

The Papal Apology and Seeds of an Action Plan

Archbishop Donald Bolen

IN THE LEAD-UP TO BOTH THE VISIT of Indigenous delegations to Rome in March 2022 and the visit of Pope Francis to Canada in July of that year, there was much conversation about the shape and content of the apology that Pope Francis should offer to the Indigenous Peoples of Canada. As one of those involved in the preparation of those encounters, and in dialogues on local and national levels with survivors of residential schools, I was able to hear many hopes and expectations connected with a response to Call to Action 58.¹

There was a wide range of perspectives in Indigenous communities about what would be most helpful for the Pope to say, but some of the central elements requested from an apology were the following:

- 1) That it would acknowledge all that Indigenous people suffered at residential schools, including: how Indigenous children were taken from their homes and separated from their parents and grandparents; how Indigenous languages were suppressed, and cultural and spiritual traditions were denigrated; how many children suffered physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, and spiritual abuse; and how many children died while at residential schools;
- 2) That it would take responsibility on behalf of the Catholic Church for the suffering experienced at Catholic-operated residential schools and that remains a legacy of those schools;
- 3) That it would acknowledge the trauma of survivors and the intergenerational trauma experienced by many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities;
- 4) That it would express real lament and sorrow and a commitment to make changes in light of what has been learned through the

¹ “We call upon the Pope to issue an apology to Survivors, their families, and communities for the Roman Catholic Church’s role in the spiritual, cultural, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children in Catholic-run residential schools” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Final Report*, Call to Action no. 58, 2015, nctr.ca/records/reports/).

- truth and reconciliation process;
- 5) That it would be offered at the site of a former residential school, preferably one where ground penetrating radar had identified possible unmarked graves; many specific requests for the Pope to visit particular places (particularly Saskatchewan, Kamloops, Winnipeg) were extended, each with hopes and expectations;
 - 6) That the apology would be connected to reparation, financial support, and other means of responding to the waves of suffering that are the legacy of residential schools;
 - 7) That it would be accompanied by a commissioning of Canadian bishops to follow up with an action plan, preferably an action plan embedded in the papal visit itself, that would move the church towards real conciliation through practical steps of solidarity; this invited a focus, even in the planning of the visit, on the importance of “the day after the apology”;²
 - 8) That it would address how the schools were an extension of colonization which led to the taking of Indigenous lands and marginalizing of Indigenous Peoples, and that the Pope would repudiate the papal bulls which provided support to the colonizers and the understanding that they were “discovering” lands which could then be claimed and occupied, with no regard for the fact that the lands had been inhabited by Indigenous Peoples for thousands of years.

There was also a recognition that each survivor would need to make their own decision about how to respond to whatever apology was given.

As the Papal visit unfolded over the course of six days,³ each event and address was carefully scrutinized and a wide range of feedback presented by media outlets. While this was to be expected, the visit was planned as an overarching whole. It is therefore both helpful and appropriate to work with the corpus of texts that Pope Francis presented as a single unit, accompanied by his actions and gestures over the course of the visit, to analyze the content of the apology given and the way forward to some degree charted out.

This paper does not offer an extensive evaluation of the papal apology but rather aims to extract and synthesize the substance of what was said. The first part will identify elements of the apology extended

² This is a phrase coined by Chief Cadmus Delorme of Cowessess First Nation, Saskatchewan. See cpc.o.on.ca/CPCO/Event_Display.aspx?EventKey=VIRTCONF22.

³ See “Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Canada,” July 24–30, 2022, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2022/outside/documents/canada-2022.html. All papal addresses, homilies, and other public remarks are included in this collection.

by Pope Francis, while the second will look at traces of an action plan identified and expanded upon as a follow up to the apology.

COMPONENTS OF THE PAPAL APOLOGY

In this section, I would like to lay out six key components of the papal apology: the way in which Pope Francis addressed the reality that many children died in residential schools; how the apology acknowledged the suffering of Indigenous people attending the schools; that the apology was extended on behalf of the church; how the residential school system was part of a colonizing effort to assimilate Indigenous Peoples, a system devastating for them; acknowledgment of the trauma and intergenerational trauma that Indigenous survivors, their families, and communities continue to carry; and how the Pope, in the context of his apology, interpreted the history of the school system from a theological perspective, as Christ crucified in those who suffered in residential schools.

