

# What would an apology from the pope mean to Canada's Indigenous (and why did it take so long)?

In 2015, Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission issued 94 ["Calls to Action."](#)

The commission had spent seven years unearthing disturbing facts about Canada's residential school system. These revelations came from official documents, written histories and eyewitness testimonies of school workers and former students, many of whom suffered physical, sexual and emotional abuse.

Along with several comprehensive reports, these 94 "calls" were the result. The commission's conclusion was that, given all the truth we now know about what Canada had done to Indigenous people, these are the tangible steps we need to take to achieve reconciliation.

Call No. 58 requested the pope to personally apologize for these schools within the year – on Canadian soil, at that.

It felt ... ambitious, which is to say it felt a bit unlikely. But, six years later, the Holy Father has confirmed his intention to make a reconciliatory visit to Canada.

## Why did this take so long?

The announcement from the Vatican in late October that Pope Francis will visit Canada to assist in the reconciliation process is causing ripples of speculation and prediction. But one obvious question we could ask is: Why did this take so long? After all, this is quite a bit later than Call 58's

parameter of “within one year.”



A woman holds up a sign during a march near a church in Chemainus, British Columbia, on Aug. 2, after the recovery of hundreds of Indigenous children's graves at residential schools across the country. CNS photo/Kevin Light, Reuters

The reason was that, the commission's wishes notwithstanding, the Holy Father was unlikely to come without an invitation from the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. Such an invitation was not forthcoming.

The official explanation for that, as given in a 2018 letter from the CCCB to the Canadian Parliament, was that a papal apology like this didn't really make sense.

“The Catholic community in Canada has a decentralized structure,” the letter began. It contains several ecclesiastical organizations that each operate relatively autonomously. Different dioceses and orders had operated residential schools, but it’s nonsensical to claim “the Church,” as a whole, was responsible for them; those parts of the Church that did bear responsibility for the schools have already issued multiple apologies.

Further, despite his prehumous cult of personality, Pope Francis is not interested in a Church that is synonymous with himself. His pontificate has stressed the theme of decentralizing the Church (see the synod on synodality) and, consistent with that, he expressed his feeling that “each bishop, aware of local needs and aspirations, is best positioned as the principal faith leader and pastor of his diocese to take concrete steps toward reconciliation.” It is quite opposed to the push of his papacy to think that the Church has not apologized until the pope has.

## **A grand gesture is needed**

On a legal and ecclesial level, this is all strictly and technically correct. But no one seemed satisfied by it, and it’s easy to see why.

Humans are not just rational animals; we are also symbolic and imaginative creatures. Powerful and dramatic displays tend to move us more powerfully than mere factual information does (which is one reason the Church has liturgy and sacraments, not just Scripture and catechesis).

For example, one of the commission’s reports was about the unmarked graves of Indigenous children on residential school properties. Everyone was, or should have been, aware that remains of Indigenous kids were secretly buried across the country. Yet this issue did not receive much attention until some of those graves were located. Somehow, finding these

bodies shook and haunted us more than that detailed 273-page document did.

Humans need the concrete; the knowledge that all the relevant “Catholic entities” have already apologized somehow wasn’t concrete enough. There was still something tangible missing, something like the emotionally irrefutable visual of a sorrowful pope uttering his apology on the ground where these harms occurred.

Further, as one Indigenous person reportedly told Bishop Don Bolen (then of Saskatoon), “It’s not that we think the pope is personally responsible ... [But we] understand from our sense of family that when one person in a family does something wrong, the whole family needs to be involved in the process of restitution, and we understand Pope Francis to be the father of your family.”

This idea of “household restitution” certainly has a Biblical ring to it. Perhaps that is why, despite its overall demurrer, the 2018 CCCB letter added that “Pope Francis remains open to a future visit when it is opportune.”

Well, it appears the opportune time has come.

## **What the pope’s visit will mean**

Though details about the potential visit remain vague, we know that, before his visit, the Holy Father will receive a delegation of Indigenous elders, knowledge keepers and survivors in Rome. Before he comes to speak, he will wait and listen.

When he does come to speak, what will it mean for Canadian Catholics? I asked around and found that some are delighted, even giddy; others are ambivalent, uncertain about what the effects of such a visit will be.

But most Catholics told me they didn’t really care what this

visit would mean for the Church. They cared about what it would mean for the survivors.

What will it mean for the survivors to hear an expression of regret from the pope as he stands on the land of their ancestors? It feels absurd to speculate about how such a diverse group would respond to something like this. Every survivor is unique: their stories are unique, their feelings are unique, and their reactions will be unique.

For some, it might leave them indifferent or even more cynical. Others might find their hardened hostility somewhat softened (witness how some traditionalists warmed a bit to the pope after his *urbi et orbi* blessing at the beginning of the pandemic). Still others might feel deeply moved and see this as a turning point for reconciliation, as residential school victim Phil Fontaine did when Pope Benedict XVI apologized to him personally.

But, ultimately, the overall reaction will probably depend, not so much on the apology itself, but on what Francis chooses to say and do besides apologize. After all, the lasting trauma of the residential schools is hardly the only hardship Canada's First Peoples face. They struggle with a host of oppressive problems, from the plight of missing and murdered Indigenous women, to the continued failure to provide clean water, to the harm done to Indigenous children in foster care.

Francis has built a reputation for himself as a pontiff with a prophetic and often denunciatory voice. This may be his moment to raise that voice against these injustices.

As it happens, he already has a foundation on which to build.

## **The legacy of John Paul II**

Pope St. John Paul II was the first (and, until Francis arrives, the last) pope to visit Canada. On two separate occasions, in 1984 and 1987, he gave impassioned addresses to

Canada's Aboriginal peoples.

In these talks, he not only affirmed the worthiness of their ancient cultures, but also, in keeping with the Church's traditional political teachings, stressed their "right" to a "just and equitable measure of self-determination," as well as their need to control their lands, their material resources, and their economies. For his advocacy, Alberta's Blood Tribe appointed John Paul II an honorary chief of their people.

Forty years later, and you'd be hard-pressed to say that Canada's First Peoples have achieved self-government or control over their resources. Although the government has a constitutionally mandated "duty to consult" First Peoples before taking actions that could affect their rights (such as industrial activity on their land), it is not bound to actually follow the recommendations of Indigenous people, nor does "duty to consult" extend to the drafting of legislation. Though steps have been taken toward actualizing Indigenous self-government, it is still far from universally recognized, and nations like the Wet'suwet'en still struggle to protect their historic and sacred territory from pipeline development.

In protesting this arrangement, Pope John Paul II was himself building on a precedent of Catholics fighting for Aboriginal rights. He explicitly referred to 1537's *Pastorale Officium*, which also affirmed the rights and freedoms of Indigenous peoples, but we could also consider historical Canadian figures like the Ojibwa chief Francis Pegahmagabow, the deadliest sniper of World War I and a practicing Catholic who was also a zealous advocate for "Indian" self-government.

Now, Pope Francis will have an opportunity to join this legacy as part of the "process of restitution" he must undertake as father of his family. If he joins his expression of sorrow for the Church's failures with his own "Calls to Action" to achieve justice for Canada's First Nations, that could be just

the kind of symbolic gesture that could drive us to fulfil the hope expressed by Pope St. John Paul II:

“I pray that the Holy Spirit will help you all to find the just way so that Canada may be a model for the world in upholding the dignity of the Aboriginal peoples.”

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