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Papal Apologies for Residential Schools and the Stories They Tell

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On April 1, 2022, in an ornate Vatican meeting room, Pope Francis offered an apology to delegations of Indigenous people who had been meeting with the Pope that week, sharing with him their experiences of Catholic-run Indian Residential Schools (IRS) in Canada and their intergenerational legacies.[1] On July 25, 2022, at the first significant event of his "penitential pilgrimage" in Canada, Pope Francis visited the site of the former Ermineskin Residential School and offered another apology during a ceremony at Maskwacis (Alberta).[2] Over the following days, he invoked the language of apology several more times.

In this article, I reflect on the particularities of these apologies, what they might reveal about the practice of church apologies in processes of truth-telling, repair, and healing, as well as my own role of expert commentator on these dynamics. An apology tells a particular story about the past and may project that story into a new and different future. Like all stories, apologies construe major characters and minor characters, plotlines, and resolutions; they include and they exclude. Scholars and commentators play a role in interpreting and framing the meaning of such stories, and thus are implicated in the practice of public apologies. I argue that while the apologizer has many tools by which to control the narrative, the transformative promise of an apology is linked to the apologizer's renunciation of control.

I write from within the discipline of theology primarily as a scholar of church apologies for historical wrongs. In my academic book on this subject, I analyzed dozens of such apologies and proposed a theological framework for understanding this relatively recent

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

[2] Pope Francis, "Meeting with Indigenous Peoples," Maskwacis, July 25, 2022 [Maskwacis Apology], www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/july/documents/20220725-popolazioniindigene-canada.html.

practice.[3] In a scholarly article, I proposed practical considerations for church entities contemplating offering apologies.[4] In relation to the possibility of Pope Francis making an apology, and in response to his statements in Rome and Canada, I published several articles of opinion and analysis, was interviewed by reporters from several news services, and gave over a dozen live interviews on television and radio to interpret the pope's actions for a public audience.[5]

My positionality and commitments are relevant. As a Christian theologian, I seek not only to interpret statements by church leaders but to assist churches to speak and act with justice and faithfulness. While I am not Roman Catholic, and am aware that my own Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has a history of anti-Catholicism, I offer my criticisms in a humble and constructive spirit. I am also a white settler, whose Mennonite ancestors settled on dispossessed Indigenous lands of Treaties 1 and 7. I now live on the Haldimand Tract, the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabeg, and Haudenosaunee peoples. My own late grandfather served for one year as a teacher in the United Church of Canada-run Indian Day School in Cross Lake, Manitoba, to which he was assigned as his alternative service as Conscientious Objector during World War II. Mennonites ran several residential schools in Ontario.[6] Though I am tempted to minimize and qualify some of these connections (the day school was on reserve and thus children were not separated from their families in the same way they were at residential schools; the Mennonite-affiliated residential schools were not directly run by the denomination of which I am a member), I take critical notice of such impulses as "settler moves toward innocence." By that phrase Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang refer to "those strategies or positionings that attempt to

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[3] Jeremy M. Bergen, *Ecclesial Repentance: The Churches Confront Their Sinful Pasts* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2011).

[4] Jeremy M. Bergen, "Whether, and How, a Church Ought to Repent for a Historical Wrong," *Theology Today* 73, no. 2 (2016): 129–148.

[5] "The Theological Reason Why the Catholic Church is Reticent to Apologize for Residential Schools," *The Globe and Mail*, June 8, 2021, www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-the-theological-reason-why-the-catholic-church-is-reticent-to/; "Pope Francis's Apology for Residential Schools Doesn't Acknowledge Institutional Responsibility," *The Conversation*, April 1, 2022, www.theconversation.com/pope-franciss-apology-for-residential-schools-doesnt-acknowledge-institutional-responsibility-180526; "Pope's Long-Awaited Apology for Indian Residential Schools in Canada is a 'First Step,'" *The Conversation*, July 25, 2022, theconversation.com/popes-long-awaited-apology-for-indian-residential-schools-in-canada-is-a-first-step-187342.

