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On Reconciliation Between the Jesuits of Canada and Indigenous Peoples

Frequently Asked Questions

1) How many residential schools were under the jurisdiction of the Jesuits?

We operated one school in Spanish, Ontario, whose identity and mission evolved over the years.

The school and its evolution have been documented in Basil Johnston’s book “Indian School Days” and Dr. David Shanahan’s “More Than Mere Talent.”

The school originated in a pre-existing school in Wikwemikong First Nation on Manitoulin Island, which we took over in 1845. It was a day school and eventually came to be called the Wikwemikong Industrial Boys’ School. It started to receive federal funds in 1879. In 1885, the school was destroyed by fire. Following an attempt to re-establish the institution, it was relocated in 1913 to a 600-acre site on the north shore of Georgian Bay, in Spanish, Ontario. It housed 180 boys of different ages. In this new location the school was called St. Peter Claver Residential School for Boys. As an industrial school it was intended to teach Indigenous children “useable” trades and skills.

St. Joseph’s School for Girls in Spanish was built in 1914. It was founded and operated by the Daughters of the Heart of Mary and located on 400 acres of land next to St. Peter Claver School.

Recognizing the failure of the industrial school model and the need for postsecondary

education, St. Peter Claver School became a high school for boys in 1947 and was called St. Charles Garnier Collegiate. It closed in 1958.

2) What was the Jesuits' reaction to the discovery of the remains of 215 children in Kamloops?

In a public statement, the provincial of the Jesuits of Canada, Fr. Erik Oland, SJ, expressed deep sadness and grief at the harrowing discovery. We stand in solidarity with the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation and all those who experience the trauma caused by the residential school system.

The public statement can be found via this [link](#).

In its Calls to Action, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) called upon the federal government to work with the churches and Indigenous community leaders to inform the families of children who died at residential schools of the children's burial locations. The TRC also called on them to respond to families' wishes for appropriate commemoration ceremonies and markers, as well as reburial in home communities where requested.

We remain committed to working with the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, Indigenous communities and former residential school students, the Government of Canada, and provincial and municipal governments to develop and implement strategies and procedures for the ongoing identification, documentation, maintenance, commemoration, and protection of residential school cemeteries or other sites where residential school children were buried. This includes appropriate memorial ceremonies and commemorative markers to honour the deceased children.

3) Will the Jesuits collaborate to conduct investigations into the remains of children?

Yes. In 2008, there was an investigation into the burials of students at the cemetery in Spanish, Ontario. A booklet was published that listed the names, parents, and home communities of all students who perished due to illness over the years that the schools were in operation, and the records respondent to their passing. To ensure that we have as full a picture as possible of what happened to these children, we have retained Dr. David Shanahan to provide a complete review of the deaths and burials.

4) Have the Jesuits of Canada apologized to the victims of residential schools?

Yes. At the TRC Québec National Event in Montreal on April 25, 2013, Fr. Winston Rye, SJ, delivered an apology and statement of reconciliation to the survivors of the Spanish residential schools in attendance.

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. ... (We) 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.

The statement also acknowledged the intergenerational trauma that impacts the children and grandchildren of survivors of residential schools.

This Apology and Statement of Reconciliation can be found [here](#).

5) How did the Jesuits react when they first started to receive complaints of abuse?

Our initial reaction was disbelief and indignation. Then the survivors responded with class action lawsuits before the courts. We deeply regret the adversarial position that was taken and the impact that this litigation had on our students. Following the Spanish Indian Residential Settlement Agreement, through the guidance and wisdom of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, we came to realize our responsibility and learned to act accordingly. We began to understand the terrible intergenerational impact that all the schools had on generations of families whose parents were survivors.

6) What concrete commitments have the Jesuits made to Indigenous communities, families, and citizens?

In our Apology and Statement of Reconciliation of 2013, we expressed to the TRC and to our former students and parishioners our commitment to:

- promote opportunities for equal access to education in the home community of every Canadian.
- support the rebuilding of Indigenous languages and cultures.
- continue the process of digitizing and making available Indigenous language resources from the archives.
- continue to provide access to the archives of the Jesuits in Canada so that the whole picture of the residential schools can be seen.

Probably our most important commitment is to stay in relationship, to listen and learn, and to try to be good allies.

7) Which commitments have been fulfilled?

We were first made aware of complaints about poor conditions and abuse at our residential school in the late 1980s. Our first reaction was unfortunately disbelief and indignation. We regret that we responded with aggressive litigation before the courts. It was only ten years later that we realized our responsibility and began to act accordingly.

