



16 April 2018

To the Honourable Members of the House of Commons and the Senate of Canada,

Media are informing the offices of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (hereafter CCCB) that a motion relating to the Catholic Church and the operation of the former Indian Residential Schools will be debated in the House of Commons and possibly also in the Senate. In addition to providing some context on the overall issue, we respectfully wish to clarify a number of inaccuracies which are being circulated or reported.

Respectfully,

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**THE INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS
AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH**

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THE INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Context

The Catholic Church is a decentralized structure. Each Diocesan Bishop is autonomous in his diocese. Although Roman Catholic Bishops relate to their national Conference of Bishops, they are not accountable to it.

Approximately 16 out of 61 Roman Catholic dioceses in Canada were associated with the former Indian Residential Schools, in addition to about three dozen out of over one hundred Catholic institutes (commonly referred to as religious orders). Each diocese and institute is corporately and legally responsible for its own actions. The Catholic Church as a whole in Canada was not associated with the Residential Schools, nor was the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (hereafter CCCB).

In a brief submitted to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in November **1993**, the CCCB acknowledged that “various types of abuse experienced at some residential schools have moved us to a profound examination of conscience as a Church” (citing the **1991** Saskatoon conference). Canadian Catholic Bishops and the leaders of men’s and women’s institutes meeting in Saskatoon in 1991 had issued a statement that “**We are sorry and deeply regret** the pain, suffering and alienation that so many experienced” at the Residential Schools.¹

In **2009**, the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, **Phil Fontaine**, along with other representatives, had a moving encounter with Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican. In describing the meeting, **Chief Fontaine told the media he hoped the expression of regret would “close the book”** on the issue of apologies for residential school survivors. Another attendee at the meeting with Pope Benedict, Edward John, Grand Chief of the First Nations Summit in British Columbia, said the Pope acknowledged the suffering of those who are still living with the consequences of their experiences at the schools. In comments to the media he said, “I think in that sense, there was that apology that we were certainly looking for.”²

The Catholic Church continues to work alongside and with Indigenous communities in order to foster an ongoing culture of reconciliation. There have been, and continue to be, numerous initiatives by Catholic dioceses, institutes and organizations in Canada to help heal the sufferings of the Indigenous Peoples. The process of healing and reconciliation is ongoing.³

¹ http://www.cccb.ca/site/images/stories/pdf/apology_saskatoon.pdf

² For a partial listing of comments following the encounter with Pope Benedict XVI, see http://www.cccb.ca/site/images/stories/pdf/2009_quotes.pdf

³ An outline of a number of Catholic initiatives in healing and reconciliation is found at <http://www.cccb.ca/site/eng/church-in-canada-and-world/catholic-church-in-canada/indigenous-peoples>

2. Draft wording of NDP and Liberal motion as circulated by media

That the House call on the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

- a) to invite Pope Francis to Canada to apologize on behalf of the Catholic Church to Indigenous people for the Church's role in the residential school system as outlined in Call to Action 58 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report,*
- b) to respect their moral obligation and the spirit of the 2006 Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement and resume best efforts to raise the full amount of the agreed upon funds*
- c) to make a consistent and sustained effort to turn over relevant documents when called upon by survivors of residential schools, their families and scholars working to understand the full scope of the horrors of the residential school system in the interest of truth and reconciliation.*

3. Misunderstandings and factual errors

A. Invitations to Pope Francis re Call to Action #58

The Holy Father has already been invited by the present and previous Prime Minister. The Catholic Bishops of Canada, including the current and past Presidents of the Conference, have assured the Pope they would joyfully and gratefully welcome him in a visit to Canada. Likewise, in a number of instances, **Canadian Bishops**, individually and collectively, **have formally invited Pope Francis to visit, including with specific reference to Call to Action #58.** Such a visit, however, depends on many factors, including timing, nature, intention, human, structural and financial resources, as well as the surrounding protocol.

B. Response of Pope Francis to the invitations

As stated in the CCCB President's recent letter to Indigenous Peoples ([copy attached](#)), Pope Francis, after considerable consultation with the Bishops of Canada as well as with the Holy See's Secretariat of State, and while being aware of and taking seriously the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, has decided as regards Call to Action #58, that he cannot personally respond. The Holy Father's decision is based the factors outlined above under point A; but also stems from the fact that each Bishop, aware of local needs and aspirations, is best positioned as the principal faith leader and pastor of his diocese to take concrete steps toward reconciliation.

For this reason, Pope Francis is encouraging the Bishops to continue taking leadership and assuming their proper role in pursuing nationally and locally their pastoral engagement and reconciliation efforts with Indigenous Peoples, including ongoing conversations by the Bishops with Elders. This work builds on past apologies, dialogue and the desire to move forward together.

Pope Francis remains open to a future visit when it is opportune and after discerning the circumstances indicated above. Sharing in the pain of Indigenous Peoples, he would certainly ensure such a visit includes meaningful encounters with them. The Gospel calls to forgiveness, reconciliation, solidarity, and communion guide the Holy Father and his brother Bishops in these matters. The Gospel of mercy is an invitation to go even further and beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, and that is what the Bishops in Canada intend to do.