[6] See Anthony Siegrist, "'Part of the Authority Structure': An Organizational History of Mennonite Indian Residential Schools in Ontario," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 93, no. 1 (2019): 5–38.

relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all."[7]

The responses of survivors and their communities to the Pope's actions are what matters most. Not speaking for them in any way, I do listen to these voices and seek to be informed by their perspectives. While I will comment in general ways on various responses—these are tied to what an apology "means"—I do not intend to pass any judgement whatsoever on the very diverse responses. I do so in the recognition that at times my public contributions may have displaced these voices.

The practice of public apologies helps us understand the papal apologies made during the visit to Canada. Expectations around apologies can vary considerably and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) is no exception. Even though it was the 2021 discovery of unmarked graves at the site of a former residential school in Kamloops which renewed calls for the Pope to offer an apology in Canada, Pope Francis's trip can also be understood as a response to the TRC *Call to Action* number 58.

POPE AS REPRESENTATIVE

As perhaps the most prominent religious leader in the world, the Pope's role as representative of the Roman Catholic Church is both a strength and a liability in the delivery of an apology. Many Catholic entities that ran schools in Canada—religious orders and dioceses—had made their own statements of apology in the past, and some Canadian Roman Catholic bishops claimed publicly that an apology by the Pope was therefore not necessary. The Holy See itself did not run schools. Nevertheless, it was evident that at the popular level, a definitive apology could only be made by the one person who could unambiguously speak on behalf of the whole church. In light of the first apology at the Vatican, the promise by the Pope to come to Canada created huge expectations for what such a visit could accomplish.

While the media reports did not typically focus on the Pope's celebrity, his personal biography—especially the physical ailments that led him to use a wheelchair for much of the trip—presented a particular image. That the Pope came to Canada despite his physical limitations was often taken to indicate a high level of personal commitment, a sign of sincerity. I was asked about this in most of my radio interviews. The personalization of such an apology is thus much higher than it would be for other leaders, such as the Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada or the Moderator of the United Church of Canada, who also speak on behalf of their churches but are not famous

[7] Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 10.

individuals. This dynamic means that every papal act may be imbued with especially powerful symbolism, though such signals do not necessarily translate into church policy. Papal celebrity draws attention to the Pope and the institution he represents, more than to those to whom he is speaking.

An apology by a representative figure such as the Pope is about the institution for which the representative speaks, though the person who speaks also shapes the meaning of the apology. His authority to speak on behalf of the church is clear, but to what extent does his personal demeanor and sincerity matter? A papal apology is important in terms of overall tone and narrative. It can send a message about what is important and how important issues are to be addressed. The Pope will not remain in Canada to implement follow-up actions; these will largely be the responsibility of the church in Canada. This does not mean that an apology should not or cannot include specific commitments. The absence of specific commitments also set a tone. In Canada, this resulted in significant disappointment, since concrete actions were not announced.

Words are not the only thing that matters in an apology. A complex practice like a penitential pilgrimage not only speaks about new relationships but can ritually represent them. During the visit of the delegations to Rome, the Pope spent many hours listening to testimonies of survivors and others affected by this legacy. Reports suggest he listened to their stories with great care and pastoral concern. That the Pope visited the site of a former school, prayed at a cemetery connected with that site, and was introduced and welcomed by Indigenous leaders who spoke the very languages the IRS system had forbidden were also significant. The timing of the trip, to coincide with the feast of Saints Joachim and Anne, was an opportunity to frame the visit as a celebration of elders—intended to emphasize a theme common to Catholic and Indigenous spiritualities—though, as I will discuss below, without adequately integrating recognition of the inter-generational trauma caused by the schools.