Acknowledging the Children Who Never Came Home

In the days leading up to the papal visit, Pope Francis referred to his trip to Canada as a penitential pilgrimage, adding that it was different from other papal trips he had taken. While it was not an “apology tour,” significant words of apology were extended at each location of the visit, and they were very much at the heart of the visit.

The first public event of the papal visit was held at Maskwacis First Nation, south of Edmonton, and site of the former Ermineskin Indian Residential School. Upon arrival at the site, Pope Francis prayed at the cemetery where it is understood that there are remains of children who died while attending the school. He then entered the church on the site, where the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation had unfurled the banner of the names on the Student Memorial Register, remembering the children who never returned home from residential schools. There the Pope prayed before the list of names, blessed and kissed the banner.

At the very start of his address, the Pope made reference to the two pairs of children’s moccasins presented to him by retired Chief Mary Ann Daywalker-Pelletier of Okanese First Nation during the meeting of the First Nation delegation in Rome on March 31st. The moccasins were presented as a living reminder of the children who died while at residential school, with the request that the pope return the moccasins when he came to Canada, with an apology.⁴

⁴ Pope Francis, “Address at Maskwacis, Alberta, July 25, 2022,” www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/events/event.dir.html/content/vaticanevents/en/2022/7/25/popo-lazioniindigene-canada.html.

Acknowledgment of All That Was Suffered in Residential Schools

In his address at Maskwacis, Pope Francis acknowledged what he had heard from the Indigenous delegations months earlier:

Again, I think back on the stories you told: how the policies of assimilation ended up systematically marginalizing the Indigenous peoples; how also through the system of residential schools your languages and cultures were denigrated and suppressed; how children suffered physical, verbal, psychological, and spiritual abuse; how they were taken away from their homes at a young age, and how that indelibly affected relationships between parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren.

The apology that followed built on that acknowledgment of the suffering Indigenous people experienced in residential schools, and how policies of assimilation, including the residential school system, “were devastating for the people of these lands.”

I am here because the first step of my penitential pilgrimage among you is that of again asking forgiveness, of telling you once more that I am deeply sorry. Sorry for the ways in which, regrettably, many Christians supported the colonizing mentality of the powers that oppressed the Indigenous peoples. I am sorry. I ask forgiveness, in particular, for the ways in which many members of the Church and of religious communities cooperated, not least through their indifference, in projects of cultural destruction and forced assimilation promoted by the governments of that time, which culminated in the system of residential schools.

At the Basilica in Quebec City three days later, he also addressed the legacy of sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable people, in a context which included but was not limited to sexual abuse within residential schools. Pope Francis noted that this scandal required “firm action and an irreversible commitment. Together with you, I would like once more to ask forgiveness of all the victims. The pain and the shame we feel must become an occasion for conversion: never again!”⁵

An Apology on Behalf of the Church

One question raised in Indigenous communities and highlighted in the media, both after the Pope’s apology in Rome on April 1st and during his visit to Canada, asked whether his apology was only

⁵ Pope Francis, “Homily at Basilica of Notre-Dame de Québec,” July 28, 2022, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/events/event.dir.html/content/vaticanevents/en/2022/7/28/omelia-vespri-quebec.html.

pointing to the sinful behaviour of a few individuals or was taking responsibility and apologizing on behalf of the Church as an institution. At Maskwacis, he had introduced a distinction that is relevant here, by noting—in the same sentence—that although “there were many outstanding instances of devotion and care for children, the overall effects of the policies linked to the residential schools were catastrophic.” He then proceeded to offer a strong critique of the church’s engagement with the system itself: “What our Christian faith tells us is that this was a disastrous error, incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is painful to think of how the firm soil of values, language, and culture that made up the authentic identity of your peoples was eroded, and that you have continued to pay the price of this.” When he proceeded to speak of “many Christians” who were responsible for the evil committed against Indigenous Peoples (a phrase he echoed at Sacred Heart in Edmonton and at the Citadelle de Québec), he made clear that he was speaking not only of those who abused Indigenous children but also of those who supported or were indifferent to the church’s engagement in the system itself. At Sacred Heart Church in Edmonton, he noted:

It pains me to think that Catholics contributed to policies of assimilation and enfranchisement that inculcated a sense of inferiority, robbing communities and individuals of their cultural and spiritual identity, severing their roots and fostering prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes; and that this was also done in the name of an educational system that was supposedly Christian.⁶

One further point in this regard emerged in a question-and-answer session in Quebec City with members of the Jesuit community in Canada, where the Pope was queried about how they should respond when asked why the Pope was apologizing on behalf of Christians but not on behalf of the Church as an institution. He responded by noting that by virtue of his role as Pope, he always speaks “in the name of the Church, not in my own name. I speak in the name of the Church even when I do not make it explicit”; the exception being when he explicitly notes that he is sharing a personal thought and not speaking in the name of the Church.⁷

⁶ Pope Francis, “Address at Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples, Edmonton,” July 25, 2022, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/events/event.dir.html/content/vatican/events/en/2022/7/25/incontroedmonton-canada.html.

⁷ Cited in Antonio Spadaro, “Pope Francis Discusses Traditionalism, Liturgy Wars, and Synodality with Jesuits in Canada,” *America*, August 4, 2022, www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/08/04/pope-francis-jesuits-canada-243481.

Cooperation with Colonizing Attitudes and a System of Assimilation

In the apology offered at the Citadelle de Québec, the focus was increasingly placed on the acceptance and cooperation within the Christian community of governmental policies of assimilation and a colonizing mentality. “In that deplorable system, promoted by the governmental authorities of the time, which separated many children from their families, different local Catholic institutions had a part.” He acknowledged that the history of great suffering within Indigenous communities, “the fruit of the colonizing mentality, ‘does not heal easily.’”⁸

In Iqaluit, too, the apology was contextualized in terms of engagement with a residential school system grounded in “policies of cultural assimilation and enfranchisement.” There, the Pope noted “how evil it is to break the bonds uniting parents and children, to damage our closest relationships,” and he relayed the testimony of an elder who contrasted the spirit within Indigenous families before and after the coming of the residential school system: “He compared those days, when grandparents, parents, and children were harmoniously together, to springtime, when young birds chirp happily around their mother. But suddenly—he said—the singing stopped: families were broken up, and the little ones were taken away far from home. Winter fell over everything.”⁹ While Pope Francis did not directly address the papal bulls of the fifteenth century often associated with the “Doctrine of Discovery,” his addresses communicated a strong critique of colonization and cooperation within the Christian community with policies of assimilation. At the Basilica of Quebec City, he stated strongly: “Never again can the Christian community allow itself to be infected by the idea that one culture is superior to others, or that it is legitimate to employ ways of coercing others.” It was communicated during the course of the papal visit that the Holy See would in due course be issuing a further statement on the Doctrine of Discovery. During the press conference on the flight back to Rome, Pope Francis spoke of the genocidal character of the taking of children from their families and the suppression of culture, traditions, and worldview.

Acknowledgment of Trauma and Intergenerational Trauma

Meeting with the Indigenous delegations in Rome, Pope Francis detailed what he had heard from those he had met, and spoke to the

⁸ Pope Francis, “Address at Citadelle de Québec,” July 27, 2022, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/events/event.dir.html/content/vaticanevents/en/2022/7/27/autor-ita-canada.html.

⁹ Pope Francis, “Address to Young People and Elders in Iqaluit,” July 29, 2022, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/events/event.dir.html/content/vaticanevents/en/2022/7/29/giovani-anziani-iquait.html.

“unresolved traumas that have become intergenerational traumas.”¹⁰ At the outset of his visit to Canada in Maskwacis, he acknowledged that even his presence on Canadian soil would evoke trauma for some by surfacing memories of devastating experiences in residential schools: “These are traumas that are in some way reawakened whenever the subject comes up; I realize too that our meeting today can bring back old memories and hurts, and that many of you may feel uncomfortable even as I speak.”¹¹ He thanked survivors for telling him “about the heavy burdens that you still bear, for sharing with me these bitter memories,” noting that even though costly, “it is right to remember, because forgetfulness leads to indifference.”

