

+ A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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Walking Forward Together: A Call to Action for the Catholic Church and Catholic Schools

“We will continue to seek ways to contribute to healing and education...and to teach the full truth about the history of the encounter between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. We recommit ourselves, in solidarity with all people of good will, to being heralds of hope and reconciliation — a process which demands patience, work for justice, and authentic mutual dialogue.” – J. Michael Miller, CSB, Archbishop of Vancouver¹

When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established as part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement in 2007, it sought to establish a process that would guide the nation through the difficult yet necessary discovery of the facts behind the residential school system, and it was intended to help establish a solid foundation for lasting reconciliation across Canada.

‘Residential Schools’ is the term used to identify the extensive school system set up by the Canadian government that operated from the 1880’s into the closing decades of the 20th century. The residential school system had the nominal objective of educating aboriginal children but also the more damaging and explicit objectives of indoctrinating them into euro-Canadian and Christian ways of living and assimilating them into mainstream Canadian society. In many instances, children were forcibly removed from their families for extended periods of time, forbidden from speaking their languages and prevented from learning about their culture by this system expressly established to support the goal of

assimilation.² Students in residential schools grew up in an institutional environment where they often experienced anxiety, hurt and alienation instead of experiencing family life in their own communities.

By the 1980s the government and the Christian churches involved began to recognize this policy of assimilation and approach to education was fundamentally wrong. This recognition was the starting point, and religious congregations and Churches began to offer apologies, acknowledging their roles and responsibility for a school system in which many students suffered physical and emotional abuse, and in which a disturbing number of students were sexually abused.

On June 11, 2008, as part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), the Canadian government issued a formal apology in parliament for the damage done by the residential school system. In his remarks on that occasion, Prime Minister Stephen Harper formally acknowledged that this policy of assimilation was wrong. “Two primary objectives of the residential school system were to

remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based on the assumption Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal. Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, ‘to kill the Indian in the child.’ Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country.” – Prime Minister Stephen Harper, official apology, June 11, 2008.³

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, established as part of the IRSAA, was officially launched in 2008, and over a 7 year period (2008–14) commissioners held public hearings across the country in which many of the former students

of residential schools, their families, and their communities were finally empowered to give voice to their own experiences, to tell their personal stories, and to hear the experiences of others. The report of the Truth and Reconciliation report also examined the systemic legal discrimination of Canada’s Indigenous peoples that had a devastating effect

on their culture, identity, democratic rights and land claims. For many Catholics, and for many Canadians, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, released in June 2015 was an awakening, providing awareness and knowledge of the very existence of residential schools. Knowing and acknowledging the truth is a necessary first step. As Canadians, gaining insight and understanding into the devastating effects of the residential schools is a necessary precondition in bringing about justice, healing and reconciliation for First Peoples in relation to their Residential Schools experiences.⁴

The “Calls to Action” contained within the Truth

and Reconciliation Commission Final Report provide 94 detailed and specific recommendations to address these issues across Canada today. Many of the recommendations are addressed to government, some to churches, others to educators, and others, more generally to all Canadians.

“The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has challenged the often narrow and distorted ways in which we have told the story of our nation, and of European and immigrant settlement here. After hearing from over 6,000 witness, the TRC process and its Final Report have given witness to a particularly painful part of our history: the waves of suffering that accompanied the Indian Act and the Residential Schools. That hidden history continues to resonate in our Canadian present — in broken communities and



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struggling families, in high incarceration and suicide rates among our Indigenous population, and in a systemic racism embedded in societal structures and attitudes. The TRC process has taken Canadian citizens back to school, and its Final Report calls all of Canada to a profound examination of conscience.”⁵ – Most Rev. Donald Bolen, Bishop of Saskatoon Chairman of the Canadian Conference of

Catholic Bishops’ Commission for Justice and Peace

A number of the Calls to Action were directed specifically towards the Christian churches that participated in the operation of residential schools. According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission it is estimated that the Catholic church operated some sixty percent of these residential schools, primarily in western Canada.⁶ Both prior to, and subsequent to the work of Truth and Reconciliation Commission, individual Bishops, as the primary pastors and faith leaders in their respective dioceses, and Superiors of religious congregations, in their leadership roles within their respective communities, have made statements

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and offered apologies for ‘having been part of a system which, because of its historical privilege and assumed superiority did great damage to Native Peoples in Canada.’”

