

Dear St. Joseph's College Community,

The tragedy of finding unmarked graves at residential schools has captured our country this year. Residential schools were an attack on Indigenous culture, language, and life, and our Indigenous sisters and brothers have been telling us this for some time. We must confront the Catholic Church's role in the project of cultural genocide towards Indigenous Peoples through residential schools and other means. As our Indigenous colleagues keep reminding us, truth comes before reconciliation.

We as Catholics and Christians must come to a greater understanding of our role in the tragedy and history of residential schools, and the essential work the TRC has laid out for us (<https://nctr.ca/records/reports/>). In one of the many listening circles I was honoured to be part of, one Indigenous leader reminded us: "Education got us into this and Education will get us out." I believe this to be true.

One way to deepen our understanding is first to learn, and through our own learning, to address the apathy in Canadian society and in our Churches. Indigenous colleagues at the University of Alberta have offered opportunities to learn through projects like the Indigenous Canada course: (<https://www.ualberta.ca/admissions-programs/online-courses/indigenous-canada/index.html>). The Catholic Intellectual Tradition, which founded what we know as the modern University, at its best holds the pursuit of truth as paramount, no matter how uncomfortable it makes us. Ignorance, apathy, and defensiveness are enemies of the truth, and we must be aware of these vices creeping in when the light of truth makes us uncomfortable. The reality of children's graves is part of this truth. The fact that our society and Church have not listened to the experiences of our Indigenous sisters and brothers is part of this truth. We must come to grips with reality and with our own ignorance, and we must actively support Indigenous communities in their own unique paths through the work of healing.

Along with facing the particular truth of residential schools, we must also understand that the way our country and our Church treats Indigenous Peoples is undergirded by colonial practices and attitudes. For Catholics in particular, doctrines like Terra Nullius ("The Doctrine of Discovery"), one of many sources for our own colonial approaches, should be repudiated by the Church. In addition, both local dioceses and the Universal Church should look for ways in which the Church can officially work with Indigenous populations across the world who have suffered under colonialism. Even the Vatican as a state could formally adopt the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This colonialism then extends beyond the Churches to how we as Canadian society honour the land and Indigenous Peoples' relationship with it, both currently and historically. We need to assess our resources use, our colonial concepts of ownership and economic growth, and our enjoyment of recreational activities all on Indigenous lands.

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Our Catholic tradition has the tools for us to engage in reconciliation, first by forming our own hearts. We are called individually and collectively to come to the cross and acknowledge our sin. Each Sunday at mass we practice our penitential rite, where we ask our community for support as we take personal responsibility for our sin: "In my thoughts, in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do." Living the story of sin and forgiveness is not easy, but it is the gospel. If we think residential schools are not our problem, we have sinned in refusing truth. If in our words we ignore or diminish Indigenous communities, we have sinned. If in our actions we are indifferent to the experience of intergenerational trauma, we have sinned. If we approach the plight of Indigenous suffering with apathy, we have sinned. But let us ask our community of faith, which includes numerous Indigenous sisters and brothers on earth and in heaven, to pray for us to get it right.

It is in this spirit that a papal apology is desperately needed. This will join the many apologies from individual Catholic organizations and Bishops throughout the years. These must be authentic apologies, that acknowledge the role the church has played in the pain and suffering of Indigenous communities. We must pursue an apology from the head of the Catholic Church to the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in Canada. Plans are in place and that conversation is occurring.

For my small part as a leader of a Catholic College, I am sorry for the times I have personally failed to foster truth and reconciliation. I am sorry for my Church's participation in colonialism and its role in residential schools. I lament the lives of the children lost and not honoured. May our future learning, understanding, and tangible actions honour their memory.

St. Joseph's College exists on Treaty 6 lands. As with the University, our place on this land can only be understood in being a treaty people. We have entered into conversations with our Indigenous partners over these difficult topics. We will continue to weave Indigenous voices in our conversations and academic discussions. We will lead our community in a Penitential Vigil to explore our shared guilt and shame and to mark September 30th. We will continue to seek ways to authentically incorporate Indigenous themes and voices into our courses. As President of SJC, I will commit to continuing dialogue with our Indigenous leaders across campus and across the province, whether through listening circles or advising our Catholic leaders on a variety of paths forward¹. We must be there to accompany Indigenous Peoples, as much as they may desire to have us walk alongside them, all while working on our own hearts through the pursuit of truth.

We will stumble in this process. There is much work to do, and we will not do it perfectly. But many Indigenous Peoples model the path forward, and I have been reminded by Indigenous colleagues to never give up hope no matter how large the task. In listening and learning from Indigenous perspectives, we can learn how to walk the path of reconciliation, learn to care for the land, and learn that everything starts with the Creator. We must listen and walk with them; we have much to learn.

Shawn Flynn

¹ <https://www.cccb.ca/media-release/canadian-bishops-announce-30m-national-financial-pledge-to-support-healing-and-reconciliation-initiatives/>