

Toward an Understanding of the Church's Role in the Canadian Residential Schools and Our Response

“There's more here than meets the eye” is often quoted when the circumstances around a particular issue are not so clear. This is the case with the recent announcement of the discovery of 215 bodies in unmarked graves at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in Kamloops, B.C., on the land of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation. Much has been said by people of various First Nations, governmental and religious leaders, various media, and Canadians in general. It has to be admitted though, in reference to the graves at Kamloops, that there is more that we don't know about the deaths and burials of the Indigenous students than what we do know.

Many are offering opinions, many are offering perspectives, and many are offering demands in light of the discovery. But we need facts. Retired Senator Murray Sinclair, who for a time chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established to deal specifically with the problems caused by the Residential Schools, has called for calm and time. An investigation needs to be made, to try to discover why these children died and how they were buried. This investigation will necessarily be led by Indigenous people for Indigenous people, as well as for all the people of Canada.

In recent weeks, many expressed shock and sadness at the news. During the hearings of the TRC, it was made known that other grave sites exist at various locations that once were Residential Schools. Each announcement of locating more graves of the lost innocents reopens the wounds that remain because of these schools and the healing that eludes our First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. The recent discoveries bring back many memories of the unhealed wounds caused by the physical, emotional and sexual abuse suffered by many of the children in these schools, along with the anxiety of separation from their families at such a young age. These wounds have had multi-generational impacts on many Indigenous people and their communities.

The shock and sadness echoes anew and Canadians are reminded, once again, that we have much work to do to achieve reconciliation with, and justice for, the Indigenous peoples of Canada. Many questions have been raised about these graves in particular, with people wondering what was the Church's role in the schools, why the Church has not apologized for its role, and what will the Church do now to further the work of reconciliation and justice.

Early Encounters Gone Wrong in the Indian Residential Schools

Relations between Catholic missionaries, including nuns and priests, and the Indigenous peoples of Canada were often mutually helpful and respectful. In the earliest years of encounter, the residents of Turtle Island taught the Europeans much that allowed them to survive the varying climates in Canada, live off the land, and cross the continent we now know as North America. In turn, missionaries established churches, schools, and hospitals, offering new spirituality, new learning and new medicines to the

original peoples of the land. Learning the languages and way of life of the peoples of the land allowed the missionaries to inculturate the Christian message, offering prayers and hymns, the Bible and the Catechism in their languages, in a respectful way that opened up the possibility for the Indigenous people to come to know Jesus and his way of life, while the missionaries continued to learn from them.

All of that changed when the Government of Canada implemented its disastrous and misguided Indian Residential Schools in the late 19th century. These schools were founded on the belief of the Government and many other Canadians of the time that the Indigenous cultures and languages would need to be eradicated so that the people of the land would adopt European ways and culture. It was to begin in the schools where the children would be separated from their families. They would be forced to “leave behind” their own learning, culture and language, and adopt new languages and ways of thinking ... the European way. In those schools entrusted by the Government to members of the Catholic Church, priests and Religious personnel became complicit in the plan of assimilation of the Indigenous peoples.

Chief Phil Fontaine, former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, in an address to Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican in April 2009, succinctly summarized the complicity of some in the Church in this way: “The Catholic Church entities thus became part of a tragic plan of assimilation that was not only doomed to fail but destined to leave a disastrous legacy in its wake. Many children died in these schools, alone, confused and bereft. Countless others were physically, emotionally and sexually abused. The fabric of family life for thousands of our people, young and old, was shattered”

(<https://www.straight.com/blogra/phil-fontaines-statement-pope-residential-schools-apology>).

Apologies by Church Leaders

In that historic meeting with Pope Benedict were representatives of Indigenous peoples and of the Church in Canada. While the Pope did not use the word “apology”, it was reported that he spoke from the heart without prepared notes, and that he was very aware of the situation in Canada. Chief Fontaine himself said, in an interview with CBC News, “he hoped that the expression of regret would ‘close the book’ on the issue of apologies for residential school survivors”. He went on to say, “The fact that the word ‘apology’ was not used does not diminish this moment in any way. ... The experience gives me great comfort.”

(<https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/pope-expresses-sorrow-for-abuse-at-residential-schools-1.778019>).

