

Truth and Reconciliation – Challenges for Canadian Martyrs Parish

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Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, 2008–2015) was part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. (The 2006 IRSSA, worth \$2 billion, included the Roman Catholic church among the four churches that ran Indian residential schools, the federal government and over 86,000 school attendees.) Indian residential schools operated in all Canadian provinces and territories except Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Newfoundland between the 1870s and the 1990s. Over 6,000 children died from tuberculosis, malnutrition and other diseases resulting from poor living conditions. Much physical and sexual abuse, along with denial of Indigenous culture and language, took place. Over 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis children between the ages of four and 16 attended over 139 schools.

Commissioners Murray Sinclair, Marie Wilson and Wilton Littlechild spent six years travelling across Canada to hear the testimony of more than 6,500 witnesses, including residential school survivors and others impacted by that school system. The TRC's final report featured 94 "Calls to Action" in the areas of child welfare, education, language preservation and health. Several challenges were specifically directed to the Canadian churches. So far, the Catholic response has been underwhelming.

For example, Call to Action #58 called upon the Pope to issue an apology "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." Prime Minister Justin Trudeau invited Pope Francis to come to Canada when they met at the Vatican in May 2017. However, on March 27, 2018, the Catholic bishops reported that Pope Francis "felt he could not personally respond" to the Canadian invitations. The bishops' message was "code" – they could not agree among themselves to ask Pope Francis to come to Canada for this purpose. On May 1, 2018, the Canadian Parliament responded by voting 269 – 10 in favour of inviting the pope to Canada to apologize.

Call to Action #48 asked all faith groups to issue a statement no later than March 31, 2016, outlining how we would implement the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). The Catholic bishops (with the Canadian Religious Conference, Development and Peace, and the Catholic Aboriginal Council) drafted and issued **two important documents**: on adopting and implementing the UNDRIP, and on responding to "the errors and falsehoods perpetuated, often by Christians" concerning "The Doctrine of Discovery" and *Terra Nullius*.¹ These statements include eight future commitments worthy of our study and action.

Call to Action #59 challenges all churches to educate our members as to why these apologies were necessary. (Most parishioners have likely not heard of these Catholic commitments, since our church has not yet created a national plan to commit to education and action on reconciliation.)

The challenge for faith communities is to embrace structural change. Reconciliation embraces Indigenous peoples exercising their rights. This heralds a new relationship, requiring a shift of power and resources. Where will church structures be reformed to provide real space for Indigenous leadership?

¹ <https://www.cccb.ca/site/eng/media-room/statements-a-letters/4446-catholic-responses-to-truth-and-reconciliation-commission-call-to-action-48-and-questions-regarding-the-doctrine-of-discovery>

Reconciliation must involve us all. This is exactly why the Oblates issued a formal apology in 1990, why in 2009 Fr. Tim Coonen OMI heard Pope Benedict express his sorrow for our treatment of Indigenous peoples, and why Canadian Martyrs parish organized a panel discussion on reconciliation for March 2 and will host a Blanket Exercise presented by Kairos for all parishioners on May 11.