

Doing Theology by Listening to Marginalized Voices? Methodological Elements from Encountering Indigenous Families in a Northern Canadian Community

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Abstract: Based on the experience of encountering Indigenous families in a northern Canadian community, this article draws methodological elements for doing theology by listening to people who suffer marginalization. Firstly, I situate *listening to marginalized voices* as an act of receiving Vatican II and a way of putting into practice Pope Francis’s call for a church that goes out to be evangelized on a path of encounter and dialogue. Secondly, I question the terminology used in referring to those who are marginalized and revisit the centre-periphery paradigm from a theological perspective, in favour of the disruptive movement of bringing the peripheries to the centre, in resonance with Matthew 25. Finally, I draw lessons from the experience of listening to Indigenous families in the Canadian north, on the journey towards a theology that listens to the voice of God in those who are marginalized.

THERE IS A RISING ASPIRATION EMERGING IN THE CATHOLIC Church today to inform our theology with voices that have been marginalized, and thus to do theology starting from the “existential peripheries.”² This intuition finds fertile ground in the pontificate of Pope Francis, which constitutes a new stage in the reception of Vatican II. This article begins by briefly situating the theme of listening to marginalized voices in the teachings of the Council and examining its articulation in Francis’s magisterium. I subsequently question the terminology used in referring to those who are marginalized and revisit the centre-periphery paradigm from a

¹ I would like to thank M. Therese Lysaught, Alexis Artaud de La Ferrière, Brigitte Cholvy, Marion Lugagne Delpon, and the anonymous reviewers of this article for their helpful feedback.

² A worldwide research project has been undertaken by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development entitled “Doing Theology from the Existential Peripheries,” for which the final reports from each continent were published in October 2022, migrants-refugees.va/resource-center/publications/.

theological perspective. I then delve into the particular experience of listening to Indigenous families in the context of Canada and inquiring as to what can be learned from these encounters to renew theology in the church. The question I seek to respond to is: *What does the experience of encountering Indigenous families in Canada contribute to developing ways of doing theology by listening to people whose voices are marginalized?*

I approach this question as a non-Indigenous Canadian from a Catholic perspective, specializing in theology regarding families. My aim is not to elaborate a systematic theology of the family in the context of a given Indigenous community, and certainly not for Indigenous peoples in general. Rather, it is to begin gleaning lessons from conversations that open up new perspectives and horizons both for informing theology regarding families and doing theology by listening to Indigenous persons. In the wake of the papal apology issued for the residential school system, in response to Call to Action no. 58 of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, this approach hopes to contribute to the work laid out in the subsequent Calls to Action. Calls to Action nos. 59 and 60 call upon churches to raise awareness among their congregations and clergy regarding the involvement of Christian churches in colonization, in particular the history and legacy of residential schools, and their responsibility on the path of reconciliation.³

In this article, I will speak about doing theology as a way of living out the call for the Church to listen to people who have been marginalized—whether by society, the church, or both. This includes but is not limited to those who find themselves in a situation of poverty from a socio-economic perspective. In referring to marginalized persons, Pope Francis has spoken in terms of “the peripheries.” This term has its usefulness but also its limitations. It is associated with the centre-periphery model developed as a way of understanding dynamics

³ Call to Action no. 59 calls upon churches in Canada to “develop ongoing education strategies to ensure that their respective congregations learn about their church’s role in colonization, the history and legacy of residential schools, and why apologies to former residential school students, their families, and communities were necessary.” Call to Action no. 60 calls upon Christian academic institutes and schools of theology to “develop and teach curriculum for all student clergy, and all clergy and staff who work in Aboriginal communities, on the need to respect Indigenous spirituality in its own right, the history and legacy of residential schools and the roles of the church parties in that system, the history and legacy of religious conflict in Aboriginal families and communities, and the responsibility that churches have to mitigate such conflicts and prevent spiritual violence.” Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, 2015, 224, 232, ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf.

of inequality in the world. On the one hand, “periphery” can be seen as a horizontal, not a vertical term: it does not designate higher or lower, better or worse, but rather further or closer. On the other hand, it is a rather static term, designating some as being on the peripheries and others at the centre without suggesting mobility between the two. It is not enough to speak of people “on the margins” as if they were meant to be there. This would only normalize the inequalities they face, as if there was no need to do anything about it. Unfortunately, any way of referring to those who experience inequality and injustice runs the risk of being reductive.

In this article, I will speak mostly in terms of those who are “marginalized,” making every effort to avoid any essentialization or romanticization of the real people I am speaking about. It is noteworthy that both Indigenous scholarship⁴ and documents of the Government of Canada⁵ utilize the language of marginalization with reference to the situation of Indigenous peoples. To speak of “being marginalized” denotes a condition imposed on someone by another. It is not a judgment on the marginalized person, but rather a critique of the system and structures that have marginalized him or her. Ultimately, these terms pale in comparison to the real people to whom they seek to refer, whose dignity defies and exceeds any term used to speak to their condition in life. No generic term can speak satisfactorily about the realities of peoples’ lives, though we must always be in search of the most respectful language. The tension here is to find ways of naming the situations of suffering, injustice, and inequality people face, while at the same time using terminology that does not inflict further suffering, injustice, or inequality. The aim is not simply to speak of those who are “marginalized,” but to do so in

⁴ See Wellesley Institute, “Towards Understanding and Supporting Marginalized Children and Youth in Ontario: The Case of Growing Up Indigenous,” June 2019, wellesleyinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Towards-Understanding-and-Supporting-Marginalized-Children-and-Youth-in-Ontario-The-Case-of-Growing-Up-Indigenous.pdf; Terry Moore, “Aboriginal Agency and Marginalisation in Australian Society,” *Social Inclusion* 2, no. 3 (2014): 124–135; Jo-Anne Fiske, “Boundary Crossings: Power and Marginalization in the Formation of Canadian Aboriginal Women’s Identities,” *Marginalised Peoples* 14, no. 2 (2006): 247–258; Mylène Jaccoud and Renée Brassard, “The Marginalization of Aboriginal Women in Montreal,” in *Not Strangers in These Parts: Urban Aboriginal Peoples*, ed. David Newhouse and Evelyn Peters (Ottawa: Policy Research Initiative, 2003), 131–146.

