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There are indeed long shadows over the waters of the history that the Church has shared with the Native Peoples. And there are ripples of light that reach us even now. The Church has walked with Aboriginal Peoples, shared their joys, their sufferings and their aspirations, and supported their struggles for recognition of their rights for personal and collective growth. Then and now, the Churches provide a place where Native and non-Native Peoples may find common ground. Non-Native Church members have accompanied Native Peoples on their journey – sometimes leading, sometimes following, and sometimes side by side.

## RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

There are many tales of solidarity, of genuine love and friendship which took place between missionaries and Native Peoples. Yet, there are other stories which continue to emerge, of oppression and even abuse of Native Peoples within the institutions administered by the Church. The shocking revelations about the various types of abuse experienced at some residential schools have moved us to a profound examination of conscience as a Church. We who share in the blessings of the Church must also bear the burden of its past. Several Church groups and religious congregations have made public statements arising from their examination of conscience.<sup>3</sup>

Following a three-day session on the residential schools' experience in Saskatoon, March 13-15, 1991, Catholic bishops and leaders of men and women religious communities stated:

*We are sorry and deeply regret the pain, suffering and alienation that so many experienced. We have heard their cries of distress, feel their anguish and want to be part of the healing process....*

*All dioceses in which residential schools were located and that are represented here agree to set up, in collaboration with Aboriginal Peoples, a process for disclosure, which respects confidentiality, and for healing of the wounds of any sexual abuse that occurred in residential schools. (emphasis added)*

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<sup>3</sup> See the Oblate Conference of Canada, An Apology to the First Nations of Canada, July 24, 1991; the Bishops' Advisory Committee, Pastoral Letter on Native Issues in Manitoba, January 20, 1993; Father Kolvenbach, the Superior General of the Jesuits, Apology to Native Americans for Past Mistakes, Idaho, May 16, 1993.



The dioceses also committed themselves to establishing

*...local forums of dialogue and other avenues for listening that will bring together former students and their families and the religious, clergy and lay staff who were involved in the schools so that they may reflect on their experience and work towards healing and reconciliation.*

In the past two years, healing conferences and school reunions have provided occasions for former students of residential schools to express the sense of loss, vulnerability, shame, and diminishment that has haunted them into their adult life. In the past few years, these have been settings where the memories are expressed and to some extent the burden shared. Out of these sessions has emerged a renewed sense of urgency to heal the brokenness in Native communities and Native families.

As anticipated at the Saskatoon Conference, approaches to healing and reconciliation are most effective on the local and personal level. Nonetheless, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and the men and women religious communities are working together through the National Catholic Working Group on Native Residential Schools to support these local efforts, to share information and resources, and to understand the meaning and effect of the residential school experience.

We cannot and do not want to deny our collective past. To do so would be to lose sight of our common future. However, justice and healing concern not only the Churches but also the whole of Canadian society. The Indian residential schools were initiated by the federal government, sustained by government funds and Native Peoples' funds that the government administered, and supervised by government officials. Far from being clandestine, the government's policy concerning the schools was expressed repeatedly, openly, and publicly. It reflected the political and social thinking of the time, and enjoyed general public support. The role that government envisioned for residential schools was expressed in the Department of Indian Affairs' Annual Report of 1889:<sup>4</sup>

*The boarding school disassociates the Indian child from the deleterious home influences to which he would otherwise be subjected. It*

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<sup>4</sup> J.R. Miller, Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada, p. 196.



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*reclaims him from the uncivilized state in which he has been brought up. It brings him into contact from day to day with all that tends to effect a change in his views and habits of life.*

Historian John Webster Grant<sup>5</sup> rightly asserts that the residential approach to schooling was designed to have a total impact on the habits and personality patterns of the children. As such, the system was dangerously flawed by the policy underlying it which was fundamentally racist. In addition, many of the difficulties encountered in the residential school system were compounded by insufficient government funding.<sup>6</sup> Inadequate housing, classrooms, and even food were frequently cited in government reports.

