



Statement

July 27, 2022

For Immediate Release

"The most important day of an apology is the day after, and the year after. We all need to be looking at what the Pope does then."

- *Dr. Cindy Blackstock, Executive Director,
First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada*

With those wise words, Dr. Blackstock this week crystalized the essence of Pope Francis's visit to Canada in terms of its relevance to First Nations, Métis and Inuit Peoples. It is an important and historic step toward reconciliation, but its true worth will only be reflected in the actions that follow.

The Pope's formal apology for the "deplorable evil" committed by Christians against Indigenous children and families that culminated in residential schools, as well as for how the "many members of the church and of religious communities co-operated . . . in projects of cultural destruction and forced assimilation promoted by the governments of that time" is being met with mixed response.

Certainly, it is a welcome – and in some cases healing – action for many First Nations, Métis and Inuit people to hear the Pontiff "humbly beg forgiveness for the evil committed by so many Christians against the Indigenous peoples." The Pope has described his visit as a "penitential pilgrimage" and has publicly acknowledged that forced assimilation eroded values, language and culture that comprised the authentic identity of Indigenous Peoples "and that you have continued to pay the price of this."

For others, however, the Pope's visit has resurfaced trauma caused by experiences at residential schools that has plagued them and their families for generations. Chief Cadmus Delorme of Cowessess First Nation acknowledged this, stating: "In the coming days please understand the Pope's visit will impact survivors and family of survivors differently. One day at a time we shall find means to get stronger."

Notably, former national Truth and Reconciliation Commission Chair Murray Sinclair, in a written statement released Monday, said the Pope's apology "has left a deep hole in the acknowledgement of the full role of the church in the residential school system, by placing blame on individual members of the church."

After Pope Francis issued his apology, Kukpi7 Judy Wilson, Chief of Neskonlith Indian Band, Secretary-Treasurer of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs and First Nations Leadership Council member, led a call for the Pope to go further by repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery and renouncing the associated Papal bulls that combined to pave the way for colonization.

As B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth, my Office stands in allyship with First Nations, Métis and Inuit people as they grapple with the complexities of the Pope's visit and apology. And we echo their leaders' common calls for concrete acts of reconciliation by the Catholic Church to follow up on those words including, but not limited, to:

- ensuring that all church records be turned over to the communities and organizations seeking to identify and learn what happened to all the children who were forced to attend residential schools;
- making a commitment to stop protecting and help bring to justice those perpetrators of abuse who are still alive;
- addressing the ongoing abuse of children in the Catholic Church;
- acknowledging and apologizing for the impact of the Doctrine of Discovery, as the Anglican and United Churches have already done.

We at RCY join in support of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples calling for the Pope's words to be just a beginning, rather than a conclusion. We align with those leaders in calling for tangible action by the Catholic Church towards repair and reconciliation that will support the well-being of Indigenous children and families now and in the future.

We also hope that subsequent action by the Catholic Church to follow its historic apology will also help to hasten repair and reconciliation work by other entities, including the Government of Canada and the RCMP, whose current and former policies have also resulted in harm to Indigenous children and families.

In an interview with CHNL Radio in Kamloops, Kúkpí7 Rosanne Casimir of Tk'emlúpsTeSecwépemc described the Pope's apology as "meaningful" and a "first step." But she acknowledged that there are "actionable next steps that still need to take place."

As Norway House Cree Nation member and freelance journalist David A. Robertson summed it up in a CBC opinion piece this week: "Without action, sorry is a fleeting and, ultimately, meaningless word."

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "J Charlesworth". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Dr. Jennifer Charlesworth
Representative for Children and Youth