

## Pope Francis's Apology to Indigenous Peoples in Canada

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### RECOVERING GRAVESITES: A ROMAN CATHOLIC LEGACY

**I**N MAY 2021, NEWS BROKE GLOBALLY about 215 unmarked graves found on the site of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School (IRS), in British Columbia. At its peak, the school located on the traditional territory of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc people housed around 500 students. The unmarked graves are believed to hold children who died while at the school.<sup>1</sup> Like many others across Canada, the school had been run by a Roman Catholic religious order, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI), from 1893 to 1969, when it was taken over by the federal government.<sup>2</sup> The school remained open until 1978.

While shocking to all, the discovery of the gravesites was not surprising to Indigenous survivors of Indian Residential Schools, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and their families across Canada. Among the 94 Calls to Action issued in 2015 by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Calls 71–76 assert that there are missing children and denounce the lack of transparency regarding their burial information.<sup>3</sup> The Calls to Action are directed toward the Christian Churches and Religious Orders involved in the Indian Residential Schools, the various levels of government keeping statistical and archival records of the IRS, and the Federal Government—the original architect of the IRS System—to rectify the lack of transparency. These records were not made available to the TRC prior to the May 2021 recovery of the gravesites using ground-penetrating radar.

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<sup>1</sup> Office of the Chief, Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc (Kamloops Indian Band), "Media Release: Statement Regarding Undocumented Gravesites at Kamloops Indian Residential School Site," May 27, 2021, [tkemlups.ca/wp-content/uploads/05-May-27-2021-TteS-MEDIA-RELEASE.pdf](https://tkemlups.ca/wp-content/uploads/05-May-27-2021-TteS-MEDIA-RELEASE.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Lacombe, Canada, "Schools Where Oblates Worked," no date, [omilacombe.ca/helpful-documents-and-resources/](https://omilacombe.ca/helpful-documents-and-resources/).

<sup>3</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action," *National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation*, 2015, nos. 71–76, [www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/indigenous-people/aboriginal-peoples-documents/calls\\_to\\_action\\_english2.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/indigenous-people/aboriginal-peoples-documents/calls_to_action_english2.pdf).

Tk'emlúps te Secwépamc's recovery of gravesites was the first of many across the country. Over the course of the following year approximately 1,500 additional graves were identified on sites of former Indian Residential Schools: by the Cowessess First Nation in Saskatchewan (the former Marieval IRS), the Lower Kootenay Band in British Columbia (the former St. Eugene's Mission School), the Penelakut Tribe in British Columbia (the former Kuper Island Industrial School), and Williams Lake First Nation in British Columbia (the former St. Joseph's Mission Residential School). Many more gravesites are expected to be identified in the coming months and years.<sup>4</sup>

### **HISTORY AND TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION**

Included in the Calls to Action of the TRC was the Call for 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. We call for that apology to be similar to the 2010 apology issued to Irish victims of abuse and to occur within one year of the issuing of this Report and to be delivered by the Pope in Canada (no. 58).

With the recovery of the gravesites came renewed calls for a papal apology on Indigenous Canadian soil. While Pope Benedict XVI "expressed his sorrow at the anguish caused by the deplorable conduct of some members of the Church and he offered his sympathy and prayerful solidarity," in a statement issued by the Holy See Press Office following a private audience with Indigenous and Church leaders in Rome (2009),<sup>5</sup> these words were subsequently understood not to constitute an adequate papal apology.

Although Pope Francis's apologies in 2022 were a long delayed response to the TRC Calls to Action, numerous apologies from various Catholic entities had previously been made to Indigenous Peoples in Canada, including the initial "Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate Apology to the First Nations of Canada" (1991) and the "Statement on Behalf of Congregations of Women Religious Involved in the Indian

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<sup>4</sup> Canadian Press, "Timeline of Events since Finding of Unmarked Graves in Kamloops," *CTV News*, May 18, 2022, [www.ctvnews.ca/canada/timeline-of-events-since-finding-of-unmarked-graves-in-kamloops-1.5908292](http://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/timeline-of-events-since-finding-of-unmarked-graves-in-kamloops-1.5908292).