⁵ See Government of Canada—Department of Justice, “Socio-economic Marginalization,” in “Understanding the Overrepresentation of Indigenous People in the Criminal Justice System,” June 11, 2024, justice.gc.ca/socjs-esjp/en/ind-aut/uo-cs; Government of Canada—Indigenous Services Canada, “An Update on the Socio-Economic Gaps between Indigenous Peoples and the non-Indigenous Population in Canada: Highlights from the 2021 Census,” October 25, 2023, sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1690909773300/1690909797208.

view of their *de*-marginalization, bringing those on the peripheries to the centre.

LISTENING TO THE MARGINALIZED AS AN ACT OF RECEIVING THE COUNCIL

The impetus to listen to marginalized voices resonates strongly with certain key emphases present in the teachings of Vatican II. The first paragraph of *Gaudium et Spes* emblematically expresses the desire for the church to resonate with the men and women of our time, based on the conviction that “nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo” in the hearts of the followers of Christ (no. 1). This calls for a theology that takes seriously and exemplifies in its way of proceeding the close solidarity of the church with men and women today—and *especially those who suffer in any way*—listening to and identifying with their “joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties” (no. 1). In what could be seen as a prefiguration of synodality, the Pastoral Constitution goes on to affirm: “With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish, and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood, and set forth to greater advantage” (no. 44). In this light, the act of listening is not a mere sociological exercise, but a matter of delving more deeply into the truth of the Gospel so that it may be better understood and presented in each culture and era.

In the midst of the Council, Yves Congar posited that the church was “called to find a new style of being present in the world.”⁶ Congar proposed a church “imbued with the evangelical ideal of poverty” in order to overcome tendencies to “betray the spirit of the Gospel” on the one hand, and “isolate and put up barriers” between the church and the people on the other hand.⁷ What Congar saw as the most promising path to this poor and servant church capable of embracing the Gospel was “a true dialogue between the Church and the world,” including a dialogue between “the periphery and the centre,” based on his conviction that the church becomes itself only in realizing the truth of its relationship with others.⁸

In this light, listening to those who are marginalized can be considered an act of receiving Vatican II insofar as it puts into practice certain fundamental principles that emerge from the Council. Based on the writings of Jesuit historian John O’Malley, Laurent Villemin

⁶ Yves Congar, *Pour une Église servante et pauvre* (Paris: Cerf, [1963] 2014), 109.

⁷ Congar, *Pour une Église servante et pauvre*, 109, 112.

⁸ Congar, *Pour une Église servante et pauvre*, 114.

pointed out three transversal questions that span the Council's teachings: the way the church manages change; the relationship between the centre and the periphery; and the Council's *modus operandi* or "style."⁹ All three relate, more or less directly, to listening to people on the margins, which can be seen as a way of navigating a change of era, a path for recalibrating the relationship between centre and periphery, as well as a *mise en oeuvre* of the style of Vatican II.

In terms of the Council's *style*, three traits could be delineated that underpin the church's call to listen to people on the peripheries. The first is the *listening attitude* of the church. This is established perhaps most firmly in the preamble of *Dei Verbum*: the church *listens* to the Word of God so that the Gospel message of salvation might be heard by all (no. 1). The mission of proclamation is grounded first and foremost in the ongoing act of *listening*. In this sense, a posture of listening can be understood as an act of receiving the Council. The church listens above all to the Word of God, but it must also listen to the multiplicity of voices it is called to interpret. In the language of Francis's pontificate, this includes hearing the cry of the poor, as well as of the earth (*Laudato Si'*, no. 49). It is interesting to ask what resonance exists between the Word of God and these many voices in the world. Pope Francis has characterized Vatican II as "a re-reading of the Gospel in light of contemporary culture," affirming that "the dynamic of reading the Gospel, actualizing its message for today—which was typical of Vatican II—is absolutely irreversible."¹⁰ Francis sees Vatican II as operating a dialogue between the Gospel and contemporary culture, in other words, between the Word of God and the many voices of the age. Perhaps in light of the Council, we could see the place of the church as being precisely at the crux of that dialogue.

A second trait of the Council's style that promotes the call to listen to the marginalized is *concern for people living in poverty*. The Council Fathers were aware of the poverty afflicting countless people around the globe, and the conciliar documents witness lucidly to their solicitude for people facing poverty and hardship. The socio-economic principles enumerated in *Gaudium et Spes* carry a strong exhortation for individuals and nations to come to the aid of those in need: "Since there are so many people prostrate with hunger in the world, this sacred council urges all, both individuals and governments, to remember the aphorism of the Fathers, 'Feed the man dying of hunger, because if you have not fed him, you have killed him'" (no. 69).

⁹ See Laurent Villemain, *L'Eglise à la rencontre de l'autre* (Paris: Cerf, 2022), 108.

¹⁰ Francis, "Interview with Antonio Spadaro, SJ," September 21, 2013, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html.

Indeed, for certain Council Fathers, this was such a central concern that they committed to personally living in a spirit of poverty by signing the *Pact of the Catacombs*.

A third trait of the Council's style that undergirds listening to the peripheries is the *dynamism of going out*. The decree *Ad Gentes* on the mission activity of the church affirms that "The pilgrim Church by its very nature is missionary" (no. 2). Richard Gaillardetz has referred to the missiological vision of Vatican II as that of a "centrifugal Church."¹¹ This *exocentric* vision of the church corresponds with the double principle announced in *Dei Verbum*: that the Church *listens* to the divine Word so that it may be *heard* by all. The church does not own the Word of God. Rather, the church must continually *receive the Gospel* in order to go out to discover how it resonates in the lives of men and women of every time and place.

STARTING FROM THE MARGINS TO BE EVANGELIZED AS A CHURCH

These conciliar principles find new expression in Francis's emphasis on *going out to the margins*—a leitmotif of his pontificate from the outset. In the General Congregations that preceded his election as pope, then-Cardinal Bergoglio stated: "The Church is called to come out from itself and to go to the peripheries, not only geographical, but also existential: those of the mystery of sin, of suffering, of injustice, those of ignorance and of the absence of faith, those of thought, those of every form of misery."¹² These words clearly indicate the dynamism of a *church that goes out*, which Francis would further develop in his programmatic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*.

As indicated in *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis sees the peripheries as being both the destination of the church's *going out* as well as the starting point for beginning anew (nos. 215, 235). Going out to encounter the peripheries is a fundamental *gesture* of Francis's pontificate, and the dynamic that he aspires to for the entire church. The question then becomes, *why* start from the peripheries? Several key elements of response are found in Francis's articulation of the church's preferential option for the poor.

They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an

¹¹ Richard R. Gaillardetz, *An Unfinished Council: Vatican II, Pope Francis, and the Renewal of Catholicism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 116.

