

Open Forum on Residential Schools In Canada

Most people attempt to avoid discussing Politics or Religion because of their divisive nature. The matter of the Former Residential Schools has them both. We, as a Parish Pastoral Team, understood the importance of addressing this issue as a parish. We do not wish to divide our parish, but to provide a forum where those who wished to participate, may have the opportunity to better understand our past as a nation and as a church, here in Canada, particularly around this particular matter.

On Wednesday August 25, 2021, a number of parishioners gathered in the church to take part in an Open Forum, which was led and organized by the Parish Pastoral Team. Those gathered, or who had submitted something in writing, had the opportunity to share their thoughts, feelings, and opinions on what has come to light over the past few months regarding the Former Residential Schools, both the Government of Canada and the Roman Catholic Church's role and participation.

From what was shared, it was clear that a wide range of opinions exist among those who participated. This more than likely, accurately reflects the greater population of both the parish and the public in general. From what was shared, we organized the comments into four categories, being:

- Responsibility of the Pope and Clergy.
- Reaction and Responsibility of the People.
- The Pain That Is Being Felt.
- The Process of Healing.

What was shared that evening was respectfully heard by all. Nothing has been redacted, but has been recorded as we heard it, always asking those who shared if we heard them accurately. No names have been attached to anything share. Not because anyone was ashamed of what they said or wrote, but because we wanted everyone to feel as comfortable as possible to share.

Finally, what became clear to us was that this would be the first step in a process of understanding, healing, and helping all concerned. There were a number of suggestions as to how to grow and become a stronger and more responsible faith community. The Parish Pastoral Team will be organizing further gatherings, with the hope to address concerns and hopes.

The following is the unredacted recording of what was shared that evening.

Responsibility of the Pope and Clergy

- Quite angry with the organization of the Church. The leadership has not been transparent with us, not speaking up about it, has not given us enough information, not willing to address the issue.
- The Holy Father needs to come here, just as I would go to the one, I wronged, so he must.
- Pope should make it a priority to apologize and to act.
- Hopefully and essentially, the apology does have to come from all of us, including the top.
- It is good that we are discussing this issue and are not shying away from it. Our church needs to discuss it and take ownership and responsibility for what has happened in the past, and we need to speak out on this. Hopefully and essentially, the apology does have to come from all of us, including the top. It is and was a shame that in the past it was discounted, and the children and parents were not listened to.
- I do not feel that the Pope has to come here, or to make any apology for something he was not responsible for. It may not have been an ideal situation, but to blame the Church for something that was clearly a Federal Government matter, is unfair. Granted, there were some Priests and Religious who acted inappropriately, but not all of them, or the people in the church should have to carry the blame.
- No one in the clergy has apologized, that this person has heard; their pastor!
- Corporate level – why has there not been an apology as yet?
- At a local parish level, being nourished, but disgruntled by the leadership of the church in addressing this issue, apologize is the beginning but real leadership is necessary. As a community together we cannot run away but be guidance to one another. The question keeps arising, “How could we do this in the past, and how in the present can we not address it. What else are we unwilling to address” This is leading to people running away from the church.
- Something needs to be done by the leadership of our church, sooner than later. Lifelong cradle Catholics are suffering because of this. They do not wish to be appeased but need honesty because of the lack of honesty and transparency.

Reaction and Responsibility of the People

- The wisdom of the Indigenous peoples is all about collaboration not submission. It is all about understanding. We all need to know about their cultures:
- Chief Dan George: “First they had the bibles, and we had the land, now they have the land, and we have the bibles.”
- The Indigenous people are the ones making this an issue, because we are not.
- It may have been a good idea, but it did not take into consideration what they were in fact doing. Did the clergy and religious know what they were doing. They may have been doing what they did with the best of intentions, but the problems that arose, was there any reflection and questioning what had happened. Did anyone step back and question it, or did they go full steam ahead because they did not see anything wrong with it.
- Started with altruistic ideas / people with thought of joining cultures – quickly people realized that was not what they had signed up for.
 - Out of control – politics and religion intertwined.
 - Never asked/answered questions of what is going wrong and what are we going to do about it?
- Those who were running and operating these schools, were they being altruistic? Maybe they were not? What has come about shows that the results were not so positive.