Speaking for the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB), Bishop Bolen stated: “The TRC process has brought about a painful awakening for many Catholics, and we see our culpability much more clearly than we did before. Both before and during the TRC process, many apologies have been offered. But we know that apologies don’t heal all the wounds.”⁷ In June 2015, the CCCB issued an initial response to the summary report of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission and committed to ensuring that the Calls to Action would receive careful hearing and full discussion. Since that time, the Catholic Church in Canada has continued to respond concretely to the Truth and Reconciliation process.

In response to Call to Action 48, the CCCB, collaborated with three other Canadian Catholic organizations (the [Canadian Religious Conference \(CRC\)](#), the [Canadian Catholic Aboriginal Council](#), and the [Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace](#)). The four organizations, representing Bishops, institutes of consecrated life, societies of apostolic life, Indigenous People, and laity, issued two documents in March 2016. In the first document, the organizations express their support for the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People](#), affirming that “its spirit can point a way forward to reconciliation

between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada.” The second document reflects on the “Doctrine of Discovery” and the notion of terra nullius, two principles which had been used by European colonists to justify confiscation of Indigenous lands. The four organizations asserted “that now is an appropriate time to issue a public statement in response to the errors and falsehoods perpetuated, often by Christians, during and following the so-called Age of Discovery.” The links below provide access to the complete documents.⁸

[A Catholic Response to TRC Call to Action 48 \(On Adopting and Implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples\)](#)

[The “Doctrine of Discovery” and Terra Nullius: A Catholic Response](#)

[An interview with Bishop Donald Bolen on the two texts](#)

[The one-page summary of the Catholic responses](#)

At the time these documents were released, the Canadian Bishops again acknowledged the tragedy of the residential school system and spoke about how the Catholic church and Canada’s Indigenous people need to [“Walk Forward Together”](#) to a better future. The Catholic response to Call to Action 48 concludes with an “appeal to all our Catholic brothers and sisters — laity, members of institutes of consecrated life and of societies of apostolic life, deacons, priests, and Bishops” — to make eight commitments in order to “continue to walk together with Indigenous Peoples in building a more just society where their gifts and those of all people are nurtured and honoured.”⁹

Again, Bishop Bolen, speaking on behalf of the CCCB in his role as Chair of the Commission for Justice and Peace, states “While many who worked in those schools sought to serve generously and carried out their duties responsibly, we have come to a deeper understanding over the past seven years about how the overwhelming legacy

of these schools was disastrous for Indigenous Peoples... The TRC Final Report wisely stressed that apologies and acknowledgements of past mistakes were an important step, but that they needed to be accompanied by constructive actions. Both texts [March 2016] urge Canadian Catholics to a deeper engagement with Indigenous Peoples, an examination of our past, and an effort to find better ways of walking forward together... Our text encourages an engagement with the UN Declaration in our parishes, schools and communities. Relationships need to be built and strengthened there, there is much learning to be done, a thousand small steps to be taken... Likewise, and I hope the present text is one such small step on a long journey towards reconciliation and a renewed covenantal relationship with Indigenous people.”¹⁰

Bishop Bolen concludes “We appreciate the way in which the TRC’s Final Report has not given up on the churches, but rather, called us to integrity and to own past sins and mistakes. We know there’s still much work to be done, both in our own coming to awareness of past offenses and in seeking reconciliation.”¹¹

As an incremental step to further the work in support of Truth and Reconciliation, the CCCB established the Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle in December 2016. Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle is a Catholic coalition of indigenous people, bishops, clergy, lay movements and institutes of consecrated life, engaged in renewing and fostering relationships between the Catholic Church and the Indigenous Peoples of Canada. The Circle seeks first to understand indigenous peoples and spiritualities in their relationship to the Catholic Church. Only by honouring indigenous peoples, cultures and spirituality and by acknowledging with sadness the many failures of the past can the work of reconciliation move forward. The circle recognizes that understanding and education must lead to action for reconciliation.¹²

Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle has a fourfold purpose: to provide a forum for its members to dialogue and encourage deeper understanding

of the relationships between the church and indigenous peoples; to serve as a united Catholic public voice on relations and dialogue between the church and indigenous peoples; to assist Catholics in engagement with the Truth and Reconciliation process and its Calls to Action; and finally to the carry out agreed-upon initiatives and concrete actions.¹³



In any community, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, the teacher has an important role in guiding student learning, skill acquisition, and achievement. In the context of Canada’s new commitment to truth and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, the teacher has an important additional role in contributing to truth, reconciliation, and healing... Teachers have an important role to play by educating all of society about the place of First Peoples within the Canadian mosaic and the importance of redressing the historical damage done to Indigenous communities.”