¹² These words were received by Cardinal Jaime Ortega of Havana, in the form of handwritten notes.

invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and put them at the centre of the church's pilgrim way. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, listen to them, speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom God wishes to share with us through them (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 198).

If theology today aspires to *listen to marginalized voices*, this paragraph provides a convincing reason *why* to do so. Here, Pope Francis introduces a notion to which the church's theology and pastoral practice are not necessarily accustomed, namely: being evangelized by those who are marginalized. Oftentimes throughout history, the church has gone out to evangelize. Yet how often does the church go out *to be evangelized*? According to Francis, this is not only as a call or invitation for the church in our day but rather a *need*. At first glance, going out to the peripheries could be seen as a response to the needs of the people living there. Yet here Francis situates the need in the other direction. It is the church who needs to receive from those often seen as being "in need." A key Francis identifies for letting this need be met is the call to *listen to them*, which in turn corresponds to his conviction that "they have much to teach us." Francis frames this assertion in profoundly theological terms. Listening to marginalized people goes hand in hand with the call to "find Christ in them." Learning from them responds to the invitation to "embrace the mysterious wisdom God wishes to share with us through them." The church is called "to put them at the centre of its pilgrim way," recognizing God's "saving power at work in their lives." Through this Christological and theological underpinning, it becomes clear that listening to people on the peripheries is a way of hearing God's mysterious wisdom and getting in touch with the salvation he is working out.

The need to listen to marginalized voices could be framed as a gauge of listening to everyone. This is logical in theory: if we listen to those who for various reasons find themselves far from "the centre," then we ought to be able to listen to everyone in between. Yet there is a double risk here. On the one hand, listening is reduced to a mere democratic exercise. On the other hand, seeing listening to marginalized persons as a way of listening to everyone makes them a mere stepping stone in order to listen to all, rather than a privileged locus in their own right. The most recent Assembly of the Synod framed the special need to listen to those on the margins as a step forward on the path toward healing, repentance, justice, and reconciliation with them: "The Church needs to listen with special attention and sensitivity to the voices of victims and survivors of sexual, spiritual, economic, institutional, power, and conscience abuse

by clergy members or persons with Church appointments. Authentic listening is a fundamental element of the path to healing, repentance, justice, and reconciliation.”¹³ Moreover, those gathered in the Synodal Assembly emphasized their attentiveness to the cry of those who are suffering around the world, asking themselves how the church can contribute to pursuing paths of reconciliation, hope, justice, and peace: “The cry of those who are poor resounded among us, of those forced to migrate and of those suffering violence and the devastating consequences of climate change. . . . We have all, at all times, taken this cry into our hearts and prayers, wondering how our Churches can foster paths of reconciliation, hope, justice, and peace.”¹⁴

QUESTIONING THE RAPPORT BETWEEN THE MARGINS AND THE CENTRE IN LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL

When referring to real people who face difficult situations, it is essential to question the terminology we employ. Terms such as “margins,” “peripheries,” and “the poor” all have their limitations. They can come across as demeaning, patronizing, or reductive. Indigenous scholar Margaret Kovach speaks of the need to avoid the “tattooing of lack.”¹⁵ Kovach warns against seeing Indigenous individuals or communities in terms of what they *do not have*—what they lack. It is critical to find the most adequate way of speaking of people who experience marginalization without reducing or relegating them to categories that either romanticize their existence or stigmatize them further. For example, the Assembly of the Synod that took place in 2023 spoke in terms of “people in poverty” instead of “the poor,” conscious of the “many faces” of those who experience its diverse forms, and spoke explicitly of the “constant risk, one to be carefully avoided, of viewing those living in poverty in terms of ‘them’ and ‘us,’ as ‘objects’ of the Church’s charity.”¹⁶

The centre-periphery model is part of the dependency theory that sought to explain a lack of economic development in Latin America in the 1960s, according to which resources flow from less wealthy countries “on the periphery” to more wealthy nations “at the

¹³ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “*A Synodal Church in Mission*”: *Synthesis Report from the First Session*, no. 16f, October 28, 2023, synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf.

¹⁴ Synod of Bishops, *Synthesis Report from the First Session*, Introduction.

¹⁵ Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021 [2009]), 238.

¹⁶ Synod of Bishops, *Synthesis Report from the First Session*, no. 4.

centre.”¹⁷ In this sense, powerful centres in global capitalism maintain their dominance at the expense of less powerful regions, kept on the peripheries of the system that thrives on their inequality. In recent decades, scholars in various fields have sought to revisit and rethink the centre-periphery paradigm. There have been efforts to “reconceptualize multi-layered relationships” and “question existing hierarchies and focusing in particular on perspectives from ‘lesser’ states and cultures.”¹⁸ Efforts to remap the centre-periphery dichotomy have sought a multifaceted approach that embraces complexity, fluidity, and dynamic exchange between different parties. It also opens the possibility of networks and liminal spaces that foster more equitable and reciprocal relationships.¹⁹

From a social perspective, the peripheries can be associated with those who are marginalized, pushed to the edges of society. Theologically, we could conceive of the peripheries as those who are afflicted, as in the biblical term *anawim*, which signifies the “little ones” of God. This “littleness” may sound disparaging or infantilizing. Yet it is to be interpreted as meaning that those who are “little” in the eyes of the world are in fact great in the eyes of God. Thus, from a Christian point of view, the “peripheries” are in reality the *centre* in God’s eyes. Scripture reveals time and again how the centre of God’s attention is not those who are economically or politically powerful, but those who on the outskirts both of society and the dominant religious communities of the day. Jesus’s ministry manifests a clear orientation towards “the lame, the mute, the blind, the maimed,” whom he heals with compassion (Matthew 15:30). In the logic of the Gospel, the margins are not forsaken; rather, they are privileged *loci* of God’s engagement with humanity, where healing and redemption are at hand.

The logic of the Gospel thus implies remapping the configuration of the centre and peripheries, so that the peripheries may constitute the centre of the church’s attention and action. It is in these terms that Pope Francis has spoken of social transformation: “When I speak of change, I don’t just mean that we have to take better care of this or that group of people. I mean that those people who are now on the edges become the protagonists of social change. That’s what’s in my

¹⁷ See Claudio Katz, *Dependency Theory after Fifty Years: The Continuing Relevance of Latin American Critical Thought*, trans. Stanley Malinowitz (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

¹⁸ Ulrich Tiedau, “Re-Mapping Centre and Periphery: Concluding Thoughts,” in *Re-Mapping Centre and Periphery: Asymmetrical Encounters in European and Global Contexts*, ed. Tessa Hauswedell, Axel Koerner, and Ulrich Tiedau (London: UCL, 2019), 189.

