

Walking Apart and Walking Together: Indigenous Public Reception of the Papal Visit

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POPE FRANCIS CAME TO CANADA TO APOLOGIZE for the Roman Catholic Church's involvement in residential schools at a profoundly difficult time for this country; after more than two years of pandemic, a pandemic which hit Indigenous communities much harder than other groups.¹ It was difficult because Canadian Indigenous peoples have been waiting and asking for a papal apology for over a decade,² but especially since the publication of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action in 2015, which include a Call to Action (# 58) specifically requesting a papal apology.³ It was a difficult time, too, because in spite of survivors' desire for a papal visit, the latter was delayed for far too long by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, divided until recently on the need for a papal apology.⁴ Sadly, many survivors had passed on before they had the chance to hear the words of apology, and most of their descendants have lost faith in the Catholic Church. While we may attribute the loss of faith to growing secularism in Canada, the failure of the Catholic Church to live up to its financial obligations mandated by the courts after the 2006 class action suit by survivors against the Government of Canada and the churches who ran

¹ See Naomi Williams, Amy Alberton, and Kevin Gorey, "Morbid and Mortal Inequities among Indigenous People in Canada and the United States during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of Indigenous Social Development* 11, no. 1 (2022): 3–32.

² In 2009, a delegation of survivors led by Phil Fontaine, then National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, met with Pope Benedict XVI, who expressed his deep "sorrow" over the schools. "Pope Expresses Sorrow about Residential Schools," CBC News, April 30, 2009, www.cbc.ca/news/world/pope-expresses-sorrow-for-abuse-at-residential-schools-1.778019.

³ "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 Calls to Action [Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015], # 58).

⁴ "Bishops not Ready to Invite Francis to Canada," *The Catholic Register*, September 16, 2017, www.catholicregister.org/item/26077-bishops-not-ready-to-invite-pope-francis-to-canada.

the schools represented—to many—bad faith on the part of the church that ran over 60 percent of the schools.⁵

The timing of Francis's visit was especially difficult because of the recent discovery of over one thousand unmarked graves at the sites of former residential schools. Although the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had already informed Canadians that over three thousand unmarked graves were likely to exist at the sites of residential schools,⁶ the Canadian public was not prepared for the discovery of the remains of 215 children detected by ground penetrating radar at the former site of the Kamloops Indian Residential School in May 2021.⁷ Similar subsequent grim discoveries were made throughout western Canada. These findings gave rise to an immediate and visceral expression of grief and anger throughout Canada. By July 4, 2021, over two dozen churches were burned or vandalized.⁸ The significance of these discoveries in shaping the reception of the Pope's visit can hardly be overstated.

Given the grief Indigenous people were experiencing over the discovery of unmarked graves, it is not surprising that much of the Papal visit was met with suspicion, especially among young Indigenous activists and intellectuals, who perceive the Catholic faith as an unambiguous source of oppression and trauma. Leading Indigenous intellectual Niigaan Sinclair—Professor of Indigenous Studies at the University of Manitoba and son of the Honourable Murray Sinclair, Truth and Reconciliation Commission Chief Commissioner—compared the papal apology in Rome to post-Shoah reckoning at Nuremberg: “This side of the Nuremberg trials, not often do you get to see the survivors of genocide confront those who

⁵ The Roman Catholic Church's failure to make the reparations determined by the class-action suit settlement of 2006 has been a chief source of its lack of credibility for Indigenous Canadians. Although the courts ruled that the church had to pay 25 million dollars in reparations, the Catholic Church only paid 1.2 million. In 2021, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops announced the undertaking of a 30-million-dollar fundraising campaign to support healing and reconciliation (“Canadian Bishops Announce \$30 M National Financial Pledge to Support Healing and Reconciliation Initiatives,” Canadian Conference of National Bishops, September 27, 2021, www.cccb.ca/media-release/canadian-bishops-announce-30m-national-financial-pledge-to-support-healing-and-reconciliation-initiatives/).

⁶ “Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Report Details Death of 3201 Students in Residential Schools,” *Toronto Star*, December 15, 2015, www.thestar.com/news/canada/2015/12/15/truth-and-reconciliation-commissions-report-details-deaths-of-3201-children-in-residential-schools.html.

⁷ “Anthropologist Explains How She Concluded 200 Children Were Buried at the Kamloops Residential School,” *The Globe and Mail*, July 15, 2021, www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-kamloops-residential-school-unmarked-graves-discovery-update/.