With respect to education, we actively support two middle schools (grades 6 to 8) that concentrate primarily, though not exclusively, on Indigenous children: Mother Teresa Middle School in Regina (started in 2011) and Gonzaga Middle School in Winnipeg (started in 2016). Both schools give a lot of attention to individual pupils and their families and teach Indigenous cultural and spiritual traditions. The two schools are also committed to supporting their pupils even after graduation, through secondary and post-secondary education, until full-time employment. They participate fully in the networks of Jesuit schools in Canada and the United States (and around the world). In this way we hope to help lessen barriers and gaps in education and employment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the country.

With respect to language and culture, we encourage the use of Indigenous languages and ceremonies in Catholic religious services. We also make accessible to researchers the historical linguistic resources in our archives.

With respect to access to records about residential schools, we supported the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in preserving the records and files from the Spanish residential school. All of the archival holdings without redaction were provided to the TRC. This includes class lists, names of students who passed away at the school, house diaries and correspondence, personnel files, and photographs. These documents are available through the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation in Winnipeg. Some are also available through the Shingwauk Project in Sault Ste. Marie.

8) Are the Jesuits willing to collaborate with the federal and provincial governments or other authorities to give access to their archives and to the site of the Spanish residential schools?

Yes. We continue to support the legacy of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

through support for the efforts of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation and the Shingwauk Project to preserve the records and archives of the Spanish residential school.

All the administrative files relevant to the Spanish schools were provided unredacted to the TRC. These included personnel files, files related to student deaths, and the house diaries and correspondence. Most of these can be viewed online via the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation and the Shingwauk Project.

9) Have the Jesuits paid financial reparations to those harmed by residential schools?

On May 4, 2004, the Spanish Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement to compensate students was signed by the Jesuit Fathers of Upper Canada, the Roman Catholic Episcopal Corporation for the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie, and the Daughters of Mary.

We fully funded the Spanish Indian Residential School Settlement at the time that it was signed and continued to make in-kind contributions to the TRC throughout its work, including office space.

10) What other steps have Jesuits taken in the ongoing work towards reconciliation with Indigenous communities?

The TRC called upon church parties, including the Catholic Church, to develop ongoing education strategies to ensure that their respective congregations learn about their church's role in colonization, the history and legacy of residential schools, and why apologies to former residential school students, their families and communities were necessary.

As part of this commitment, Jesuits in training are involved in experiences led by Indigenous Elders. The high schools we are responsible for have been incorporating this history into their teaching programmes.

We also helped to organize a week-long intensive theology course at St. Paul University in Ottawa on the Church and Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. This brought together many Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons, especially Catholics, active in reconciliation work across the country.

The TRC also called upon leaders of the Catholic Church to respect Indigenous spirituality in its own right and educate their own on the history and legacy of

residential schools and the roles of the Church parties in that system. We appreciate that it is important for the Church to come to an understanding of the history and legacy of religious conflict in Indigenous families and communities and the responsibility that the Church has to mitigate such conflicts and prevent spiritual violence in the future.

We are exploring with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous Christians ways to decolonize the practice of the Christian faith and to encourage Catholics in Canada to appreciate the richness of Indigenous spiritualities.

In direct response to the TRC's Calls to Action, some Indigenous and non-Indigenous Catholic leaders worked with the leadership of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops to launch in 2016 the Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle. It is dedicated to improving relations between Indigenous peoples and the Catholic Church, as well as between Indigenous and Catholic spiritualities.

In September 2019, the Canadian provincial, Fr. Erik Oland, SJ, assigned a Jesuit priest to work full time to promote our 2015 commitment. His objective is to work toward decolonization among Jesuits in a more systematic way by encouraging our ministries to develop relations with Indigenous people, communities, and organizations.

Most importantly, we continue to be in relationship with Indigenous people through Indigenous Catholic parishes around Georgian Bay and Thunder Bay, through Kateri Native Ministry in Ottawa, as well as through the middle schools in Regina and Winnipeg.

11) What is the Jesuits' opinion about the request that Pope Francis issue an apology to survivors, their families and communities?

We believe that an apology from the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and a visit from the Pope to apologize for the role of the Catholic Church in residential schools and colonization (as requested by the TRC Call to Action 58) would be very helpful in bringing about justice and reconciliation with Canada's Indigenous communities.

There have been many apologies from dioceses and religious orders. A collective apology from the whole Church in Canada would be an important contribution to healing. All parts of society need to be healed of the attitudes and impacts of colonization.