

Pope Francis's Apology: Encounter and Meaning

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For the deplorable conduct of those members of the Catholic Church,
I ask for God's forgiveness and I want to say to you with all my heart:
I am very sorry.¹

—Pope Francis to Indigenous Delegates from Canada

POPE FRANCIS'S APRIL 1, 2022, APOLOGY TO INDIGENOUS delegates representing First Nations, Métis, and Inuit in Canada was heartfelt, eliciting profound emotions of joy and sorrow from those who witnessed it. His apology came after private meetings with each group of delegates earlier in the week. He met separately with each group. During these meetings, the delegates communicated to the Pope their own personal stories about the legacy of the residential schools. In the first part of this paper, I will focus on the words of the apology itself. Following that, I will say something about the symbolism of the meetings and what needs to follow.

ENCOUNTER

Three lines from Pope Francis's final address to the Indigenous delegation are striking. The Pope said: "I have listened attentively to your testimonies." He stated: "Listening to your voices, I was able to enter into and be deeply grieved by the stories." The final line is the apology itself: "For the deplorable conduct of those members of the Catholic Church, I ask for God's forgiveness and I want to say to you with all my heart: I am very sorry."² Why are these words so important to so many Indigenous peoples in Canada? I suggest it has to do with two things: the encounter itself and the impact of the words "I am sorry."

Encounter is a rare thing. It can only happen when one meets another face-to-face. Encounter is difficult from a distance or even via a technological application like FaceTime or Zoom. Why would so

¹ Pope Francis, "Address of His Holiness, Meeting with Representatives of Indigenous Peoples in Canada," April 1, 2022, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/april/documents/20220401-popoli-indigeni-canada.html.

² Francis, "Address of His Holiness."

many Indigenous people travel so far if not for the actual encounter with the person from whom they sought to be heard and seen, from whom they sought an apology? In her essay, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” French philosopher Simone Weil wrote, “The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: ‘What are you going through?’”³ Love was sought and received in this rare and—some would say—beautiful encounter between Pope Francis and the Indigenous delegates. From a place of woundedness and hope, Indigenous peoples sought something vital from a person who symbolized so much pain and possibility in their lives. It seems to me that the Pope was not seen as merely the enemy, the perpetrator from whom one demands justice. I am not convinced justice was the most important or grounding motivator for this journey. “Justice” is an abstract term denoting the condition of something morally correct or fair, or of righting a wrong. It seems to me many among the Indigenous delegation to Rome were seeking something more than justice.

One can experience this in the responses to Pope Francis’s apology. Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner Chief Wilton Littlechild

felt a swell of emotions and tears in his eyes as he heard Pope Francis apologize at the Vatican on Friday for the Roman Catholic Church’s role in residential schools. The words came on the chief’s 78th birthday. It was especially meaningful, he said, because during the 14 years he attended residential school as a child in Alberta, he was not allowed to celebrate. “I hoped for it. I prayed for it. I dreamt for it,” he said. “But I never expected to live and see and feel it.”⁴

Similarly, 85-year-old Métis elder Angie Crerar, with tears streaming down her face, said “she could see that Francis spoke with sincerity. ‘My heart is so full I can hardly speak.’”⁵ In these experiences and many others that occurred during the week, encounter (or love of neighbour) was prior to justice.⁶ Meaning was constituted

³ Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge Classics, 2021), 69.

⁴ Kelly Geraldine Malone, “‘I Prayed for It’: Emotions, Tears as Pope Apologizes for Residential Schools,” *Toronto Star*, April 1, 2022, www.thestar.com/news/canada/2022/04/01/indigenous-delegates-set-to-have-final-meeting-with-pope-francis-at-vatican.html.

⁵ Malone, “‘I Prayed for It.’”

⁶ I am drawing on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, in particular his two major works *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

in these encounters.⁷

Even though the face-to-face encounter took precedence in these meetings, the *meaning* of the words themselves went beyond the encounter. The meaning exceeded the small group of individuals who encountered Pope Francis during those few days in Rome and reached out to many residential school survivors across and perhaps even beyond Canada. The significance and power of his apology is important to note. It has a force behind it that can heal. Here, the apology is not descriptive, rather it is creative. It creates an act. It is an action not merely acknowledged for its truth value, that is, as an uttered apology. Rather, the utterance itself brings about an action, the act of apologizing. This, in part, explains the power behind the words and their emotionally charged response. The reverberations of Pope Francis's speech act, the act of apologizing, went well beyond the small delegation of Indigenous peoples who witnessed the apology in person. I think the power of the apology has something to do with what Bernard Lonergan identifies as "incarnate meaning."