<sup>5</sup> "Canada: Communiqué of the Holy See Press Office," April 29, 2009, [www.vatican.va/resources/resources\\_canada-first-nations-apr2009\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/resources/resources_canada-first-nations-apr2009_en.html).

Residential Schools of Canada” (2009, 2013).<sup>6</sup> Various individual and groups of bishops also extended apologies in the form of letters, statements, verbal apologies, and homilies: Archbishop Austin E. Burke of Halifax, Nova Scotia (1992); Archbishop Gerald Pettipas of Grouard-McLennan, Alberta (2008); Bishop Albert LeGatt of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (2008); Archbishop Sylvain Lavoie of Keewatin-LePas, Manitoba (2008); Bishop Murray Chatlain of Mackenzie-Fort Smith, Northwest Territories (2009); Catholic Bishops of Saskatchewan (2012); Catholic Bishops of British Columbia and Yukon (2013); Catholic Bishops of Alberta and the Northwest Territories (2014); Archbishop Terrence Prendergast of Ottawa, Ontario (2015); and Archbishop J. Michael Miller of Vancouver, British Columbia (2015).<sup>7</sup>

As an entity, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB) issued numerous statements over the years: a *Statement of Apology* in 1991, *Let Justice Flow Like a Mighty River: Statement to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (1993), and *Launching of Truth and Reconciliation Commission: An Opportunity for Healing and Hope* (2008) (although the CCCC did not formally participate in the TRC process).<sup>8</sup>

### PAPAL APOLOGY—VATICAN, APRIL 2022

The collective hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Canada has generally responded cautiously to Truth and Reconciliation. Many faithful Catholics believe in, support, and are working toward righting the Church’s relationship with Indigenous Peoples in Canada. But there can be no reconciliation without repentance. The fact that it took the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops so long to reiterate its apology following the recovery of unmarked graves at IRS in the spring/summer of 2021 was perhaps a sign of internal ambivalence

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<sup>6</sup> Oblate Conference of Canada on Behalf of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Canada, “An Apology to the First Nations of Canada,” July 24, 1991, [omilacombe.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AN-APOLOGY-TO-THE-FIRST-NATIONS-OF-CANADA-BY-THE-OBLATE-CONFERENCE-OF-CANADA-w-intro-1991.pdf](http://omilacombe.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AN-APOLOGY-TO-THE-FIRST-NATIONS-OF-CANADA-BY-THE-OBLATE-CONFERENCE-OF-CANADA-w-intro-1991.pdf); Canadian Religious Conference, “Statement on Behalf of Congregations of Women Religious Involved in the Indian Residential Schools of Canada,” 2009, 2013, [crc-canada.org/en/statement-congregations-women-religious-involved-indian-residential-schools-canada/](http://crc-canada.org/en/statement-congregations-women-religious-involved-indian-residential-schools-canada/).

<sup>7</sup> With the exception of the verbal apologies made on March 9, 2009, at the “Remembering the Children” event by Bishop LeGatt of Saskatoon and Archbishop Lavoie of Keewatin-Le-Pas, links to these apologies are available on the CCCC website: [www.cccb.ca/indigenous-peoples/chronology-of-ccc-b-engagement/](http://www.cccb.ca/indigenous-peoples/chronology-of-ccc-b-engagement/).

