

Why is the Pope Going to Canada?

Indigenous Peoples and Residential Schools

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In the days between March 28 and April 1 of this year, a delegation of representatives of the indigenous peoples of Canada traveled to Rome with some of their bishops for several meetings with Pope Francis. He promised to travel personally to Canada later this summer to continue the dialogue in their “indigenous territories.”

During the concluding meeting, the pope said, “it is my hope that our meetings during these days will point out new paths to be pursued together, will instill courage and strength, and lead to greater commitment on the local level. Any truly effective process of healing requires concrete actions. In a fraternal spirit, I encourage the Bishops and the Catholic community to continue taking steps toward the transparent search for truth and to foster healing and reconciliation. These steps are part of a journey that can favor the rediscovery and revitalization of your culture, while helping the Church to grow in love, respect and specific attention to your authentic traditions. I wish to tell you that the Church stands beside you and wants to continue journeying with you. Dialogue is the key to knowledge and sharing, and the Bishops of Canada have clearly stated their commitment to continue advancing together with you on a renewed, constructive, fruitful path, where encounters and shared projects will be of great help.”^[1]

In these pages we will attempt to briefly outline the context of the journey of truth and reconciliation with the indigenous peoples of Canada, in which the pope is intensely engaged, alongside the Canadian Church.

Indigenous peoples, the 'discovery' debate and the birth of Canada

First of all, who and how many are these indigenous peoples? Today we speak of three distinct indigenous peoples. Initially there are the First Nations, which include the groups, or bands that were present in these lands before the arrival of the Europeans. The term "First Nations" must be read in relation to the "successive" groups – French and English – for whom equal dignity is claimed. Today there are 634 groups with about 50 different languages.

In 2016 there were about one million people counted among the First Nations (exactly 977,230). Then there is the group of *Métis* ("mestizos"), born from the encounter between indigenous people and Europeans, 587,545 people were counted in 2016. Canada is the only country where such a group is recognized with its own specific identity. The third component is that of the *Inuit*, the people of the northernmost lands, the Arctic lands. In the past they were commonly referred to as "Eskimos," and they numbered 65,025 in 2016. In total, according to the 2016 census, they were 4.3 percent of Canada's total population, but the number was soaring, having grown by 39 percent since 2006.

Each of these three components now has its own assemblies or representative bodies, with its own authorities. They strongly affirm their cultural identity. In fact, the delegation that came to Rome to meet Pope Francis was made up of three groups, with their own distinctive dress and insignia, each of which had its own personal meeting with the pope, before the shared concluding audience, in which the pope addressed them all together.

The origin of the problems that have emerged ever more clearly in recent decades – on a national level and with international echoes – goes back, of course, to the time of the "discovery" of the American continent by Europeans and the process of its progressive colonization by the powers of the time: Spain and Portugal in the Central and South Americas, France and England in the North. What relations were established with the peoples who already inhabited the New World? What issues arose relating to the use of the resources and "ownership" of the boundless lands

where these peoples had resided since ancient times and newcomers arriving to impose their presence, believing themselves superior because of the means at their disposal, their culture and their religious faith?

The position of the Catholic Church has long been radically critical of all forms of colonialism. In her magisterium we find ancient and authoritative attestations affirming the dignity of indigenous peoples, beginning with the famous ones of Paul III in the Bull *Sublimis Deus* of 1537: “We define and declare that the aforesaid Indians and all other peoples who may hereafter be discovered by Christians, are in no wise to be deprived of their liberty and the possession of their goods, even though they have not the faith of Jesus Christ. They may and ought, freely and lawfully, enjoy their liberty and the possession of their goods. They are not in any way to be reduced to slavery.”^[2] This doctrine has subsequently been repeatedly reaffirmed with authority by the popes, up to and including Pope Francis.^[3]

