



Shoes are placed on the lawn outside the former Kamloops Indian Residential School on June 4, 2021 (Darryl Dyck/CP) THE CANADIAN PRESS

CANADA

One priest's message to the church: 'Shut your mouth and just listen'

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Last Sunday, Father Paul Bringleston of St. Ann's Roman Catholic Church in Flin Flon, Man., delivered a homily about the Catholic Church's role in residential schools in Canada, and notably, its failure to apologize and account for its "horrendous visible sin." His message to bishops: "You sit there in your offices knowing that you embody a legacy that we are discovering every year is filled with racism and hatred." Father Bringleston's sermon, which he [posted on YouTube](#), ends with an apology to Indigenous people, and a message to church leaders: "Take off your robes, your shoes, and your rings and your crosses. Sit yourself in a chair. And listen. Listen. Listen until it hurts. And keep listening." Since the discovery of a [mass grave](#) in Kamloops, B.C., [a number of people](#) within the Catholic Church have expressed disappointment and anger over the Church's response. Here are Bringleston's remarks, which stand out for their forcefulness and as a call to action to other priests:

Perhaps like many of you, I spent a good portion of this week without being able to help but hear, listen and read as the discovery [in] Kamloops of the former residential school filled itself out even more.

I was taking a few days alone at my cabin, mostly because I was feeling a little overwhelmed by the whole thing. And I find it nice to be alone sometimes when I'm that frustrated. I don't think I've had a day this week that I haven't been sick to my stomach. You can't help but read what's on social media today. You can't, as much as sometimes we say we shouldn't put a whole lot of time and effort into it. And believe me, there is definitely no small shortage of negativity and distortion that can be on there. But if you ever want to get a real pulse of where people are at, generally speaking, it's not a bad place to start.

One particular statement that stuck with me like a gut punch on Wednesday came from Charles Adler. Many of you might be familiar with him, older people anyway. I started listening to Charles when I first moved to Manitoba back in 1989. He was at CJOB in Winnipeg. I find him a very easy listen. He's a very open-minded individual who's allowed himself to be changed by experience that he lives. And by the experience, more importantly of others.

He had a comment on Wednesday that just hit me right in the stomach. And it's going to hit you, too. One of the expressions that was found to be discovered in the early days of the residential school inquiries that took place over 20 years ago, was a recurrent phrase in both church and government documents that the goal was to take the Indian out of the child. Charles Adler

commented that it seems that the priests took the Christ out of Christian. And he's right. He's absolutely right.

I can't explain how this happened. I can't explain the history of how it unfolded. I can't explain it at all. I can't even explain our church's response to it really clearly and articulately. And I don't think I'm alone as a priest in being able to acknowledge that. I think we have bishops and priests that can fake it.

But I think at the real core of all of our lives, there is a powerlessness here that we just simply don't have the words.

I can't help but think, I can't help but think that even though I don't fly airplanes, and I'm not a pilot, if I see a plane in a tree, I know something went wrong. I don't have to be an expert in church history, with the mission of Christ, to see that we as priests, and as religious, as a church, we did it wrong. And we're still doing it wrong, in many ways.

Twenty-one years ago, when I became a priest, the psychologist that I was seeing at the time, he looked me in the eye and asked me really, if I wanted to be a priest, and he told me face to face, "Paul, you're going to suffer, because you don't fit in." And I've never really felt that I fit into the Catholic Church, at least the institution. My first love has always been God and God in people.

And all I ever wanted to do was to make God real in people's lives, to show people what I discovered. But part of being able to do that requires us to be very rigorously honest about who it is we really are as people in the church, that we are as sinful and as flawed as the people we consistently call out and condemn. That's been a steep learning curve.

For me that came 12 years ago, when I had to get sober, I had to look at my failings as a priest, and the sin of my life as a priest. And it wasn't an easy path to take. And I think we as a country must look as a church and take that same deep breath, and ask ourselves: how did this really truly happen? And I have all kinds of opinions on that, that, that [are] too long to get into here. But I think it's safe to say that what we have done isn't working. Or at the very least, it's not working as well as it can, or as well as it should. None of this is an accident. This was deliberate, decisions were made, choices were made. And those decisions and those choices were deliberately covered up.

And I have a share in that even though I wasn't alive, and I wasn't there. As a priest, I have a share in that. And that makes me angry. Because I can take responsibility for what I do in this life. But it's very hard and unnatural to take responsibility for what others may have done in God's name, a name and a mission that I share today. And so I do have a moral responsibility to acknowledge it, when I see it. To say what it is, for what it is.

I think one of the hardest things as priests is being able to sit in the woundedness of someone else, really without saying a thing. And yet, that's really, that's really how anything heals. And the church. The church that we live in today is not the church of 50 years ago, in spite of how many bishops and priests we have today thinking that it's so. And if anything that this pandemic has taught us is the church has shifted, and beautifully and wonderfully so. And that the bishops and priests need to catch up with that. Not try to recreate something that no longer lives.

I've listened to statements this week come out from all corners of the church. Some of them have been beautiful and compassionate, and others are just plain out of touch. The statement that came from the Conference of Catholic Bishops was one of the weakest gutless statements I think I've ever read. We need to call that out for what it is. It boils down to thoughts and prayers. It's not enough.

The honest question comes: how come the church hasn't apologized? And there have been meagre attempts at that. But it's clear from what we're discovering today that that has not been enough. It hasn't been enough. We're not getting it right.

My alcoholism gave me a great gift of reminding me when I had to take a moral inventory of my own life, and then share it with someone else. That that was the beginning of a real change. And I call upon priests in our country to do that moral inventory, where you can with courage, and you're going to find shame.