THE WORDS OF THE APOLOGIES

An apology must name the wrongs committed and who was/is responsible for them. The public discourse in advance of the visit indicated that Pope Francis would apologize for the Catholic Church's involvement in IRS. This shaped expectations and thus reception. For some, what mattered most was that the Pope came and apologized. He said the words "I am sorry"—and thereby went beyond what some survivors had ever expected to hear. A closer look at the specific texts raises important questions. What was the significance of the fact that the Pope acknowledged "physical, verbal, psychological, and spiritual

abuse," but not sexual abuse?[8] Was he denying that sexual abuse happened, despite definitive testimony and documentation, and the fact that public apologies by various Catholic entities acknowledged such abuse?[9] Was this omission inadvertent, implying that his statements were not vetted by those who had a good understanding of IRS history? This was one of the many times during the papal visit when I wondered whether the Pope was receiving good advice about the particularities of IRS history, the Catholic Church in Canada, and recent public discourse in Canada.[10] If the advice and vetting of statements did not emerge from an understanding of the particular issues, this undermined the Pope's capacity to inspire and instruct the Catholic Church in Canada.

In his public statements, the Pope acknowledged various types of wrongs committed. There was the policy of assimilation that sought to destroy Indigenous identities, languages, cultures, and spiritualities, within a larger project of colonization. Students were abused at the schools. While many of these wrongs were named—and named as "contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ"—how the Pope was identifying those who were responsible was unclear. Neither in his Vatican nor his Maskwacis statements did the Pope acknowledge that the Catholic Church as an *institution* was responsible for implementing a harmful, let alone sinful, policy. Rather, it was individuals, such as "a number of Catholics, particularly those with educational responsibilities," who had a role in "these things that wounded you, in the abuses you suffered and in the lack of respect shown for your identity."[11] Or that "many Christians supported the colonizing mentality of the powers that oppressed the Indigenous people." And that "many members of the Church and of religious communities cooperated, not least through indifference, in projects of cultural destruction and forced assimilation promoted by the governments of that time."[12] The Pope acknowledged that structural injustice was embodied and advanced by institutions such as the government, but not by the church *per se*.

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[8] Francis, Maskwacis Apology.

[9] Sexual abuse is acknowledged in an early apology: Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate, "An Apology to the First Nations of Canada," (1991), www.cccb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/oblate_apology_english.pdf; and a more recent one: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Statement of Apology by the Catholic Bishops of Canada to the Indigenous Peoples of this Land," September 24, 2021, www.cccb.ca/letter/statement-of-apology-by-the-catholic-bishops-of-canada-to-the-indigenous-peoples-of-this-land/.

[10] The Pope also seemed unaware of the significance of his use of the term "genocide" in relation to IRS. He used the term in an interview on the plane back to Rome but not in any public settings. The Final Report of the TRC described the IRS policy as an instance of "cultural genocide."

[11] Francis, Vatican Apology.

[12] Francis, Maskwacis Apology.

There are theological reasons for these formulations, expressed in *Lumen Gentium*'s claim that "by no weak analogy" may the church be compared with the incarnation itself: "While Christ, holy, innocent, and undefiled knew nothing of sin, but came to expiate only the sins of the people, the Church, embracing in its bosom sinners, at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, always follows the way of penance and renewal."[13] This suggests that sin is present in the church in and through members. As explicated in *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*, published in connection with Pope John Paul II's 2000 "Day of Pardon," the church is compared to a mother who repents for the sins of her children. So the church does truly repent (or apologize), but the collective agent which speaks does not speak for what it has done but rather for what its individual "children" have done.[14]

When I tried to explain this in an opinion piece in the national newspaper of record, I received several responses that implied I was thereby defending and excusing the church from taking such institutional responsibility. In fact, I argued that this is not the only option even within the terms of Catholic theology. In the debates at Vatican II, in the influential writings of Karl Rahner,[15] and in more recent theological proposals,[16] the holiness of the church is not taken to imply the church's sinlessness. Both are true simultaneously. Although Pope Paul VI intervened in the deliberations on the final text of *Unitatis Redintegratio* to insert the words "in its members" into this phrase—"This people of God, though still in its members liable to sin, is ever growing in Christ"[17]—the fact that the penultimate text did not have such a qualification is indicative of a live option in Catholic theology.