In the 94 recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, many of the Calls to Action emphasize the importance of education. Whether in schools, health care, the justice system, government, museums, business, sports, media, seminaries and churches, the final report identified many opportunities to achieve reconciliation with our Indigenous peoples through educational initiative. In the words of Justice Murray Sinclair, Chair of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission, “Education is what got us here and education is what will get us out.”¹⁴

As the Catholic Church responds to the Calls to Action in a variety of incremental steps, so too Catholic schools are called to embrace the work of seeking truth and reconciliation. The distinctive expectations for students of Catholic schools are determined and shaped by a vision and the destiny of the human person that emerges from our faith tradition. This Christian anthropology and worldview reveal the dignity and value of the person. Our

tradition tells us that God creatively and lovingly calls each of us into the wonder of life, sustaining us by the power of the Holy Spirit, throughout our human journey, into eternal life. This vision of the human journey is best understood within the context of relationship. It is accomplished in communion and in solidarity with all human beings.¹⁵

Rooted in this vision, Catholic education fosters the search for meaning as a lifelong spiritual and academic quest. The expectations guiding the journey of learning for all students in Catholic schools, therefore, are described not only in terms of knowledge and skills, but necessarily in terms of values, attitudes and actions informed by both faith and reason. It is in this context that Catholic teachers have both a unique responsibility and a graced opportunity to address the injustices of the past and to “Walk Forward Together” in building a more just society for the future.

Supports for Catholic Educators engaged in Indigenous Education

The Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario (ACBO) created the Institute for Catholic Education (ICE) in 1988 to coordinate the work of Catholic Associations and organizations in writing Catholic curriculum within the parameters established by the Ministry of Education. The seven partner organizations and associations who constitute ICE recognize the importance of Indigenous education and each organization and association has undertaken specific initiatives to advance work in support of truth and reconciliation. To signal the importance of this work, and to offer further support, the Catholic educational partners have directed The Institute for Catholic Education (ICE) to assist Catholic educators to respond to the Calls to Action that relate to education within the Truth and Reconciliation Commission



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report, and to the current and emerging initiatives of the Ministry of Education with respect to Indigenous education. The ICE partners also continue individually to focus their own professional learning initiatives on building awareness, understanding, and commitment to the work of Truth and Reconciliation.

The Indigenous education initiatives of ICE are intended to support the efforts of Catholic

educators across the province as they embrace the challenge of “Walking Forward Together” in Ontario Catholic schools -- through curriculum, in supports for teachers and in sharing the best practices within school boards to accomplish this important goal. It is imperative that Indigenous education be addressed through appropriate curriculum in Ontario’s Catholic schools — and that resources be developed or identified to support the distinctively Catholic way that Catholic schools will address these issues. The mandate for the ICE Indigenous education curriculum initiative is to identify, create or share resources for Catholic schools that support teachers to address the curriculum in ways that reflect the distinctive nature and mandate of Catholic schools, through the lens of gospel values and the faith tradition of the Catholic church. Other Catholic partners, including the Catholic Curriculum Corporation (CCC) and the Eastern Ontario Catholic Curriculum Corporation (EOCCC), and the 29 Catholic district school boards in the province are actively involved in curriculum initiatives, in partnership with Indigenous community leaders, to identify or to create appropriate resources. A searchable database of curriculum resources for Indigenous Education has been developed (iceont.ca) and will continue to gather resources aligned with provincial curriculum expectations.

