

Pope apologizes for evil of Canada's residential schools

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Pope Francis attends a silent prayer in Maskwacis, Alberta
Pope Francis says effects of residential schools were 'catastrophic' during visit to Maskwacis, Alberta, July 25, 2022 [Guglielmo Mangiapane/Reuters]

Edmonton, July 25 (RHC)-- Pope Francis has apologised to Indigenous people in Canada for the Catholic Church's role in abuses they suffered at residential schools, the forced-assimilation institutions that First Nation, Inuit and Metis children were forced to attend for decades.

After a visit on Monday to the former site of Ermineskin Residential School in Maskwacis, in the western province of Alberta, the pope said he travelled to Canada “to tell you in person of my sorrow [and] to implore God’s forgiveness, healing and reconciliation.”

“I am here because the first step of my penitential pilgrimage among you is that of again asking forgiveness, of telling you once more that I am deeply sorry,” Pope Francis said during a ceremony in Maskwacis attended by Indigenous leaders, residential school survivors, elders and others.

“What our Christian faith tells us is that this was a disastrous error incompatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ,” he said, describing the effects of residential schools as “catastrophic”. “I humbly beg forgiveness for the evil committed by so many Christians against the Indigenous peoples.”

Ermineskin, which operated from 1895 to 1975 and was run by the Catholic Church, was one of Canada’s largest residential schools, government-funded and church-run institutions that aimed to forcibly assimilate Indigenous children into mainstream European culture.

More than 150,000 First Nation, Metis and Inuit children were separated from their families and forced into residential schools between the late 1800s and 1990s. They were subjected to widespread physical, psychological and sexual abuse and banned from speaking Indigenous languages, and thousands of children are believed to have died while in attendance.

The system amounted to “cultural genocide”, a federal commission of inquiry, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), said in 2015. “You have travelled a long way to be with us on our land and to walk with us on the path of reconciliation,” Dr Wilton Littlechild, a survivor of Ermineskin Residential School who has long advocated for a papal apology, told Pope Francis at the start of Monday’s ceremony. “For this, we honour you and extend to you our most heartfelt welcome.”

The pope’s six-day visit to Canada this week comes after hundreds of unmarked graves were recently uncovered at several former residential school sites, spurring renewed calls for accountability from the government and the Catholic Church, in particular.

For decades, Indigenous survivors called on the pope to apologise for the church’s role in the abuses that took place at residential schools, and an apology was one of the TRC’s 94 Calls to Action seven years ago (PDF).

Speaking to an Indigenous delegation that travelled to Rome earlier this year, Pope Francis in April apologised for the “deplorable conduct” of members of the Catholic Church.

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