It cannot be denied, however, that there had previously been statements – in the debates reference is made above all to some Papal Bulls of the end of the 15th century and to the principle embodied in *terra nullius* (“no man’s land”) – which had been used to justify the appropriation of lands, in particular by “Catholic” powers, in the light of the intertwining interests of evangelization and colonization. Over time people came to speak of a “Doctrine of Discovery” as a concept of international law, which in the 19th century was invoked in lawsuits between the new States of the American Federation and indigenous peoples. On the indigenous side there is therefore an insistent demand for the rejection of this doctrine, and various non-Catholic Christian denominations spoke out in this regard between 2009 and 2013. Therefore it continues to be necessary to reaffirm the historical, spiritual and conceptual distance traveled by the Catholic Church in order to achieve over time an ever clearer vision and an ever more decisive affirmation, in all appropriate forums, of the dignity and rights of indigenous peoples and of the irreconcilability between evangelization and colonialism.

In this journey, in the times closest to us, the words and deeds of Saint John Paul II on the occasion of some of his journeys on the American continent (but also elsewhere, as in Australia and New Zealand) should be recalled for their great relevance. With regard specifically to Canada, one cannot forget his two meetings

with the indigenous peoples during his journey to Canada in 1984, and then especially the third, which took place on September 20, 1987. Then, as an adjunct to a long trip to the United States, he returned to Canada to hold a meeting with the indigenous peoples at Fort Simpson in the remote Northwest Territories, which three years earlier had been canceled because of the dangerous weather conditions for air travel. The pope on that occasion had to limit himself to a videotaped message, but promised to return, which he did. Then, on October 12, 1992, for the 500th anniversary of the “discovery of America,” he addressed a message from Santo Domingo to all the indigenous peoples of the American continents.

But for Canada, as elsewhere, the issues relating to indigenous peoples go far beyond their relations with the Catholic Church or the other Christian Churches. Beyond the period of “discovery” and the first phase of colonialism in the eastern regions, new and enormous problems developed during the period of Canada’s formation and transformation during the 19th century, and with the massive expansion of “white” presence, activities and interests westward towards the Pacific coast. United Canada was born in 1867 as a federal Dominion of the British Empire. In 1876 the Indian Act was promulgated as the Canadian government’s legal and programmatic reference document for the management of “Indian Affairs,” that is. matters pertaining to indigenous peoples in the context of the new country.

Canada’s policy regarding indigenous peoples at that time was marked by the belief, culturally dominant at that time among “civilized” regions, in the inferiority of indigenous ethnic groups and cultures and their inevitable extinction, and thus by the pressure for the assimilation of indigenous peoples into a European-based society as the only realistic prospect of a future for them. The great buffalo herds had been exterminated in the course of the 19th century, and so the hunting peoples of the prairies had to become farmers. The First Nations were assigned – by treaty – territories where they were to remain confined and, to a certain extent, protected from the incursions of the whites. But in the end the interests of the latter always prevailed.^[4]

Together with this system of reserves, another pillar of the Canadian policy for Indian Affairs was for a long time the system of residential schools, into which children and young people of the indigenous peoples were encouraged, and

sometimes forced, to be educated in a regime involving clear and deliberate separation from their families, communities and cultures. These schools enforced rigid discipline, the imposition of the exclusive use of the English language, the learning of activities and trades suitable for assimilation into European-style society, and Christian religious practices.

Indian Residential Schools

These schools were desired and financed by the government and entrusted for their management to numerous representatives of the Christian Churches that traditionally dealt with educational activities as part of their mission. They were thus massively and directly involved in the responsibility for the implementation of the Canadian policy regarding the indigenous peoples.

The residential school system historically spans more than a century. A total of 139 schools existed, distributed throughout the country, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from Nova Scotia to Vancouver, even if they were mainly in the western territories and for the most part in the English-speaking states of Canada. In Quebec there were a few for a brief period, and the Catholic ones had specific characteristics.^[5] It is estimated that these schools hosted a total of about 150,000 children, both boys and girls, which is certainly a very large number, even if some studies maintain that they were always a minority compared to the overall total of indigenous children.^[6] The first was opened in 1831 (before Canada became a political reality), the last was closed in 1996. By 1920 there were about 80. By 1931 there were three times as many schools as there were 50 years earlier.

