

Pope admits treatment of Indigenous in Canadian schools was genocide

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The pope made the comment while flying back to Rome after a week-long trip to Canada [File: Carlos Osorio/Reuters]
Pope Francis looks on after landing in Iqaluit International Airport, in Iqaluit, Nunavut, Canada.

Vatican City, July 30 (RHC)-- Pope Francis has said the treatment of the Indigenous people in Canada amounted to a “genocide” following a six-day trip in which he apologized to survivors of abuse at Catholic-run schools.

The leader of the Catholic Church on Saturday said “taking away children, changing the culture, changing the mentality, changing the traditions, changing a race” amounted to genocide.

“I didn’t say the word [in Canada] because it didn’t come to my mind, but I did describe [it]. And I asked for forgiveness for this process which was genocide. I condemned it, too,” he told reporters on board his plane returning to Rome.

During his trip, the pope apologized for the “evil” inflicted on Indigenous communities at Canada’s residential schools, where children were sent as part of a policy of forced assimilation. He cited the “cultural destruction” and the “physical, verbal, psychological and spiritual abuse” of children over decades.

From the late 1800s to the 1990s, Canada’s government sent about 150,000 children into 139 residential schools run by the church, where they were cut off from their families, language and culture. Many were physically and sexually abused, and thousands are believed to have died of disease, malnutrition or neglect.

Since May 2021, more than 1,300 unmarked graves have been discovered at the sites of the former schools, sending shockwaves throughout Canada — which has slowly begun to acknowledge this long, dark chapter in its history.

The pope’s tour of Canada ended on Friday in the northern territory of Nunavut, where he met residential school survivors. “I thank you for having had the courage to tell your stories and to share your great suffering, that I could not imagine,” Pope Francis told the crowd.

At the start of the week, the pope apologised for the first time in Canada. “I humbly beg forgiveness for the evil committed by so many Christians against the Indigenous peoples,” he said on Monday.

For decades, Indigenous leaders had called on the church to apologise for its role in the residential school system, and the papal apology offered this week has been welcomed by some survivors as an important step in the path to healing.

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