

## Truth, Healing, and Reconciliation: The Challenge for Future Relationship between Indigenous Peoples and the Catholic Church

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THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, PARTICULARLY IN THE AMERICAS, from both theological and sociological perspectives, has a fundamental challenge in its relationship historically and today with Indigenous peoples. This challenge is rooted in the inherently colonial nature of evangelization and relationships that existed between Indigenous peoples and the representatives of the Catholic Church in the Americas. I experience that challenge firsthand both as a Catholic Indigenous person and in my role as the Director for Truth and Healing at Red Cloud Indian School in Pine Ridge, South Dakota. The school itself was a former boarding school for Indigenous children, part of a larger and systematic effort to “civilize” Indigenous people across the United States and Canada. These efforts have had long lasting impacts on the Indigenous communities having experienced them, including loss of language, culture, and even family.<sup>1</sup>

The schools were known for their policies that had resoundingly traumatizing effects on children across the spectrum. Cultural practices such as keeping long hair for spiritual purposes were brutally shattered when the schools systemically sheared students’ hair upon their arrival. The use of firm corporal punishment that we would today acknowledge as abuse was widespread. Death from disease, malnutrition, or even neglect occurred to the point where these schools, particularly those distant from the Indigenous communities from which students were taken, required cemeteries to bury them.<sup>2</sup> The Catholic Church in the Americas played an active role in running these schools, having run nearly half of the residential schools that

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, Josephine Chase, Jennifer Elkins, and Deborah B. Altschul, “Historical Trauma among Indigenous Peoples of the Americas: Concepts, Research, and Clinical Considerations,” *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 43, no. 4 (2011): 282–290, doi.org/10.1080/02791072.2011.628913.

<sup>2</sup> David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2020).

existed in Canada and over one hundred of the schools that existed in the United States.

In my role I support a Truth and Healing effort for the Maḥpiya Luta (Red Cloud School), the Jesuits that still sponsor the school, and the wider community. We deliberately use the term “healing” rather than “reconciliation” because that term carries different kinds of weight depending on the perspective. As a concept in the Catholic faith, reconciliation is deeply sacramental and core to the message of the Gospel. It involves God’s call to forgiveness, a desire to atone, a need for penance, a journey toward repentance, and living as God would desire us to live in good relationship to others. This theological vision of reconciliation is not widely understood nor often applied in the context of Indigenous communities and their relationship to the Catholic Church.

The practical exercise of the term reconciliation—as often experienced in court systems and projects of restorative justice—seems rooted in returning to some previously good relationship that existed prior to the harm inflicted, which many Indigenous people argue is not true of the relationship Indigenous peoples had with settler-colonial communities and governments. There is also a sense that reconciliation means two equals are coming to a shared table in order to find solutions and meet each other through concession and compromise; however, Indigenous peoples struggle to see that such a relationship truly can exist, as one side of this equation has an uneven power differential with many aspects of true justice for Indigenous people simply being off the table from the beginning, such as land return, reparations, or even full autonomy. Thus, in our efforts at Maḥpiya Luta we are engaging in a process of Truth and Healing. We firmly believe that at the very least healing is possible even if reconciliation, in its less theological form, is not as easily achievable.

In response to the major social backlash against the Catholic Church in Canada after numerous former boarding schools rediscovered the unmarked graves that scattered the grounds after years of neglect, theologian Brett Salkeld wrote that the Church should atone for this egregious role in Indigenous Canadian history.<sup>3</sup> It should do so because the Church failed to live up to at least two fundamental beliefs within its own tradition. First, the family is sacred and core to the gift of creation, and, despite this, the Church was involved in a systemic effort to remove children from their families to civilize them.

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<sup>3</sup> Brett Salkeld, “Guilt, Responsibility, and Purgatory: How Traditional Catholic Teaching Can Help Us Think about Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparations,” *Church Life Journal*, McGrath Institute for Church Life, University of Notre Dame, September 30, 2021, [churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/guilt-responsibility-and-purgatory-how-traditional-catholic-teaching-can-help-us-think-about-truth-reconciliation-and-reparations/](http://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/guilt-responsibility-and-purgatory-how-traditional-catholic-teaching-can-help-us-think-about-truth-reconciliation-and-reparations/).

And second, the efforts to culturally change Indigenous people went against the spirit of the Council of Jerusalem, where the Church made the important decision that it was not a single-culture church.

Why Catholic individuals were willing to engage in such a system that failed fundamentally to live up to these two core beliefs reflects the missionary church's fundamental problem with its historic ties to colonialism and how evangelism is conceived as a result. Is the church inherently missioned to change other people? On the most basic of levels, yes. The great call tells us to share the good news of the Gospel with all peoples and hope they hear that good news. The deep question theologians must face is to what extent does hearing the gospel also come with deep cultural, linguistic, and spiritual changes, too. Every culture contains good and evil, as does every individual. God created all people and I believe strongly that all cultures are inherently, at least the good in them, influenced by a human yearning for God. The devil seems to be in the details, as many in our world will clash over what should or should not be part of the Catholic faith when it comes to inculturation.