And you're going to find things that you are guilty of. Acknowledge them. You'll find that, by and large, people are willing to hear it.

And then we let people talk. Part of making an amends in AA is expressing our contrition and saying I'm sorry. And then the very next part is shutting my mouth and allowing the people I hurt to have their say, no matter how long it

takes, no matter how humiliating that is. That's the least we can do as a church.

It is not for us to tell Indigenous peoples, it's time to move on. You don't tell a victim when their suffering is over. You sit with that pain. And despite every human instinct, you have to respond to it and to say something to all the what-about-isms, shut your mouth, and just listen.

That's what I've had to do all week. And it's not nice, it's not pretty. There are some that are quick to say, you don't have to apologize, you weren't a part of that. Look at your life, you're... that's crap. If there's suffering that I can see, and suffering and pain that I know about, that I hear, and then able to experience, I have a moral obligation as a disciple of Christ to be present in that pain.

As a good friend of mine is always fond of saying, "Paul, you don't know shit from Shinola." And I don't. But I know enough to recognize a hurting people. And I know enough now to shut my mouth and listen, to call upon my brothers in the priesthood to do the same.

It's no secret that the church has lost a lot of moral credibility, long before the discovery of this grave in Kamloops. And sadly, I believe what they're saying, there will be more. I don't know how that happened. It goes against everything we as a church hold dear: the dignity of the dead. I can't imagine making a choice deliberately to cover that up for any reason.

And so we have lost our credibility. Bishops still write these beautiful, long letters that are all in the head. Bishop, no one reads them anymore. No one reads them anymore. You're reminding us about our moral lives every day of the bloody week. You're reminding us about how evil abortion is and how I can't love a man or a woman can't love a woman. How gay men and women can't be married and how they can't have children. You're telling us that we're missing mass on Sunday to spend time with our families is a sin. And all the while you sit there in your offices knowing that you embody a legacy that we are discovering every year is filled with racism and hatred.

It can't continue, not in the way it has. Our communities, specifically in our own country, have grown more polarized over the years, and especially in this last year, we're insulated. We surround ourselves with people who are like minded. And I can think of no greater example of that than the Most Holy

Roman Catholic Church. Some of these bishops and priests don't get it because they don't want to get it. They don't understand that people's lives have changed. And that condemnation no longer works. Shaming people no longer works when we ourselves are guilty, of horrendous visible sin.

It begins with us being able, to be willing to sit with the valid and justifiable pain and horror of a whole nation of people in this country. And to listen to it, even though it's painful to hear, because that's where the real growth of redemption that you and I talk about as priests every week, that's where that redemption begins, is in the hearing of the hurts as they were, and without trying to minimize them or deflect them or justify them in some other way. We were and are wrong.

This can't continue. And this is happening in the Catholic Church in Canada. As long as we only listen to the people who show up, the church will never be where it was called to be.

We need to risk living in our shame. Without looking for a ready answer. Without looking for calming words and thoughts and prayers. We need to allow Indigenous people to know that in spite of everything, we're still going to be here, and if the church collapses physically from this—good. So what if we can't pay our bills? So what? Is that really what the church is about? Keeping buildings like this open? Much of the world doesn't have churches like this, and their faith grows. Because priests are present in the lives of all people. Not just the church. And the ones we have cajoled into praying and into remaining.

There will be a reckoning. And I know that we have in this country good men who are willing to inspire and guide the rest of us. And I call on them to hold their brothers accountable. I call on them not to write a bloody letter. But to get up in front of people, like I'm doing this morning, without notes, speak from the heart. And tell your people, tell anyone who will listen that you're sorry.

Don't say you understand because you don't. I don't understand. But I know what pain is. And I can understand that. And I understand that in the lives that I feel pain that no one could tell me to get over it. So don't expect Indigenous people to get over it. Walk with them, accompany them in their anger and let the anger flow. It has to. It has to in order for the real gospel to be felt and to be experienced.

My dear bishops, my dear priests. We no longer have authority, moral authority, over our people. Stop kidding yourself like you do. You don't. Take off your robes, your shoes, and your rings and your crosses. Sit yourself in a chair. And listen. Listen. Listen until it hurts. And keep listening. Only then, only then will we ever have a shot at healing.

I am only pastor of St. Ann's in Flin Flon. To Indigenous people here in my care, in my past, throughout our country I, Paul Bringleton, a priest of the most holy Roman Catholic Church, apologize.

We failed you. It's time for us to be truly accountable with that, and for that. For those who have left the church over this, I'm sorry.

For those who stayed, I'm sorry.

We need you. The church is better off with you than without you. We don't give up on a family member. Don't give up on the gospel. Even though we've had a piss-poor way of representing Christ over many years in our country, there are those of us who want to stay, to be a part of your life in whatever way we can, in whatever way you want to.

Help us to understand. Call us to accountability.

To members of my own parish and parishes that are listening to this, hold your priest accountable. Challenge your bishop to talk and to listen. Knights of Columbus, Catholic Women's League of Canada, write those letters that you're always so famous for writing about every other blessed social justice issue on the map. Write your church a letter asking for your priests and bishops to be present to Indigenous peoples without reservation.

And ask them not to write another letter. Ask them to leave their office and get out onto the street and sit amongst the people whose hearts we have broken, whose dignity we have robbed and whose lives we have betrayed. Only then, only then, will healing truly have a chance of being the reconciliation that the gospel of Jesus Christ demands of us.

<https://macleans.ca/news/canada/one-priests-message-to-the-church-shut-your-mouth-and-just-listen/>