¹⁹ Jordan Kellman, “Beyond Centre and Periphery: New Currents in French and Francophone Atlantic Studies,” *Atlantic Studies* 10, no. 1 (2013): 4, doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2013.769793.

heart.”²⁰ It is not a mere matter of charity towards those who have less, but a question of disrupting systems and structures that foment inequality, discrimination, oppression, and injustice.

THE CASE OF LISTENING TO INDIGENOUS FAMILIES IN CANADA

For generations, Indigenous peoples in Canada have suffered from the marginalization that has resulted from colonization at the hands of government, churches, and society at large. As Indigenous writer Patty Krawec recounts, the ravenous hunger of “big brother” the white man sought to make Indigenous peoples vanish from the lands of their ancestors: “From the very beginning, the newcomers worked to destroy Indigenous people. Their aim included destroying our beliefs about ourselves and our relationship with the seen and unseen world and replacing them with European Christian beliefs.”²¹ Like projects of settler colonialism across the globe, it was an attempt to “destroy in order to replace.”²² Colonization sought to erase the identities, cultures, and histories of Indigenous peoples in Canada. In residential schools, Indigenous children were given numbers rather than names. Their languages were forbidden, and their stories not heard. Their culture and way of life were seen as an obstacle to eradicate on the path of “settling” Canada.

As a non-Indigenous person, I am an outsider within Indigenous communities. My position in Canada is that of a newcomer whose family came to the country last century, a drop in the bucket compared to the immemorial Indigenous generations that have inhabited these lands for millennia. This double status—newcomer and outsider—requires an epistemologically and personally humble approach. An example of studying families from a marginalized cultural group to which one does not belong is found in the work of Lisa Sowle Cahill. Cahill sought to glean lessons from African American families to renew the Christian vision of the family in today’s society. Cahill stated her purpose as follows:

I do not aim to treat theories of the black family in America comprehensively nor claim anything like a full and true appreciation of the realities behind the theories that I do treat. I certainly do not presume to speak for African Americans in relation to family matters.

²⁰ Pope Francis and Austen Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 18.

²¹ Patty Krawec, *Becoming Kin: An Indigenous Call to Unforgetting the Past and Reimagining Our Future* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf, 2022), 41–44.

²² Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409.

My aim is, rather to begin to absorb the lessons about family life that African American experience can teach those of us who come from other segments of America and who tend to approach the situations of families in this country primarily from the standpoint of the “traditional,” middle-class nuclear family, relatively privileged by class and socioeconomic standing.²³

As a white woman, Cahill did not try to offer a comprehensive black theology nor claim expertise in African American culture or history; rather she sought to integrate the experience and perspective of African American family life to more fully understand the family from a Christian point of view. Like Cahill, I am not a member of the community whose perspective I seek to learn from. My research seeks to *start* absorbing lessons about family life the experiences of Indigenous persons can teach those of us who come from other segments of Canadian society, and indeed other parts of the world, enlarging the cultural horizons of Catholic theology regarding families.

Significant research has been done on Indigenous families in other domains, such as law, social work, and family studies, but relatively little in theology. The aim here is not simply to take families into account or study them from afar, but to encounter them personally as the basis for doing theology. What is more, Catholic theology on families has often focused heavily on a Western understanding of family, rather than engaging with the vast array of family models in diverse cultures. Researching Indigenous peoples in Canada, one becomes quickly aware of the crucial importance of *family*. On the one hand, family is the foundation for the kinship relationships that characterize Indigenous life. On the other hand, the long history of colonization in Canada has had a particularly devastating impact on Indigenous families, whose effects continue to this day. In many ways, the situation of Indigenous peoples in Canada today is deeply connected with the systematic rupture of families through the residential school system.

In theological terms, the past and present marginalization of Indigenous peoples in Canada constitutes a “sign of the times”²⁴ that demands our attention. In Canadian society at large, and specifically

²³ Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), 112.

²⁴ Here we speak of “sign of the times” as that which cannot be ignored without jeopardizing the credibility of our witness to the Gospel, and thus where God awaits the church in the present. See Massimo Faggioli, “Reading the Signs of the Times through a Hermeneutics of Recognition: *Gaudium et Spes* and Its Meaning for a Learning Church,” *Horizons* 43 (2016): 338.

in the Catholic Church, there is a growing awareness of the wounds suffered by the Indigenous peoples in Canada, particularly as a result of the residential school system: a government-mandated, church-administered policy in which children were removed from their families in a project of forced cultural assimilation,²⁵ whose express aim was to “kill the Indian in the child.”²⁶ In 2015, the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada stated that “the establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of [Canada’s Aboriginal policy for over a century], which can best be described as ‘cultural genocide.’”²⁷ Returning from his visit to Canada in 2022, Pope Francis likewise characterized the experience of the residential school system—“taking away children, changing culture, changing mentality, changing traditions, changing a race”—as “genocide.”²⁸ In the face of this tragic situation, the church is gradually recognizing its need to repent and be converted. The residential school system intentionally destroyed the bonds that characterize Indigenous kinship to eradicate Indigenous cultures, languages, and spiritualities. Removing children from their parents has led to intergenerational trauma, creating a context in which residential school survivors may have struggled to raise their own children since they themselves did not receive the parenting they needed as children. In many ways, the situation of Indigenous peoples in Canada today is intimately related to the harm inflicted on family life over generations. The church is slowly realizing that it cannot remain unmoved in the face of the suffering it has imparted to Indigenous families.

²⁵ “These residential schools were created for the purpose of separating Aboriginal children from their families, in order to minimize and weaken family ties and cultural linkages, and to indoctrinate children into a new culture—the culture of the legally dominant Euro-Christian Canadian society” (TRC, *Summary of the Final Report*, v.)

²⁶ TRC, *Summary of the Final Report*, 130; 369; 375; 376.

²⁷ TRC, *Summary of the Final Report*, 1.

