

Missed Opportunities and Hope for Healing: Reflections of an Indigenous Catholic Priest— Interview with Fr. Daryold Winkler

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FOLLOWING THE PANEL DISCUSSION at the Canadian Theological Society in May 2022, Jane Barter and Doris Kieser sat with Fr. Daryold Winkler to revisit and record his comments on the panel for this special issue of the *Journal of Moral Theology*. Fr. Winkler recounted his family's and his own narrative of separation, diminishment, and intergenerational trauma within the history of Indian Residential and Day Schools in Canada. Subsequent to Pope Francis's penitential pilgrimage to Canada in July 2022, we posed some further questions about his response to the papal visit. Both accounts provide his unique insight as an Indigenous (Ojibway) Catholic priest in Canada.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Why is reconciliation especially important to you?

Reverend Winkler: The context of my contribution to the roundtable discussion was intended to be from a personal perspective. I have Indigenous roots and am a second-generation survivor of the Indian Day School and Residential School system. For me, the issue of reconciliation in the church is visceral because my mother and her siblings experienced the detrimental effects of these assimilation policies that we now know as cultural genocide. The effects of these policies continue to be felt in subsequent generations; they are intergenerational and traumatic.

A LEGACY OF DEGRADATION, TERROR, AND VIOLENCE

What are the effects of intergenerational trauma for Survivors of Indian Residential Schools?

Reverend Winkler: I want to relate some experiences of my mother, her sister, and her brother in these schools. My mother's experience was one of degradation. She was ridiculed by her teachers because of her inability to grasp English as quickly as other students. The kind of intimidation and humiliation she experienced as a child had lifelong

consequences. She felt deeply that she was inferior to non-Indigenous people, and this sense of inferiority was passed down to her children.

As with many young Indigenous people in the residential schools, my aunt wanted to run away. She told me of an experience of her attempt to run away with two other female students her own age (eleven years old). They had plotted to escape from the school after the bell rang during recess by running across the field into the woods. When the bell rang, the two other girls ran but she remained frozen—feeling completely terrorized by what the consequences would be if they were apprehended. She never learned what happened to her two friends, and never saw them again. Much of her time in the residential school was characterised by a never-ending sense of terror. This also resulted in a lifelong experience of never feeling safe and secure, fearful of harsh consequences for her actions.

My uncle was a typical eight year old child who, like children of every culture, wanted to play, run, horse around, wrestle, laugh, and tease. Once, when he was playing and horsing around, his teacher walked into the classroom and singled him out. He was called to the front of the classroom and told to extend his hands. The teacher then took a ruler and smacked his hands so harshly that his fingers, wrists, and forearms swelled to such an extent that he was unable to hold a pencil to write or hold a book to read. This kind of violence was not uncommon with students who were just being kids. Looking back on these kinds of experiences seventy years later, he still finds it hard to believe that adults perpetrated these kinds of sadistic practices on children.¹

THE CHALLENGES OF RECONCILIATION

What challenges do you see for healing and reconciliation in our Canadian context?

Reverend Winkler: I believe that one of the biggest challenges in truth and reconciliation in Canadian society is for fellow Canadians to actually recognize the darkness of what happened in residential schools. There is a tendency to minimize the darkness since it is too hard to believe the stories shared by survivors. “It couldn’t have been that bad. This must be an exaggeration of what really happened.” As a younger person, I even found accepting and believing these stories difficult. Yet they are true. Further, it is even more difficult to believe how this trauma continues to be passed down to subsequent

¹ For extensive accounts from survivors of the Indian Residential School System in Canada, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, “Canada’s Residential Schools: The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada,” Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015, publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.807830/publication.html.

generations. We can see this trauma in the legacy of pain among Indigenous communities nation-wide. At the same time, there are many biases about Indigenous peoples, both conscious and unconscious, affecting Canadians who see no need for reconciliation. “They get free education; they get all kinds of free money; the chiefs are corrupt. They get too much money and we see no change.” These kinds of perceptions impede any true understanding of the need for truth prior to reconciliation. There will be resistance to reconciliation if there is a continued lack of awareness of the systemic problems experienced by Indigenous peoples, the truth of our history. If Canadian people heard these stories and really listened, we would be much closer to reconciliation.