What does it mean for the Catholic Church to have fundamental concepts such as evangelization rooted in practices that were also culturally, spiritually, and linguistically damaging? That was not always the case and certainly not for every community in the United States. Indigenous peoples can incorporate Catholicism into their own cultures quite fluidly, and the Pueblo nations in the southwestern portions of the United States are strong examples. Even here in the great plains early Jesuit missionaries were quick to learn the native languages of the people to whom they were missioning and began translating the Bible, prayers, and even parts of the mass into those languages. Many Indigenous peoples were evangelized through their mother tongue. However, that paradigm did not last and certainly did not include other aspects of culture. In some ways, the boarding school system that imposed western cultural norms and language on Indigenous communities undermined the early efforts of missionaries who began that process in the language of the people.

To be Catholic, how much must one conform to a western way of being? To what extent is the Church a source of liberation for peoples across the world and to what extent is it a source of colonial or imperial domination? How do any of these questions intersect with deep concepts of faith and the gospel message of universal truth? For some the answer might seem simple. The message of the gospel is one to be shared regardless of the culture and that message transcends cultures. When does that message become a culture in its own right? Should it become so, and to what extent has it become so?

These and many more complex questions are likely to remain unanswered, as the practice of faith and the underlying doctrine

remain murky and unclear. What is clear, and what should be carefully understood by even the deepest of skeptics, is that the pain the missionaries of the Catholic Church in the colonial world inflicted on many individual Indigenous peoples through the boarding schools and other violent forms of evangelization requires deep reflection, thoughtful efforts toward healing, and most importantly, acknowledgment that such pain is real.

Despite that seemingly simple conclusion, the broad discussion around reconciliation, the Catholic Church, and Indigenous peoples is complex and difficult to engage because of great emotional pain connected to nearly all sides of the issue. A necessary axiom, however, is important to begin with: colonization was at best a paternalistic process, and at worst a genocidal one that cannot be justified. The complex relationship Indigenous peoples now have with modernity, acculturation, and revitalization efforts is for them to figure out collectively and as individuals. Given this reality, the challenge remains as mentioned above: What does it mean for the Catholic Church in the Americas to have been not only complicit, but an active participant in the erasure of various Native American peoples' cultures, languages, and spiritual traditions?

The story of the boarding school era for Indigenous peoples is both a grand narrative of forced removal and cultural indoctrination and individual stories that change across time and place. As part of the truth-telling process, we are gathering testimonies from the eldest boarding school attendees alive today to hear their story. If you have heard one boarder's story, then you have heard only one boarder's story. Each one represents the journey of a unique individual and most of them have had mixed and complex experiences that are a profound blend of what one boarder said was "the good, the bad, and the ugly." Especially in the wake of the media reports about boarding school history, it was clear that some of the former boarders themselves felt their stories were not truly being heard or understood. One of the elders we interviewed said, "I felt the need to tell my story or else somebody else will tell it for me."

School systems are complex in their relationship to racial and cultural minorities in the United States, and that is also true of Indigenous peoples. The advent of a national school movement meant a desire to build a public education system and a mostly common curriculum that told a particular story about the United States and its people and history. This has led to the very real and ongoing challenge of minorities not experiencing themselves in their schools through curriculum. At the same time, schooling has provided the single largest method for social mobility for these same communities in ways that have led to educated minorities becoming leaders and changemakers.

Thus, while it is undeniable that the boarding school system for Indigenous peoples was harmful and painful for many who endured it, it is also the case that the system provided moments of liberation and social mobility for individuals throughout their existence. There are just as many boarders who report their experience as wonderful as there are who report it as terrible, and nearly every individual boarder has experiences that represent a range. It is hard for people to hold these seemingly incompatible truths together at the same time, but the reality is far more nuanced than the narrative would suggest. During one particularly difficult sharing session, a boarder/alumnus from our institution spent a long time telling tragic stories of abuse she had witnessed and the anger she felt toward the institution; however, after a time she began to shift and talk about the good memories she had and the joy she experienced as a student. She was particularly keen on sharing her love of learning Latin and how it inspired her to a future as a writer. The moment reflected to me the importance of rooting the work of truth and healing in the individual as much as possible.

This is one of the great challenges of colonial history and the impact it has on modern peoples. Colonialism acted as a form of literal, cultural, and spiritual warfare. And like all wars, it breeds intergenerational hatred between two opposing sides. Colonialism creates a binary that is very difficult to dismantle even centuries later. This is especially the case in parts of the world where the paradigm has truly never shifted toward something we can consider post-colonial. Rather, in settler-colonial contexts such as the United States and Canada there is a reality in which colonial behavior and systems have not truly left and the Indigenous have not truly been able to return to self-governance and autonomy.