<sup>8</sup> Each of these CCCC statements can be found on their website: [www.cccb.ca/indigenous-peoples/chronology-of-ccc-b-engagement/](http://www.cccb.ca/indigenous-peoples/chronology-of-ccc-b-engagement/).

about the Church's role in IRS.<sup>9</sup> Relying on considerations relative to ecclesial structure to evade a renewed apology (e.g., there is no such entity as the Canadian Catholic Church),<sup>10</sup> rather than attending to the pastoral necessity of reiterating, as often and deeply as necessary, its sorrow, apology, and repentance for our participation in cultural genocide, the CCCB failed Indigenous Peoples and Catholics across the land. After several months, its long delayed apology came on September 24, 2021, followed by a pledge of \$30M on September 27, 2021.<sup>11</sup> These gestures appeared to set the stage for a series of papal apologies. The historical resistance of Canadian Catholic bishops to inviting Pope Francis to Canada (a typical protocol for the Pope to enter the pastoral jurisdiction of the Bishops of Canada) out of concern for the expense incurred or their internal disagreement about how best to respond to Indigenous Peoples in Canada, and Pope Francis's subsequent inability to offer an apology in 2018,<sup>12</sup> seemed a turning point for many Canadian Catholics. In the form of petitions, many concerned Catholics voiced their desire for the Canadian Catholic Bishops to produce an apology and initiate a papal visit to fulfill the

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<sup>9</sup> Deborah Gyapong, Canadian Catholic News, "As Bishops Ponder Pope Francis Visit to Canada, Indigenous Relations Are a Priority," *The Catholic Register*, October 3, 2017, [www.catholicregister.org/item/26107-bishops-ponder-pope-francis-visit-to-canada-indigenous-relations](http://www.catholicregister.org/item/26107-bishops-ponder-pope-francis-visit-to-canada-indigenous-relations); Michael Swan, "Pope Francis not Coming to Canada to Apologize for Residential Schools," *The Catholic Register*, March 28, 2018, [www.catholicregister.org/item/27075-pope-francis-not-coming-to-canada-to-apologize-for-residential-schools](http://www.catholicregister.org/item/27075-pope-francis-not-coming-to-canada-to-apologize-for-residential-schools).

<sup>10</sup> Archdiocese of Toronto, "Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Residential Schools," June 2021, [www.archtoronto.org/siteassets/media/archdiocese-of-toronto-main-site/files/press-releases/2021/residential-schools---frequently-asked-questions--june-2021.pdf](http://www.archtoronto.org/siteassets/media/archdiocese-of-toronto-main-site/files/press-releases/2021/residential-schools---frequently-asked-questions--june-2021.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Catholic Bishops of Canada, "Statement of Apology by the Catholic Bishops of Canada to the Indigenous Peoples of This Land," September 24, 2021, [www.cccb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Statement\\_from\\_CBC\\_to\\_Indigenous-EN.pdf](http://www.cccb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Statement_from_CBC_to_Indigenous-EN.pdf); Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Canadian Bishops Announce \$30M National Financial Pledge to Support Healing and Reconciliation Initiatives," September 27, 2021, [www.cccb.ca/media-release/canadian-bishops-announce-30m-national-financial-pledge-to-support-healing-and-reconciliation-initiatives/](http://www.cccb.ca/media-release/canadian-bishops-announce-30m-national-financial-pledge-to-support-healing-and-reconciliation-initiatives/).

<sup>12</sup> Jorge Barrera, "Lack of Bishops' Consensus, Concerns over Cost behind Pope Apology Decision: Archbishop," *CBC News*, April 26, 2018, [www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/cost-lack-of-consensus-behind-pope-apology-decision-1.4635802](http://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/cost-lack-of-consensus-behind-pope-apology-decision-1.4635802); Jason Warick, "Renewed Calls for Pope to Visit Sask. to Apologize for Residential Schools after 2017 Effort Failed," *CBC News*, June 8, 2021, [www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/saskatchewan-chief-residential-schools-pope-francis-1.6057016](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/saskatchewan-chief-residential-schools-pope-francis-1.6057016); Dean Detloff, "Why Hasn't Pope Francis Apologized in Canada? Ask the Bishops," *National Catholic Reporter* (online), July 6, 2021, [www.ncronline.org/news/guest-voices/why-hasnt-pope-francis-apologized-canada-ask-bishops](http://www.ncronline.org/news/guest-voices/why-hasnt-pope-francis-apologized-canada-ask-bishops).