Just over half were entrusted to Catholic Church bodies, the others to other Christian denominations, such as Anglicans and Methodists. The Catholic ones were managed by different religious congregations or other bodies. The largest group was entrusted to the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, but there were also several other male and female religious congregations (such as Sisters of Charity, Grey Nuns, Sisters of the Assumption, and Sisters of St. Anne), as well as various dioceses. The number of Catholic bodies registered as parties to the Agreement on Indian Residential Schools, discussed below, was fifty.

Criticism of these schools and the living conditions that characterized them appeared from the first decades of the 20th century, especially with regard to the severely deficient sanitary conditions, the poor diet, the rigidity and harshness of the educational methods, and separation from families and environments of origin. Mortality was high; tuberculosis and other diseases claimed many victims.^[7] At the beginning of the 20th century the mortality rate due to tuberculosis was 19 times higher among the First Nations than the general population.

All this, of course, corresponded to limited resources allocated to these schools. The Government Department for Indian Affairs, on which they depended and to whom their leaders turned, blamed the situation on the limited resources available to them and pressed for the schools themselves to become as self-sufficient as possible. This meant relying on the indigenous students, who were to be trained in various trades and activities (such as agriculture, handicrafts, with sewing and home economics for girls), to work. Certainly, improving the quality of these schools was not among the priorities of the administrations of the time. It has been calculated that per capita expenditure for indigenous children was practically half of that for non-indigenous. During the First World War, funds were reduced to support the substantial Canadian military commitment in Europe. The fact that the bodies of pupils who died at the schools were not sent back to distant home communities, but were buried locally, was in compliance with a specific direction from the government department to reduce expenditure. This situation continued virtually unchanged for decades, without being seriously questioned, since it corresponded to the dominant view in society reflected in the politics of the country. It has been stated that “until the 1980s, no one in a position of authority would have admitted the profound failure of the residential system, or spoken publicly about its victims.”^[8]

In the course of time, however, and as the indigenous peoples' self-awareness grew, things gradually changed. As early as the 1950s, the residential school system began to be indicted by individual testimonies. Then these testimonies, often dramatic, of former pupils and their relatives about the sufferings and abuses of various kinds – cultural, but also physical and sexual – became more frequent and were increasingly reported in the press. Moreover, the conditions of the indigenous peoples, including the problems of hardship and social marginalization (alcoholism, poverty, health

situation, cultural suppression and criminal behavior), were and still are much more serious than in the rest of the population, reinforcing awareness of the very serious long-term consequences of the destruction of traditional cultures,^[9] in which the residential schools had played an important role. The indigenous peoples became more active in organizing themselves, taking their lives into their own hands, presenting their grievances and demands. There were sometimes violent confrontations over local territorial issues (such as the Oka crisis in 1990), and the emergence of reparation movements (including the famous Idle No More, founded by four indigenous women in 2012).

It then became necessary to address issues related to the situation and claims of indigenous peoples at the national level. In 1991, a Royal Commission on Indigenous Peoples was established to study and advise on government policy in relation to the country's historically original nations. It published its report in 1996. Subsequently, several class actions were filed by indigenous groups against the Canadian State and Christian Church institutions for abuses, demanding the payment of damages. This led to the Agreement on Indian Residential Schools in 2005, which provided for binding indemnification and intervention measures in favor of the indigenous peoples, and the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada in 2008. The latter completed its report in 2015, making no less than 94 recommendations and requests to the federal government and various institutions on a wide range of issues pertaining to all major aspects of the condition of indigenous peoples, including child welfare, health, language, justice, culture and education, with measures to be implemented for reconciliation in society.^[10] Work to implement these recommendations continues to this day through the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation established at the University of Manitoba.^[11]