A legacy of degradation and violence follows survivors and their descendants as a result of the residential school experience. The residential schools were especially insidious because residential school children did not have the opportunity to go home to be comforted. There was no one to whom the children could turn who would hold them and say, “It’s going to be all right,” “It’s going to get better.” These children did not have that reassurance.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PAPAL APOLOGY IN ROME

What is the significance of the papal apology in Rome?

Reverend Winkler: “[Listening to your stories] has made me feel two things very strongly—*indignation* and *shame*.² One of the most important aspects of truth-telling, as we know from truth and reconciliation processes held in many other countries in the world, is that victims feel that their stories have been heard and believed.

By saying that he felt *indignation* and *shame* in listening to the Survivors’ stories, Pope Francis indicated that he was listening to what he heard. Pope Francis has been a proponent of the notion of *encounter*.³ From the beginning of his pontificate, he has attempted to create a global *culture of encounter*. It has been his understanding that the path to peace involves listening to and dialoguing with the Other. An encounter happens when we listen without judgment, without barriers, in the hope of learning from the Other. When he indicated that what he heard from survivors led to feelings of indignation and shame, there was the relief that our truth is being heard: “I have listened attentively to your testimonies ... and I have brought them to

² Pope Francis, “Meeting with Representatives of Indigenous Peoples from Canada: Address of His Holiness,” April 1, 2022, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/april/documents/20220401-popoli-indigeni-canada.html.

³ Notable in Pope Francis’s encyclicals: *Lumen Fidei*, 2013, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html; *Laudato Si’*, 2015, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html; *Fratelli Tutti*, 2020, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

my thoughts and prayers.”⁴ There is a measure of empathy—essential for reconciliation.

He also indicated his wish to achieve a decolonized future—to eradicate the sense that “my culture is superior to yours,” “that my spirituality is superior to yours.” He reminds us in the apology that there are new forms of colonization of which we need to be aware: political, ideological, and economic. “Let us help each other together to overcome it.”

HEALING INITIATIVES

What can the Church do concretely to advance the process of healing and reconciliation in Canada?

Reverend Winkler: Any truly effective process of healing requires concrete action. The Pope indicated the need to restore broken and fragile Indigenous communities. An important component of this revitalization in Indigenous communities will depend on the healing of intergenerational bonds that were severely damaged by the Residential School system. “The ties that connect the elderly and the young are essential.”

Pope Francis also spoke of the connection to the land and the importance of re-connecting to Indigenous spirituality. These reconnections will happen through initiatives financially supported by both government and Church.

CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL GIFT EXCHANGE

What are the benefits of reconciliation in Canada?

Reverend Winkler: The Pope indicated that there are things the Church can learn from Indigenous peoples. The first is an Indigenous understanding of the land and creation: our common home. We ought not to exploit the land for the sake of greed but, rather, ought to see the land as a source of life.

Secondly, we can learn that humanity exists in a web of relationships—that everything is connected. “With the Creator, with the human community, with all living species and with the Earth, our common home.” Not respecting this web of relationships will be the source of global destruction. Pope Francis also expresses this common connection with one another and with creation in his 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si’*.

Thirdly, Pope Francis recognizes that within Indigenous culture and spirituality there is a harmony, both exterior and interior, which needs to be respected to live a good life. This is reminiscent of the

⁴ Francis, “Meeting with Representatives of Indigenous Peoples from Canada.”

medicine wheel teaching of many Indigenous peoples in North America.⁵

Finally, Pope Francis knows that the many cultures in the world, Indigenous cultures included, are a patrimony—an inheritance—belonging to all humanity. The Church is enhanced through Indigenous cultural and spiritual traditions.

PAPAL APOLOGY IN ROME

How did you receive Pope Francis's apology in Rome?

Reverend Winkler: After Francis made the apology in Rome, I saw incredible hope for reconciliation, as did all the delegates. The leaders of the three Indigenous groups—First Nations, Inuit, and Métis—felt relief and hope from the words of the Pope. A good listener repeats what they have heard and, all week in Rome, the Pope was hearing stories from the survivors, and these stories were truly reflected in his apology. He listened with no barriers. He listened with no prejudice. He listened without fear of being sued, due to the legacy. He just dropped everything. Indigenous people came back very hopeful about reconciliation.

POPE FRANCIS'S PENITENTIAL PILGRIMAGE TO CANADA

What are your thoughts about Pope Francis's visit to Canada and his interactions with Indigenous Peoples in Alberta, Quebec, and Nunavut?