Pope Francis proceeded to recognize that while he was not able to visit many of the places where he had been invited, he was “aware of the sufferings and traumas, the difficulties and challenges, experienced by the Indigenous peoples in every region of this country.” In the journey forward, he stressed that it would be important “to assist the survivors of the residential schools to experience healing from the traumas they suffered.” At Lac Ste Anne, he made reference to “traumatic experiences that no human consolation can ever heal.”¹²

While he did not use the language of intergenerational trauma during the course of his visit to Canada, he pointed to its reality, to “the scars of still open wounds” (Lac Ste Anne) and ongoing suffering within Indigenous communities.

A Christian Interpretation of Indigenous Suffering

While it was clear that Pope Francis was mindful of speaking to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, to Catholics and people adopting a wide spectrum of worldviews and faith traditions, his apology grew out of a very particular faith lens. That was most clearly expressed at Sacred Heart Church in Edmonton, speaking to a church gathering, where he contrasted two approaches to evangelization, with very different ways of exercising power and authority. He pointed to the lasting pain created when Christians and ecclesial institutions “imposed their own cultural models” and “forced God” on students, noting that this was not God’s way. By contrast, God loves, liberates, and sets us free.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, “Address to a Delegation of Indigenous Peoples,” Clementine Hall, Rome, April 1, 2022, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/april/documents/20220401-popoli-indigeni-canada.html.

¹¹ Francis, “Address at Maskwacis.”

¹² Pope Francis, “Homily at the Lac Ste Anne Pilgrimage,” July 26, 2022, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2022/documents/20220726-omelia-lacsteanne-canada.html.

One cannot proclaim God in a way contrary to God himself. And yet, how many times has this happened in history! While God presents himself simply and quietly, we always have the temptation to impose him, and to impose ourselves in his name. It is the worldly temptation to make him come down from the cross and show himself with power. ... Brothers and sisters, in the name of Jesus, may this never happen again in the Church. May Jesus be preached as he desires, in freedom and charity. In every crucified person whom we meet, may we see not a problem to be solved, but a brother or sister to be loved, the flesh of Christ to be loved.¹³

In that context, the Pope spoke of “Christ, crucified in the many students of the residential schools.” That provides a very different lens from which to view the presence of God in the context of residential schools: God is in and with the little ones and their suffering. While there was no request to survivors that they view or receive his apology from that same faith perspective, that was the theological framework from which it was offered.

ELEMENTS OF AN ACTION PLAN EMERGING FROM THE APOLOGY

In the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Final Report commentary on Call to Action 58, it is noted that “apologies mark only a beginning point on pathways of reconciliation; the proof of their authenticity lies in putting words into action.”¹⁴

Meeting with the Indigenous delegations in Rome, Pope Francis had noted that “any truly effective process of healing requires concrete actions” (April 1, 2022). At the very start of his visit to Canada, Pope Francis expressed his agreement with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s request for engagement following an apology:

Dear brothers and sisters, many of you and your representatives have stated that begging pardon is not the end of the matter. I fully agree: that is only the first step, the starting point. I also recognize that, “looking to the past, no effort to beg pardon and to seek to repair the harm done will ever be sufficient” and that, “looking ahead to the future, no effort must be spared to create a culture able to prevent such situations from happening.”¹⁵

¹³ Francis, “Address at Sacred Heart Church,” Edmonton.

¹⁴ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*, Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, 224, ehpmh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf.

¹⁵ Francis, “Address at Maskwacis,” quoting “Letter to the People of God,” August 20, 2018, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180820_lettera-popolo-didio.html.

