

A Partial Papal Apology

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I begin by acknowledging that I write on the traditional and unceded territory of the Ktunaxa people who have lived here for over 10,000 years, living gently on the land with great care.

Secondly, I write as a white settler theologian. It is not up to me to say what the Pope's apology means to the Indigenous people and residential school survivors to whom it was addressed. Nevertheless, as a fellow traveller with Pope Francis in the way of Christ, I find some significant shortcomings in his statement.

I begin by honouring Pope Francis for this historic, momentous, first step. For the first time, a Pope has said "I am sorry" to Canadian Indigenous people and residential school survivors. It was a moving moment for the delegations who travelled to the Vatican, and for many of us who watched on TV.

Throughout his reign, Pope Francis has shown that he is a humble servant. This moment was no different. The stories he heard moved him deeply. His heart aches for Indigenous people who have suffered, as he showed in Bolivia in 2015 when he apologized for the "grave sins" of colonialism against the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas.

He met with delegations representing the Inuit, Métis, and First Nations peoples of Canada. He honoured their care of the land "which you see not as a resource to be exploited, but as a gift of heaven." He noted "the particular riches of your languages, your cultures, your traditions, and your forms of art," the very things the church had tried to repress.

I commend Pope Francis for naming some of the important facets of the lived experience of Indigenous people in Canada.

In a key step, he named the wrongs that they suffered. Indigenous people endured the tragic legacy of "being uprooted [in which the passing on of] knowledge and ways of life in union with the land was broken by a colonization that lacked respect for you, tore many of you from your vital milieu and tried to conform you to another mentality." He acknowledged the whole terrible history of "ideological colonization," which "still continues today." He is filled with "indignation and shame."

This terrible treatment was the result of the official policy of the government of Canada, enforced by the RCMP, and administered by the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, and United Churches—to assimilate Indigenous people into white settler society by taking their culture, traditions, languages, and spirituality away. For all Canadians, it is a dark and shameful part of our history.

But the great failure of his statement is that Pope Francis stopped short of offering a full apology for the role his church played in inflicting damage. He merely apologized for "the role that a number of Catholics, particularly those with educational responsibilities, have had in all these things that wounded you, in the abuses you suffered and in the lack of respect shown for your identity, your culture and even your spiritual values."

But it wasn't just "a number of Catholics" who were guilty "of this deplorable conduct." The church as an institution was complicit in the policy of the government. The church implemented a governmental policy which sought to take away the identity, culture, language, and name, of Indigenous people. As church historian Jeremy Bergen from the University of Waterloo puts it,

“The Pope did not acknowledge that the church as an institution embraced assimilationist policy in its decision to run the schools.”

It’s all too easy to blame a few individuals. But the guilty party was the institution, and Pope Francis failed to apologize for the institution of which he is the head. It failed to be a full and complete apology.

A second issue for me (as a grammar nerd) is that much of his statement is in the passive voice. “These things were done to you,” he said, but that fails to identify the perpetrator of the action. A heartfelt apology would have said, “We did this to you” in the active voice. The passive voice allowed Pope Francis to sidestep the Church’s role as the perpetrator of these actions, and it shielded him behind a wall of ambiguity. An authentic apology is as clear as possible in accepting appropriate blame.

This partial apology is only an exceedingly small first step. Much work remains to be done. Near the end of his remarks, Pope Francis said “Any truly effective process of healing requires concrete actions.” He promised to come to Canada. To use a sports analogy, this first meeting was held on the Pope’s home field; now the Pope will come to our home field, where many Indigenous people are waiting to hear a genuine apology on their own land.

At the same time, Canadian citizens have a great deal of work to do as well. As Senator Murray Sinclair (Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission) said in response “the Church must push forward to address deniers within their congregations.” There are still too many settlers who deny the truth and harm we have done. Indeed, far too many still think that “everything would be fine if they would just be like us”—another form of the same assimilationist policy.

The Anglican Church of Canada apologized in 1993, accepting full responsibility: “I accept and I confess before God and you, our failures in the residential schools. We failed you. We failed ourselves. We failed God. I am sorry ... that we were part of a system which took you and your children from home and family... that we tried to remake you in our image, taking from you your language and the signs of your identity ... that in our schools so many were abused physically, sexually, culturally, and emotionally. On behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada, I present our apology.”

Since then, we have begun walking on the difficult journey of reconciliation. My hope is that the Pope’s statement becomes a first step in a commitment to that same journey.