One of the most distressing topics, and one that continues – and will continue for a long time – to stir up waves of emotion, is the search for children who died while in residential schools, about whom no records have been kept, or whose graves have not been identified. Searches around the sites of long-established schools not infrequently result in the discovery of human remains, including many of children. The Commission's very detailed report on this subject helps to understand this distressing aspect.^[12]

The grievances are manifold: sometimes the dead pupils were buried in the mission cemetery, sometimes in other nearby cemeteries of hospitals or refuges for the poor, or in cemeteries near the school. During the Spanish Influenza epidemic the deaths were so numerous that individual funerals were impossible. In addition, many of these cemeteries have been abandoned over time, following the closure or destruction of the school, which also took place some time ago. It is therefore difficult to find details of the burials, relying on the memory of individuals. So far this has been done for more than 3,000 children. No one can say for sure how many dead there were in total, but probably there were considerably more than 3,000. For the indigenous people this is rightly an important issue, so research must continue in the archives and new technologies must also be used to scan the terrain of the sites. As mentioned earlier, one fact that is highlighted in the report is that the custom of not returning the bodies of dead children to their families was in compliance with the federal department's direction to avoid excessive expenses.

It is therefore a long, arduous and complex historical process of rethinking and revising the entire history and social and political reality of Canada, which shakes the national conscience and forces an awareness of the importance and rights of indigenous peoples, who have long been neglected and violated. This process is not exclusive to Canada; it is part of a worldwide movement whose most eloquent expression and most authoritative international reference is the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

The involvement of the Church and the request for a trip by the pope

How is the Church involved in this process? The meetings and speeches of St. John Paul II mentioned above show that the Church had been well aware for decades of the change of culture and situations connected with the end of colonialism and the dominance of European culture in the world. Universal declarations of principle, however, are one thing and changes of mentality and specific outcomes in the life of society, and also in that of the Church, are quite another.

The Christian Churches have been deeply involved in the process underway in Canadian society, especially from two perspectives: 1) the relationship between the activity of evangelization – in the traditional sense of “conversion to Christianity” – and respect for the cultures and beliefs of the indigenous peoples; 2) the direct and co-responsible participation in the educational system of the residential schools, the management of which was entrusted to Church bodies. On this issue in particular, the Christian Churches, and especially the Catholic Church, have become frequent targets of very harsh criticism in recent decades.

Already in the early 1990s we have, therefore, from the Catholic Church, important declarations on the question of Indian residential schools, with explicit recognition of egregious failures and a commitment to solidarity with the indigenous peoples in their search for dignity and justice. We can recall the concluding statement of the National Meeting on the issue held in Saskatoon in March 1991,^[13] and especially the extensive document of July 24, 1991, *An Apology to the First Nations of Canada by the Oblate Conference of Canada*.^[14] The Oblates of Mary Immaculate, who were the religious congregation most involved in the residential schools, presented the indigenous peoples with an articulate request for forgiveness, the central and strongest statement of which was as follows: “We apologize for the *existence of the schools themselves*,^[15] recognizing that the biggest abuse was not what happened in the schools, but that the schools themselves happened [...], that the primal bond inherent within families was violated as a matter of policy, that children were taken from their natural communities, and that, implicitly or explicitly, these schools operated out of the premise that European languages, traditions and religious practices were superior to indigenous languages, traditions and religious practices. The residential schools were an attempt to assimilate aboriginal peoples and we played an important role in the unfolding of this design. For this we sincerely apologize.”

In 1993 the Commission for Justice and Peace of the Bishops’ Conference addressed an extensive letter to the Royal Commission mentioned above on the Catholic Church and Indigenous Peoples, under the title *Let Justice Flow Like a Mighty River*.^[16] Among other things it refers to the residential schools and their negative consequences. It also recalls that they were an expression of government policy, and

that at that time meetings and conferences for listening and healing were already underway for those suffering from the consequences of the traumas suffered in the schools.