⁸ “Burned Churches Stir Deep Indigenous Ambivalence over Faith of Forefathers,” *The Guardian*, July 4, 2021, www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/04/canada-burned-churches-indigenous-catholicism.

performed the act. Pope Francis, 85, was not in power when residential schools were in operation in Canada, but the church has profited from what happened in those places.”⁹ To understand why the words of the Pope often fell on rocky soil we must grasp something of the context; the sentiment expressed by Dr. Niigaan Sinclair was not exaggerated or unusual among Indigenous political commentators, journalists, and public intellectuals.

The words pronounced by Pope Francis—and the gestures that accompanied them—also seemed to have missed the mark quite apart from the charged context. This was made painfully evident by the use of Latin during the Mass celebrated in Edmonton. As Father Daryold Winkler describes, the use of Latin would have been “triggering for many of the survivors because it was the language used at the schools.”¹⁰ It was also made apparent in the Pope’s reception of a headdress—for Plains people, the highest symbol of honour bestowed on a leader—and the outcry that ensued.¹¹ His apologies themselves (reviewed in this volume by Jeremy Bergen) were also found wanting in terms of their lack of explicit reference to sexual abuse, the Doctrine of Discovery, or the church’s explicit role in the colonization of the Americas. There were many missed opportunities. As Bergen writes: “There is a missional imperative to communicate effectively in the contemporary context.”¹²

There were also moments of profound communication, especially when the Pope encountered individuals, listened to them, stopped to reflect upon their experiences and the vast and complicated land and history of Canada. Several of the articles in this volume attest to this. Fr. Daryold Winkler puts it this way: “The Pope met 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.”¹³ In this patient work of listening a shared horizon of meaning can emerge. In listening to the survivors, the Pope was clearly moved and distressed by their testimony:

⁹ “Day of Symbolic Connection, not Reconciliation,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, April 1, 2022, www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/life/faith/2022/04/01/day-of-symbolic-connection-not-reconciliation.

¹⁰ Daryold Winkler, “Missed Opportunities and Hope for Healing: Reflections of an Indigenous Catholic Priest,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, no. 1 (2023): 77.

¹¹ “Gift of Headdress to Pope Draws Condemnation from Some First Nations People in Manitoba,” CBC News, July 27, 2022, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/first-nation-headdress-gift-pope-reaction-1.6533168.

¹² Jeremy Bergen, “Papal Apologies for Residential Schools and the Stories they Tell,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, no. 1 (2023): 54.

¹³ Winkler, “Missed Opportunities and Hope for Healing,” 78.

walking across ice, *âsawiskohtew*, and another for walking alone, *peyakohtew*. Importantly, there is also a term for walking past the place where someone should have been, *âstêhtew*. *Astêhtew* refers to walking past a place where people once lived and no longer are—an experience known all too well by Indigenous peoples in Canada. Where once there were thriving communities, countless members of these communities are now absent—the children who did not come home from residential schools, missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, or those who succumbed to the diseases of colonialism including suicide, poverty, and substance abuse. One suspects that Pope Francis intuited something of the *ashtêhtew* as he prayed at the Ermineskin cemetery in Mawcawis, Alberta.

In this sense the pilgrimage of penitence ended up being a shared journey. The overcoming of difference between two parties once caught up in enmity—how we often conceive of reconciliation—became the walking together of two parties who lament the missing and the dead, strive to overcome the continuation of such deaths, and seek to restore communities and traditions upon these lands. As Pope Francis said in his sermon at Sainte-Anne de Beaupré:

Brothers and sisters, these are our own questions, and they are the burning questions that this pilgrim Church in Canada is asking, with heartfelt sorrow, on its difficult and demanding journey of healing and reconciliation. In confronting the scandal of evil and the Body of Christ wounded in the flesh of our Indigenous brothers and sisters, we too have experienced deep dismay; we too feel the burden of failure. Allow me, then, to join in spirit the many pilgrims who in this place ascend the “holy staircase” that evokes Jesus’s ascent to Pilate’s *praetorium*. Allow me to accompany you as a Church in pondering these questions that arise from hearts filled with pain: Why did all this happen? How could this happen in the community of those who follow Jesus?¹⁷

In this sermon, the Pope reflects upon the trauma and grief of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24: 14–35), “reading” Christ’s wounds as those carried by Indigenous persons, who present to us anew Christ’s suffering and pain. As Archbishop Donald Bolen puts it in this volume: “That provides a very different lens from which to view the presence of God in the context of residential schools: God is

¹⁷ “Apostolic Journey to Canada: Holy Mass at the National Shrine of Sainte-Anne de Beaupré” (28 July 2022), www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2022/documents/20220728-omelia-beaupre-canada.html, accessed November 20, 2022.

in and with the little ones and in their suffering.”¹⁸ 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.