Though I do not speak as a Catholic theologian, I draw attention to constructive resources within Catholic theology for a more unambiguous acknowledgment of the sinfulness of the church on this issue. A sinless church is simply an abstraction, and not the pilgrim church in history. Even when speaking about the universal church,

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[13] Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 8.

[14] International Theological Commission, *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*, (1999), no. 3.4, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000307_memory-reconc-itc_en.html.

[15] Karl Rahner, "The Church of Sinners," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969), 253–269; Karl Rahner, "The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, 270–294.

[16] Brian P. Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness: Sin and Sanctity in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018); and Jeanmarie Gribaudo, *A Holy Yet Sinful Church: Three Twentieth-Century Moments in a Developing Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015).

[17] Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 3.

unwarranted abstractions intrude in any attempt to do so in ways that separate it from the particular, embodied, social, and institutional realities of local churches. Furthermore, there is a missional imperative to communicate effectively in the contemporary context. A public audience will not and does not believe a story about a sinless institution. Unless there is acknowledgment of failures (and sin) at the institutional level, there is little reason to expect that institutional action and reforms will be undertaken to repair the damage and ensure that such acts are not repeated in the future.

The failure of the Pope to acknowledge institutional responsibility was widely noted in the coverage of the Vatican and Maskwacis statements. Many hoped this could be corrected during his visit. Some reporters and commentators were keen to take anything that might be interpreted as acknowledgment of the complicity of more than individuals to be adequate as institutional acknowledgment. Thus, the following line from his homily at the Lac Ste Anne pilgrimage site was promising: "All of us, as Church, now need healing: healing from the temptation of closing in on ourselves, of defending the institution rather than seeking the truth, of preferring worldly power to serving the Gospel."[18] One story took this to mean that the "church should accept institutional blame,"[19] even though the wording could align with the sinless Mother, sinful children analogy, an analogy the Pope seems to invoke in the sentence which followed. The phrase "all of us" may imply a perspective on the church as a community of (sinful) individuals, which is still not to say that the church itself was the agent that perpetrated harms.

Beyond the parsing of particular phrases, what would count as a true acknowledgment of institutional responsibility? How would that sentiment be evident in action? The Pope's homily in Edmonton presented a shocking disconnection from the Maskwacis event held the previous day and raised doubts for me about whether the Pope, or those organizing the trip, truly understood the nature and magnitude of the harms caused by IRS. Given the occasion of the Feast of Saints Joachim and Anne, the Pope preached on the vital role of parents and especially of grandparents in the nurture of a true understanding of who each person truly is. He spoke about the importance of learning from ancestors, and how faith is passed on "through a mother tongue, with affection and encouragement, care, and closeness."[20]

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[18] Pope Francis, "Homily," Lac Ste Anne, July 26, 2022, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2022/documents/20220726-omelia-lacsteanne-canada.html.

[19] Philip Pullella and Tim Johnson, "Pope: Church Must Take Institutional Blame for Harm Done to Indigenous Canadians," *Reuters*, July 27, 2022, www.reuters.com/world/americas/pope-apology-tour-canada-continues-with-stadium-mass-2022-07-26/.

[20] Pope Francis, "Homily," Edmonton, July 26, 2022, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2022/documents/20220726-omelia-edmonton-canada.html.

