

In Canada, a visit to heal wounds and restore hope

What can melt a heart, and what can harden it? St. Augustine said that the same stirring gesture will coax a noxious stench out of sewage and a beautiful fragrance from perfume; in the same way, the same gesture can soften one person and alienate another. The pope's recent visit to Canada was proof of this.

Some context: For over a century, the Canadian government had a policy of taking Indigenous children from their families and putting them in boarding schools where they were generally forbidden to go home to visit their people or speak their native languages, with the goal being to "civilize" them by teaching them English and the culture of the settlers. Because they were inexpensive, and already had experience running mission schools, churches and religious orders, particularly Catholic ones, were recruited to run these schools. While there are examples of genuine education and care taking place at residential schools, too many of them were characterized by physical and sexual abuse of the children who were trapped within their walls. The harmful effects of this still reverberate among Canada's First Nations to this day.

In the 1990s, Chief Phil Fontaine, a residential school survivor, did important work raising awareness about what took place under this program. This led to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, led by commissioners such as Chief Wilton Littlechild, another survivor. The TRC, as it was known, produced comprehensive reports about the history of residential schools and issued calls to action as a result of their findings. One of these was for Pope Francis to come onto Canadian soil and apologize for the Church's role in the schools.

In July, the Holy Father answered this call after receiving a

delegation of Indigenous Canadians in Rome four months earlier. When this "[penitential pilgrimage](#)," as he called it, was announced, a graphic designer of Metis heritage (that is to say, a descendant of European and Indigenous unions) designed a logo for the visit, a swirling blue circle full of Aboriginal and papal symbolism. If you lived anywhere the pope visited, you likely saw that logo everywhere.

During his brief visit, the pope did too much to even begin to explain here. However, we can focus on a few especially significant moments.

A heartfelt apology

He first landed in Alberta (which is currently governed by a Catholic premier) and attended an Indigenous ceremony on the site of Ermineskin Indian Residential School, where he [reiterated the apology](#) he had previously offered at the Vatican: He was "deeply sorry" for the Church's participation in the residential school program. In a powerfully symbolic gesture, he kissed a banner on which were written the names of all the children who disappeared at residential schools – who likely died from ill-care but were never returned to their families. (Whether or not a particular site in Kamloops happens to be an example of an unmarked graveyard is not especially important to the fact that such unmarked graveyards undoubtedly exist.)

This is [what the pope apologized for](#). Despite what some slanderous commentators claim, he was not apologizing for the evangelistic work of the Church, or even for every single residential school; he even acknowledged that "Christian charity was not absent, and there were many outstanding instances of devotion and care for children." However, it cannot be denied that grave and grotesque harms also occurred there, often perpetuated by priests and nuns. This seems to warrant an apology.

At this ceremony, Chief Littlechild of the TRC gave the Holy Father a headdress. For First Peoples, this is a sacred vestment, awarded for important work on behalf of the community. The traditionalists who are snickeringly indignant that the pope donned this headgear can reflect on the fact that some non-Catholic Indigenous people feel the same way, including a woman named Si Pih Ko, who rebuked him aloud in Cree. Strange bedfellows, as they say. (Note that none of her protests, which asserted the rights of Indigenous sovereignty, actually contradicted the pope's words or actions.)

Pope Francis then met with survivors and spoke at a ceremony [in Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples](#), a beautiful parish in downtown Edmonton that blends Indigenous spirituality with Catholicism. Francis' remarks ought to be carefully studied for the ways they drew from the symbolism in that building – for example, the four points of the medicine wheel corresponding to the cross, or the teepee-shaped tabernacle that he likened to the Hebrew “tent of meeting” – as material for future reflections on liturgy and iconography. (Significantly, this parish is run by the Oblates, the same order that ran a majority of Catholic residential schools and that recently opened their archives to the National Center for Truth and Reconciliation; a lot has changed since those uglier days.)