²⁸ See Francis, “Apostolic Journey to Canada (24–30 July 2022): Press Conference on the Return Flight to Rome,” July 29, 2022, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/july/documents/20220729-voloritomo-canada.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/july/documents/20220729-voloritomo-canada.html). Moreover, “Many Catholics are calling on Church leaders to take more decisive action with Indigenous peoples to assist in the healing of those wounded by the Church, particularly by the Indian Residential School system and its legacy. There is also a general desire to listen to, and walk with, Indigenous Peoples (the theme of the Summer 2022 visit of Pope Francis to Canada’s Indigenous Peoples is ‘Walking Together’). Many expressed a desire for the Church to walk in greater humility, in a restored relationship with Indigenous Peoples and with all of creation.” See Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Synod on Synodality: National Synthesis for Canada*, no. 8, August 31, 2022, ccc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Synod-on-Synodality-EN-2022-08-31.pdf. This is accompanied by a wider awareness in the church of the importance of Indigenous people, particularly evident in the Synod on the Amazon in 2019 and the Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia* that followed.

Amidst this complex situation, Catholic theology regarding families has much to learn from listening to Indigenous families in Canada. The effects of colonization and the residential school system on families were unfortunately understated in the public addresses and apologies offered by Pope Francis during the penitential pilgrimage to Canada in 2022. Indigenous families were critically attacked by the colonial project of forced assimilation and cultural genocide in which the church was a key actor. On the path of truth and reconciliation, the church must recognize its role in the intergenerational trauma Indigenous families have inherited from the past, raise awareness of the realities they face in the present, and support their journey of healing into the future.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE IN A NORTHERN CANADIAN COMMUNITY

The experience of listening to Indigenous families in a community in the Canadian north took place in the wake of the historic visit of Pope Francis to Canada from July 24–29, 2022, for a penitential pilgrimage of healing and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. The visit was a response to Call to Action no. 58 of the Final Report of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, which called upon the Pope to come and apologize for residential schools on Canadian soil. News of the discovery of unmarked graves in Kamloops and elsewhere in 2021 redoubled the cry for the Pope to apologize in Canada. In spring 2022, an Indigenous delegation of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit went to the Vatican to share their stories and witness with Pope Francis. After meeting in private with each group, he asked them for forgiveness during a public audience.²⁹ A few months later, the Pope reiterated his apology at the site of the former residential school in Maskwacis, Alberta. There were mixed reactions to the Pope's visit and criticism over certain "missed opportunities," such as ambiguity about the church's *institutional* responsibility for residential schools, no explicit reference to *sexual abuse* suffered in the schools, and absence of Indigenous cultures and languages in the *liturgies* celebrated over the course of the visit. In spite of some disappointment over the more formal aspects of the visit, the informal moments were perhaps more transformative, both for the Pope and those he met with. Fr. Daryold Winkler, an Indigenous Catholic priest, recounted that: "The Pope met

²⁹ "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. And I join my brothers, the Canadian bishops, in asking your pardon." Pope Francis, "Meeting with Representatives of Indigenous Peoples in Canada," April 1, 2022, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/april/documents/20220401-popoli-indigeni-canada.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/april/documents/20220401-popoli-indigeni-canada.html).

with survivors and really listened to them. He listened without barriers. Most of the work of reconciliation took place behind the scenes and was not witnessed by the public. He took extra time to listen fully, careful not to interrupt the survivors' stories, which sometimes made him late for other engagements."³⁰ Jane Barter has characterized this as the "patient work of listening" by which "a shared horizon of meaning can emerge."³¹ Barter summarized Francis's action as follows, which offers a template for non-Indigenous people in walking with Indigenous: "The Pope invites the Indigenous peoples of Canada to permit him to accompany them on this journey (*ashtêhtew*) in lamenting the wounds of the body of Christ among Indigenous peoples and seeking their healing."³² However, as Jeremy Bergen has noted, "The Pope will not remain in Canada to implement follow-up actions; these will largely be the responsibility of the church in Canada."³³

The varied responses to Francis's visit reflected the diversity of Indigenous peoples in Canada. The three main groups of Indigenous peoples in Canada are the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. Together, they comprise approximately 1.8 million people or 5 percent of the Canadian population. Among First Nations, there are over 630 communities, representing over fifty nations and fifty Indigenous languages.³⁴ As Indigenous writers Bob and Cynthia F. Joseph note: "Indigenous communities in Canada are made up of people from many different cultures and languages. A generic or homogeneous 'Indigenous People of Canada' does not exist. . . . However, the cultural diversity among the Indigenous population is often overlooked or not realized."³⁵

During the two summers that followed Francis's visit to Canada, I had the privilege of being welcomed in a Dene community in the Canadian north as part of a program working to raise awareness and build relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous on the

³⁰ Doris M. Kieser and Jane Barter, "Missed Opportunities and Hope for Healing: Reflections of an Indigenous Catholic Priest—Interview with Fr. Daryold Winkler," *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, no. 1 (2023): 78, doi.org/10.55476/001c.66253.

³¹ Jane Barter, "Walking Apart and Walking Together: Indigenous Public Reception of the Papal Visit," *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, no. 1 (2023): 83, doi.org/10.55476/001c.66237.

³² Barter, "Walking Apart and Walking Together," 86.

³³ Jeremy M. Bergen, "Papal Apologies for Residential Schools and the Stories They Tell," *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, no. 1 (2023): 51, doi.org/10.55476/001c.66235.

³⁴ See Government of Canada—Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, "Indigenous Peoples and Communities," June 13, 2024, rcaanc-cimac.gc.ca/eng/1100100013785/1529102490303.

³⁵ Bob Joseph and Cynthia F. Joseph, *Indigenous Relations: Insights, Tips & Suggestions to Make Reconciliation a Reality* (Saanichton, BC: Indigenous Relations, 2019), 12.

path of reconciliation.³⁶ I found it to be an arduous context, both geographically and socially, where suffering, hardship, and death are part of daily life. As in other remote Indigenous communities, there are alarming rates of suicide, particularly among young people.³⁷ I also recognized many of the other key issues that affect Indigenous communities in Canada, such as a shorter life expectancy, more limited access to education and health care, and difficulties in finding employment.³⁸ This particular community was never home to a residential school but it did have a so-called Indian Day School that operated from the 1940s to the 1980s. Families speak of how they suffer from substance abuse and domestic violence. I found it to be a community in which spirituality plays a central role in daily life, with a strong emphasis on prayer and trust in God. Among the younger generations, there has been disillusionment with the church in the wake of revelations of unmarked graves in 2021, which has stung the wounds inflicted across generations by the residential school system.

The primary objective of my time in the community was simply to be with the people and listen to them. Part of this listening took the form of a research project that aims to inform Catholic theology by learning from Indigenous perspectives and experiences regarding family life.³⁹ As I got to know people, I would ask if they would be interested in being interviewed. The aim was not so much to seek a representative sample, but rather to listen to those I encountered about the joys and challenges their family had experienced. This research in

³⁶ To protect the confidentiality of the research participants in the community, its precise location is not disclosed in this article. The risk associated with personal data, such as family experiences and religious beliefs, being attributed to the participant seems to outweigh the possible benefit of mentioning the name of the community.

