

Canada's Catholic bishops sorry for abuses of Indigenous children

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The Canadian government apologized back in 2008 and admitted that physical and sexual abuse of Indigenous children in the schools was rampant [File: Shannon VanRaes/Reuters]

Ottawa, September 26 (RHC)-- Catholic Bishops in Canada have apologized "unequivocally" to Canada's Indigenous peoples for a century of child abuse at church-run residential schools that was part of a government program to "assimilate" them into Canadian society, but the step still falls short of the request for the Pope to also make an apology.

“We acknowledge the grave abuses that were committed by some members of our Catholic community; physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, cultural, and sexual,” according to a statement from the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops published over the weekend.

“Along with those Catholic entities which were directly involved in the operation of the schools and which have already offered their own heartfelt apologies, we, the Catholic Bishops of Canada, express our profound remorse and apologize unequivocally,” the statement said.

The experiences of Indigenous children, forcibly separated from their families under a government policy later described as cultural genocide came to the spotlight, after a radar survey uncovered evidence of the remains of more than 1,000 children buried in unmarked areas on the grounds of residential schools in recent months.

Back in June, Pope Francis expressed his pain over the discovery of the remains of 215 children in a church-run boarding school, but did not offer an apology. The system, which operated between 1831 and 1996, removed about 150,000 Indigenous children from their families and brought them to Christian residential schools run on behalf of the federal government.

They were forced to convert to Christianity and not allowed to speak their native languages. Many were beaten and verbally abused, and up to 6,000 are said to have died.

A papal apology was one of 94 recommendations from the TRC, but the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops said in 2018 that the pope felt he could not personally apologise for the residential schools.

Indigenous children had their long hair, which often had spiritual significance for them, cut upon arrival and were forbidden from speaking their native languages, according to the TRC. Students were given European names and, often, numbers and uniforms.

The schools focused on manual skills, teaching boys carpentry and other trades, while girls were primed for domestic service. While the schools were touted as the only way for Indigenous children to get a formal education, the students also worked, cleaning out manure or feeding animals.

The Canadian government apologised in Parliament in 2008 and admitted that physical and sexual abuse in the schools was rampant. Many students recall being beaten for speaking their native languages. They also lost touch with their parents and customs.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said the Catholic Church must take responsibility for its role in running many of the schools, and provide records to help identify remains. Earlier, Trudeau had also formally requested The Vatican for the Pope’s apology.

Indigenous leaders have said that the legacy of abuse and isolation is the root cause of epidemic rates of alcoholism and drug addiction on reservations. Since the discovery of unmarked graves at the sites of former residential schools, there have been several fires at churches across Canada. There has also been some vandalism targeting churches and statues in cities.

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