



Diocese of Prince George

6500 Southridge Avenue
Prince George, BC Canada V2N 5P9
Phone: (250) 964-4424 Fax: (250) 964-2101

June 15, 2021

“We’ve been grieving our whole lives. We’ve been born into sorrow.” Those heartbreaking words were spoken recently by a young indigenous woman at a memorial in Surrey, BC for the children whose unmarked graves were discovered at the site of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School.

Her words capture the suffering inflicted on generations of indigenous people – the students who attended the residential schools in BC and across the country, their families and descendants and entire communities of First Nations. As I listened to her voice on the radio, I thought of the faces of the many indigenous men and women I have come to know in the parishes of the dioceses. It is impossible for us who are non-aboriginal to appreciate the depth of the wound that is carried by our indigenous brothers and sisters.

It was certainly wrong of the Church to cooperate in policies that aimed to deny native children their language and culture and destroyed their family life. Even worse, members of the Church committed abuse on innocent children entrusted to their care, which was an assault on the human dignity of these students. These crimes were a betrayal of the faith and the religious vows of the perpetrators.

Thirty years ago, in 1991, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the congregation that operated many of the residential schools in BC, made a four-page apology “for the part we played in the cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious imperialism that was part of the mentality with which the peoples of Europe first met Aboriginal peoples and which consistently has lurked behind the way the Native peoples of Canada have been treated by civil governments and by the churches.” Similarly, the Sisters of St. Ann, who supplied teachers to some residential schools, also apologized, as did the bishops of the dioceses of BC as part of a Truth and Reconciliation gathering in Vancouver.

Since 2007, the diocese has sponsored and fully participated in multiple “Returning to Spirit” workshops to promote healing and reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous persons. Our diocesan Catholic schools continue to address this tragic history in their curriculum.

“We’ve been grieving our whole lives. We’ve been born into sorrow.” The eloquence of that young woman reminds us of the ongoing urgency of reconciliation and healing. In the hope of contributing to that, on behalf of the diocese I add my own sincere regret and apology to those who suffered and continue to suffer the effects of the residential schools and ask their forgiveness for our failures. The diocese remains committed to the path of reconciliation with those who have suffered and to a continuing dialogue with First Nations’ leadership.

Last Friday an important initiative finally became public. For more than two years, a small committee of Canadian bishops has been working with the national indigenous leadership and officials in Rome to organize a visit of indigenous leaders, elders, residential school survivors and youth from across Canada for a meeting with Pope Francis at the Vatican. This will allow the pope to hear the voices of aboriginal peoples directly about the terrible history of residential schools and the Church’s complicity. It will give him the chance to respond to those voices. I am sure he will offer his own apology as pastor of the universal Church.

Bishop Stephen Jensen