³⁷ See Statistics Canada, “Suicide among First Nations People, Métis, and Inuit (2011–2016): Findings from the 2011 Canadian Census Health and Environment Cohort (CanCHEC),” June 28, 2019, statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/99-011-x/99-011-x2019001-eng.pdf?st=RS2r9P2u; T. Kue Young, Boris Revich, and Leena Soininen, “Suicide in Circumpolar Regions: An Introduction and Overview,” *International Journal of Circumpolar Health* 74 (2015): 1–8, doi.org/10.3402/ijch.v74.27349.

³⁸ See Joseph and Joseph, *Indigenous Relations*, 36–38.

³⁹ The research project was ethically reviewed and approved by competent authorities of the Pontifical John Paul II Theological Institute for Marriage and Family Sciences in Rome and by KU Leuven in Belgium, the universities with which the researcher is associated. However, since the research context is located in Canada, special attention was paid to the guidelines laid out in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS 2), which “provides ethics guidance that applies to all research involving human participants—including their data and/or biological materials—conducted under the auspices of an institution eligible for funding by the federal Agencies (CIHR, NSERC, SSHRC).” While the research does not fall under the jurisdiction of a Canadian academic institution, the researcher nevertheless completed the CORE-2022 course, including Module 9 on research with Indigenous persons.

no way intends to portray “the Indigenous family” as if the vast diversity of Indigenous families could be essentialized or rarefied as a singular object of study. Rather, the motivation is to listen to Indigenous individuals about their personal experience, so as to receive their words and break down the ignorance of Indigenous perspectives among non-Indigenous. My hope is that this contributes, even in some small, modest way, to the shared journey of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous in Canada. Overall, I was privileged to interview forty persons—of whom thirty-eight were from the local Dene community and two others were cultural mediators—spanning over thirty hours of interview in total and 250 pages of written transcript. On a human level, it was clear from the outset that the “encounter” had primacy over the “interview” itself. My priority was to spend time with people and get to know one another. Only after interacting with a person informally on one or more occasions would I ask if he or she would be interested in doing an interview.

The present article does not analyse the thematic content of the interviews. Rather, I will draw some lessons from the *experience of listening* to Indigenous families in a community in the Canadian north that may be helpful in doing theology by listening to people who suffer marginalization. Doing theology in this way is a two-fold path of letting what we have heard *inform* our theology and at the same time letting the experience of listening itself *form* our way of doing theology. The following eight points serve as elements of response to the question: *What does the experience of encountering Indigenous families in Canada contribute to developing ways of doing theology by listening to people living on the existential margins?*

Entering Another's World as a Guest

This attitude is almost natural when one travels thousands of kilometres to arrive in an unfamiliar, isolated community. However, it can also be a disposition to cultivate more generally in approaches to theology that seek to listen. This calls for reflection on not only *how* we listen to people but also *where* we listen to them. Do we meet them “on their turf” or on ours? Of course, this question not only applies to the physical location of where the encounter takes place. It is most importantly a style and posture to adopt wherever we might be. Especially when it comes to asking questions that touch upon a person’s life story, it is of the utmost importance to “take off our sandals” as we realize that we are standing on sacred ground. This also underlines the importance of welcome. It is the hospitality of the local community that enables the relationship to develop and makes the research possible. In a spirit of mutuality, this calls for being

hospitable in return, welcoming the words and experiences that community members have to share.

I have realized that this calls for adapting myself to encounter the other person on his or her terms. This can also mean shifting the research methodology according to the concrete conditions, leaving space for methods to be prudently and discerningly adapted. Ultimately, I experienced this as a certain emptying of myself; not pretending to be someone I am not, but rather making room for others.

Trust Develops by Being There and Sharing Life

As Indigenous supporter Clare Land has observed, “The first aspect of working with Indigenous people is to try to build trust.”⁴⁰ The first interview I conducted in the community began by cutting wood. Without saying a word, it was as if the person was asking me, “Are you willing to walk the mile with me?” As we began the interview, it started raining. So, there we sat, out in the rain, as the man responded to my questions and shared his story. After some twenty minutes, he invited me under a tarp next to his tent, where our interview continued. The longest interview took place after sharing a family meal together. I was grateful to be invited as a guest around the kitchen table. The interview that ensued out on the porch of the home lasted over two and a half hours.

In both cases, I dare to think that the experience of having *been there*, of having shared an experience together, was the key to these two men opening up and having so much to share with me, as someone whom they felt was genuinely interested in listening to what they had to say. The point is not to be with people and share life in order to “win the prize” of an interview. Rather, it is to see trust as an indispensable condition for authentic listening. In an organic and unforced way, trust develops as we spend time together and share ordinary experiences of life with one another. Trust is especially crucial when one is an outsider in a community that has suffered injustice and inequality at the hands of outsiders. Ethical research protocols also help to cultivate trust, including confidentiality, informed consent, and clearly stating the scope and purpose of the research.

Of utmost importance is the climate of the interview and the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee, fostering a rapport of trust, respect, cultural sensitivity, and authentic care and concern. A key disposition of the interviewer is that of a student who wishes to learn from what the interviewees have to share. This requires an attitude of openness and the suspension of preconceived notions as

⁴⁰ Clare Land, *Decolonizing Solidarity: Dilemmas and Directions for Supporters of Indigenous Struggles* (London: Zed, 2015), 147.

much as possible, while at the same time being aware, and not naïve, regarding one's own cultural lens.

Letting Ourselves Be Surprised by the Faith of Others

Given the significant influence of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) in this area for over a century, the community remains largely Roman Catholic. The sole place of worship in the community is a Catholic church. I had not expected that the community would be so strikingly marked by Catholicism. Arriving in the community I had assumed there would be a strong rejection of Catholicism given the church's role in Canada's colonial past and the residential school system. The range of attitudes of Indigenous in Canada towards the Christian faith and church institutions is but one example of the vast diversity across Indigenous communities.