Critics speak out

Probably the most controversial part of the trip was the [pope's open-air Mass](#) in Edmonton's Commonwealth Stadium, which is typically used for events such as football games or monster truck rallies (one of which took place a few days after the Mass). Critics claimed that the liturgy lacked Aboriginal content, and they were especially prickly about the fact that the Eucharistic prayer was said in Latin. None of them seemed aware that the pope's vestments were designed by a member of the Nisga'a Nation who used Indigenous imagery in it, or that

a Cree-Metis priest organized the liturgy, and none of them mentioned that the Mass was preceded by a speech from no less than Phil Fontaine himself, who called on his Aboriginal brothers and sisters to forgive in order to achieve reconciliation and move forward.

There were also complaints about the homily. The Mass celebrated the feast of Sts. Joachim and Anne, and, in keeping with this, Pope Francis spoke about the need to honor our grandparents and maintain the Faith they passed on to us without falling into traditionalism. Many claimed this was insensitive to Indigenous peoples who had been robbed of the experience of being raised by their grandparents and receiving their culture.

But this criticism fails to understand that this Mass was not meant to be an isolated event. Like the liturgies of the Triduum, it was just one part of a larger sequence and needs to be understood in connection to what came before and afterwards – especially afterwards, since, that afternoon, [he visited Lac St. Anne](#).

This lake was revered by the Nakota Sioux and Cree nations as the “lake of the Spirit” or “God’s lake” even before Europeans arrived. When Catholic missionaries came, they soon recognized that those who immersed themselves in its waters often experienced miraculous healings. They soon named it after St. Anne, to whom many Indigenous Catholics have a special devotion, and began organizing pilgrimages there on her feast day. To this day, that pilgrimage remains the largest gathering of First Peoples in western Canada.

When [the pope said Mass](#) at this Lourdes of the North, he opened with a greeting in Cree, Nakota and Blackfoot, and addressed exactly this point during his sermon, acknowledging that “part of the painful legacy we are now confronting stems from the fact that Indigenous grandmothers were prevented from passing on the Faith in their own language and culture. That

loss was certainly tragic, but," he added, "your presence here is a testimony of resilience and a fresh start, of pilgrimage toward healing, of a heart open to God who heals the life of communities." Before he left, the pope, still in his wheelchair, went down to the lake itself and blessed its waters, having compared them in his homily to the Sea of Galilee where Jesus healed souls and bodies.

A mood of hopefulness

After leaving Alberta, the pope said Mass and met with Indigenous delegates in Quebec, where he did for Canadian culture what he had done for Indigenous spirituality: Drew fruitful connections between its iconography and Catholic spirituality. The maple leaf is not exactly rich in symbolism for most Canadians, but the Holy Father drew meaning from how each maple leaf is unique, how each one in producing oxygen can be used to bandage and sooth wounds to produce a beautiful exegesis of the Canada flag, which should give every Canadian Catholic cause for patriotic sentiment.

Finally, Pope Francis concluded his visit [in the territory of Nunavut](#), where he spoke not only to residential school survivors and elders but also to Inuit young people outside of Nakasuk Elementary School. In a sense, this was the most striking moment of the whole tour. The residential schools tried to rob Indigenous people of their culture and their future. In contrast, here the pope stood in front of a primary school, used the image of a traditional Inuit lamp in his speech, and exhorted Inuit youths to greatness by quoting to them the Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit principles, which are the rules of Inuit cultural pedagogy. A more potent symbol of the reversal of the residential schools would be hard to imagine. He concluded his speech by expressing the hope that his hearers would "come to see the Inuk face of Jesus Christ."

After all this, what can we say? Obviously, the work of restitution for residential schools is not over, but this

seems like perhaps the most important milestone in that journey. Some people, of both a “conservative” and a “progressive” bent, will still be unhappy. But for what it’s worth, my experience was that the general mood was one of solemn but jubilant hopefulness. Some unhappy tears were shed, but so were many grateful and joyful ones; for all the objections and anger, genuine healing and restoration occurred. Some hearts were hardened, but I think many were softened, and, out of this tear-soaked clay, we hope and pray that God molds us into a holier and happier community.

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