

# A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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## *Signs of Hope, Hope for Signs* – *Indigenous Perspectives for Catholic Education* by Bailey Clyne, with reflections from Sharon Giroux and Tesa Fiddler

This monograph is a result of a webinar held on December 12th, 2024, the **National Day for Prayer in Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples**. Our webinar on that day included this reflection:

Good afternoon everyone, my name is Bailey Clyne and I am the Indigenous student trustee for the Dufferin Peel Catholic District School Board. I am honoured to be here today to reflect on the theme “Signs of Hope and Hope for Signs.”

Today is the Day of Prayer in Solidarity with Indigenous People. The theme “Signs of Hope and Hope for Signs” invites us to recognize the work that is being done within Catholic education and our journey towards reconciliation with Indigenous people.

There are numerous signs of hope in the Catholic education system when it comes to reconciliation with Indigenous people. There has been a growing commitment from Catholic schools when it comes to teaching about and acknowledging the history, injustices, and harm that was done to Indigenous peoples. Inviting Indigenous elders and knowledge keepers into schools and classrooms to share their experiences has also been a sign of hope towards reconciliation. Within the Church, it is nice to see the initiatives they have created, such as today, the day of prayer in solidarity with Indigenous people, which is a

symbol of hope. This day is a great opportunity for the Catholic community to take time to reflect, pray, and commit to actions of healing and reconciliation.

One of the most impactful steps forward is the integration of Indigenous studies classes which helps raise more awareness about the history of Indigenous peoples. Lastly, a sign of hope that I have seen is the work that the Ontario Catholic School Trustees’ Association (OCSTA) has put into providing resources and programs that can be used by teachers that connect Indigenous perspectives and teachings to our Catholic faith. Last year as a student trustee, I had the opportunity to work with OCSTA and many other Catholic school board student trustees across Ontario to create a resource with Indigenous influencers. This resource highlights many Indigenous people who have done amazing things and connected their achievements to how they have lived out the Catholic graduate expectations. OCSTA also led the development of an Indigenous resource for the Ontario Catholic virtual online learning portal for staff and students. This resource supports the inclusion of all students in the classrooms and highlights the joy, beauty and brilliance of Indigenous peoples.

It is important to recognize the work that the Church and Catholic education has done in regards to Truth and Reconciliation because while there have been some steps made in the right direction, it is imperative

to use this as a stepping stone for what needs to be done to fully achieve the goal of reconciling with Indigenous peoples. The way forward requires us to do more than just learning; we must commit to real, systemic changes that reflect the core values of our faith.

I am going to share what I hope for the future and what I believe needs to happen to improve the relationship between the Church, Catholic people and Indigenous peoples.

Beyond curriculum updates and the inclusion of Indigenous studies courses in schools, it is important to now look at what can be done to improve them, specifically when it comes to the content being taught. Currently the course focuses mostly on the trauma that Indigenous peoples have faced and the negative parts of their history. But, it is also important to highlight the brilliance and resilience of Indigenous people.

Bringing in Indigenous elders and knowledge keepers is a great first step, but now it is important to foster ongoing relationships with Indigenous communities and peoples so that Indigenous perspectives can inform more aspects of curriculum. Having Indigenous history taught through all aspects of curriculum is important so that all students are required to learn about Indigenous people and Truth and Reconciliation. Although having Indigenous studies courses is amazing, it is an optional course, so many students will miss out on this knowledge and not have a deeper understanding of the injustices that Indigenous peoples have and continue to face. Having more information about the history of Indigenous people in history classes is a great way to achieve this. This information being accessible for all students through including it in more aspects of curriculum will help to ensure a better education for the future generation because they will play a major role in achieving reconciliation. I know that Indigenous ways of knowing have started to become integrated into more areas of the curriculum – such as science, which is a very positive step and I hope to continue to see more of this happening in the future.

Lastly, Catholic education must not only recognize the injustices of the past, but actively contribute to the healing process. The land acknowledgement should not be utilized as a mere gesture, but rather should incite action towards Truth and Reconciliation. It is crucial that these words are not said thoughtlessly, but are said with true intention and commitment to make real changes towards reconciliation. Reconciliation is a two-way agreement. Indigenous people cannot reconcile with themselves. Indigenous people have put a lot of effort into reconciling with the Church, but when the efforts are not reciprocated, it ultimately diminishes the whole effort in its entirety. By adding more Indigenous histories to our curriculum we are achieving truth, but I believe that more effort needs to be directed into achieving the reconciliation we have been working towards.

What the Church has done so far to reconcile with Indigenous peoples shows me that there is hope for the future. But my biggest hope is that the Church and the Catholic education system will continue to listen to Indigenous peoples for guidance on what else needs to be done to achieve and implement reconciliation. Let us remember that hope does not mean waiting passively for change, but rather working actively, every day to create that change.

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## Reflection by Tesa Fiddler

Bailey's presentation on Catholic education, framed through the lens of "Signs of Hope and Hope for Signs," was both inspiring and thought-provoking. As an Indigenous person myself, her words resonated deeply, particularly how she spoke about the importance of fostering spaces that nurture both spiritual and cultural identities.

As a First Nations student, Bailey's voice carried a unique and critically important perspective that reminded educators and leaders of education institutions of the opportunities we must teach the 'Truth', elevate the voices of Indigenous students and their families, and utilize education as a tool not just for academic growth, but for personal and communal growth and healing.

The messages she shared highlighted the responsibility of Catholic education to lead in reconciliation efforts by honouring Indigenous perspectives and fostering environments where cultural and spiritual identities can coexist and thrive. Bailey's reflections highlighted not only the challenges but also the opportunities to build systems that promote equity, understanding, and mutual respect. Schools can do this by providing Indigenous languages, land and cultural learning opportunities for Indigenous students.

It was a powerful reminder that "Signs of Hope" come through concrete actions, and "Hope for Signs" rests in the collective efforts of education systems to move forward together with compassion and accountability.

## Reflection by Sharon Giroux

Listening to Bailey's presentation and her reflections during the panel discussion was moving. The theme of the discussion was 'Signs of Hope and Hope for Signs,' and she exemplified this with her words. She spoke her truth, using her own life experiences as a Catholic student and a Student Trustee as examples. She expressed her thoughts in such an eloquent manner and highlighted key points about why we were gathered. Moving reconciliation forward will require a strong commitment from everyone involved, with all parties actively working to make the necessary changes on this path to reconciliation.

Bailey offered a variety of ways to continue improving our relationships, especially for future generations. She suggested integrating Indigenous ways of knowing into the curriculum, highlighting the joy, beauty, and brilliance of Indigenous peoples, and examining ways to make the Indigenous studies course more than just optional, as well as improving how the content is taught. These options were not available when I was her age, and hearing her share ideas about how we can move forward has inspired me to keep advocating for these changes.

**Tesa Fiddler** is Anishinaabe/Anishinew from Kitchinuhmaykoosib Inninuwig. She is the Coordinator of Indigenous Education at Thunder Bay Catholic DSB and is currently on secondment as an Education Officer at the Ministry of Education.

**Sharon Giroux** is a member of M'Chigeeng First Nation. She resides in Chatham-Kent and is a member of the Marten clan. She is the Vice President of Equity for OECTA Provincial.