While Pope Francis did not explicitly lay out an action plan for the church in Canada, he did empower it to engage with Indigenous communities on a path toward healing, reconciliation, and solidarity. In various ways, he pointed to the importance of building relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, relationships shaped by attentiveness to the needs of the other, and by a desire to walk together. At Sacred Heart Church in Edmonton, he stressed that this engagement needed to happen at the local level:

Dear brothers and sisters: gestures and visits can be important, but most words and deeds of reconciliation take place at the local level, in communities like this, where individuals and families travel side-by-side, day by day. To pray together, to help one another, to share life stories, common joys and common struggles: this is what opens the door to the reconciling work of God.¹⁶

He also gave indicators of what the path forward would require, at both local and national levels. In this second section of the paper, I would like to highlight four areas where Pope Francis summoned the church to engagement: telling the truth about the past; upholding and standing in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples in their rightful pursuit of justice; offering support for the recovery and strengthening of Indigenous language and culture; and emphasizing the beauty and importance of Indigenous understanding of creation and relationship with the land and environment.

Commitment to the Transparent Search for Truth

Meeting with Indigenous delegations in Rome (on April 1, 2022), Pope Francis noted:

Without historical memory and without a commitment to learning from past mistakes, problems remain unresolved and keep coming back. ... The memory of the past must never be sacrificed at the altar of alleged progress. ... In a fraternal spirit, I encourage the Bishops and the Catholic community to continue taking steps towards the transparent search for truth and to foster healing and reconciliation.¹⁷

It was telling that Pope Francis began his trip to Canada in Maskwacis by focusing on honest attentiveness to the past, calling for deeper investigation “into the facts of what took place,” and “mak(ing) space for memory. Here, today, I am with you to recall the past, to

¹⁶ Francis, “Address at Sacred Heart Church,” Edmonton.

¹⁷ Francis, “Address to a Delegation of Indigenous Peoples.”

grieve with you, to bow our heads together in silence and to pray before the graves.”

Meeting with an Indigenous delegation in Quebec City, he framed the purpose of his visit in relation to the critical role of truth-telling in order to move towards a future of right relationships: “I have come ... so that progress may be made in the search for truth, so that the processes of healing and reconciliation may continue, and so that seeds of hope can keep being sown for future generations—Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike—who desire to live together, in harmony, as brothers and sisters.”¹⁸ For the church in Canada, following this path will entail, among other things, ongoing historical research on the historical experience of Indigenous Peoples at the time of colonization and residential schools; assistance to First Nations and Inuit communities where there was a Catholic-operated residential school, as they engage in archival work to understand better what happened there; and working with Catholic school and ongoing adult education systems in the preparation of curriculum and programs providing an accurate account of the residential school legacy, treaties, and an understanding of intergenerational trauma.

Commitment to Walking with Indigenous Peoples in Pursuit of Justice

Survivors of residential schools have repeatedly asked churches and society as a whole to support the inherent rights of Indigenous Peoples, rights given them by the Creator, rights articulated in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP).¹⁹

It was at the Citadelle de Québec that Pope Francis spoke most directly to the injustice and inequality experienced by Indigenous peoples in Canada, and the importance of making economic and social decisions addressing their needs. The challenge he extended was to both church and society as a whole:

Even in a country as developed and prosperous as Canada, which pays great attention to social assistance, there are many homeless persons who turn to churches and food banks to receive essential help in meeting their needs, which, lest we forget, are not only material. These brothers and sisters of ours spur us to reflect on the urgent need for efforts to remedy the radical injustice that taints our world, in which the abundance of the gifts of creation is unequally distributed.

¹⁸ Pope Francis, “Greetings to a Delegation of Indigenous peoples,” Archbishop’s Residence, Quebec City, July 29, 2022, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/july/documents/20220729-delegazione-indigeni-quebec.html.

¹⁹ United Nations General Assembly, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, September 13, 2007, www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf.

It is scandalous that the well-being generated by economic development does not benefit all the sectors of society. And it is indeed sad that precisely among the native peoples we often find many indices of poverty, along with other negative indicators, such as the low percentage of schooling and less than easy access to owning a home and to health care.²⁰

The Pope proceeded to point towards the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as guideposts for moving towards a more just society.²¹

At Commonwealth Stadium in Edmonton, he offered a vision of what a future where justice flourished might look like:

A future in which the elderly are not cast aside because, from a “practical” standpoint, they are “no longer useful.” A future that does not judge the value of people simply by what they can produce. A future that is not indifferent to the need of the aged to be cared for and listened to. A future in which the history of violence and marginalization suffered by our Indigenous brothers and sisters is never repeated. ... Let us move forward together, and together, let us dream.²²

For the Catholic Church in Canada, being an ally in the rightful pursuit of justice will require building relationships with Indigenous communities, listening to the needs of survivors, and being ready to engage at all levels in solidarity with Indigenous communities as they strive to address inequalities, racism, and systemic injustices, and respond to those suffering the effects of intergenerational trauma.