In any case, problems that have deep and distant roots require much time, work and shared suffering to reach a solution. The process of debate, reflection and dialogue with indigenous peoples on residential schools continues. It is accentuated and intensified because complex legal issues are developing as a result of the many lawsuits filed for damages as a result of the treatment suffered in the schools. In this regard, in the already mentioned Agreement on Indian Residential Schools, reached at the national level in 2005, the Catholic parties make three very onerous commitments: 1) the direct payment of a sum of 29 million Canadian dollars (CAD) in cash; 2) the realization of specific initiatives and services “for healing and reconciliation” valued at 25 million(CAD); 3) a fundraising campaign throughout the country, to support other programs for the same purpose, aimed at raising 25 million (CAD).

In 2015 the Canadian government acknowledged that the first two commitments had been honored, and that the efforts made on the third had been adequate, although they had not achieved the expected results. Even so, the Bishops’ Conference made a very firm direct commitment,^[17] guaranteeing a contribution of 30 million(CAD) and stating its desire to respond positively to the requests made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission regarding the Catholic Church in its 2015 final report.^[18]

Some of these requests concern the formation of the clergy, religious and laity in reference to indigenous culture and spirituality, collaboration to rediscover and honor the memory of children buried without identification, and participation in the financing of projects for indigenous culture, languages and education. But the first of the Commission’s requests directly involves the pope and is worded as follows: “We call upon the Pope to issue an apology to survivors, their families, and communities for the Roman Catholic Church’s role in the spiritual, cultural, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children in Catholic-run residential schools. We call for that apology to be similar to the 2010 apology issued

to Irish victims of abuse and to occur within one year of the issuing of this Report and to be delivered by the Pope in Canada.”^[19]

The bishops of Canada, for their part, issued a strong plea for forgiveness on September 24, 2021: “Along with those Catholic entities which were directly involved in the operation of the schools and which have already offered their own heartfelt apologies, we, the Catholic Bishops of Canada, express our profound remorse and apologize unequivocally.” They went on to affirm that they were “fully committed to the process of healing and reconciliation” and, in response to the request to personally engage Pope Francis in that process, they invited a representation of Indigenous survivors, elders/knowledge keepers to travel with them to Rome to meet with the pope, “so as to discern how he can support our common desire to renew relationships and walk together along the path of hope in the coming years.” They concluded with a “pledge to work with the Holy See and our Indigenous partners on the possibility of a pastoral visit by the pope to Canada as part of this healing journey.”^[20]

We have thus returned to the starting point of our article. The delegation’s visit to Rome took place in the best possible way. The pope’s charisma, evident in welcoming and listening and the clarity of his words touched his visitors. The esteem for their cultures and traditions, the condemnation of the violence of colonization, the indignation and shame for the various forms of abuse suffered, particularly in the residential schools, as a counter-witness to the Gospel were expressed in no uncertain terms. In the press conference at the end of the trip, the representatives of the three indigenous components of the delegation and the bishops accompanying them expressed their satisfaction and confidence that the pope’s promised trip would bear decisive fruit in encouraging the indigenous peoples to affirm their rights and realize their aspirations, and that the Catholic Church would accompany them on this journey.

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In conclusion, allow us a brief reflection. In reviewing these events, we have encountered a great deal of suffering, first and foremost that of the indigenous peoples and of a great many students in the residential schools, victims of immense

injustices and serious abuses, but also – in the background – that of so many people who have expended much of their strength with the sincere intention of serving the Gospel and the indigenous peoples. They now feel frustrated by very harsh criticism, which includes generalizations, which is also not just. We think that this is a penitential price, far from useless, to be paid in a journey of purification on the part of the Church. We hope that it will bear fruit in a deeper, more fruitful and renewed – truly reconciled – encounter with indigenous peoples and the whole of Canadian society. This is a journey for which many in the Church are working generously, with enthusiasm, constancy and dedication, and in which the pope’s journey is proposed as a precious, encouraging step.