Reverend Winkler: First, as an Indigenous person and with family members who are survivors of the Indian Day School and Residential School systems, *I was relieved* to hear the news that finally the Pope was coming to Canada to apologize to the survivors. This visit would fulfill Call to Action number 58 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.⁶

I had had serious doubts about whether the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops would in fact invite the Pope to deliver his apology, since there seemed historically to be so much resistance. Cardinal Collins of Toronto, for example, seemed to suggest in June 2021—a year before the Pope's visit—that given what other Church entities had already undertaken, including Pope Benedict's expression of sorrow in 2009, a papal apology made in Canada was not needed

⁵ Francis Whiskeyjack, "The Medicine Wheel," *Windspeaker.com*, no date, windspeaker.com/teachings/the-medicine-wheel.

⁶ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action," no. 58, *National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation*, 2015, www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/indigenous-people/aboriginal-peoples-documents/calls_to_action_english2.pdf.

for reconciliation to proceed.⁷ This suggestion downplayed the Calls to Action of the TRC and misunderstood the nature and purpose of an official apology from the Pope.

I think that for many Indigenous peoples, the Papal visit was a necessary step in the process of reconciliation between the Catholic Church and Indigenous peoples. I do not deny that efforts of reconciliation had begun at the local, grass roots level before the Pope's visit. Nor do I deny that the many apologies by superiors of Catholic religious orders and bishops were important. They certainly were important. But the papal visit somehow legitimized continued efforts for reconciliation. Reconciliation begins by saying officially "I am sorry." Only the Pope could do that and Indigenous peoples believed it was necessary that it be done here, on this land.

There are also Indigenous peoples who believe that much more could have been accomplished during the visit, especially around the topics of the Doctrine of Discovery,⁸ the mention of sexual abuse in the schools, or the opening of archives. I was very disappointed that at the public liturgies in Edmonton and Ste Anne de Beaupré, there were missed opportunities to integrate and celebrate Indigenous cultures and spiritualities; it could have been a sign—a time to model reconciliation on a liturgical level—to see the Pope surrounded by survivors at these liturgies, rather than being surrounded by bishops. The bishops in the front, wearing their mitres, prevented people from seeing the Pope and hearing his words. With some imagination, the liturgies could have engaged Indigenous spirituality. For instance, it would have been wonderful to see the several bishops who have learned Indigenous languages, like Archbishop Murray Chatlain (Archdiocese of Keewatin Le-Pas, Manitoba) and Archbishop Sylvain Lavoie (Archbishop Emeritus of Keewatin Le-Pas) pray parts of the Eucharistic prayer in Dene and Cree, respectively, rather than having the prayer solely in Latin, as we witnessed at the public mass in Edmonton. To use Latin would have been triggering for many of the survivors because it was the language used at the residential schools.

These formalities were in marked contrast to the arrival of Pope Francis prior to the Mass, when he came out of his Pope-mobile. There was Indigenous drumming. There was energy, people were waving

⁷ Sarah Smellie, "Toronto Archbishop Calls Trudeau's Comments about Church and Residential Schools 'Unfair,'" *City News, Toronto*, June 6, 2021, toronto.citynews.ca/2021/06/06/toronto-archbishop-calls-trudeaus-comments-about-church-and-residential-schools-unfair/; 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.

⁸ See, for example, Assembly of First Nations, "Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery," January 2018, www.afn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/18-01-22-Dismantling-the-Docctrine-of-Discovery-EN.pdf.

their arms. There was an intense sense of joy and celebration, and the Pope was loving it, too. People were handing him babies. I thought, “Wow, this is going to be a great celebration.” Then the bishops started the mass in pre-Vatican II vestments. By not honoring or privileging Indigenous spiritual traditions in a Mass supposed to be about reconciliation, the bishops were not working toward reconciliation.

This oversight also runs counter to Pope Francis’s emphasis on synodality and the leadership of the laity. The trip to Canada could have been a time when the laity, particularly the survivors, were at the centre of worship. The Pope’s goal from the beginning of his papacy has been to decentralize Rome and focus on local theologies and traditions. The irony to me is that the bishops in Canada resisted the Pope’s visit as long as they could.