Support of Indigenous Languages, Cultures, and Worldview

As noted above, during the course of his visit to Canada, Pope Francis expressed how wrong it was that Indigenous languages and cultures were suppressed and acknowledged the devastating impact of that loss. He also highlighted his great respect for Indigenous languages and cultures at each location he visited.

At Maskwacis, of traditions passed on for thousands of years, he noted: “You learned to foster a sense of family and community, and

²⁰ Francis, “Address at Citadelle de Québec.”

²¹ TRC Call to Action no. 48 calls the churches to adopt the UN Declaration “as a framework for reconciliation.”

²² Pope Francis, “Homily at Commonwealth Stadium,” Edmonton, July 26, 2022, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2022/documents/20220726-omelia-edmonton-canada.html.

to build solid bonds between generations, honouring your elders and caring for your little ones. A treasury of sound customs and teachings, centred on concern for others, truthfulness, courage and respect, humility, honesty, and practical wisdom!”²³ At Lac Ste Anne, on the feast of Saints Anne and Joachim, grandparents of Jesus, he celebrated the presence and blessings of Indigenous grandmothers, and noted: “I am struck by the vital role of women in Indigenous communities: they occupy a prominent place as blessed sources not only of physical but also of spiritual life.”²⁴

At the Citadelle de Québec he spoke of how Indigenous culture “is of great help in recalling the importance of social values” and commented: “The Indigenous peoples have much to teach us about care and protection for the family; among them, from an early age, children learn to recognize right from wrong, to be truthful, to share, to correct mistakes, to begin anew, to comfort one another and to be reconciled.”²⁵ In Iqaluit, he reflected on how Inuit Peoples have passed on from generation to generation “such basic values as respect for the elderly, genuine fraternity, and care for the environment.” He specifically encouraged the young people to listen to the wisdom of their elders, and to celebrate their culture and their “beautiful Inuktitut language.”²⁶

When Pope Francis returned to Rome, at his weekly public audience (on August 3, 2022), he spoke of his visit to Canada and noted how he had “reaffirmed the active will of the Holy See and the local Catholic communities to promote the Indigenous cultures, with appropriate spiritual paths and with attention to the customs and languages of the peoples,” and spoke of the possibility of “recover(ing) harmony between modernity and ancestral cultures.”²⁷ His visit to Canada encouraged a deep engagement with Indigenous peoples on the level of culture and worldviews. In Maskwacis, Pope Francis commented: “When the European colonists first arrived here, there was a great opportunity to bring about a fruitful encounter between cultures, traditions, and forms of spirituality. Yet for the most part that did not happen.”²⁸ While the suppression of Indigenous ways in the past is to be acknowledged and mourned, the possibility still exists today for Christian communities to support the recovery and strengthening of Indigenous languages, traditions, and cultures, and to be receptive to the possibility of encountering the riches of those ways.

²³ Francis, “Address at Maskwacis.”

²⁴ Francis, “Homily at Lac Ste Anne.”

²⁵ Francis, “Address at Citadelle de Québec.”

²⁶ Francis, “Address in Iqaluit.”

²⁷ Pope Francis, “General Audience,” August 3, 2022, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2022/documents/20220803-udienza-generale.html.

²⁸ Francis, “Address at Maskwacis.”

