
The Pope in Canada: “I humbly beg forgiveness for the evil committed by so many Christians”

A silent prayer at the Ermineskin school cemetery, a symbol of the 139 residential schools-many of them run by Catholics - where 150million children were torn from their families, becoming victims of "physical, psychological and verbal abuse" due to the government's "assimilation" policies. Thus began the 37th apostolic journey of the Pope, who is continuing in Canada these days the "penitential pilgrimage" he began four months ago in Rome with indigenous peoples. Meeting in Maskwacis with [indigenous First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples](#), Francis referred to the two pairs of moccasins he had received as gifts from the indigenous Canadians themselves during his meetings at the Vatican, keeping his promise to return them once he arrived on their lands. He then kissed the flag with the names of all the children who never returned to their homes. “To walk together, to pray together and to work together, so that the sufferings of the past can lead to a future of justice, healing and reconciliation” is the goal of the trip, which is made - he explained in his very first speech - like the others that preceded it under the banner of three feelings: grief, indignation and shame. “To remember the devastating experiences that took place in the residential schools hurts, angers, causes pain, and yet it is necessary” is the Pope’s thesis. At the heart of the first speech on Canadian soil is a request for forgiveness:

I am sorry for the ways in which, regrettably, many Christians supported the colonizing mentality of the powers that oppressed the indigenous peoples. I ask forgiveness, in particular, for the ways in which many members of the Church and of religious communities cooperated, not least through their indifference, in projects of cultural destruction and forced assimilation promoted by the governments of that time, which culminated in the system of residential schools.

"This was a **disastrous error**, incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus Christ", he laments: "It is painful to think of how the firm soil of values, language and culture that made up the authentic identity of your peoples was eroded, and that you have continued to pay the price of this. "In the face of this deplorable evil, the Church kneels before God and implores his forgiveness for the sins of her children", the Holy Father's "Mea Culpa":

"I myself wish to reaffirm this, with shame and unambiguously. I humbly beg forgiveness for the evil committed by so many Christians against the indigenous peoples."

“Begging pardon is not the end of the matter”, but only the starting point, assures Francis, according to whom an important part of the reconciliation process will be

“to conduct a serious investigation into the facts of what took place in the past and to assist the survivors of the residential schools to experience healing from the traumas they suffered.”

“Here, today, I am with you to recall the past, to grieve with you, to bow our heads together in silence and to pray before the graves”, referring to the pause in prayer in the cemetery that preceded the meeting. In [Edmonton, at the Church of the Sacred Heart](#), meeting with the "open and inclusive"

parish community that also welcomes and integrates indigenous peoples and mirrors what the Church should be, the Pope returned to the "Mea Culpa" he uttered in his first address: "If we think of the lasting pain experienced in these places by so many people within ecclesial institutions, we feel nothing but anger, nothing but shame.

"It pains me to think that Catholics contributed to policies of assimilation and enfranchisement that inculcated a sense of inferiority, robbing communities and individuals of their cultural and spiritual identity, severing their roots and fostering prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes; and that this was also done in the name of an educational system that was supposedly Christian."

Education, he points out, must always start from respecting and promoting the talents that are already there within people: "It is not, nor can it ever be, something pre-packaged and imposed. For education is an adventure, in which we explore and discover together the mystery of life. Thanks be to God, for in parishes like this, day by day, through encounter, foundations are being laid for healing and reconciliation."

"Nothing can ever take away the violation of dignity, the experience of evil, the betrayal of trust. Or take away our own shame, as believers. Yet we need to set out anew,

and Jesus does not offer us nice words and good intentions, but the cross: the scandalous love that allows his hands and feet to be pierced by nails, and his head to be crowned with thorns", is the indicated and desired way forward.

"To look together to Christ, to love betrayed and crucified for our sake; to look to Christ, crucified in the many students of the residential schools:

for Francis, this is the only way to heal the "very painful wounds" of the past, inflicted on indigenous peoples because "believers became worldly, and rather than fostering reconciliation, they imposed their own cultural models". This attitude "dies hard, also from the religious standpoint". But God does not act this way, the Pope warns: One cannot proclaim God in a way contrary to God himself. And yet, how many times has this happened in history!" "While God presents himself simply and quietly, we always have the temptation to impose him, and to impose ourselves in his name", is Francis' analysis: "it is the worldly temptation to make him come down from the cross and show himself with power. Yet Jesus reconciles us on the cross, not by coming down from the cross". "In the name of Jesus, may this never happen again in the Church", is the final appeal.

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