Why would the Pope not use the word ‘apology’? The answer to this question is rooted in two things: our understanding of what it means to be “Church” and a legal perspective. Unlike the United Church of Canada or the Anglican Church of Canada, the Catholic Church is a decentralized organization. Each diocese is the Catholic Church at

the local level. All diocesan Churches in union with the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, make up what we refer to as the Universal Church. The Pope presides over the Universal Church, as the link among all local Churches and as the authoritative voice for the official teachings of the Church throughout the world.

So, there is no “Catholic Church of Canada” but rather the Catholic Church *in* Canada, made up of 70 dioceses, each with its own bishop. From the Church’s perspective, a bishop is not like a “plant manager” working for a CEO at the Vatican, but the head of a local Church, responsible for the work and affairs of the Church in his diocese. This is established in Canadian law whereby each diocese is an Episcopal Corporation, with the dioceses in Quebec each being a *fabrique*. Some dioceses outside Quebec are adopting that model of governance. But as a corporation or *fabrique*, each diocese is a unique ecclesial and legal entity. The same applies to various Religious communities across Canada. Each has its own system of governance and regulations. They work autonomously, but in cooperation with the bishop in whose diocese they are located.

For these reasons, then, apologies for sins and crimes committed by people of the Church throughout the world are the responsibility of the local bishop or Religious superior. And that is why, going back 30 years to 1991, apologies have been offered in Canada by individual bishops and superiors of Religious communities as well as by representatives of all the bishops of Canada. The Residential Schools were operated in approximately 16 of the 61 dioceses that existed then, staffed by about 36 Religious communities of the 100 that were working in Canada at that time.

One of the earliest apologies for the mistreatment of children in Residential Schools was given by the missionary order of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, who are among the most numerous and long-serving missionaries in the country, up to this day. Many came to this country and gave their whole lives to spreading the Gospel. It is unfortunate that some also ran Residential Schools, including the one at Kamloops. “We apologize for the part we played in the cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious imperialism that was part of the mentality with which the peoples of Europe first met the Aboriginal peoples and which consistently has lurked behind the way the Native peoples of Canada have been treated by civil governments and by the churches”

(<https://omilacombe.ca/indian-residential-schools-missionary-oblates-mary-immaculate-q/>) .

Fr. Raymond de Souza, a regular contributor to the National Post, has recently written on the topic of these apologies. You can find his article, which has further examples of apologies on this question at <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/raymond-j-de-souza-it-is-historically-inaccurate-to-suggest-the-catholic-church-hasnt-apologized-for-residential-schools>.

For the TRC or the Prime Minister of Canada to demand that the Pope come to Canada to give an apology is misguided on many levels. First, the Prime Minister fails to understand the very nature of the Church in which he claims membership. And while he

may not be theologically astute on all things Catholic, he should be careful to be accurate when speaking to national and international media. Secondly, such a demand of a sovereign world leader is ludicrous. Mr. Trudeau can no more summon the Pope to Canada than he can summon the President of China to have a conversation about human rights in that country.

Thirdly, such a demand also ignores the lengths that Pope St. John Paul II went to when he visited the Indigenous peoples of Canada during his papal visit to our country in 1984. He visited Midland, Ontario, but a visit to Fort Simpson, N.W.T., was cancelled due to bad weather. Instead, the Holy Father landed at the Yellowknife airport where he gave his address to the people of Fort Simpson by radio and television. At Yellowknife, Pope John Paul said: "It is clear from the historical record that over the centuries your peoples have been repeatedly the victims of injustices by newcomers who, in their blindness, often saw your culture as inferior. ... Today, I want to proclaim that freedom which is required for a just and equitable measure of self-determination in your own lives as native peoples. In union with the whole Church I proclaim all your rights, and their corresponding duties. And I also condemn physical, cultural, and religious oppression, and all that would in any way deprive you or any group of what rightly belongs to you." In 1987, John Paul returned to Canada explicitly to visit Fort Simpson, to fulfill his promise to return. Finally, the Prime Minister's demand also ignores the extraordinary visit of Indigenous representatives with Pope Benedict in 2009, mentioned above.

It's not a matter of semantics. Words are very important, and the person who utters them must have the ability to stand behind them because every apology must be based in a desire to change, and that desire must come from within ... within a country ... within a diocese ... within a Religious community ... within a person. For that reason, we can speak an apology only when we are ready and able to bring about change.