TRC's Call to Action no. 58, months before the bishops did. The frustration among Canadian Catholics was palpable.<sup>13</sup>

Following their apology and financial pledge, the CCCB cooperated with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis groups across Canada to bring a delegation to Rome, to meet with Pope Francis. Originally, the meeting was scheduled for December 2021. However, due to the rapid spread of the Omicron variant of COVID-19,<sup>14</sup> it was rescheduled to March-April 2022. Between March 28 and 31, 2022, each of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit delegations met privately with Pope Francis in Rome to offer accounts of their own and their ancestors' experiences in Indian Residential Schools in Canada. They recounted the unconscionable abuses perpetrated against them by Roman Catholic operators of the schools. They spoke of the tragic legacy of the schools for Indigenous people in Canada. They identified the intergenerational trauma currently plaguing Indigenous groups across Turtle Island. Pope Francis listened.

On April 1, 2022, Pope Francis responded to the delegates of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples visiting him in Rome.<sup>15</sup> He recounted their stories, apologized for the Church's role in Canadian Indian Residential Schools, and promised to continue to journey with them toward reconciliation on their native lands, in Canada. The fulfillment of this promise would be a concrete response to the Call to Action number 58 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Pope Francis's initial apology to the Indigenous delegation was an opening gesture toward repentance and reconciliation.

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<sup>13</sup> Sam Bianco (Initiator), "Statement from Concerned Canadian Catholics on the Discoveries in Kamloops," [www.change.org/p/canadian-conference-of-catholic-bishops-statement-from-concerned-canadian-catholics-on-the-discoveries-in-kamloops-fdaf3705-463e-4bac-9354-b8203a4762a6](http://www.change.org/p/canadian-conference-of-catholic-bishops-statement-from-concerned-canadian-catholics-on-the-discoveries-in-kamloops-fdaf3705-463e-4bac-9354-b8203a4762a6); Hon. George Valin and Maurice Switzer (Initiators), "Call for Papal Apology for Residential School Abuses," [www.change.org/p/call-for-papal-apology-for-residential-school-abuses](http://www.change.org/p/call-for-papal-apology-for-residential-school-abuses). Together these petitions garnered over 70,000 signatures.

<sup>14</sup> "Canadian Catholic Bishops, Assembly of First Nations, Métis National Council, and Inuit, Tapiriit Kanatami Provide an Update on Delegation to Rome," *Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops*, December 7, 2021, [www.cccb.ca/announcement/canadian-bishops-assembly-of-first-nations-metis-national-council-and-inuit-tapiriit-kanatami-provide-an-update-on-delegation-to-rome/](http://www.cccb.ca/announcement/canadian-bishops-assembly-of-first-nations-metis-national-council-and-inuit-tapiriit-kanatami-provide-an-update-on-delegation-to-rome/); "Canadian Bishops and Indigenous Delegates Depart on Historic Trip to the Holy See," CCCB, March 24, 2022, [www.cccb.ca/media-release/canadian-bishops-and-indigenous-delegates-depart-on-historic-trip-to-the-holy-see/](http://www.cccb.ca/media-release/canadian-bishops-and-indigenous-delegates-depart-on-historic-trip-to-the-holy-see/).

<sup>15</sup> Pope Francis, "Meeting with Representatives of Indigenous Peoples in Canada: Address of His Holiness," April 1, 2022, [www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/april/documents/20220401-popoli-indigeni-canada.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/april/documents/20220401-popoli-indigeni-canada.html).

## PENITENTIAL PILGRIMAGE TO CANADA AND THEOLOGICAL ROUNDTABLE

Pope Francis made good on his promise to visit Indigenous Peoples on their native soil in July 2022. Over the course of five days, he met and spoke with Indigenous communities in numerous contexts, in Alberta, Quebec, and Nunavut.<sup>16</sup> His pilgrimage of penance was indeed historic.

