 1857, he became known throughout the Northwest Territories as a great spiritual leader. People used to travel many miles to visit with him, and today they still come to visit his grave. All the elders that knew ?ehtseo Ereya talk about how special he was in the eyes of God.

The local priests also appreciated the holiness of ?ehtseo Ereya. Father Jean Denis, O.M.I., a long-time pastor at Deline parish, was impressed with the holiness of ?ehtseo Ereya's life, his healthy melding of Dene and Catholic spirituality, and the positive effect his teaching had on the people he visited with.

?ehtseo Ereya was raised in Ticho territory, in the Behchoko area of the Northwest Territories. Together with his family, ?ehtseo Ereya traveled around the Sahtu area. He built his first log home in what today is called Deline, a community on the shores of beautiful Great Bear Lake (the largest fresh water lake solely in Canada and the seventh largest lake in the world). He chose this place for its good fishing, hunting and trapping.

Later in his life, ?ehtseo Ereya said that when he was young he was visited by two angels to share the teachings of the Holy Book. These visits continued for years. Once he had grey hair he was told to share his knowledge and to speak to Dene people everywhere. Even though he had no knowledge of written words, he had a rich knowledge of the Bible. Throughout the day, he would go from home to home, talking to the people. The Dene people have a tradition of prophets: good people who have some sense of the future and good words of guidance for the people. ?ehtseo Ereya is seen as one of the most gifted prophets. Some people would doubt his wisdom, but he was able to read their hearts and often predict their actions. He predicted the future for the people and the land. He would also do anything to help people in need. ?ehtseo Ereya would often say, "Remember to always share and to love one another." He also said, "Remember to always keep the words that I taught you. Use them and teach them to each other."

?ehtseo Ereya's nephew remembers how he would say that you must not be stingy with your food. He would say, "If on your table cloth you have served tea many times and have said prayers over the food many times, what is placed on that table cloth will not disappear." This was in one of the harshest climates in Canada where hunger and starvation were common.

?ehtseo Ereya also warned the people about the “yellow poison” that would be mined at Port Radium, also on the shores of Great Bear Lake. This first Uranium mine was open from 1942 to 1960. The uranium was used for the bombs that fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Early mining practices were very primitive, and many of the miners suffered from exposure to uranium.

?ehtseo Ereya died on September 23, 1940, at the age of 83. He is remembered as a great prophet who worked hard and preached to many Dene people the Good News. He was loved and respected by young and old alike because of his strong belief in God. ?ehtseo Ereya was a great teacher, and so the local school has been named after him. His stories continue to be a gift for the people. ?ehtse Ayha in his own life tried to live out the best of two traditions. He prayed with the drum, participated in drum dances, feeding the fire ceremonies, and in many ways was fully active in his Dene traditional culture. At the same time he was a faithful Catholic. He had great respect and love for Jesus, for the stories of the Bible, and for the sacraments. He encouraged his people to practise both their traditional culture and their Catholic faith.

In the 1980s, ?ehtseo Ereya’s log cabin was rebuilt and made a place of prayer. In 1991, a spiritual gathering was organized to celebrate his life and teachings. This gathering occurs annually in mid-August in Deline, and is attended by many Dene from near and far. In many homes throughout the Northwest Territories there is a picture of ?ehtseo Ereya on their wall. His continuing positive influence on his people supports that he truly was a holy man.

?Ehtseo Ereya reminds us that the particular spiritual legacy and gifts of our aboriginal brothers and sisters have much to offer our present-day society. He also calls us to respect both Catholic and Indigenous spiritualities, and to celebrate what is common between them. As ever, our Church needs good prophets.

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[1] ?ehtseo means grandpa in North Slavey or Dene Roi. The “?” symbol indicates a pause at the beginning of the word.

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