The Blessing of Indigenous Understanding of Creation and the Land

Throughout his pontificate, Pope Francis has paid significant attention to the environment and care for the earth, and in the most important documents in that regard, he has highlighted the wisdom of Indigenous peoples with respect to creation. In *Laudato Si'*, his encyclical on the environment, Pope Francis noted that in caring for creation

It is essential to show special care for Indigenous communities and their cultural traditions. They are not merely one minority among others but should be the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting their land are proposed. For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values. When they remain on their land, they themselves care for it best. (no. 146)

In the apostolic exhortation which followed the Synod on the Amazon, Pope Francis spoke of how the Indigenous peoples of the Amazon “care for ecosystems and they recognize that the earth, while serving as a generous source of support for their life, also has a maternal dimension that evokes respect and tender love.”²⁹

It was not surprising then that Pope Francis would speak of Indigenous respect for the land and creation when visiting the Indigenous peoples of Canada. At Maskwacis he noted:

Brothers and sisters, you have lived on these lands for thousands of years, following ways of life that respect the earth which you received as a legacy from past generations and are keeping for those yet to come. You have treated it as a gift of the Creator to be shared with others and to be cherished in harmony with all that exists, in profound fellowship with all living beings.³⁰

At the Citadelle de Québec, he spoke of the constant concern of Indigenous peoples for the environment, “in fidelity to a harmonious vision of creation as an open book that teaches human beings to love the Creator and to live in symbiosis with other living creatures.”³¹ He stressed the ways in which Indigenous traditions invite a long look into the future and the implications of actions we take today: “We need to be able to look, as the Indigenous wisdom tradition teaches, seven

²⁹ Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, no. 71.

³⁰ Francis, “Address at Maskwacis.”

³¹ Francis, “Address at Citadelle de Québec.”

generations ahead, and not to our immediate convenience, to the next elections, or the support of this or that lobby.” In the midst of a frenzied pace of life, “we can learn much from this ability to listen attentively to God, to persons and to nature. ... In this regard, the values and teachings of the Indigenous peoples are precious.”³² In Iqaluit, Pope Francis spoke of the “beautiful and harmonious relationship between you and this land you inhabit,” and encouraged the young Inuit to continue that tradition: “Care for the earth, care for your people, care for your history.”³³

In this regard, Pope Francis’s encouragement to church and society in Canada is to listen deeply to and learn from the wisdom of Indigenous ways of relating to and caring for the land, for the sake of the future for all of us.

CONCLUSION

When Pope Francis returned to Rome and spoke of the visit (on August 3, 2022), he commented on the pain he felt in hearing from elderly in Iqaluit “who had lost their children and did not know what had become of them, due to this policy of assimilation.” He added: “It was a very painful moment, but one we had to face: we must own up to our mistakes, to our sins.”³⁴

The papal apology was an attempt to do that.

Ted Quewezance of Keeseekoose First Nation in Saskatchewan, a survivor I have the privilege of working with, has frequently said in recent months that each survivor will need to make their own decision whether to accept or not to accept the papal apology, and that every survivor is on their own healing journey.

Pope Francis’s words of apology did not meet every request or expectation from survivors and Indigenous communities. For some, it did not say enough. For others, it brought healing. For still others, it was a step along the way, but one needing to be made real by being followed up with concrete actions, solidarity expressed in a way that builds relationships and restores trust.

The motto of the papal visit was “Walking Together.” In leaving the Basilica in Quebec City, Pope Francis was asked if he wanted to write something in the visitors’ book. He agreed to do so, and wrote, “*Marcher ensemble, ce n’est pas facile, mais c’est possible.*” “It is not easy to walk together, but it is possible.” That is the great invitation before both Church and society in Canada, now that we live into the day after the apology. **M**

³² Francis, “Address at Citadelle de Québec.”

³³ Francis, “Address in Iqaluit.”

³⁴ Francis, “General Audience,” August 3, 2022.

Archbishop Donald Bolen, MTh, LTh (St. Paul University, Ottawa), is the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Regina. He was born on Treaty 4 Territory in Gravelbourg, Saskatchewan. After graduate studies and ordination to priesthood, he taught in the Religious Studies department at Campion College at the University of Regina and engaged in parish ministry. In 2001, he was appointed to work at the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, serving the Catholic Church's international dialogues with Anglicans and Methodists. He was named Bishop of the Diocese of Saskatoon in 2010 and Archbishop of Regina in 2016. Within the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, he has been active in ecumenical and justice work. At both diocesan and national levels, he has been actively involved in Indigenous relations and responding to the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He was a part of the Bishops' Working Group that worked on the Indigenous delegation to Rome in March 2022 and the Pope's visit to Canada in July 2022.