



**Statement by the Permanent Council
of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops
in an Initial Response to the Summary Report and Calls to Action by the Truth and
Reconciliation Commission**

Introduction

Since the beginnings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, hundreds of thousands of Catholics across the country have been involved in its hearings, directly or indirectly, including members of our Church from First Nations, Metis, and Inuit communities, as well as non-Aboriginal Catholics. Some of these were involved in the actual work of the Commission, while many more participated in its national and regional events, but all shared deeply in the issues being raised, through their prayer, reflections and a deep sense of solidarity, compassion and justice. This past June 2, the Commission tabled its summary report and Calls to Action in the nation's capital. We wish to share our immediate response as the Permanent Council of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

A Hard, Painful Road

For the past six years, the Commissioners, their staff and many volunteers have worked courageously and tirelessly to lead our nation in a profound examination of conscience on a painful part of its collective history: the establishment and maintenance by the Canadian government of residential schools for Aboriginal children. For close to 130 years, along with other Christian Churches, a number of Roman Catholic dioceses, religious communities and missionary organizations collaborated in running these schools. Aboriginal children were forcibly enrolled, and subjected to an aggressive process of assimilation, with the terrible consequences now recognized by Canadian society.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission created an environment in which many of these former students, their families and their communities were empowered to give voice to their own experiences and enabled to listen to the experiences of others. These witnesses revealed how much damage and suffering they lived in these institutions, and how this also affected the lives of later generations. Those appearing before the Commission gave witness to an amazing strength and vision for reconciliation. Their testimony lays out a challenge and an opportunity to choose a path of reconciliation.

For many Canadians, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission offered a first insight into the effects of the residential schools. Though some former students affirmed positive experiences and expressed thanks for the many good and kind staff who worked in the schools, many others bore

witness to painful separation from family and community, harsh discipline, poor living conditions, and assaults on their language, cultures and spiritual traditions. Survivors spoke, often with great pain, of physical, emotional and sexual abuse which haunted them throughout their lives.

Catholic leaders, including former staff who worked in the schools as well as representatives of other Church institutions, were present at the national and regional events of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, listening, bearing witness, and expressing apologies, regret and the same desire for reconciliation. They were particularly touched by the will for forgiveness and reconciliation expressed by some of those who had suffered the most. They recognized in these survivors the face of Jesus, the wounded healer, who “intercedes for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53.12).

A New Journey Already Begun

For some in the Catholic community – members of dioceses and religious congregations as well as First Nations, Inuit and Metis Catholics who had attended these schools – this journey began long before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Workshops such as *Returning to Spirit*, and events such as the Sacred Assembly, inspired by the late Elijah Harper, have opened opportunities for people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to give witness to their journey. For these, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was yet another important step in providing further opportunity for deeper encounter, greater understanding and renewed hope.

Over 20 years ago, on July 24, 1991, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate delivered an apology at the Lac Ste Anne pilgrimage site. This was the first of many similar statements from Catholic Bishops and others in leadership positions who, over the years, have apologized “for having been part of a system which, because of its historical privilege and assumed superiority did great damage to Native Peoples in Canada” and in which “the primal bond inherent within families was violated as a matter of policy.”¹ Recognizing the call to be one people of God, truly catholic and inclusive of all cultures, they lamented that “(we) have contributed to the loss of (Indigenous) language and culture and to the burden of shame.” In solidarity with those who have gone before us, “we carry immense sorrow for having contributed to this tragedy.”

The Way Forward

During the 1880s, the Cree in Saskatchewan were seeing the death of their way of life. It was a time of great trauma for their families and communities. Chief Poundmaker gave a famous talk in which he encouraged his people not to give up on the journey: “We all know the story of the man who sat beside the trail too long and then it grew over and he could never find his way again. We can never forget what has happened, but we cannot go back, nor can we just sit beside the trail.”² Today, faced with the burden of the past, all Canadians, non-Indigenous and Indigenous together, need to find the strength to move along the path of reconciliation that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has set out.

¹ Apology of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate at Lac Ste Anne Pilgrimage, June 24, 1991.

² Dying words of *Petocahhanawawin* (Chief Poundmaker), 1842-1886.

Confident in God who, through the gift of Jesus, will bring to fulfilment every act of kindness and every sacrifice offered from a good heart, we invite all Canadians to encourage each other on the road of reconciliation. Where members of our Church and others have fallen short of being authentic witnesses to the liberating love of God, let us heed the words of Pope Francis: “God is always capable of restoring our joy; he makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and to start anew.”³

i. Addressing the Broader Issue

By focusing on the Indian Residential Schools, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has encouraged a collective examination of the Canadian connection to one institution that existed for 130 years. However, the colonial policy that was at work in the residential schools affected all society, and even today continues to have a negative impact on Canadian institutions and even among the members of Canadian faith communities.

