



THAT WE MAY WALK TOGETHER

PASTORAL LETTER TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD IN CANADA

The path of the Church, arising from her very nature, is that of reconciliation. Pope Francis, in the course of his “Walking Together” pilgrimage to Canada, reflecting on the teaching of Saint Paul that the Church is the “living body of reconciliation,” offered these words: “The word ‘reconciliation’ is in fact practically synonymous with the word ‘Church’. It comes from the word ‘council’, and it means ‘meet again in council.’ The Church is the house where we ‘conciliate’ anew, where we meet to start over and to grow together. It is the place where we stop thinking as individuals and acknowledge that we are brothers and sisters of one another. Where we look one another in the eye, accept the other’s history and culture, and allow the mystique of togetherness, so pleasing to the Holy Spirit, to foster the healing of wounded memories” (Meeting of Pope Francis with the Indigenous Peoples and members of the parish community at the Sacred Heart Church, Edmonton, July 25, 2022).



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POPE FRANCIS

For some time now, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has been engaged in dialogue with the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities of this land. Encouraged by the presence, words, and gestures of Pope Francis, we wish to invite all members of the Catholic Church in Canada, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, to join us in continuing the pilgrimage towards deep healing and lasting reconciliation.



This pilgrimage is not new; in the early years of the Church's pastoral life in this land, individuals of extraordinary courage and fortitude – Indigenous and newcomers – learned each other's languages and customs, engaged in trade and commerce, exchanged knowledge and technologies, and worked together for the mutual benefit of all. Communities of consecrated life, some of which were founded in Canada, sought fervently to share the gospel with everyone, including Indigenous inhabitants, many of whom, having heard the gospel, embraced the call of Jesus. Celebrated figures of the Church in Canada set up missions, schools, hospitals, orphanages, and other centres of social service to meet the ever-increasing needs of both the colonial and Indigenous populations. Such activities were repeated for centuries throughout this country.

We know, however, that alongside this arc of our history, another view has come to predominate and overshadow the first one in recent times. Meeting and listening to the stories of Canada's Indigenous Peoples, wider society and the Catholic Church have learned that colonization also resulted in great displacement and suffering.

The weeds of human greed and violence, of empire and conquest, were sown alongside the seeds of true evangelical witness and Christian virtue. As the weeds matured, even within faithful Christian communities, they grew into a system that increasingly marginalized Indigenous Peoples and disrespected and denigrated Indigenous ways. This is a dark and tragic part of the Canadian story. Insofar as members of the Church participated in it, it also remains a dark and tragic part of the Christian story in this land.

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Image: Papal Visit 2022, Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta
Photo credit: Matthew Bodnarek/CCCB

Love for the gospel of Jesus Christ demands that we acknowledge the bad in order to separate it from the good, as chaff is sifted from wheat (cf. Matthew 3:12). Fidelity to our Lord leads us to celebrate and build upon the good, while renouncing and discarding the bad.

Regarding the system of Indian Residential Schools, in particular, let us, as Christians, not be afraid to say what must be said. Pope Francis did so when he visited Maskwacis in Alberta during his “penitential pilgrimage,” stating: “Although Christian charity was not absent, and there were many outstanding instances of devotion and care for children, the overall effects of the policies linked to the residential schools were catastrophic. What our Christian faith tells us is that this was a disastrous error, incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” The legacy of involvement of many Catholic dioceses, communities, and people in a system that deprived generations of Indigenous children of their language, culture, history, traditions, spirituality, and family life, and included some terrible abuses, fills us all with sadness and remorse.

As the Bishops of Canada’s Catholic dioceses and eparchies, following the example of the Holy Father, and in keeping with the apology we offered with one heart and voice at our Plenary Assembly meeting in 2021, we renew our profound sorrow for the wrong that was done, and commit ourselves to finding new ways to accompany Indigenous Peoples in their pursuit of justice, healing, and reconciliation.

Listening and dialogue are keys to building upon the relationships developed in recent



months. We have spoken clearly about our desire to listen and learn how to walk together with Indigenous communities in new ways: the establishment of formal structures will ensure ongoing communication and mutual support with national organizations; and regular meetings between diocesan and eparchial bishops with local Indigenous leaders, including former students of residential schools, will promote relations of friendship and solidarity in agreed-upon projects to foster well-being.

Seminary formation, catechetical training, and religious education programs, too, will need to be updated so as to incorporate lessons from the troubled past in order to avoid repeating similar errors in the future. Here the voices of Indigenous people will be most helpful: teaching the Indigenous experience of residential schools, while also sharing the gifts of their respective traditions, wisdoms, histories, cultures, and ways of life. Let us all be humble and open to learning from Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers present in our communities. Their faithful witness to the liberating power of the gospel is a foundation on which we can set our hope for renewed relations between us for the sake of the whole Church and for our society.

As leaders of our dioceses and eparchies, we wish to express our joy and appreciation for the way many Catholic Indigenous Peoples have faithfully kept the gospel over many years, in spite of challenges and obstacles sometimes put forward against it. It is in the spirit of such courageous commitment that Pope Saint John Paul II spoke strongly of the profound

debt of gratitude the Church owes to Indigenous Catholics: “Your encounter with the gospel has not only enriched you, it has enriched the Church. ...your Amerindian and Inuit traditions permit the development of new ways of expressing the message of salvation.... Welcoming the gospel in your own unique way, you continue to challenge all Christians at the deepest level of their understanding of the mystery of Christ. Not only have you received Christ but also because of your fidelity to the gospel many Catholics experience Christ anew through you.”

(Homily given at Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, Quebec, September 10, 1984).

We, your Bishops, gathered last September during our annual plenary meeting, desired to make these thoughts known to you, the Catholic faithful of Canada, in order to support Indigenous Peoples of this land in their pursuit of justice, and to work tirelessly with them towards reconciliation. It is our prayer that you will respond to this invitation in a spirit of love and service, as followers of Jesus Christ, members of his “living body of reconciliation,” so that together we may help our relationships with Indigenous Peoples enter a new era of encounter and dialogue.

8 February 2023

