



RECONCILIATION

As Catholics, we understand reconciliation to be the restoration of a broken relationship. Our deepest need for reconciliation is with God, since we have all broken our relationship with him through our own sinfulness. But sinful actions can also affect our relationships with others, and sometimes relations between entire groups of people can become damaged. The letter to the Ephesians speaks of the tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians and emphasizes that Jesus' sacrifice of himself for all unites all people:

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one . . . He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. (Ephesians 2:14-16)

When a relationship has been wounded because of offences, these need to be admitted through a confession that is accompanied by a willingness to prevent the actions from happening again.

During his trip to Bolivia on 9 July 2015, Pope Francis stated that:

Like Saint John Paul II, I ask that the Church – I repeat what he said – “kneel before God and implore forgiveness for the past and present sins of her sons and daughters”. [6] I would also say, and here I wish to be quite clear, as was Saint John Paul II: I humbly ask forgiveness, not only for the offenses of the Church herself, but also for crimes committed against the native peoples during the so-called conquest of America. Together with this request for forgiveness and in order to be just, I also would like us to remember the thousands of priests and bishops who strongly opposed the logic of the sword with the power of the Cross. There was sin, a great deal of it, for which we did not ask pardon. So for this, we ask forgiveness, I ask forgiveness. But here also, where there was sin, great sin, grace abounded through the men and women who defended the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, in its Summary of the Final Report, provides a definition of reconciliation consonant with a Christian understanding: reconciliation is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country. In order for that to happen there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour.

The Churches, the religious orders and institutes who played a role in Residential Schools have apologized for their role in operating those schools. On September 24, 2021, all the Catholic Bishops of Canada together made "their unequivocal apology to the Indigenous Peoples of this land." The Bishops then added that "as a tangible expression of their commitment to walk with the Indigenous Peoples of this land along the pathway of hope," they were making a nation-wide collective financial commitment to support healing and reconciliation initiatives for residential school survivors, their families, and their communities. They pledged initiatives in every region of the country to reach a target of \$30 million over 5 years. This is all in response to what Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission had said:

Reconciliation must support Aboriginal peoples as they heal from the destructive legacies of colonization that have wreaked such havoc in their lives. But it must do even more. Reconciliation must inspire Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples to transform Canadian society so that our children and grandchildren can live together in dignity, peace, and prosperity on these lands we now share.

At the earliest opportunity in 2022, a delegation of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit leaders, residential school survivors, Indigenous Elders and knowledge-keepers, and youth will participate in private meetings with Pope Francis in Rome. This will be a preparatory step for his anticipated visit to them in Canada. It is hoped that the Pope's visit will be one further step on the long road that has begun in Canada toward complete reconciliation. Justice, respect and friendship, but never assimilation, are pillars of the reconciliation the Church and Indigenous peoples are seeking to build together.

The TRC in its Call to Action 48, asked faith groups in Canada to "formally adopt and comply with the principles, norms, and standards of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) as a framework for reconciliation". In response, the Catholic Bishops in Canada, with leaders of Catholic organizations and lay associations (now known as the Guadalupe Circle), issued a statement on March 19, 2016 supporting the adoption of the Declaration as issued in 2007.[1] The Declaration, which has now been incorporated into the Canadian legal framework, can provide a framework for discerning a way forward toward healing and reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. Why? Because the primary cause of the broken relationship was a lack of respect for the rights of Indigenous Peoples. By laying out in clear terms what those rights are, the Declaration provides a structure upon which that relationship can be rebuilt.

On this journey, when we walk in solidarity on the path of seeking justice, there are steps we can take that lead to right relations and reconciliation. If we want to know if reconciliation is real, watch our feet! As a church, our feet should bring us closer to Indigenous Peoples and to concrete acts of justice that can transform the word reconciliation into "reconcili-action".

Without truth, justice, and healing, there can be no genuine reconciliation.
(Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada)

For Reflection

1. Where do you find hope in the words of Pope Francis?
2. Where do you find hope in the statements of the TRC?
3. Where do find hope in the response of the Canadian Bishops?

[1] A Catholic Response to Call to Action 48 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (On Adopting and Implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples) 19 March 2016
<https://www.cccb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/14.-Catholic-response-call-to-action-48.pdf>