

The forgiveness of sins

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The Pope kisses the hand of Christian school survivor Elder Alma Desjarlais, in Edmonton (Canada).N. DENETTEAP

By Guillermo Alvarado

Pope Francis is visiting Canada this week on what he himself called "a pilgrimage of penance" to ask forgiveness from the victims of the horrors perpetrated by representatives of the Catholic Church who collaborated in an ethnocide against indigenous peoples in that country.

This gesture by the pontiff had been expected for several years, given the magnitude of the damage caused to tens of thousands of children in the so-called "residential schools", founded by the Canadian State but operated by religious congregations.

Between 1890 and 1997, that is, for more than a century, about 130 such institutions operated in the North American country, where at least 150,000 indigenous children were separated from their parents, relatives and communities and forcibly locked up in them.

There they were subjected to a process of "integration" to destroy their culture, identity and history, forbidden to speak their language, wear their clothes, practice ancestral games and entertainment, and even the use of their original names to transform them into anything but what they were.

That idea alone is abhorrent and undignified, not to use terms that would be inappropriate, but unfortunately it was not the only thing they had to endure.

These "residences" were centers of horror, where all kinds of physical, labor, psychological and even sexual abuses were practiced. It is estimated that at least four to six thousand children died from the mistreatment and lack of medical attention and their bodies were buried in mass graves.

Willie Sellars, head of the Williams Lake First Nation clan, said many bodies were thrown into rivers and lakes or dumped in incinerators. "For those children, he added, there will be no headstone, no unmarked grave, no small fragment of bone, to be forensically analyzed."

The discoveries made at sites such as Saint Joseph's Mission in British Columbia, Kuper Island in western Canada, or the Kamloops boarding school, have nothing to envy in cruelty and sadism to the Nazi camps during World War II.

Those who survived those places suffer serious after-effects, some with alcohol or drug addiction or acute periods of depression and anguish.

This is what Pope Francis' trip to Canada is all about, asking forgiveness for those sins, which are not his own, but those of deviant sectors of his church and which will not only be demanded of the people concerned in this tragedy, but of all humanity, which is offended every time such crimes are committed.

I think it is good that he does so because it could encourage to reveal other horrors hidden in unknown tombs in a good part of our region, where lie thousands who are sought by fathers, mothers, sons or brothers who live between pain and hope.

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