It is worth noting that, as leader of the third party in the House of Commons at the time of the TRC, Mr. Trudeau pledged to act on all of the "calls to action" in the TRC report that would be the responsibility of the federal government. It was a pledge he renewed after being elected with a majority government in November 2015. It was not until the budget of 2019, however, that money was set aside to search out the many graves at Residential Schools across the country. Despite the pledges and rhetoric, the money was made available only on June 4 this year. That same day, the Prime Minister, at a press conference covered by international media, ignoring 30 years of apologies and pledges and action by bishops and heads of Religious orders to work for reconciliation and justice, once again lectured the Catholic Church for what he said was a refusal to act in this matter.

Furthering Reconciliation and Justice

It doesn't end with an apology. Many Catholic entities in Canada – dioceses and Religious communities – have contributed much over the years to promote

reconciliation and justice, including \$29 million in cash and more than \$25 million “in-kind” contributions. Across the country, Catholic dioceses – some which never ran Residential Schools – took up a collection that raised \$3.7 million. These were initiatives that came out of the TRC, and are in addition to the over \$3 billion in reparations paid by the federal government since the 1990s.

On the local level, we see the great benefit of the Indigenous studies program at King’s University College in London, which fosters awareness of the meeting of two cultures, giving students an opportunity to meet and work with Indigenous peoples in the North. Religious communities in the diocese have fostered encounters through such experiences as “the blanket exercise” and have worked toward justice in housing and education. Our local Catholic school boards work with Indigenous leaders to bring awareness to students in our elementary and secondary schools. The Diocese of London, along with other Catholic dioceses in Ontario, is contributing to the erection of a permanent monument in Toronto’s Nathan Phillips Square to honour survivors of Residential Schools. Called the “Restoration of Identity Legacy Project”, it will feature a sculpture of a turtle that measures two metres in the midst of a beautiful reflecting pool and garden, along with an educational centre. These are but some of the ways local Catholics are responding.

Is there more to do? Certainly! The process of healing is multi-generational and life-long. It will require a commitment by all Canadians to restore the damage done to First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples across our vast land. The Church’s ministry of accompaniment will be important, working alongside Indigenous people to call on our governments to bring to fruition all of the TRC’s “calls to action” expected of governments at all levels. We need to work with them to fulfill long-time promises of clean water, adequate housing, better health care and education in Indigenous communities. We need to root out all forms of racism, and so treat all the peoples of the land of whatever race, creed or colour as our sisters and brothers. We need to be prepared to “go to the margins”, as Pope Francis teaches us again and again, to be present to, to learn from, and to work alongside those most in need, especially victims of racism, discrimination, neglect and abuse. This is a life-time of work, but together with all Canadians, of any faith or of none, we carry on with determination to see justice done for survivors of Residential Schools and their families. And to make sure such a thing never happens again!

On June 10, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB) announced that they have been working for over two years at local and national levels, bilaterally with the First Nations, Métis and Inuit national organizations, on another papal meeting. They have been preparing to arrange a delegation of Indigenous people to meet with Pope Francis in order to foster “meaningful encounters of dialogue and healing”. “This pastoral visit,” the CCCB statement noted, “will include the participation of a diverse group of Elders/Knowledge Keepers, residential school survivors and youth from across the country. The event will likewise provide Pope Francis with a unique opportunity to hear directly from Indigenous Peoples, express his heartfelt closeness, address the

impact of colonization and the implication of the Church in the residential schools, so as to respond to the suffering of Indigenous Peoples and the ongoing effects of intergenerational trauma” (CCCB, Ottawa, 10 June 2021). The meeting, having been delayed by the pandemic, is expected to take place before the end of 2021.

There is more here than meets the eye but, for now, we need to lobby our government to ensure that the money recently released will provide for the promised full investigation of every cemetery at every Residential School. In this way, it is hoped, families finally will be able to learn how their loved ones died and be able to receive their remains for a proper burial at home, where possible, and to establish memorials at these sites as determined by their communities.

May St. Anne, the Mother of Mary and Grandmother of Jesus, so close to the Indigenous peoples, intercede for us to be able to bring about the change we need in our hearts, in each city and town, in our province, and in this country that so many call 'home'.