In the case of this community, public places such as the airport, the health clinic, the band hall, the convenience store, and the local lodge are adorned with images of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The devotion of the people is evident in the way they pray the Rosary before Mass, the heart with which they sing hymns in their own Dene language, and their undying trust in God no matter the hardships they face. Of course, this would not necessarily be the case for all Dene communities, as Indigenous peoples have varied and complex relationships with Christianity. While some Indigenous are fervent Christians, others understandably contest the influence of Christianity in favour of the resurgence of Indigenous spiritualities. In many cases, people practice both Indigenous and Christian spiritual traditions, bringing together these two identities in various "hybrid" forms.⁴¹

Communities characterized by popular piety can sometimes challenge those who have received a theological formation. It can be easy to forget that throughout his ministry Jesus was often amazed by the faith of others. Christ was not struck by the eloquence or sophistication of people's faith, but rather its audacity, simplicity, and sincerity. Perhaps theology today is called to be surprised by the faith of others, welcoming it as a precious gift touched by the spark of divine wisdom.

Especially in a context of evident interculturality, in which differences can seem like a source of division or separation, I came to see that recognizing each other as brothers and sisters in Christ can be a way of finding common ground to journey together, enriched by the diverse ways faith is lived out and expressed.

⁴¹ See *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada*, ed. James Treat (New York: Routledge, 1996).

Wrestling with Our Complicity and Letting Our Views Be Shifted

Against the backdrop of colonization in Canada and the church's role therein, I have come to bear a sense of complicity with the structural causes underlying much of the suffering Indigenous persons experience. In this regard, the words of Clare Land offer an important orientation: "The challenge is to admit it, to resist it, to undo it, yet also to see how it provides us with opportunities to resist the workings of colonialism. These aspects of reckoning with complicity are nonetheless based on the realization that complicity is inescapable. This is a contradiction that must be factored in and reflected upon continuously."⁴²

Of course, doing research with Indigenous peoples, and listening to the peripheries in general, runs the risk of a kind of *transactionalism*, in which we go out to receive something we need or want from others. Another way of seeing this would be *extraction*, whereby the researcher goes to "extract" data for the sake of his or her own research without considering any possible benefit for the community, as occurs with natural resources in many contexts of colonization throughout history and to this day. This would only exacerbate existing inequalities. Avoiding this risk requires being aware of it and reflecting upon how to mitigate it on an ongoing basis. Key remedies in this regard, so it seems, are reciprocity and relationship.

These relationships can open us to a new awareness that brings us to question and shift our conceptions of faith and society. For me, the experience in the north brought me to revisit my vision of God, my country, the church and its mission, and the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous in Canada. I was struck to the heart as I learned anew how God scorns triumphalist missionary conquest, and acts rather through closeness with people who suffer, in order to redeem what they are going through. I saw before my eyes the ongoing effects of the settler colonialism that is the spine of the nation called Canada. This has made me turn my attention and focus my energy on the situation of Indigenous peoples in Canada and working towards right relationship with them as a non-Indigenous person.

Experiencing the "Mystique" of Living Together as a Path of Reciprocity

Even over a limited period of time, the experience of *living together* with others offers a unique richness to the atmosphere in

⁴² Land, *Decolonizing Solidarity*, 229.

which research unfolds. When working across cultures, there is a risk of perpetuating an excessive and unhelpful division between “us” and “them.” This can be accentuated by a “folkloric” approach to interculturality, fascinated by various cultural aspects without genuinely encountering the *persons* who are part of that culture and understanding their situation. According to Clare Land, overcoming cultural distance “is not directed to denying differences”; rather, it is a question of “reconstructing the interests of members of dominant groups” to reach “different modes of relating: modes marked by a greater sense of mutuality.”⁴³ Everyday moments of living life together and enjoying one another’s company can help nourish the sense of reciprocity. During my time in the community, this included such simple activities as going fishing, playing Monopoly, and drinking Kool Aid together.

Sitting with the Pain of the Other and Sharing in Their Grief

On numerous occasions during interviews, painful experiences were recounted. The lesson learned in the Canadian north was to simply be there, showing solidarity through our attentive and supportive presence. Those moments give the impression of being in touch with the suffering of Christ. It is an experience of *compassion* in the etymological sense of the word: being with the suffering of another. This is the experience of Mary and her *stabat* at the foot of the Cross. We could ask ourselves, to what extent does “remaining with” or “abiding in” Jesus involve staying with the suffering of others, not to idealize or perpetuate it, but to be present to it as a way of journeying forward together, following the dynamic of the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is a call to realize how Christ suffers with and in those who are suffering. We, like Mary, have the opportunity to be there with him, standing in the hope that there will be redemption. I realize my own poverty when I recognize that I cannot “solve” anything. Yet I find meaning in letting someone else’s poverty meet my own. There lies a space for discovering Christ who makes himself poor with us.

Being Clear about Our Intentions

I have grappled with the question of *why* I am doing this research. I am confronted with the need to clarify my intentions for myself and others. It is important that the people I conduct interviews with are conscious of my intentions. The key ethical requirement in this regard

⁴³ Land, *Decolonizing Solidarity*, 226.

is that of *informed consent*. Here, being “informed” includes being aware of who I am as a researcher and what the research will be used for. Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith refers to this as “positioning,” which she explains as follows: “Given the history of unethical and exploitative research on Indigenous peoples, it is important for a researcher to be clear and open about who they are and what they are seeking and to locate themselves in context. The basic questions to answer are ‘Where are you from?’ ‘What brings you here?’ ‘How long do you intend staying?’”⁴⁴ This calls for ongoing critical reflection on my own intentions, as well as on my positioning and relationships with the community in which the research takes place.

Returning to the Essential

Listening to men and women in the community, I was often struck by how their words and way of being have the power to bring us quietly back to the essentials. On the walls of their homes, many have sayings such as “Family is everything” or “Here we love,” surrounded by photos of their loved ones and family members across multiple generations. I saw these as signs of the central role of family in the lives of individuals.

This is also evident in the ways funerals take place in the community. The entire community stops in this shared moment of grieving: the local store is closed, and the attention of the whole community turns to supporting one another amidst the loss they share. Amidst such suffering and difficulties, many aspects of their life point to a keen awareness of what is most important, what really matters. In this regard, they have much to teach us so that we too can learn from them how to be more focused on the essential.

In spiritual terms, “returning back to the essential” could be seen as a path of *conversion*, coming back to what truly matters in God’s eyes, to the source of life and meaning to which God draws us and where he awaits us. In theological terms, this return to the essential could be seen as a dynamic of *ressourcement*, rediscovering the sources of faith and the church to inspire a new fidelity to the Gospel and shed new light on the priorities and orientations of our mission in the world today.

⁴⁴ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 3rd ed. (London: Zed, 2021).