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^[41] Francis, *Address to delegations of indigenous peoples of Canada*, April 1, 2022, at www.vatican.va

^[42] On this topic and the discussion of the Doctrine of Discovery, see the important document of the Commission for Justice and Peace of the Canadian Bishops’ Conference and the Letter presenting it:

www.cccb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/catholic-response-to-doctrine-of-discovery-and-tn.pdf

^[43] Francis, Apostolic Letter *Querida Amazonia*, No. 18. The Church’s commitment to indigenous peoples in the current pontificate was particularly evident at the Synod for the Amazon and in the pope’s meeting with Amazonian peoples in Puerto Maldonado, Peru (January 18, 2018).

^[44] Moreover, the very nature of these treaties, between the end of the 19th century and the first part of the 20th century, was interpreted very differently by the indigenous tradition and the European mentality. With an effective formula, it has been said that for indigenous people they were “the recognition of a relationship,” while for non-indigenous people they were “a transfer of power.”

^[45] Cf. H. Goulet, *Histoire des pensionnats indiens catholiques au Québec*, Montréal, Les Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 2016. According to this important study, there were only six Catholic residential schools in Québec after 1950 run by the Oblate Fathers, with an approach that favored the preservation of indigenous cultures.

- ^[6]. Cf. Letter from the Canadian Bishops' Conference to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1993: www.cccb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/let_justice_flow_like_a_mighty_river.pdf/ 19, No. 8.
- ^[7]. Mention should be made of Dr. P. H. Brice's first "Report to the Department of Indian Affairs" in 1907 and later his book *A National Crime*, 1922, taken up in recent years in J. S. Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986*, Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Press, 1999.
- ^[8]. M. Abley, *Conversation with a Dead Man. The Legacy of Duncan Campbell Scott*, Vancouver, Douglas & McIntyre, 2013, 67. This book by noted Canadian journalist Mark Abley is composed as a long and articulate fictional dialogue with Duncan Campbell Scott, a long-time official in charge of the federal Department on Indian Affairs and a prominent poet in the history of Canadian literature. Abley poses to Scott today's serious criticisms of the school system and Indian policy, and Scott defends himself in light of the mindset, dominant culture, and operating criteria of his time. This is an original and well-documented effort to contextualize the issues while presenting a firm critique of the errors and injustices of the past.
- ^[9]. One of the examples of the destruction of traditional cultures was the opposition to or prohibition of ancient customs, such as the celebrations and dances of the sun, at the summer solstice, or the potlaches on the Pacific coast. Missionaries were generally opposed to such customs because they also had aspects that were not acceptable to Christian morality (such as wounding or disrespectful treatment of women).
- ^[10]. See the English text of the recommendations at https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf
- ^[11]. The center's website is: <https://nctr.ca>
- ^[12]. See Dr Scott Hamilton, *Where are the Children buried?*, in <https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/AAA-Hamilton-cemetery-Final.pdf>
- ^[13]. See "Statement by the National Meeting on Indian Residential School", at www.cccb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/apology_saskatoon.pdf
- ^[14]. Cf. "An Apology to the First Nations of Canada by the Oblate Conference of Canada", at www.cccb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/oblate_apology_english.pdf
- ^[15]. The italics are in the original text.
- ^[16]. Cf. "Let Justice flow like a mighty river", in www.cccb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/let_justice_flow_like_a_mighty_river.pdf

^[17]. See “Canada’s Bishops Provide Update on Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement”, at

www.cccb.ca/indigenous-peoples/indian-residential-schools-and-trc/canadas-bishops-provide-update-on-indian-residential-school-settlement-agreement

^[18]. Cf. footnote 7. The Recommendations for the Church are in Nos. 58-61.

^[19]. *Ibid.*, No. 58. The reference is to the Letter of Benedict XVI to the Catholics of Ireland, March 19, 2010, and in particular to No. 6 of the Letter: cf. www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/it/letters/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20100319_church-ireland.html

^[20]. The full statement from the bishops can be found at www.cccb.ca/letter/statement-of-apology-by-the-catholic-bishops-of-canada-to-the-indigenous-peoples-of-this-land