INCARNATE MEANING

Canadian theologian and philosopher Bernard Lonergan identifies different "carriers of meaning" or different ways meaning is embodied.⁸ These carriers of meaning are: intersubjective, artistic, symbolic, linguistic, and incarnate meaning. Each carrier is rich and deep. I have no doubt all were operative during the meetings in Rome—the unspoken meaning of intersubjectivity in the smiles and the tears; the artistic and symbolic meaning of the music, costumes, singing, and dancing, of cultures and traditions being communicated; and the linguistic meaning of the words spoken publicly and in private. However, the carrier of meaning I wish to focus on is incarnate meaning.

Lonergan speaks of incarnate meaning as "*cor ad cor loquitur*," heart speaking to heart. Incarnate meaning "is the meaning of a person, of his way of life, of his words, or of his deeds. It may be his meaning for just one other person, or for a small group, or for a whole national, or social, or cultural, or religious tradition."⁹ Thinking about incarnate meaning in relation to the meeting between the Indigenous delegates and Pope Francis helps one understand the intensity and outreach of the apology. While encounter is face-to-face, the incarnate meaning of the Pope with Indigenous delegates representing survivors of

⁷ I am grateful to Christina Vanin, Associate Professor at St. Jerome's College, for this insight into constitutive meaning in relation to Pope Francis's apology.

⁸ See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 57–73.

⁹ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 73.

residential schools allowed for a broadening of the meaning and impact of the apology. It explains why the apology spoke to so many more survivors even though they were not physically present in Rome. While encounter demands the face-to-face relation, the incarnate meaning of the Pope allowed the apology to move beyond the immediacy of those present to the much larger number of survivors watching and listening from their own territories. The Pope's apology conveyed a meaning that came from the person he is, his life lived, his words spoken, and the deeds he has done. It also came from his role as leader of the Roman Catholic Church.

As Natan Obed, President of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, said: "Behind the coverups, behind the indifference over 100 years, behind the lies, behind the lack of justice, this Pope—Pope Francis—decided to go right through it and decided to speak words the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis have been longing to hear for decades."¹⁰

MORE IS NEEDED

Testimonies of survivors in Rome who were present during the apology, and from those who watched and listened from Canada, give evidence to its powerful impact. At the same time, it is important to note that there were those who felt the apology was not enough. There were those who did not experience the "encounter." They were critical of the specific wording, and felt not enough was said and done. Also, as journalist Tanya Talaga wrote in her March 30, 2022, piece in *The Globe and Mail*: "Many in our communities do not believe an Indigenous delegation should be here at all, that the damage cannot be undone."¹¹ Clearly more needs to be done. All three leaders of the Indigenous delegations expressed both gratitude for what had happened during the week-long meetings and the need for further action.

As Natan Obed stated,

The apology that was made was one that is long overdue. It also is an apology that individual survivors and intergenerational survivors all will have very different feelings and perspectives about today. As an institution this is an apology that we have formally asked for through ITK's [Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami] endorsement of the TRC's calls to action and also in preparation for this particular meeting. It was a very clear position of ITK's to bring forward a papal apology in Canada in relation to the Churches' role in residential schools. So today we have

¹⁰ Malone, "I Prayed for It."

¹¹ Tanya Talaga, "In Rome, I Have Seen Indigenous People Bring Hope and Resistance to the Pope's Doorstep," *The Globe and Mail*, March 30, 2022, www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-in-rome-i-have-seen-indigenous-people-bring-hope-and-resistance-to-the/.

a piece of the puzzle. We have a heartfelt expression from the Church that was delivered by Pope Francis in an empathic and caring way. I was touched by the way in which he expressed his sorrow and also the way in which he condemned the actions of the Church in particular regards. There is much more to do. So, an apology is a part of a larger picture.¹²

In a similar vein, Cassidy Caron, President of the Métis National Council, and leader of the Métis delegation to Rome, stated:

On Monday we delivered a message to Pope Francis. One of inviting him on a pathway forward for truth, healing, reconciliation, and justice. All of the messaging that we brought to Pope Francis has come from hours spent with our survivors and intergenerational survivors so that we could do what we could to represent the diversity of the Metis nation and the diversity of their perspectives. In Pope Francis's statement today, I see that we were heard, I hear that we were heard. He truly reflected the way that we are. That we are all connected in a web of interconnected relationships. I see that in his message and that is truly meaningful to us. The apology that we received today is absolutely historic and so meaningful to so many people. This opens a door for us to continue to move forward on our healing journeys. ... And it opens a door for us to continue to fight for action. Any truly effective process of healing requires concrete actions. An apology is one step forward but there is much work to be done. And much action to be done as well.¹³

Finally, Dene National Chief Gerald Antoine, who led the Assembly of First Nations delegation to Rome, states:

Pope Francis ... had issued a long overdue apology for the Church's role in the Church run residential schools. I am very certain that there is a lot of emotions today. We accept this apology as a gesture of good faith that acknowledges he will come to our home to visit with our families. To formally apologize to all our family members. This day for us is very special. Finally, we are going to be able to begin to put some closure. However, despite this positive gesture, it is like hunting, we just spotted a fresh track, and we still need to do work. We still need to follow those tracks. So, we have an amazing tradition, we have an amazing way of life. We all know that this way of life has brought

¹² Natan Obed, "Indigenous Delegates React to Pope's Apology for Church Role in Residential Schools," April 1, 2022, *YouTube*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=umYT5U7TYcE.

¹³ Cassidy Caron, "Indigenous Delegates React to Pope's Apology."

us to this point. We never gave up our teachings, we never gave up our language, we never gave up our culture, we never gave up our governance. There is a change going forward. ... We are going to be going home to share what we heard here and what we experienced. ... It is indeed an historic step for the holy Father. We seek to hear these words of apology on our lands and our homes.¹⁴

In all three reactions to Pope Francis's apology, we hear clearly that more is needed. In the Ojibway-Anishinaabe tradition, there are culturally based processes allowing for the coming together of Anishinaabe and non-Anishinaabe people. One such process of coming together is to enter one another's lodge.

It is a process of coming together in such a way that the parties put aside their biases and enter into an agreement as to how to live together. Importantly, it entails a willingness for both parties to acquire a degree of understanding of the other's *i-nah-di-zi-win* (ontology), *nah-nahn-gah-dah-wayn-ji-gay-win* (epistemology), and *bish-kayn-di-ji-gay-win* (pedagogy). Inherent in the process is participating in a ceremony such as a Talking Circle, the exchange of gifts, and a Pipe Ceremony to arrive at some mutually agreed form of accommodation—that is, reconciliation.¹⁵

The Delegation of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit traveled a long way to enter the Pope's lodge, and now the Pope was to come to Canada to enter the Indigenous peoples' lodges. This protocol allows for a "truly level playing field" where Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples can come together in a good way, that is, in a relationship that is mutually respectful.¹⁶ The path had already been laid by the Indigenous delegation entering the Pope's lodge, sharing their culture and their stories, exchanging gifts, and other ceremonies that constituted the meetings during the week. They experienced the world in which the Pope lives. The positive encounter with Pope Francis in Rome facilitated this protocol moving to the next stage—the Pope's visit to the land from which the delegates have come. It seems possible, in this encounter and the entering of each other's lodge, that the residue of colonialism might move closer to healing at least in this concrete instance and in future meetings. It is possible to get to know people in their own setting and this facilitates getting rid of stereotypes and finding some common ground. The path was launched in Rome and moved to closure when the Pope visited Canada.

¹⁴ Gerald Antoine, "Indigenous Delegates React to Pope's Apology."

¹⁵ Jerry Fontaine and Don McCaskill, *Di-bayn-di-zi-win: To Own Ourselves* (Toronto: Dundum, 2022), 19.

¹⁶ Fontaine and McCaskill, *Di-bayn-di-zi-win*, 20.