In response to Pope Francis's encounter with the Indigenous delegates and in anticipation of his Canadian pilgrimage, a panel discussion of the papal apology, convened by Drs. Jane Barter and Doris Kieser, was held at the Canadian Theological Society meeting and conference in May 2022. Dr. Christine Jamieson, Dr. Jeremy Bergen, Rev. Daryold Winkler, and Archbishop Donald Bolen each spoke to their experience of the April 1<sup>st</sup> apology from within their own history and in accord with their own hopes. In the reflections offered by the four participants in the roundtable discussion of the initial papal apology, we witness a variety of responses both to the apology itself and the long process by which it came to pass. The stories they told and insights they shared shed some light on the initial reception of Pope Francis's April apology.

We are pleased to offer revised versions of those presentations as part of this symposium in the *Journal of Moral Theology*. Given the timing of the initial panel, some roundtable participants have included references to his visit to Canada, while others have confined their responses to his April 1, 2022 apology to the Indigenous delegation to Rome. In this light, the ensuing discussion captures responses from diverse perspectives on Pope Francis's apology to Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Our hope in convening these specific panelists was to summon responses to the papal apology from within a spectrum of experience(s).

Archbishop Donald J. Bolen, eighth Archbishop of Regina, Saskatchewan. His work with the Canadian Catholic Bishops encompasses ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, and justice and peace work. His service in the global Catholic Church promotes Christian unity through ecumenical dialogue with a variety of Christian denominations. Archbishop Bolen has been notably supportive of concrete Canadian Catholic initiatives to enact truth and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, particularly in light of Catholic participation in Indian Residential Schools.

Jeremy Bergen, Associate Professor of Religious and Theological Studies at Conrad Grebel University College at the University of Waterloo in Ontario. He teaches and writes in the area of contemporary Christian—more particularly Mennonite—theology,


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<sup>16</sup> "Pope Francis's Penitential Pilgrimage," *Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops*, no date, [www.cccb.ca/indigenous-peoples/pope-francis-penitential-pilgrimage/](http://www.cccb.ca/indigenous-peoples/pope-francis-penitential-pilgrimage/).

including on church apologies for historical wrongs. In his 2011 book *Ecclesial Repentance*, Dr. Bergen analyzed over 100 instances of churches apologizing for historical wrongs and proposed a theological framework for understanding this relatively new practice. We welcome his reflections on the practical tasks of repentance and reconciliation for Canadian Christian churches and the papal apology to Indigenous Peoples of Canada.

Christine Jamieson's roots are with the Boothroyd First Nation. She is a member of the Nlaka'pamux Nation Tribal Council in the Fraser Canyon and she is Associate Professor of Theological Studies at Concordia University in Montreal. Since 2010, she has been working with Indigenous themes and spirituality in her research, writing, and teaching.<sup>17</sup> As a Canadian and Indigenous scholar of theology, Dr. Jamieson's voice in discussions regarding Catholic reconciliation with Indigenous peoples offers rich insight into the complex relationships among the Church and First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples.

Father Daryold Corbiere Winkler is an Ojibway priest and Pastor at St. Basil's parish in the Catholic diocese of Ottawa. As St. Basil's Pastor, Fr. Daryold participates in the Kateri Native Ministry, which celebrates mass in the parish. This ministry has been committed to healing, reconciliation, and spiritual growth of Indigenous people for over 20 years. His reflection on the apologies of Pope Francis to Indigenous peoples of Canada speaks from both his own familial Ojibway experience and intergenerational trauma, and his experience as a pastor to Indigenous Catholics in Ottawa.

The final participant in this roundtable discussion is Jane Barter, co-editor of this symposium and Professor of Religion and Culture at The University of Winnipeg. As a Settler on Treaty One, the traditional lands of the Anishinaabe, Cree, Dakota, Dene, and Oji-Cree Peoples 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*. 

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<sup>17</sup> Christine Jamieson, "Profile," *The Conversation*, no date, [theconversation.com/profiles/christine-jamieson-892527](http://theconversation.com/profiles/christine-jamieson-892527).

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