EMERGING QUESTIONS AND NEXT STEPS FOR THEOLOGY ON THE PATH OF DECOLONIZATION

This singular experience of listening does not pretend to be a perfect exemplar, but rather one modest attempt to listen to people in one Indigenous community as part of the ongoing learning process of the entire church. In seeking right relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous in Canada, it is clear that reconciliation without decolonization is ineffective and insincere. The colonial project in Canada hinged upon the marginalization of Indigenous peoples across the country. Overcoming such systemic marginalization demands systemic change. This is true of Canadian society at large, but also of churches in Canada. Christian communities that take reconciliation seriously cannot avoid decolonizing their practices and theology. As Jane Barter has noted, “To be sure, theology provides the hidden concepts that underwrite the colonial project . . . yet it also provides the resources for interruptions to historicist fatalism.”⁴⁵ Whereas theology was previously an instrument justifying various tenets of colonialism, today it has a role to play in disrupting the patterns of injustice, inequality, and discrimination engrained in the history of Canada and harming Indigenous peoples across the country to this day. Doing theology in a decolonial key raises a number of questions for further reflection, including the following.

1. How could Indigenous methodologies and epistemologies be integrated into theological inquiry and discourse? For example, doing research in a way that embraces Indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing. It can be a challenge for non-Indigenous researchers to embrace Indigenous perspectives in their work on and with Indigenous persons. A key here would be to closely collaborate with Indigenous persons throughout the successive stages of the research process.
2. How can the protagonism of Indigenous persons and communities be fostered in theology? In addition to *listening*, what are other ways of involving Indigenous as more active protagonists of theological analysis and reflection in a synodal style? This raises the question of expanding and diversifying the *subjects* of theology—for whom and by whom.⁴⁶ The question is thus how to effectively do theology *with them*, as subjects and not merely objects of theological research. It is not only a question of whom

⁴⁵ Jane Barter, “God Keep Our Land? Unsettling Christian Theology,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 38, no. 2 (2022): 173, doi.org/10.3138/tjt.2022-0028.

⁴⁶ Cf. Gilles Routhier, “La naissance d’une théologie pratique et pastorale. Dans le sillon du concile Vatican II et l’interrogation actuelle sur les ‘sujets’ de la théologie,” *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 107, no. 3 (2019): 478, doi.org/10.3917/rsr.193.0463.

theology seeks to address but who it involves in the various stages of its development, reflection, and articulation.

3. In encountering Indigenous peoples, how can research avoid falling into the trap of scientific “extraction,” collecting data for academic objectives with little relevance for the participants? The *community dimension* of research—done not only *on* a community but *with* and *within* a community—emerges as a helpful aspect to foster. This could include, for example, involving participants in interpreting the research, finding ways to share results with them and receive feedback, both to verify the contents and deepen the ongoing encounter with them. Reflection can also be dedicated to finding ways of benefiting those involved in the research, without ever having the pretension of fixing problems or finding permanent solutions.

MATTHEW 25 AS PARADIGM FOR THE CHURCH’S RELATIONSHIP WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN CANADA

Lilla Watson, an Australian Aboriginal, had the following message for non-Indigenous who seek to support Indigenous peoples and their causes: “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”⁴⁷ Jesus’s account of the Final Judgment in Matthew 25 makes it clear that our liberation is indeed “bound up” with one another. As such, the Gospel passage constitutes a powerful paradigm for considering the church’s relationship with Indigenous peoples in Canada. These words of Christ are a call to action against the backdrop of eternity. They open up a horizon for considering the ultimate meaning of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous in Canada and beyond. It is chilling to think of this biblical scene in light of the colonial project of forced assimilation and cultural genocide in which the church participated: “*Whatever you did to the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.*” As we have seen above, “the least” is certainly not a satisfying way to identify any particular group or individual. However, the phrase does not intend to be pejorative. Jesus’s words do not imprison anyone in a position of being “lesser.” Rather, they are a poignant wake-up call, intended to change the point of view of the listener: those who may be considered “least” from a human perspective are those with whom God most closely identifies. What has the church done to those

⁴⁷ Lilla Watson, “Recognition of Indigenous Terms of Reference,” Keynote Address at “A Contribution to Change: Cooperation Out of Conflict Conference: Celebrating Difference, Embracing Equality,” Hobart, Tasmania, September 21–24, 2004. Watson identifies this slogan as a collective statement from activists working in Brisbane in the 1970s.

considered “least of Christ’s brothers and sisters” among Indigenous peoples in Canada? What is the church doing today?

In the face of settler colonialism in Canada, God identifies personally with each man, woman, and child who has suffered because of the residential school system and its devastating consequences. God grieves the ongoing suffering of countless Indigenous families who bear the wounds of intergenerational trauma, made manifest in substance abuse, domestic violence, and suicide. Amidst these tragic struggles, God dares to open a horizon of eternal hope. The church is called to conversion from colonialism of the past and the indifference of the present to a future of being with God in our Indigenous brothers and sisters.

Whereas the church contributed to silencing Indigenous cultures, languages, and spiritualities, it is now time for the church to open the ears of its heart to listen deeply. What it hears will inevitably entail disrupting the existing rapports that perpetuate colonial inequalities, keeping certain people at “the centre” of church and society while leaving others marginalized.

If God identifies personally with those who are marginalized, then efforts to listen to them, hear their voices and stories, learn from their wisdom and experiences, are in fact pathways of listening to God. For those who practice theology, the question is thus: do we listen to those whose voices are marginalized? And if not, are we in fact leaving God’s voice on the margins?

The horizon of the Final Judgment sheds light on the ultimate meaning of listening to marginalized voices. Doing theology by listening to marginalized voices is a step towards a church that lets itself be continually converted by Christ, who speaks in those whose voices often go unheard. The Final Judgment makes clear what is at stake in the daunting task of listening carefully to our brothers and sisters who are marginalized. God waits on the margins, seeking our solidarity. Duane Gastant Aucoin of the Tlingit Nation in the Yukon fittingly captures the journey of redemption that Indigenous and non-Indigenous can walk together with God: “Just as God brought good out of the evil done to His Son after they crucified Him, by raising Him up from the dead, so too we must work with God and with each other to bring good out of the evil done to our people. So that we as a whole may be given new life and rise up from the tomb in which we have been placed, stronger and more alive than before.”⁴⁸ **M**

⁴⁸ Cited in Brian McDonough, “The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada,” in *The Church and Indigenous Peoples in the Americas: Between Reconciliation and Decolonization*, ed. Michel Andraos (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019), 71.

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