

The Catholic Church and the TRC
(op-ed article by the Most Rev. Donald Bolen, Bishop of Saskatoon)

As a boy growing up on a farm in Saskatchewan, my telling of the history of that place began with the arrival of my grandparents and great-grandparents. Last Summer I learned that the oldest traces of settlement in the province, dating to about 8,500 years ago, were only a half hour from our farm. I had no idea of that larger history of Indigenous Peoples on the prairies.

Over the past seven years, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has challenged the often narrow or distorted ways in which we have told the story of our nation, and of European and immigrant settlement here. After hearing from over 6,000 witnesses, the TRC process and its Final Report have given witness to a particularly painful part of our history: the waves of suffering that accompanied the Indian Act and the Residential Schools.

That hidden history continues to resonate in our Canadian present - in broken communities and struggling families, in high incarceration and suicide rates among our Indigenous population, and in a systemic racism embedded in societal structures and attitudes. The TRC process has taken Canadian citizens back to school, and its Final Report calls all of Canada to a profound examination of conscience.

The TRC process has brought about a painful awakening for many Catholics, whose Church was involved in running 60% of the Indian Residential Schools. We heard how children were in many instances forcibly removed and taken great distances from their families, forbidden to speak their languages, and prevented from learning about their culture in a system expressly established for their assimilation. Many students suffered physical and emotional abuse, and there was a deeply disturbing number of students who were sexually abused. Students grew up in an institutional environment where they learned little about normal family life or how to be a parent.

The primary interest of the TRC was to bring to light the residential school system's legacy of hurt and alienation, by providing survivors with an opportunity to tell their stories in a non-adversarial context. Creating a space for telling those stories of suffering is indispensable to healing and reconciliation, and the Catholic Church, along with other Christian churches, has strongly supported the TRC process.

One of the challenges faced by the Catholics has been how to come to terms with the history of our involvement in residential schools without adopting a defensive posture, but also without scapegoating or 'throwing under the bus' the many priests, members of religious communities, and laypeople who served at the schools, or who worked with Canada's Indigenous Peoples over the last four centuries. The fact that the residential school system was misguided and deeply flawed, and that some who worked at the schools committed terrible deeds, does not nullify the truth that others served there generously, with self-sacrifice and good intentions.

The TRC's Final Report gives a telling account of the regional event in Victoria, where the Superior of a Catholic religious community gave an account of his experience of serving at a residential school, and was challenged by a student who attended the same school but had a very

different (and negative) experience. The Report points to their “seemingly irreconcilable” accounts and experiences as “a stark reminder that there are no easy shortcuts to reconciliation” (Vol. 6, pp. 10-11).

While visiting Saskatoon in 2014 for an event entitled 10,000 Healing Steps, TRC Commissioner Justice Murray Sinclair spoke of the experience of shame that many now feel regarding the residential school legacy, and stated: “you should not feel ashamed about this, you should feel committed to doing something about it. Shame will get us nowhere; guilt will get us nowhere.... We must commit to working together to fix this.”

The TRC’s Final Report and Calls to Action do not give up on the churches who were involved with the residential schools. Rather, they call us to integrity by owning past sins and mistakes, and to be actively engaged in the process of reconciliation and of building a better future. That approach is laudable and to be welcomed.

On March 29, Catholic responses were published addressing two of the TRC’s Calls to Action: one responding to the invitation to repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples, the other endorsing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. More responses will be forthcoming, not only in written form, but also through a deeper engagement with Indigenous people as we look to strengthen relationships, stand in solidarity in the pursuit of justice, and take other small steps on the long walk towards healing and reconciliation in our nation.

The Most Reverend Donald Bolen is the Roman Catholic Bishop of Saskatoon and Chairman of the Commission for Justice and Peace of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Link to the press release on the CCCB website:

<http://www.cccb.ca/site/eng/media-room/statements-a-letters/4446-catholic-responses-to-truth-and-reconciliation-commission-call-to-action-48-and-questions-regarding-the-doctrine-of-discovery>

Link to the Catholic Response to Call to Action 48 of the TRC on adopting and implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples:

<http://www.cccb.ca/site/images/stories/pdf/catholic%20response%20call%20to%20action%2048.pdf>

Link to the Catholic Response on the “Doctrine of Discovery” and *Terra Nullius*:

<http://www.cccb.ca/site/images/stories/pdf/catholic%20response%20to%20doctrine%20of%20discovery%20and%20tn.pdf>