

# Pope Francis's apology failed to acknowledge the Church's full role in residential schools, Murray Sinclair says

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 LISTEN TO ARTICLE



Pope Francis waves the the crowd as he makes a lap at Commonwealth Stadium in Edmonton, Alberta.

GAVIN JOHN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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The chief commissioner of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has issued a blistering critique of Pope Francis's apology to Indigenous people, saying "it left a deep hole in the acknowledgment of the full role of the church in the residential school system, by placing blame on individual members of the church."

Mr. Sinclair issued a press release just moments before Pope Francis appeared before thousands of people at Edmonton's Commonwealth Stadium for a mass commemorating St. Anne, grandmother of Jesus.

In 2015, the commission issued Call to Action #58, asking the Pope to deliver an apology in Canada for the church's role in the residential school system. On Monday, seven years later, Pope Francis heeded the call, but apologized for individual Catholics who participated in the schools, not for the church as a whole.

The wording jarred many Indigenous leaders and residential school survivors, who had been reiterating demands for an institutional apology since April, when the Pope uttered similar words of sorrow in Rome.

"It was more than the work of a few bad actors – this was a concerted institutional effort to remove children from their families and cultures, all in the name of Christian supremacy," Mr. Sinclair said.

He added that he hopes the Pope will take the criticism to heart as he continues with his six-day pilgrimage to Canada.

On Tuesday morning, Pope Francis presided over a mass before tens of thousands of people at Edmonton's Commonwealth Stadium. It focused more on spiritual matters than the penitential themes of the previous day.

July 26 is the feast of St. Anne, a revered figure among Indigenous Catholics, and Pope Francis used the occasion to remind spectators of the importance of listening to elders.

"In the fog of forgetfulness that overshadows our turbulent times, it is essential to cultivate our roots, to pray for and with our forbears, to dedicate time to remember and guard their legacy," he said, according to an English translation of his homily, which he delivered in Spanish. "This is how a family tree grows, this is how the future is built."

Several people at Commonwealth Stadium told The Globe and Mail they accepted that Francis's apology on Monday was sincere. They were at the stadium, they said, because they respected what Francis stood for. "We are here because, to us, Francis represents hope and change for the Catholic Church," said Angela Jackson, 45, an artisan from Canmore, Alta. "He represents openness and acceptance of different groups of people, like LGBTQ people, who have been shunned in the past. Our faith should be about universal love and acceptance."



There were moments of reflection, remembrance and emotion as Pope Francis apologized Monday for the history of abuse suffered by Indigenous children at residential schools. The Pope paused to reflect at a cemetery, returned moccasins given to him at the Vatican and a Cree woman sang the national anthem in her Indigenous language.

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Brian Lucas, 46, a member of Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation of Port Alberni, B.C., agreed. He and his family drove 14 hours to reach Edmonton. “I have no reason to hate him or the church, though both my parents were in residential schools and they had awful problems with alcohol and gambling.” Mr. Lucas said that he accepted Francis’s apology and that it was time to move forward. “I don’t want to hold onto resentment because I don’t want to pass on resentment to my children and grandchildren,” he said. “I have learned that it is more important to treat everyone with dignity and respect.”

Before the service, the pontiff toured Commonwealth Stadium in one of his popemobiles, a customized Jeep Wrangler. He blessed a number of babies, including Gianna George. Gianna’s parents, Gerrin and Liza, held her up and security passed the child to Francis. He kissed her on the forehead and the crowd cheered. “We feel so excited and thrilled. Our prayers have been answered and heard,” Ms. George said after the blessing.

Later on Tuesday, Pope Francis is scheduled to travel to Lac Ste. Anne, about 90 kilometres northwest of Edmonton. The holy site attracts as many as 40,000 pilgrims each year. Last week, Alberta Health Services issued an alert for toxic blue-green algae in the lake and warned visitors against swimming or wading. It’s unclear how the advisory will affect proceedings.

On the second day of his six-day trip to Canada, Pope Francis said he was “deeply sorry” for church members who participated in the “cultural destruction and forced assimilation” of Indigenous people through the residential school system.

Catholic missionaries ran a majority of the roughly 140 government-funded residential schools that spanned the country from the 1800s to 1969, when Ottawa took over administration functions. The federal government estimates that around 150,000 Indigenous children attended the schools. Many experienced physical and sexual abuse. Under the 2006 Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, the federal government set aside nearly \$2-billion to compensate former students.

