

Statement of Reconciliation
The Jesuits in English Canada

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The Jesuits in English Canada

Truth & Reconciliation Commission
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Let me begin today by first acknowledging all Survivors of the Residential Schools and their families, the Elders present, the Commissioners, Church and community leaders and members of the wider communities. We thank you sincerely for the invitation to share in this important event.

The Jesuits in English Canada want to take this special occasion to honour the Survivors. It has taken great courage, strength and generosity for you to come forward and to share your story with all of us here, a story of loss, grief, hardship, but also of resistance and healing.

We also greet the children and grandchildren of the Survivors, who suffered in turn from their parent's trauma in the Residential Schools and learned from their character and bravery.

We come today to pay tribute to the individuals who attended the Spanish Residential School; both boys and girls. We recognize and embrace the students who attended the St. Peter Claver Residential School for Boys, St. Charles Garnier Collegiate and St. Joseph's School for Girls, some of whom are with us today in the audience.

This gathering is a symbol of hope and a reminder to all of us that such abuse must never happen again.

I stand here on behalf of the Jesuits to say that we are truly, deep within our hearts, sorry for what we did to injure individuals, families and communities by participating in the Canadian Residential School system.

When the Jesuits first met with First Nations peoples 400 years ago, we recognized the greatness of your traditional spiritual beliefs. That openness was lost in the 20th Century.

The legacy of the Residential Schools is a terrible cloud on our legacy of friendship. Today, we are relearning how to trust each other in a deeper understanding of our own faith through the lessons that your Elders have taught us.

It has been a struggle for the Jesuits to recognize that we became an active part of a system aimed at the assimilation of your traditional culture. It was not until it was much too late that we realized the harm that we had done.

The Jesuits are proud to still count many of our former students as friends and colleagues. We are grateful for the forgiveness and understanding that you have extended to us over the years. We humbly thank you for sticking with us and continuing to welcome us in your homes and communities.

We come to celebrate the achievements of our students. We recognize that what they achieved as professionals, athletes and community leaders was not because of our efforts at the school – but through their own strength of character and love of knowledge.

We also come to acknowledge the students who were brave enough to confront us about our role in the Residential School system some thirty years ago. We treated you as dissenters and malcontents rather than listening to what you had to tell us.

Through litigation and lawsuits, we learned about harsh conditions, poor food, brutal punishment and horrible incidents of sexual molestation. You turned to the courts because the Jesuits turned away from you.

As educators, we have been shocked by stories of bullying, inadequate clothing, strapping and beatings for minor offences. Our School harboured individuals who molested or abused students. Bed wetters were tormented by older students and staff alike. The food was not fit for the needs of growing boys and girls.

Children who were much too young were taken from the love of their families and placed under the guidance of men and women who had little training and less compassion.

Most of all, we have heard stories of the inherent unfairness of the system. Students were given the strap for things that they did not do. Bullies were rewarded and victims punished. Abuse was not disclosed because there was no one who would hear a student's cry for help.

We are still struggling with how it could possibly have happened. We realize that the abuse might have been uncovered and punished many years ago, if there had been someone that the students could turn to. We failed in putting the needs and interests of the Jesuit priests and brothers ahead of the welfare of our students.

We vow that this will never be "the way things are" ever again.

Amongst the heartache, we have delighted in stories about how students outwitted their teachers and kept their spirit alive through practical jokes and ingenuity. Our students understood their instructors and their human frailties so much better than their teachers understood them. They fought against the unfairness of the system with humour and good nature.

We have heard of brave students who were resourceful enough to set out for their home communities. We are ashamed of the harsh punishments that they received when they were brought back by the authorities.

We offer a sincere prayer of thankfulness that no young lives were lost at our school because students ran away.

We have learned from these harsh lessons and have become stronger from your example. To the students who have defended us and taken our part, we are truly grateful. We will strive to prove ourselves worthy of the respect and love that you have shown your teachers.

We are deeply grateful to the communities that have continued to welcome us as pastors and as friends in the years since the Spanish Residential Schools closed.

We are humbled by your love and forgiveness. We have never had to beg for reconciliation; you have offered it to us freely for so many years by your example.

We ask for your forgiveness for any role that our school may have played in sowing distrust and division between Catholic and Protestant families. It is not enough to decry the narrow mindedness of the times. By teaching intolerance in our schools, we sowed division where it had never existed.

Many of you have asked when the reconciliation between the churches will occur. We desire and pray that it is happening today as we move together in healing with our friends in the Ecumenical Working Group.

Finally, we have learned of the terrible inequality that continues to exist between the educational opportunities for white students and students from First Nations in Canada. Young people are still being transported to white communities, to obtain an education in an environment that is foreign to them. This is exactly what happened in the past and we seem to be reliving it again.

We share Shannen Koostachin's dream that in our lifetime we will see equal opportunities for education in the home community of every Canadian. We will do everything in our power and influence to ensure that this comes to pass and the injustices of the past are not perpetuated.

You had the courage to stand up and speak out about the past. You can help us all to open our minds and our hearts to understand and to stop the destruction now and not have to go through this all over again.

Today we stand before you to pledge our support in the rebuilding of your language and culture. We cannot undo the things that are done, but we can take positive and meaningful steps to rebuild.

We have opened our Archives so that the whole picture of the Residential Schools can be seen.

We will unlock the doors to the ancient books that preserved the languages of the First Nations and make copies available to people in their own communities.

These precious resources will never again be the exclusive property of white scholars and academics.

We thank the Commissioners for challenging us to undertake this journey of self-examination and reflection with them. We will work hand in hand with our students past and present to bring all these things to pass.

May the Creator God who sees all and knows what is truly in our hearts, bring us together. May the Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha guide us that we can learn from each other, for she is a model for us all.

May we come once again to call each other “friend”.

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