I expected the Pope to draw what I saw as the inevitable conclusion: given the importance of family for faith and flourishing, it is all the more tragic and sinful that IRS, with the active agency of the church entities that ran them, aimed to destroy those family connections. The schools aimed to silence the "mother tongues" of Indigenous children and cut off family ties of affection and encouragement. But he did not make such a connection at all. There was no recognition of the role of the church (or even of "some Catholics") in the conditions of family dysfunction, the loss of cultural connection, and intergenerational trauma. Without such acknowledgments, the questions the Pope asked the audience have a different tone, even of blaming or scolding the victim. He asked, "Do we remember the good teachings we have received? Do we talk to our elders, and take time to listen to them?" suggesting that these things have been neglected perhaps because of affluence, "well-equipped" homes, and the "fog of forgetfulness" in our "turbulent times."[21] After the Edmonton homily I wondered if my role as commentator on the visit implicated me in the "apology-industrial complex" in which an apology serves to rehabilitate the image of a powerful institution while simultaneously letting that institution get away without making any profound changes or taking costly actions.

FRAMING THE NARRATIVE

An apology is a speech act performed by one who has done wrong. Even if the reparative work of an apology may call for a shift in power relations between the parties,[22] and increased agency for those who have been harmed, the reality remains that the one speaking has the attention of the wider public. The speaker may use that opportunity to control the narrative about the past, minimize the wrongs of the past, and frame their own efforts to repair.

In his Vatican statement, the Pope framed colonization—especially "ideological colonization"—as something of a common enemy. It has harmed Indigenous peoples and the church. He spoke about "a colonization that lacked respect for you," through which "great harm was done to your identity and culture." The passive construction, which does not identify who was responsible, nevertheless implies responsibility outside of the church. As the Pope continued, noting how "forms of political, ideological, and economic colonization still exist in the world," and calling on his audience to "help each other,

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[21] Francis, "Homily," Edmonton.

[22] See Neil Funk-Unrau, "Re-negotiation of Social Relations through Public Apologies to Canadian Aboriginal Peoples," *Research in Social Movements, Conflict, and Change* 29 (2008): 1–29.

together, to overcome it," he fostered the impression that the church could not have been the agent of what it now condemns.[23]

During his visit to Canada, Francis often assumed a pastoral posture in guiding survivors to deal with the trauma they experienced. While such a role is understandable in one sense, it can blur what an apology aims to communicate. It too quickly shifts to a posture of control, the pastor knowing what is needed. Stating his desire to "grieve with you, to bow our heads together in silence," the Pope called those listening to allow "moments of silence to help us interiorize our pain … [and] pray to the God of life."[24] But is there such a thing as "our pain"—the pain of both survivors and perpetrators? Francis was undoubtedly pained by the actions of "some Catholics," but even with deep sympathy, the implication that the church is also a victim of these actions such that its pain is of a similar kind to that of those who attended the school is a problematic move to innocence.

In the Vatican and Maskwacis Apologies, Francis asks for God's forgiveness and the pardon of those persons hearing his words. Asking forgiveness is a controversial element of apology discourse, with some scholars suggesting that an apology ought to be accompanied by a request for forgiveness[25] and others arguing that forgiveness should not be sought.[26] At issue is the power dynamics between the parties, and the expectations that may accompany any such request. When forgiveness (or pardon) is sought from God, this invokes and imposes a range of particular theological assumptions on the process, including an understanding of the role of the church in mediating God's forgiveness and pronouncing absolution. When forgiveness, especially in explicitly Christian terms, is sought from human victims this can impose the expectation that since God forgives the sins of all persons—including victims—then they ought to forgive as well. This imposition can be damaging for those who have a different spiritual framework or may not be prepared to respond in that way. For example, victims of clergy sexual misconduct report feeling obligated