The Catholic Church, as a community of sinful men and women, is not immune to this. Its members have sometimes been spiritually blind, unable to see themselves as one Catholic family and to celebrate what Saint Pope John Paul II so prophetically proclaimed: “Christ, in the members of his Body, is Himself Indian.” The work of reconciliation will need to address not only the legacy of residential schools, but all cultural, economic and social policies which can hinder the vision and implementation of a renewed partnership with Aboriginal Peoples.

ii. Engaging in Meaningful Dialogue

The work of reconciliation offers a privileged opportunity to live the Way of the Gospel. In the life of the Catholic Church in Canada, this is close to the renewed efforts and new approaches to evangelization, demanding “dialogue not only with individuals but with cultures. It is to transform hearts, as well humanize political and economic systems.”⁴

Dialogue requires cultivating an attitude of openness in our lives. It demands deep listening, concern, respect, and hospitality towards the other. Foundational to what it means to be both human and Christian, it is a grace that must be fostered and practised. To that end, we invite each Catholic diocese and all Catholics to seek ways and occasions to foster the spirit of dialogue. We encourage Catholic communities to find occasions to gather as a united community of faith, possibly on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12), the feast of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha (April 17, whom Pope Benedict XVI called the Protectress of Canada), or on other occasions such as Aboriginal Day (June 21), in order to embrace and celebrate the unity to which Christ calls all his members.

Dialogue also takes the form of action. Catholic social teaching places a priority on action for justice as a constitutive dimension of witnessing to the Gospel. In Canada, this has provided a foundation for many initiatives and efforts in solidarity with Indigenous peoples in the last half century alone. The commitment to the struggle for justice has in turn been greatly

³ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 3.

⁴ *Towards a New Evangelization: Message by the Permanent Council of the CCCB on the 500th Anniversary of the Evangelization of the Americas*. September 14, 1992.

strengthened and broadened by ecumenical cooperation among Canadian Christians. This too needs to be continued and strengthened.

We are grateful for those who have developed workshops, courses and other learning tools to engage non-Aboriginals and Aboriginals together in dialogue toward understanding, celebrating diversity and embracing unity. We encourage pastors, Indigenous spiritual leaders, as well as teachers and other Catholic laity to take advantage of what is offered by groups and organizations in Canada which witness to the possibility of reconciliation and healing.

iii. Strengthening Families

Witnesses at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission often made reference to the damage to their families that was inflicted by the Indian Residential Schools system. Today, First Nations, Metis and Inuit Peoples are the fastest growing population in Canada. A commitment to reconciliation will include work to support Indigenous peoples in their effort to assure that the coming generations grow strong, proud, loving and healthy families.

All levels of government – federal, provincial and territorial, municipal – must collaborate in ensuring a system of education for Aboriginal children that will assure fair access to culturally relevant learning in schools which are justly funded, safe, secure, and accessible to all Indigenous students, through elementary to post-secondary education.

There needs to be special attention to the central role of women in the family and community by confronting the epidemic of murdered and missing Indigenous women. The right and responsibility of Indigenous families and communities to provide a supportive and corrective environment for their members must be re-affirmed. Canadians also need to work together to depopulate the prisons of Canada. A disproportionate number of prisoners are Indigenous: a sign Canadian justice and correctional systems do not respond adequately to Aboriginal realities.

iv. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

Neither the Catholic Bishops of Canada as a whole nor the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops was involved in the operations or management of the former Indian Residential Schools. Moreover, our Conference is not the national headquarters of the Catholic Church, nor does it have authority over our country's dioceses or religious communities. In its role as the national assembly of Bishops, our Conference facilitates the work of individual Bishops who are the primary pastors and faith leaders in their respective dioceses.

In that framework, we wish to confirm that the Calls to Action which have been recommended to Churches by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission are on the agenda of the next Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Bishops of Canada. We are committed to ensuring that the Calls to Action will be given careful hearing and full discussion. We are confident they will be carefully considered by the Bishops of Canada, and in this process we know we can count on the collaboration of the Canadian Catholic Aboriginal Council. In addition, we

are confident that major superiors of congregations of religious women and men throughout Canada are committed to discerning how they may receive and respond to the Calls to Action.

Fellow Travelers on the Way to God

One family before God, and united with our Aboriginal Catholic brothers and sisters, we encourage each other in the hope that, by the Spirit of Jesus who has reconciled the whole world to the Father, we – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – will be reconciled to each other. As members of the Catholic community, we are confident we all undertake this journey under the protection of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, a spiritual mother in our faith. We remember her as one who reveals to us what it means to be a follower of Christ and to allow the Holy Spirit to illuminate what is noblest, truest and holiest in our cultures. Her life of heroic virtue as a truly Christian Mohawk woman is a gift to all the Church in our country and around the world. Let us seek her intercession and guidance as Protectress of all Canada.

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