On the plane trip back to Rome, the Pope was interviewed by Brittnay Hobson of the Canadian Press. Ms. Hobson is an Anishinaabe journalist from Long Plain First Nation, Manitoba. She asked: “The people who heard your words of apology this past week expressed their disappointment because the word genocide was not used. Would you use that term to say that members of the Church participated in genocide?” To this, Pope Francis replied:

It’s true, I didn’t use the word because it didn’t come to my mind, but I described the genocide and asked for forgiveness, pardon for this activity that is genocidal. For example, I condemned this too: taking away children, changing culture, changing mentality, changing traditions, changing a race, let’s put it that way, an entire culture. Yes, genocide is a technical word. I didn’t use it because it didn’t come to my mind, but I described it. ... It’s true, yes, yes, it’s genocide. You can all stay calm about this. You can report that I said that it was genocide.¹⁹

This unscripted moment had tremendous and unforeseen consequences for reconciliation in Canada. Despite the many instances of missed communication, the use of the term “genocide” by the Pope enabled Indigenous commentators—even secular critics—to receive his visit retroactively with greater hospitality. Because many Indigenous groups and leaders have long been urging the Canadian government and public at large to accept that the process of colonization of Canada, including the residential schools, was in fact a genocide, the Pope’s recognition of this was a moment of gratuitous and surprising solidarity. When the House of Commons resumed its meetings in the fall after the Papal Visit, Winnipeg Centre Member of Parliament Leah Gazan was able to call upon the Pope’s acknowledgment in her motion: “That, in the opinion of the House the government must recognize what happened in Canada’s Indian residential schools as genocide, as acknowledged by Pope Francis and in accordance with article II of the United Nations Convention on the

¹⁸ Donald Bolen, “The Papal Apology and Seeds of an Action Plan,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, no. 1 (2023): 40.

¹⁹ “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-in-flight-press-conference-canada.html.

Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.”²⁰ Gazan’s motion passed with unanimous consent in the House of Commons in October 2022. Although genocide is a legal term whose use has political implications in Canada, it is important to view the term and Pope Francis’s acceptance of it as a moment of shared understanding among parties who were no longer strangers, but people who travelled on a journey of mourning together, with one party remembering their losses, and the other learning to grieve and repent. Indigenous Canadians have long persisted in their efforts to narrate the story of their loss, their experience of walking through a vast land where people ought to have been: women and girls who have been murdered or gone missing, children who never returned, those who died too soon from disease and suicide. This has been done in story and song; through art and in legal and political reform. It has generally been done in a context and climate in which Canada has refused or trivialized these narrations, because to acknowledge them would be too costly. Such acknowledgment would require, among other things, economic and land redistribution of the kind Canada is unprepared to make. In Pope Francis, Canada’s Indigenous peoples found an unlikely ally, one whose call for care for the earth and protection of the poor is not merely sentimental, but rather reveals commitment to the economic and societal changes necessary to put an end to the suffering of the world’s poor and dispossessed.

It is difficult to predict what the legacy of the Papal apologies and visit will be within Indigenous public discourse. Such discourse is as divided and varied politically as any other in Canada. Many people were warmly receptive; many remain suspicious. That Francis’s visit made an indelible mark upon public life and reconciliation in Canada cannot be doubted. For an international leader to acknowledge the historic genocide in Canada advanced very important and charged political and legal conversations. In my view, the Pope did much more: he was able to bear witness in word and action to what Canadians like to believe they have left behind. In this sense, he was able to link together Canada’s and the church’s terrible history with the ongoing colonial violence that marks much of Indigenous life in this country and thereby to call attention to national wounds that are far from healed. **M**

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²⁰ “MPs Back Motion Calling on Government to Recognize Residential School Programs as Genocide,” CBC News, October 27, 2022, www.cbc.ca/news/politics/house-motion-recognize-genocide-1.6632450.

and the homeland of the Métis Nation. Barter has been fortunate enough to participate broadly in Indigenous-Settler dialogue, and was recently co-organizer of a national conference on the Report of the National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. An Anglican priest, she has served two Indigenous parishes in Treaty One, and has been deeply engaged in her diocese on issues pertaining to reconciliation. She has written several articles and book chapters on theology and Canadian Indigenous-Settler relations, including “God Keep Our Land? Unsettling Christian Theology,” for the *Toronto Journal of Theology*.