[23] Francis, Vatican Apology.
[24] Francis, Maskwacis Apology.
[25] For example, Nicholas Tavuchis, *Mea Culpa: A Sociology of Apology and Reconciliation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 22–23; and Zenon Szablowinski, ''Apology with and without a Request for Forgiveness,'' *Heythrop Journal* 53, no. 5 (2012): 738.
[26] Matt James, ''Wrestling with the Past: Apologies, Quasi-Apologies, and Non-Apologies in Canada,'' in *The Age of Apology: Facing up to the Past*, ed. Mark Gibney, Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, Jean-Marc Coicaud, and Niklaus Steiner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 137–138; Thomas Brudholm, "Apology without Forgiveness," *Social Research* 87, no. 4 (2020): 835–861.

to extend forgiveness when this has been asked of them.[27] While asking forgiveness may give a victim the opportunity to assert agency by refusing to grant it, such an option is also available in response to apology. The difference is that an expectation of a particular response is tied to the Christian practice of forgiveness much more tightly than to the practice of apology.

In 2009, Pope Benedict XVI met privately with Phil Fontaine, then National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations and himself a residential school survivor. The Pope did not offer an apology. Rather, he expressed sorrow at what Indigenous children experienced at the hands of some Catholics.[28] At the time, Fontaine publicly stated that the Pope's statement should "close the book" on the request for apologies. Writing in a national newspaper, Catholic columnist Raymond De Souza lauded Phil Fontaine's response to the Pope as "magnificent, moving, and magnanimous." De Souza concluded: "Reconciliation requires that apologies be offered. They also need to be accepted."[29] He asserted that since Fontaine was treating the Pope's statement as an apology, and one that he accepted, then that is what it was.

Fontaine has since spoken about the pressure he was under to characterize the meeting with Pope Benedict as a significant milestone and accomplishment.[30] He acknowledged that some of this pressure came from fellow survivors, but in light of how commentators like De Souza seized on his comments as an appropriate "reconciling" Indigenous response, one can see how the expectations of non-Indigenous people and the church itself were also at play.

Critics of the reconciliation framework note how that concept functions in ways that allow the perpetrator to determine its meaning and expect victims to reconcile themselves to the terms on offer.[31] The 2008 apology by the Canadian Prime Minister for the Government of Canada's role in IRS may be understood as the crown determining what reconciliation will mean, placing its own apology at the centre

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[27] Carolyn Holderread Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Church*, reprint (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 123.

[28] Communiqué of the Holy See Press Office, April 29, 2009, www.vatican.va/resources/resources_canada-first-nations-apr2009_en.html.

[29] Raymond De Souza, "Should the Pope Apologize … Again?," *National Post*, December 21, 2015, nationalpost.com/opinion/father-raymond-j-de-souza-should-the-pope-apologize-again.

[30] Willow Fiddler, "Former Chief Hopes Second Meeting with Pope Will Lead to Papal Apology, Better Understanding of Trauma," *The Globe and Mail*, March 30, 2022, www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-former-chief-hopes-second-meeting-with-pope-will-lead-to-papal-apology/.

[31] Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), chap. 4; Taiaiake Alfred, "On Reconciliation and Resurgence," *Rooted* 2, no. 1 (2022): 76–81.

of the reconciliation process, and assuming the apology's acceptance.[32] The apologies of Pope Francis also serve to control the narrative by defining what the issues are, and therefore also what is not on the table. The papal visit reinforced a narrative that the IRS legacy relates to culture and not to land. In this respect, it is not unlike the Canadian government apology, granting some ground in order to foreclose on more radical implications of the injustices perpetrated, such as the violation of treaties and dispossession of land.

Both the Vatican and Maskwacis statements open with praise for Indigenous cultures and values. The Pope celebrates the wisdom of thinking in terms of impact on the seventh generation, respect for elders, care for lands, and practices of seeking harmony. He laments that IRS sought to destroy these cultures. He also points to what a reconciled and repaired state of affairs would be: one in which "Christians and civil society" would "accept and respect the identity and the experience of the Indigenous peoples."[33] While there is mention of land throughout the statements, it recedes as the object of Indigenous wisdom. There is no mention of how the land was taken, nor of the possibility of its restitution. If the problems are defined as individual suffering and loss of culture, then acknowledging that suffering and supporting and lauding the recovery of culture appear to be appropriate responses. But if dispossession of the land is the overarching project within which IRS was one strategy, then a repaired relationship cannot bypass the much more difficult question of land restitution.