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authentic reconciliation, and right relationship involves developing a fulsome understanding of Indigenous history, culture and traditions, and encouraging a deeper understanding of the relationships between the Church and Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous spiritualities in Canada. For this reason, the scope of curriculum development should include resources to address Indigenous history and culture before the arrival of European settlers, the four hundred year story of engagement and relationship from the time of New France and Ste. Marie among the Hurons, to treaties, the Indian Act, residential schools and contemporary developments in political advocacy and legislative, judicial and societal change. The relationship between the Catholic Church and Indigenous Peoples should be included as part

of the curriculum, presented in a fair and comprehensive manner that acknowledges the overwhelming legacy of the residential schools as disastrous for Indigenous Peoples, while also acknowledging those aspects of history and relationship where the presence of the Catholic church in Canada made positive contributions in the lives of many.

National Chief Phil Fontaine of the Assembly of First Nations, in his address to Pope Benedict XVI in 2009, eloquently presented both truths, in balance, acknowledging the many positive aspects of the relationship between Catholic Church and Canada's Indigenous peoples while very clearly naming and condemning the role the Church played in residential schools.

National Chief Phil Fontaine of the Assembly of First Nations, Address to Pope Benedict XVI in 2009

“The Catholic Church has always played a significant role in the history of our peoples. Priests and nuns were some of the first Europeans to arrive on our shores. Our ancestors taught the newcomers how to survive the cold, how to live off the land and how to navigate the vast continent. They taught them diverse and beautiful languages, including those of Mig'maq, Anishinabe, Cree and Dene. In return, missionaries built schools, churches and hospitals — not just in cities but also in remote areas of the country where our people lived.

They acted as intermediaries in treaty negotiations and interpretation, and often expressed their serious reservations about the federal government's intentions in the implementation of the treaties. Many embraced our languages with enthusiasm, wrote them down and created dictionaries, bibles and books of prayers that we still use to this day. The Catholics recognized the deep spirituality of our peoples and introduced a faith to which many Indigenous people devoutly adhere.

What brings us here today, however, was the failure those many years ago, by Canada, and religious authorities, to recognize and respect those who did not wish to change — those who wished to be different.

For reasons rooted in the imperfection of the human condition, those at the highest levels of authority in Canada came to believe that our Indigenous cultures, languages and our ways of worship were not worth keeping and should be eradicated. To implement this belief, the Canadian government adopted the policy of forcibly removing indigenous children from their families and communities and placing them in Indian Residential Schools under the care and control of members of Catholic entities and other churches.

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. We suffered needlessly and tragically. So much was lost for no good reason.

The Catholic Church, too, was harmed by the residential school experience. Many good and decent men and women of faith were tainted and reviled because of the evil acts of some. The hundreds of years of good will and hard work by courageous and committed missionaries were undermined by the misguided policy Catholic priests and nuns found themselves enforcing. The reputation of the Catholic Church was

impoverished. This, too, was tragic. But today is a new day. We are here at the Vatican in your presence, Most Holy Father, to change this sad history. Our struggle has reached a decisive moment. While the past must never be forgotten, our destiny lies in building a future with enduring foundations, the cornerstone of which must be forgiveness.

Our elders teach us that we have choices in life. We can build up, or we can tear down. We can forgive with generosity of spirit and with the hand of friendship, or we can seek sustenance from bitterness and vengeance. We come here today with the lessons of our ancestors and elders in mind. Reconciliation and friendship is what we seek. The time to rebuild a better and brighter future together is upon us. The moment to bridge the gap has come. Healing the wounds of the residential schools legacy will take years, perhaps even decades of work. But today marks an important milestone on the road out of darkness.¹⁶ – National Chief Phil Fontaine of the Assembly of First Nations, Address to Pope Benedict XVI, April 29, 2009

‘Walking Forward Together’

All educators need to be attentive to their own need to learn more about the shared history of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in this country. A commitment to understanding the historical, social and economic conditions of Indigenous populations establishes a foundation to foster respect and understanding of the cultures, traditions, languages and protocols of Indigenous peoples.

Calls to Action 62 and 63 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission specifically call educators to address the need to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms:

- 62. i. Make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples’ historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students
- 63. i. Developing and implementing Kindergarten to Grade Twelve curriculum and learning resources on Aboriginal peoples in Canadian history, and the history and legacy of residential schools.
- ii. Sharing information and best practices on teaching curriculum related to residential schools and Aboriginal history.
- iii. Building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect.
- iv. Identifying teacher-training needs relating to the above.