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission called on the pope to apologize for the church’s role in the “spiritual, cultural, emotional, physical and sexual abuse of children in Catholic-run residential schools.

Initially, Canadian bishops were hesitant. Some said the church's decentralized structure meant the Pope had little responsibility for events in far-flung archdioceses. They also argued that Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 expression of sorrow during a closed-door meeting with Indigenous leaders had addressed the issue.

The pressure to apologize mounted last year, when several First Nations located possible unmarked graves on the sites of former residential schools using ground-penetrating radar. Their findings made international headlines. The Vatican invited a delegation of Indigenous leaders and residential school survivors to Rome last December, but a sudden surge in COVID-19 cases led to the trip being cancelled.

During a rescheduled spring trip, the Pope told the delegation he was sorry for the "deplorable conduct" of church-members who abused children in residential schools and vowed to bring the sentiments to Canadian soil.

Many Indigenous leaders had been hoping he would expand on his words in Rome and provide an institutional apology, not just express sorrow for the actions of individual Catholics. But the apology reiterated much of what he'd said in Rome.

"I am sorry. I ask for forgiveness, in particular, for the ways in which many members of the Church and of religious communities co-operated, not least through their indifference, in projects of cultural destruction and forced assimilation promoted by the governments of that time, which culminated in the system of residential schools," he said on Monday at an outdoor gathering near the former site of the Ermineskin Indian Residential School, once one of the largest residential schools.

He said that residential school policies were "catastrophic" and begged forgiveness "for the evil committed by so many Christians against Indigenous peoples."

Near the end of his speech, the Pope called for a "serious investigation of what took place in the past and to assist the survivors of the residential schools to experience healing from the traumas they suffered." The pontiff spoke in Spanish, his first language, with English translations provided by the Holy See press office.





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Spectators gave the speech a warm reception, clapping and cheering after his expression of sorrow. Afterward, however, many onlookers said they expected more. “I’m happy to hear that he said the words ‘I’m sorry,’ but it wasn’t as encompassing as it could have been,” said Kukdookaa Terri Brown, residential school survivor and founding chair of the survivors circle with the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation

She also noted the Pope declined to mention sexual abuse or the Doctrine of Discovery in his speech.

During the rest of his visit, Pope Francis is expected to meet with Indigenous groups and residential school survivors in Alberta, Quebec and Nunavut.

The pontiff has called this a “penitential pilgrimage,” the first visit of its kind by any pope. Both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict made apologies for church abuses, but never made contrition the focus on any single trip.

John Paul II is the only other pope to have visited Canada. He made the apostolic voyage three times, in 1984, 1987 and 2002. During his first visit, he met with several Indigenous delegations to acknowledge mistakes by Catholic missionaries, preach reconciliation and advocate for Indigenous self-government. He also reaffirmed a 1537 papal edict declaring Indigenous people should not be deprived of liberty or property.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-pope-francis-apology-criticism-murray-sinclair/>

Mr. Sinclair, characteristically, nails it. The Pope has a mystical insistence on the sanctity of the priesthood—conveyed upon the priest in ordination, and thereby intrinsic to the Church—and he will not admit corporate or systemic fault. Every sin, no matter how grievous by the Church is an individual one by a priest or other representative of Catholicism. An egregious doctrine like that of Discovery is still, in Papal eyes, the failure of individual Catholics, including Popes, who were especially corrupt during this era. An easy way to keep the idealized Church pure and blameless. The Church never becomes what its leaders and members make it—except when they do something right. As though the Church can never be predominantly what its “servants” are. There is a whole lot of spiritual cheating, sleight of hand, and self-delusion going on here. It’s like “America can never be wrong” or unworthy of obedience, so don’t kneel during the anthem and, if you can’t help but clench your black fist, keep it by your side.

Poor Jesus, poor God, to have all these shameless fools claim to be Christians and God’s chosen people. I would understand if they have made another world and gone off to spend their time fishing and swimming in the Ocean, getting and keeping a good tan.

Oops. I recently heard an ad from cancer agency insisting there is “No such thing as a good tan.” Tell that to all the Indigenous folk on the planet, and every other person of colour. Tell it to Caucasians who have spent most of their ancestral history “unprotected” in the great outdoors. Just as who would want to spend an eternity with most “Christian” claimants, who would want, even if natural selection favours over time all the Health advocates policing us, to share a planet with nothing but them? I doubt God would either. TJB