What then does healing and reconciliation look like when colonial structures are still in place and have an active impact to this day? It is inevitable, particularly in today's ever globalizing world, that cultures will clash, and the processes of assimilation, acculturation, and appropriation will follow. Those processes need not be violent or harm the dignity of human beings and their created communities of cultures, faiths, and traditions. This is what theologians of our time will need to look at much more deeply in the future, especially in the context of evangelization.

Historically evangelization has been deeply connected to structures of violence and subjugation that made the adoption of Catholicism for some communities deeply painful. This is the case for many, though not all, Indigenous communities in the United States. When the sharing of the Gospel was rooted in violence it is no wonder that the very message itself is deemed destructive. The truth of the Gospel, however, is one of peace, relationship, and love rooted in the example of Jesus Christ, God's greatest gift and sacrifice for humankind. It is

shameful that such a message was passed on to some communities and regions of the world in a way that outright contradicts it.

At a crucial moment in our truth and healing effort, we met with a large group of protestors who had demonstrated on our campus a week prior to this gathering. It was an intense, emotional, and painful meeting where many voices of anger were raised at the history of our school and the broader perception of the Catholic Church. We listened and tried to respond openly, calmly, and with a heart turned towards understanding. It was admittedly difficult to do. There came a truly profound moment deep into the meeting. A passionate male elder who was part of the protest group spoke; he is someone to whom, when he begins to speak, everyone listens. He was speaking directly to his fellow protestors and said that they came here today to fight against this church. They wanted to have a fight with this church, and they even wanted us to fight back. He wished we did fight back. He said, "But they are not." Instead, we were listening. He shared that Indigenous peoples have been betrayed time and time again by the US Government and others. But sometimes in the history of fighting for Indigenous rights, it is okay to try trusting. Maybe, he said, it was time to trust this institution to do the right thing.

It is a difficult position to be in to ask for the trust of others when they perceive you as the perpetrator of their pain and historical harm, as is the case with some Indigenous peoples and their perception of the Catholic Church. That moment where we were given trust represented the power of the personal journey toward healing. The difficult question we must ask ourselves is what our role, as representatives of this larger church, is in the effort to support individual healing journeys. We are called to be a different church, one Pope Francis described in his apology to the Indigenous peoples of Canada during his Pilgrimage of Penance in the summer of 2022:

Thinking about the process of healing and reconciliation with our indigenous brothers and sisters, never again can the Christian community allow itself to be infected by the idea that one culture is superior to others, or that it is legitimate to employ ways of coercing others. ... In order to defeat this culture of exclusion, we must begin with ourselves: bishops and priests, who should not feel themselves superior to our brothers and sisters in the People of God; pastoral workers, who should not understand service as power. This is where we must start. You are key figures and builders of a different Church: humble, meek, merciful, which accompanies processes, labors decisively and serenely in the service of inculturation, and shows

respect for each individual and for every cultural and religious difference.<sup>4</sup>

What does a new evangelization look like in the wake of this seemingly newfound call to live as the Gospel teaches? How does the sharing of the good news become that which allows for others to see it is a message of liberation rather than one of oppression? I do not have the answers to these questions, but I encourage all Catholics to consider the historic impact of that not being the case and the ways in which we must change in order to truly be a Church that lives its gospel message. For the Catholic faith to have a vibrant future we must openly engage the abuses of our past and contend with what it means to be a different church today. Such a journey is one that will take all of us as members of the body of Christ in the fullness of his charity. That charity must be extended certainly to those communities whose historic relationship with the church was one of deep pain, but it must also be extended to ourselves as the inheritors of this faith and legacy. It is a legacy that is truly rich with both beautiful and powerful moments of relationship and conversion, and one also full of dehumanization and destruction. We must accept that both of those realities are true and try deeply to understand the impact of it all.

What I hope to portray and help all understand is that history is never a black and white binary of evil and good. History instead is a complex entanglement of good intentions, harm, successful and failed attempts at justice, cruelty and wickedness, and a never-ending story of human beings trying to understand the world around them and live. That impossible entanglement has an impact on our world today in ways that continue to shape the future of the Church in the Americas and her children. The deep ties the Catholic Church has to colonialization need to be fully examined and the wounds caused need attention and care to heal. I pray that the blind will see and that hearts will be moved. **M**

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<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, Homily at Vespers with Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Consecrated Persons, Seminarians, and Pastoral Workers in the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Québec, July 28, 2022, [www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2022/documents/20220728-omelia-vespri-quebec.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2022/documents/20220728-omelia-vespri-quebec.html).

American Indian Catholic Schools Network for four years and has advocated for truth and healing in Catholic ministries and schools serving Indigenous peoples.