One of the consequences of this parsimonious approach by government to Native education was that student labour which began as part of their education, became a financial necessity. From the beginning, government agents contemplated a self-sustaining system no longer depending on the public purse. In 1847, Egerton Ryerson, Chief Superintendent of common schools for Upper Canada, optimistically concluded that "with judicious management these establishments will be able in the course of a few years to support themselves."<sup>7</sup>

Although they may have become a symbol of the disintegration of Native culture and a lightning rod for anger about this historical period, the residential schools were only a part of the overall government strategy to assimilate or integrate the Native Peoples. Neither justice nor healing can take place without significant participation of the federal government and

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<sup>5</sup> John Webster Grant, Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter Since 1534 (Toronto, Buffalo, London, University of Toronto Press, 1984), pp. 167-189.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Lascelles, OMI, "Indian Residential Schools," in *The Canadian Catholic Review*, May 1992 (pp. 6-13), documents that, in 1892, a per capita grant arrangement was established which provided \$110.00 to \$145.00 per year per student in the industrial school system, and \$72.00 per year in the boarding schools which were situated closer to reserves. By 1924, each of the schools operated on a grant of about \$21,689.16 per year. He also cites Anglican officials' declaration to the Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons, that in the previous year they had contributed over \$65,000.00 to Indian education out of their own funds. In turn, the Roman Catholic delegation testified that they had put out \$110,000.00 to build Fort Chipewyan school. A letter from the Provincial of the Sisters of St. Ann in 1927 illustrates this point. She wrote "I know how surprised he [Duncan Campbell Scott] would be to learn that for the last sixty years each sister has been receiving approximately 50 cents a day for about 14 hours labour."

<sup>7</sup> J.R. Miller, Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada, p. 107.



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the rest of Canadian society. Residential schools were manifestations of the wider problem of how government and the rest of Canadian society related and still relate to Native Peoples.

Researchers estimate that a minority of Native children attended residential schools.<sup>8</sup> Yet, it is clear that many of the signs of disenfranchisement and dislocation are equally evident in Native communities which never experienced the reality of residential schools. It is imperative today to confront both the individual and social causes of the profound powerlessness and marginalization of Native Peoples that has existed over several generations.<sup>9</sup> Aboriginal Peoples will need all of their spiritual and social resources, all of their creative powers, and all of their hope and courage to address responsibly the challenges facing them as individuals and as communities.

In the encounter between the non-Natives and Aboriginal Peoples, much was gained and lost. The missionaries lived among the Aboriginal Peoples, sharing their lives, their joys and their pains and helping to teach and to heal. Many missionaries made significant contributions to the retention and revitalization of these same cultures and languages.<sup>10</sup> There is much in the historical relationship between the Catholic Church and Aboriginal Peoples to celebrate and build on. However, we are currently very aware of what was lost and this is of great concern to us.

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<sup>8</sup> See J.R. Miller, "Owen Glendower, Hotspur, and Canadian Indian Policy" in *Sweet Promises*, (Toronto, Buffalo, London, University of Toronto Press, 1991, pp. 323-352). At page 333 he says "...the conventional view of residential schools fails to note that the system never reached more than a minority of young Indians and Inuit." Thomas Lascelles in *Indian Residential Schools* says "Historically, most Native students never went to residential schools. The majority attended day schools on their reserves, or mixed schools in nearby towns or cities. All told, roughly 100,000, perhaps less than one in six, were educated in the residential schools, either exclusively or for a specific period."

<sup>9</sup> See Wolfgang Jilek, *Indian Healing: Shamanic Ceremonialism in the Pacific Northwest Today* (Surrey, British Columbia and Washington: Hancock House Publishers, 1982), where he discusses the symptoms of "anomic" depression as rooted in several generations of powerlessness caused by colonization.

<sup>10</sup> Many missionaries who worked in the past and many others who are working with the Native Peoples of Canada today, made great efforts to learn Native languages, to discover their internal rules and to produce learning and teaching instruments. The missionaries launched several periodicals in Indian and Inuktitut languages. Some go back as early as 1900 and one periodical has had as many as 1,200 subscribers. One of these written in a stenography invented by Father Jean-Marie Lejeune could be read by several Native groups in B.C. Over 300 original Indian and Inuktitut manuscripts exist. Among these are: 141 dictionaries (27 different Indian languages); 74 grammars (19 different languages); stories, legends, instructions, hymns and prayer books, catechisms and translations of biblical texts. There are, in