This papal visit also made me realize the deep polarity within the Catholic Church in Canada. Like Pope Francis, many people understand the importance of Indigenous leadership and the need for the Catholic Church to change. But there are others, particularly in leadership, who want to go back to a colonial church. Pope Francis understands the church to be a hospital for healing—a field hospital.⁹ This is the polarity—Francis understands that the church is a place of healing, a place of welcome, a place of safety. Reconciliation will require us to meet people where they are.

Despite all these missed opportunities, the Pope’s private meetings with survivors in all three locations may have had the most powerful impact for healing and reconciliation. 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. My mother—who died long before the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples¹⁰ or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission—would have been completely astounded to know that the Pope came to Canada to apologize to her for the suffering she and thousands of others experienced in the schools. So when the Pope came here to apologize, I accepted the apology on her behalf and said with her, “We forgive you.”

⁹ Massimo Borghesi, *Catholic Discordance: Neoconservatism vs. the Field Hospital Church of Pope Francis*, trans. Barry M. Hudock (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021).

¹⁰ Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, “Final Report on the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples,” vols. 1–5, October 1996, www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/aboriginal-heritage/royal-commission-aboriginal-peoples/Pages/final-report.aspx.

MOVING FORWARD

Pope Francis reiterated his desire for the restoration of intergenerational Indigenous family relationships, customs, spirituality, and ties to creation, the Creator, and the land. What do you see as necessary next steps and concrete actions for the Catholic Church in Canada to enact Pope Francis's vision?

Reverend Winkler: The Canadian Catholic bishops have pledged to raise \$30 million to accrue financial resources for initiatives of cultural renewal and healing of Indigenous people across Canada. I see this as an important first step and very concrete action to foster healing and reconciliation. It will certainly take more than \$30 million to restore what has been lost over seven generations of colonialism and cultural genocide. Nevertheless, it is an important beginning for the restitution of harms caused by the Catholic Church.

I also see the need for nurturing awareness among the Catholic laity and clergy about the history of colonialism in Canada. At the present time, I think many still are not sympathetic to the cause of reconciliation because they simply are unaware of the real history of colonialism.

An important question for many asks how we can measure the healing and reconciliation resulting from the efforts made by the Catholic Church and other Churches, and the governments on various levels. In response to this question, I want to echo former Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner Justice Murray Sinclair:

Healing will result in a diminishment of the percentages of Indigenous people who are incarcerated in Canadian prisons. At the moment, approximately 30% of all incarcerated Canadians are Indigenous; First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people are disproportionately admitted into correctional facilities.¹¹

Healing will result in a decrease in the number of the nearly four thousand missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls across Canada.¹²

Healing will show a decline in the numbers of Indigenous children taken from their homes and placed in foster care outside their communities. This practice is consistent across Canadian provinces and territories.¹³

¹¹ See Jamil Malakieh, "Juristat: Adult and Youth Correctional Statistics in Canada, 2018/2019," *Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics*, Catalogue no. 85-002-X, December 21, 2020, 5, www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-002-x/2020001/article/00016-eng.pdf?st=g-yrQ-y_.

¹² "Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls," vols. 1a and 1b, *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, 2019, www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/.

¹³ See Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal, "Indigenous Child Welfare," no date, cwrrp.ca/indigenous-child-welfare.

At the same time, we will see increases in the number of Indigenous youth graduating from secondary and post-secondary schools.¹⁴

I am convinced that in all of these instances and more, we will be able to measure the healing taking place among Indigenous peoples as a result of special initiatives that foster the cultural and spiritual flourishing of the most vulnerable and fragile peoples within Canadian society.

This will be a work for the long haul. We are only at the foothills of a journey that is as daunting as climbing Mount Everest. At the risk of sounding naïve or Pollyannaish, I have become hopeful that healing and reconciliation will happen. **M**

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¹⁴ Vivian O'Donnell and Paula Arriagada, "Insights on Canadian Society: Upgrading and High School Equivalency among the Indigenous Population Living Off Reserve," *Statistics Canada*, Catalogue no. 75-006-X, September 19, 2019, www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/75-006-x/2019001/article/00013-eng.pdf?st=nuLFeG5V; "NHS in Brief: The Educational Attainment of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada," *National Household Survey (NHS)*, 2011, Catalogue no. 99-012-X2011003, 2013, www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-012-x/99-012-x2011003_3-eng.pdf.