The Pain That is Being Felt

- Not about money Embarrassed by the church.
- Blame government but church responsible.
- We took everything plus their babies.
- Angry and sad with the church, with what we have done, but a failure to even address the issue when it has come up.
- Have not been to church because we are so angry and hurt. The top down must first apologize and address it through action. How could we have done what we did, especially Jesus as an example, we are not following the poor or his example, somehow, we have forgotten it or ignored it. What we did to them and continue to do is wrong.
- Cathedral in Saskatoon, 28.5 million next to nothing has been given in compensations. We have yet to make our restitution to the victims of the residential schools.
- The parishioners ought not be the one who are paying for this, it ought to be the leadership who pays for this. Sell off what you need to sell off.
- Corporate Church needs to put forward money towards helping them heal. Help to encourage their heritage and culture. Unless we address this, we will be doomed to repeat this on some level. It is not the mission of the church to accumulate wealth but to distribute it, beginning with themselves.
- As followers of Christ, we ought to be models of Jesus.
- Seem inappropriate for group of Indigenous peoples going to Rome rather than the Pope coming here.
- Church should not come to the people to pay restitution.
- Deeply hurt and conflicted Jesus would never have allowed this if he were present.
- Corporate church needs to actively work at spending money on First Nations to give them what they deserve.
- Ultimately mission of Church to advocate and protect the innocent and impoverished not to amass wealth.

The Process of Healing:

- Chief Dan George: integration: can we talk integration until there is integration of hearts and minds. This then leads to genuine and peaceable integration of all.
- We need to go to them, so they teach us; going to them is a sign of our willingness to understand. Essential for us to grow from this. Can be both!
- Segregation never works, integration does not mean that we eliminate or shun another, but we learn from another.
- Forgiveness and Prayers essential to help understand our role in the past in participating in the R.S. No money is going to undue the devastation that happened. A sense of embarrassment for our church's role, both with the governments.
- Transform Anger into something positive:
- Experiential exercise: Indigenous person guides us through with The Blanket Exercise the history of their people, and then include us.
- Fund Raiser Walk: the walks that children made to escape the schools, they as parishioners are doing this in remembrance and to raise funds to help Former Brantford residential School now the Cultural Centre.
- As a faith community, though we may be a small community, we can do something, and let's do it. Not all parishes acknowledging in the same ways.
- Brantford – Indigenous students bused to High School.

- No one wanted to believe stories of their lives told fluffed off, now the reality coming out.
- Might be more appropriate for us to go the First Nations turf Participated in a Blanket Exercise (40 people) and fundraising walk.
- Blanket – guided by First Nations person, tells of the history of Canada from their perspective.
- Walk: Mohawk Cultural Centre former Residential School, to Six Nations Reserve – this was the path the children took running home or away would have taken. Remember particular child on walk.
- Today, community of faith – what are we going to do about it?
- Something should be done by the leader of our Church sooner than later. Suffering of all peoples – need of prayer.
- I lived among and worked with the Indigenous people/children. The elders never spoke to her about the R.S. for their own reasons. What did come up so often was the necessity of being in relationship with them. Something we failed miserably at. All the indigenous want is to be acknowledged, respected and to be treated with respect for who they are. It is not about us telling them who they are or having them be like us. Reconciliation is possible through mutual respect and understanding of the other through relationship – relate as equals, not parent/child.
- We could learn so much from them and could benefit today.
- Lived among the Ojibway people north of Thunder Bay for many years.
- Elders did not share residential school experiences but did take away their deep sense of relationship as opposed to what we understand as relationship.
- What is needed for reconciliation is a better understanding of relationship on the First Nations terms.

More Concise Summary of Comments

The following is a summary of the comments that were heard and recorded on the evening of our first Residential Schools forum. The actual comments are recoded in point form after the summary.

Responsibility of the Pope and Clergy

The people who spoke about the responsibility of the Pope and the clergy felt that the leadership has not been transparent with information about this issue. They felt that it is inappropriate that a delegation of people from Canada should visit the Pope. As the absolute head of the Roman Catholic Church, he should take ownership and should visit Canada to meet with aboriginal representatives and apologize.

It was pointed out that the Church is not the only body responsible for the horrors of Residential Schools. The federal government was the architect of the program with a stated outcome of eliminating the “Indian problem”. The Church was complicit in that it administered many of the schools.

Though at the local parish level there are many initiatives in the works, there is frustration with the leadership of the Church. If they refuse to own this terrible historic truth, then what safeguards will be put in place to prevent such things from happening in the future.

The question keeps coming up: “How could we do this in the past? How in the present can we not address it and what else are we unwilling to address?” This is leading to people away from the church.