During his visit, the Pope was repeatedly challenged to "repeal the Doctrine of Discovery." This phrase was shouted out at the Maskwacis event by Chief Judy Wilson of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs. Activists unfurled a banner inside the Basilica of Sainte Anne-de-Beaupré, just meters from the Pope, calling on him to "Rescind the Doctrine [of Discovery]." When Indigenous reporter Jessica Ka'nhehsíio Deer asked the Pope on his return flight whether the fact that he did not comment on the Doctrine of Discovery was a missed opportunity, the Pope asked her to clarify since he did not know what was meant by that term. While that immediate response may have been due to the fact that the Pope is not as conversant in English as in other languages, it is striking nevertheless that he did not appear to have been briefed on what was a major theme in the coverage of his trip. It also suggests that he did not want to talk about the implications for land. When he did respond to the question, he reframed it in terms of

[32] Eva Mackay, "The Apologizers' Apology," in *Reconciling Canada: Critical Perspectives on the Culture of Redress*, ed. Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 47–63.
[33] Francis, Maskwacis Apology.

"ideological colonization"—the "attitude of reducing their culture to ours"—again emphasizing the theme of culture rather than land.[34]

Yet, despite the fact that this penitential pilgrimage was highly scripted, and statements of apology could be understood as attempts to control the narrative, numerous instances of interruption highlighted the agency of Indigenous critics and the disruption of the dominant narrative. In addition to various interventions explicitly linked to the Doctrine of Discovery, a poignant interruption occurred during the Maskwacis event. After the Pope spoke, a woman went to a microphone and sang in Cree to the tune of the Canadian national anthem. Though whether this was part of the planned program or what the song meant was unclear at the time, we later learned that it was a rebuke of what the Pope had just said. Si Pih Ko explained the message of what she sang: "You are hereby served spoken law. We, the daughters of the Great Spirit and our tribal sovereign members cannot be coerced into any law, any treaty that is not the Great Law. […] We have appointed chiefs on our territories. Govern yourselves accordingly. 'Hiy Hiy' does not mean 'Thank you.' It means that I have nothing more to say."[35] This response is not just about not accepting the apology; it is about not accepting the apology story.

Renouncing Control

In several radio interviews, I was consistently asked about whether I believe that Pope Francis's apologies will help advance reconciliation, and what the church needs to do next. My instinct was to be positive in response to the first question, because I very much want that to be the case. I accepted the framework of "reconciliation," because there did not appear to be time to question this. I could speak about the importance of the Pope setting a tone and charting a direction. I could point to some unique aspects of this particular apology, linked as it was to a week of listening to the stories of the delegations to the Vatican, and the "penitential pilgrimage" framework of his visit. I could also note the failure to acknowledge institutional responsibility yet express hope that the church may yet do this because it is possible even within Catholic theology. I could itemize a list of "next steps" which might reflect what some survivors are calling for, though that can create the impression that working through the list will be "enough"—the achievement of reconciliation.

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[34] "Pope Francis: It was a Genocide against Indigenous Peoples," *Vatican News*, July 30, 2022, www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-07/pope-francis-apostolic-journey-inflight-press-conference-canada.html.

[35] Karen Pauls, "'I Couldn't Stay Silent,' Says Cree Singer Who Performed Powerful Message for Pope Francis," *CBC News*, July 29, 2022, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/cree-woman-singing-papal-visit-1.6535 055.

Despite this, the pressure of immediate assessment fails to recognize that a public apology is political speech,[36] and the impact of such speech may be evident only years and decades in the future.