In his final speech on Friday, April 1, 2022, the Pope clearly expressed his deep appreciation of the spirituality, culture, and language of the Indigenous peoples living in Canada. His words convey a profound grasp of the values that inhabit Indigenous peoples' way of being in the world. His recognition of the importance of land for Indigenous people was particularly striking. He stated,

First, your care for the land, which you see not as a resource to be exploited, but as a gift of heaven. For you, the land preserves the memory of your ancestors who rest there; it is a vital setting making it possible to see each individual's life as part of a greater web of relationships, with the Creator, with the human community, with all living species and with the earth, our common home. All this leads you to seek interior and exterior harmony, to show great love for the family and to possess a lively sense of community. Then too, there are the particular riches of your languages, your cultures, your traditions and your forms of art. These represent a patrimony that belongs not only to you, but to all humanity, for they are expressions of our common humanity.¹⁷

SEVEN SACRED TEACHINGS AS GUIDE¹⁸

I wish to end by pointing out the convergence between Pope Francis and the Delegation of Indigenous peoples from Canada who visited him in late March 2022. It seems to me that what made the encounter deep and abiding was the shared concern to walk a good path in relationship with others—both humans and non-humans. One way of expressing this is to draw on the Ojibway-Anishinabe seven sacred teachings, which guide one to walk upon this earth in a good way, in good relationship with others. The seven sacred teachings, also called the seven Grandfather teachings or the seven Grandmother teachings, are core values that guide one in having good relations. They are not prohibitions but ways of living a “good life.” The first is *respect*, meaning deeply cherishing each other, taking a second look, and not jumping to conclusions about another. Respect is for others, the earth, and for oneself. *Humility* is connected to the earth. We are of the earth. It signifies generosity and not looking upon yourself as better than anyone else. *Truth* denotes the “sound of the heart” in the

¹⁷ Francis, “Address of His Holiness.”

¹⁸ For this section on the seven sacred teachings, I am drawing on Anishinaabe/Ojibway academic and jurist John Borrows's book *Law's Indigenous Ethics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019) and paper “Seven Generations, Seven Teachings: Ending the Indian Act,” research paper for the National Centre for First Nations Governance, 2008, fngovernance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/john_borrows.pdf.

sense of speaking from the heart. It signifies speaking according to one's experiences. *Honesty* points to a way of life or character. Here one is undeviating, straight, correct, and right. *Wisdom* (spiritual knowledge) means seeing more fully. With greater light a broader horizon opens. *Love* includes ideas of pity, empathy, and deep unconditional love. It should continually flow to sustain those around us. Finally, *bravery* means being strong hearted. It means being courageous even when things do not turn out as one hoped. To follow these teachings is to live ethically. All are equally important. All are needed to walk a good path.

I mention these teachings because I saw each one operative during the encounter between Pope Francis and the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit delegates. There was wisdom, bravery, love, humility, respect, truth, and honesty that guided both the preparation for and the actual meetings themselves. If these guides to ethical living, to good relations were not present, I believe the visit would have failed. This meeting required integrity from both parties as they entered dialogue with each other. The seven teachings are the backdrop to living this integrity in relation to each other and all our relations. In line with this, I was struck by the generosity of spirit that exuded from the visit, so much hope could clearly be seen in the sharing of prayers, songs, and dancing.

The groups have shared their prayers and songs and danced in St. Peter's Square. On Thursday, members from Coast Salish and Squamish First Nations in British Columbia, wearing traditional headwear and regalia, sang honour songs for the First Nations delegation as they left the hotel for the Vatican, then again in St. Peter's Square as supporters and media waited for their meeting with the Pope to conclude. ... "What that song means is our spirit is coming back to us. It's really significant that we share that song at this time because our spirit is coming back to us," said one of the drummers.¹⁹**M**

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¹⁹ Willow Fiddler, "Through Gifts and Customs, Indigenous Delegates to Vatican Share Their History and Hopes," *The Globe and Mail*, March 31, 2022, www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-indigenous-delegates-shared-gifts-customs-with-vatican-pointing-to/.

ethics, bioethics, Indigenous spirituality, and Lonergan studies. In 2009-2010, during a sabbatical year, she earned a Certificate in Organizational and Clinical Ethics, working in hospitals in the Greater Toronto Area. This experience grounded her teaching in bioethics. She has taught a course titled *Indigenous Spirituality* each year since 2015 leading to a deeper exploration of her Indigenous roots.