C. Apologies on behalf of the Catholic Church to Indigenous Peoples for the Church's role in the residential school system

To suggest that the Catholic community has not accepted responsibility for its involvement in residential schools **is simply inaccurate. The Catholic Church has apologized in the way it is structured.** The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada website provides **a link to the numerous apologies provided by Canadian Catholic entities that operated residential schools.**⁴

Historically, the Government of Canada entered into individual contracts with about 50 autonomous "Roman Catholic Entities". These entities, as they are referred to by the Settlement Agreement, were mainly Catholic institutes. Some mission dioceses were also involved in the former schools. **These entities collectively issued a public apology in 1991.** Individual public apologies followed by these entities in the years to come.

The Bishops of Canada collectively, through the CCCB, have on a number of occasions expressed regret and remorse at the involvement by various Catholics in the former schools.

The concern of the Catholic Bishops and faithful for the sufferings of Indigenous Peoples was reiterated on several occasions by **Pope John Paul II** during each of his three visits to Canada. **Pope Benedict XVI**, in a particular way, received a delegation of Indigenous representatives in **2009** and expressed sorrow and regret for the abuses suffered in the residential schools.⁵ The Indigenous participants, including the then National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), not only recognized this as an apology but expressed satisfaction with it.⁶

In his statement to Pope Benedict, **AFN National Chief Phil Fontaine**, acknowledging the work done by others over "decades and generations to bring the residential school problem to a close" but who "never lived to see this day," and recognizing that healing "the wounds of the residential school legacy will take years, perhaps even decades of work," called the meeting with the Pope "an important milestone on the road out of

⁴ <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=9>

⁵ The text of the communiqué issued by the Holy See Press Office following the meeting is found at <http://www.cccb.ca/site/eng/church-in-canada-and-world/catholic-church-in-canada/indigenous-peoples/3203-pope-benedict-xvi-meets-with-representatives-of-former-indian-residential-school-students-and-the-church-in-canada>

⁶ For a number of comments by Indigenous and other participants following the audience with Pope Benedict XVI, see http://www.cccb.ca/site/images/stories/pdf/2009_quotes.pdf

darkness” that offers hope “we can work together to shape a new Canada for our people.”⁷

Following the meeting, **Chief Fontaine** said “this visit with the Holy Father **closes the circle of reconciliation**. In the past, we received apologies from the Anglican, United and Presbyterian churches and the Government of Canada for the residential schools. Today's expression of understanding, acknowledgement and emotion by His Holiness on behalf of the Catholic Church **closes the circle**.”⁸

Internationally, both **Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis** have on a number of occasions **apologized** to Indigenous Peoples everywhere for past wrongs. Pope Francis holds Indigenous Peoples everywhere in the world close to his heart and advocates the value of engaging them as critical dialogue partners.

D. Questions regarding financial settlements, payments, etc., relating to the 2006 Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA)

The **Holy See** and the **CCCB** were **never involved in running the former schools**. The “Roman Catholic Entities” named as parties in the IRSSA were legally deemed to have fulfilled the requirements of the settlement agreement by a judicial review. Following this review, the former Conservative government released the entities from further obligations – a decision which the present Liberal government did not appeal.

The 50 or so individual entities which signed the IRSSA paid

- i) **\$29 million in cash** (less legal costs);
- ii) **more than the required \$25 million of “in-kind” contributions**; and
- iii) an additional **\$3.7 million** from a “best efforts” campaign with a goal of \$25 million.⁹

Those same entities, together with other dioceses, institutes, and national Catholic organizations, continue to be involved in efforts across the country to provide in-kind contributions which financially speaking go well beyond the scope of the Settlement Agreement.

⁷ “Phil Fontaine’s statement to the pope on residential schools apology,” *The Georgia Straight*, 29 April 2009 [<https://www.straight.com/blogra/phil-fontaines-statement-pope-residential-schools-apology>]

⁸ “AFN National Chief says private audience with Pope Benedict XVI in Vatican City ‘closes the circle’ and enables work towards reconciliation for residential school survivors”, Cision new release, 29 April 2009 [<https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/afn-national-chief-says-private-audience-with-pope-benedict-xvi-in-vatican-city-closes-the-circle-and-enables-work-towards-reconciliation-for-residential-school-survivors-537511241.html>]. The text of Chief Fontaine’s statement to Pope Benedict is found at <https://www.straight.com/blogra/phil-fontaines-statement-pope-residential-schools-apology>.

⁹ Details about the efforts by the Catholic entities are provided by Archbishop Gerard Pettipas, C.S.S.R., Chairman of the Board, on behalf of the then Corporation of Catholic Entities Party to the Indian Residential School Settlement, in “Questions and Responses Related to Recent Media Coverage on Catholic Entity Commitments in the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement”, 21 April 2016 [<https://archgm.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/MFT-Campaign-201604.pdf?4ac5ab>].

E. Questions regarding the turning over of relevant documents when called upon by survivors of residential schools, their families and scholars

The CCCB does not have any residential school records. Nor does the CCCB have authority over any of the Catholic entities which may hold records.

Among the entities, there is a spirit of cooperation with Indigenous Peoples with regards to personal records and information relating to the former schools. At the same time, as stated on the public record, there are also privacy concerns, including those of Indigenous Peoples, which need to be taken into consideration on a case by case basis.

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