A part of the learning for Catholic educators should also extend to understanding the response and commitment of the Catholic church towards walking forward together. To better understand a Catholic perspective on Indigenous issues, educators are encouraged to read the statement of the Canadian Catholic Bishops (March 2016) and related documents found at:

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

The Canadian Catholic bishops ask us to “Walk Forward Together” with Indigenous Peoples “in building a more just society where their gifts and those of all people are nurtured and honoured”. This broad mandate informs and guides the efforts of Catholic educators generally¹⁷ and provides specific guidance for the ICE curriculum initiative. In their message, the Bishops go further, in an eight-point plan to urge us to:

1. Continue to work with Catholic educational institutions and programs of formation in learning to tell the history of Canada in a way that is truthful, ensuring proper treatment of the history and experience of Indigenous Peoples, including the experience of oppression and marginalization which resulted from the Indian Act, the Residential School system, and frequent ignoring or undermining of signed treaties.

2. Work with centres of pastoral and clergy formation to promote a culture of encounter by including the study of the history of Canadian missions, with both their weaknesses and strengths, which encompasses the history of the Indian Residential Schools. In doing this, it will be important to be attentive to Indigenous versions of Canadian history, and for these centres to welcome and engage Indigenous teachers in the education of clergy and pastoral workers, assuring that each student has the opportunity to encounter Indigenous cultures as part of their formation.
3. Call upon theological centres to promote and continue to support Indigenous reflection within the Catholic community and include this as part of the national ecumenical and interreligious dialogues in which the CCCB is involved.
4. Encourage partnerships between Indigenous groups and existing health care facilities to provide holistic health care, especially in areas where there are significant health needs.
5. Encourage initiatives that would establish and strengthen a restorative justice model within the criminal justice system. Incarceration rates among Indigenous people are many times higher than among the general population, and prisons are not sufficiently places of reconciliation and rehabilitation. Such initiatives include the renewal of the criminal justice system through sentencing and healing circles and other traditional Indigenous ways of dealing with offenders where appropriate and desired by Indigenous Peoples.
6. Support the current national inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls and work with others towards a healthier society where just relations flourish in families and communities, and where those most vulnerable are protected and valued.
7. Support Bishops and their dioceses and eparchies, as well as superiors of institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life, together with lay Catholic organizations, in deepening and broadening their relationships, dialogue and collaboration with Indigenous Peoples; in developing programs of education on Indigenous experience and culture; and in their efforts to continue to move forward with renewed hope following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Final Report and its Calls to Action, especially those that address faith communities.
8. Encourage Bishops, as well as the superiors of institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life, together with lay Catholic organizations, to invite a greater acquaintance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in their dioceses and eparchies, in their parishes and educational institutions, and in their communities and pastoral work, thus fostering continuing reflection in local contexts on how various aspects of the Declaration can be implemented or supported.¹⁸

With this eight-step plan, the Catholic Bishops of Canada encourage all Canadian Catholics to embrace a deeper engagement with indigenous peoples and an examination of our past in an effort to find better ways of walking forward together.

These commitments are not a comprehensive list of how Catholics presently do and potentially could stand in solidarity with their indigenous brothers and sisters, but they point to some important areas where walking together is needed.

Inequities faced by Indigenous communities, the legacy not only of the residential schools but of the broader colonial history of this nation, must be addressed, partly as a gesture of reconciliation, but also as a fundamental acknowledgement of basic human rights, and as an expression of our recognition of the inherent human dignity of each person, made in the image and likeness of God. The Catholic church plays an important role in advancing this work when it promotes a culture of encounter between the Catholic and Indigenous communities and includes Indigenous spiritual practices as part of our ecumenical dialogue and supports important contemporary Indigenous issues such as health care, criminal justice and missing women.

Catholic schools also have an important role to play in helping to address the historic injustice that is part of our colonial history. Catholic schools contribute to this work when curriculum is comprehensive and truthful about the history and experience of Indigenous Peoples. Catholic schools have a broad mandate to help form and shape our graduates as discerning believers, caring family members, collaborative contributors and responsible citizens. As Christians, we are called to bear witness to our

faith through our commitment to love, peace and justice and as Catholic educators, we are privileged to be in a position to support and advance the important work of truth and reconciliation. In this way, we can “Walk Forward Together” with Indigenous people, to build “a more just society where their gifts and those of all people are nurtured and honoured.”

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