The Pope's apology simultaneously addressed two audiences—IRS survivors and communities, and the Catholic Church in Canada. It is the second audience that will need to do the ongoing work, take concrete steps, and foster commitment at the parish level. A separate article would be necessary to begin to explore what this may look like. Can a particular public apology serve the goals of justice, repair, and transformed relationships? I do not believe that words themselves can give a definitive indication.

There has been a notable development over the past several decades about what we now call church apologies, especially in the Catholic context. When Pope Paul VI acknowledged that wrongdoing by Catholics contributed to the division among Christians, he used the language of pardon and forgiveness. A series of statements in the 1990s by national synods of bishops in different European countries used the language of repentance in relation to the Holocaust. Pope John Paul II's "Day of Pardon" in 2000 conspicuously avoided terms such as "apology" and "sorry." He asked for pardon and occasionally spoke about repentance. However, the high profile character of the Day of Pardon led to its coverage in the public media where it was widely reported and assessed in terms of *apology*. The difference between what the Pope said and how it was received illustrates how public expectations are crucial for reception and therefore the meaning of such statements. The church cannot fully control the message, which is a good thing.

With Pope Francis the language of apology has been embraced. Even though this is not the church's first language—it is not repentance, confession, or pardon—it is appropriate given the need to communicate to a public audience. Especially when those harmed are explicitly asking for an apology, perhaps because the meaning of apology is widely understood, or to avoid the imposition of theological concepts on those who may reject the church, the church apology has become a true practice of the church.

In my view, concepts such as apology, repentance, and plea for forgiveness each have a respective associated range of meanings, which can be used in ways that are self-serving. In the 1990s, the United Church of Canada was advised that a statement of repentance for residential schools would not expose them to legal liability in the way an apology would. In 1997, they took the safer route and offered a statement of repentance. A year later, they made a statement of

[36] See Alice MacLachlan, "Beyond the Ideal Political Apology," in *On the Uses and Abuses of Political Apologies*, ed. Mihaela Mihai and Mathias Thaler (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 13–31.

apology in full awareness of the legal and financial risks.[37] When addressing the legacy of clergy sexual abuse in Ireland, Irish Archbishop Diarmuid Martin reflected as follows: "When I say 'sorry,' … I am in charge. When I ask forgiveness, however, I am no longer in charge. I am in the hands of the others. Only you can forgive me; only God can forgive me."[38] My concerns about requests for forgiveness notwithstanding, neither the meaning of any of these terms nor public statements which incorporate them definitively determine whether they are efforts to assert control. The key to reconciliation is the renunciation of control in favour of an ethic of vulnerability.

The paradigm of the church apology ought not to be the carefully worded statement, but the weeping sinner who sets herself at the mercy of the one she has harmed. When Ezra confesses the sins of his generation, and of generations past, he recognizes that God would be justified in wiping his people out, without remnant or survivor. They have no standing on their own and exist entirely at the mercy of another (Ezra 9:13–14). His prayer concludes: "Here we are before you in our guilt, though no one can face you because of this" (Ezra 9:15). The people then "wept bitterly" (Ezra 10:1). When the prodigal son returns in abject shame, he says to his father, "I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (Luke 15:21). He has no expectation whatsoever that he will be restored to his former position.

Given the history of churches minimizing their own wrongdoing and announcing resolution, however premature, the church which responds to the call to apologize should not see itself as the mediator of God's forgiveness. The church should not determine when an apology has been accepted or lived out, nor what reconciliation means. Repentance calls for the renunciation of such claims. Repentance calls for deep contrition and amendment of life. The practice of apology is ultimately not about which precise words are used, but the spirit which lies behind them and the praxis which informs them, as well as the openness to follow the lead of those who were harmed. M

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[37] Donna Sinclair, ''A Question of Repentance,'' *United Church Observer*, October 1997, 12–14.

[38] "Acts of Contrition," Editorial, *New York Times*, March 3, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/03/01/opinion/01tue3.html.

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