Reaction and Responsibility of the People

The culture of the Indigenous people was very different from that of the Colonists. Their culture is one of collaboration and mutual aid. They approached the colonists from the perspective of cooperation and trust. The colonists approached the relationship with the intent to force the aboriginal people into submission.

The indigenous people are the ones driving the reconciliation efforts. We, the descendants of the colonists are not. Chief Dan George made some very profound statements during the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions’ study:

“Can we talk of integration until there is integration of hearts and minds? Unless you have this, you only have a physical presence, and the walls between us are as high as the mountain range.”

“When the white man came, we had the land, and they had the Bibles. Now they have the land, and we have the Bibles.”

It is likely that some of the religious and lay individuals who invested themselves into bringing education to the first nations people were altruistic and really believed that they were doing good. Aside from the deliberate intent of the Government of Canada to “take the Indian out of the child”, there was likely a true effort to work with the people. Unfortunately, no one considered implementing any checks and balances to oversee what was happening.

The outcome of the clash of cultures resulted in the desperate situation that exists today. We need to be engaged in seeking reconciliation and reparation for what our ancestors were responsible for.

The Pain That is Being Felt

People are hurt and embarrassed by the Church and here poor response. Yes, the government holds much of the blame, but the Church needs to own her part in the Residential School scandal. As Canadian Catholics, we took everything from, including their babies. Some of the faithful are so distraught by the lack of action of the Church that they are staying away from Mass. We are not following the example of Jesus' example of how to look after the poor. Somehow, we have forgotten it or ignored it. It is wrong.

Examples of how the Church is ignoring the duty to the survivors of the Residential Schools are seen in actions such as spending 28.5 million dollars to build a cathedral in Saskatoon. At the same time, the Church is fighting not to pay restitution to survivors of this terrible legacy. It is not the mission of the Church to accumulate wealth, but it is to distribute it to the poor.

The Church should raise money to aid in restitution by selling off relics, not asking for special collections from the faithful. In addition to paying money, the Church should work to revive the awareness of the culture and traditions that were taken from the first nations people of this country.

The Process of Healing:

We need to take the initiative to reach out and learn about the Indigenous culture. We need to be willing to understand and to grow. Our history of segregation only leads to ignorance and misunderstanding. We need to learn and to integrate into each other's cultures. Money alone will not create reconciliation. We need to pray and to ask for forgiveness. The anger that exists needs to be turned into a positive energy.

Different parish communities have different opportunities to learn. There are ways that some people have used to gain a greater understanding. We need to arrange occasions to go in groups onto reserve lands and meet with the elders of those communities. We need to engage in activities like the "Blanket Exercise" where a First Nations person tell the history of Canada from their perspective. We could participate in a fundraising walk such as in Brantford where they walk from the Mohawk Cultural Centre, which used to be a Residential School, to the Six Nations Reserve along the path that runaway children might have taken. The idea is to try and imagine what a child might have been feeling as they ran away for the school.

This needs to be spearheaded from many levels. From the Magisterium to the parishes. Many Indigenous people will not talk about their experiences because they feel that they will not be believed. All the Indigenous people want is to be acknowledged, respected and to be treated with respect for who they are. If we the descendants of colonials could grow to understand and embrace the difference between the Indigenous concept of relationship and our western concept, it would be a huge step towards honest reconciliation and respectful integration

Not The End, But A Start:

If one were to provide an overall summation of the evening, it was clear that opinions and feelings on this matter vary, which more than likely is an indicator of how the vast majority of people feel in the parish and in society in general. This is not a matter of one side being right and the other wrong, it shows that when we have differing opinions on a matter, it is difficult if not impossible to bring about a constructive solution that all can agree upon. For this reason, we were not seeking consensus, nor to find a solution to this issue that evening. What we came away with was one simple lesson, and it is that we do not know what we do not know. The step moving forward is to accept the responsibility to educate ourselves to all the facts. Through this education, together we may bring about genuine and sincere action that will seek and promote good will among all. The one thing we could all agree upon that evening was that we need to promote and to enshrine the common good everywhere.

We the Parish Pastoral Team thank all who participated in the Open Forum and encourage you and everyone else not to lose heart, but to stand firm in the desire to see a better society in Canada and a renewed Catholic church of love and kindness. Let us take with us the words that God inspired the Prophet Micah to share with the world,

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy

and to walk humbly with your God.” (NIV)

Our work has not ended, but just begun.

Peace and Good Will,

Parish Pastoral Team