



RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL RECRIMINATION, REPENTANCE, AND REALITY

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Kamloops Indian Residential School. (undated) Wikipedia photo. Cover photo: A makeshift memorial for 215 children of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in Kamloops, British Columbia, on June 2, 2021. Cole Burstson/AFP/Getty Images.



Introduction

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Residential School Recrimination

Allegations of widespread abuse against children who were said to have been [forced to attend Canada’s Indian Residential Schools](#) were uncommon before the last of them was shuttered in 1996. That was the year the [Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples](#) alleged the existence of systemic abuse at these boarding schools, charges detailed in the [2015 Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](#), the body appointed to examine the history, operation, and legacy of these schools.

Indigenous activists and institutions linked to them, abetted by a compliant mainstream media preoccupied with sensational stories, began zealously promoting even more scurrilous assertions about the Indian Residential Schools, especially those administered by the Roman Catholic Church, starting on May 27, 2021.

On that day, the Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc Indigenous band of Kamloops, British Columbia, issued a emotion-laden [press statement](#) reported on around the world, that a ground-penetrating radar survey of the area surrounding the

former Indian Residential School had found the “remains of 215 children who were students” of the Roman Catholic-run institution.

The Kamloops discovery became Canada’s George Floyd moment. There were angry vigils and public displays of grief and shame almost instantly; flags on government buildings were lowered to half-mast for nearly six months; [statues of former Canadian heroes were defaced, destroyed, or removed](#); and dozens of mainly [Catholic churches were vandalized or burnt to the ground](#).

The furor attending the Kamloops announcement has never receded as later findings were announced in other provinces, with the number of purportedly unmarked graves holding the remains of supposedly missing individuals, primarily children, [eventually totalling more than 1,900](#). New burial finds prompted cries of a previously hidden “Holocaust” or “Final Solution” against Indigenous people. The Kamloops school was alleged to have been a “[concentration camp](#),” the supposedly revealed burials evidence of a [horrific crime](#).

[More recently](#), Kimberly Murray, the independent special interlocutor on missing children, unmarked graves and burial sites associated with residential schools, revealed she had met with Canada’s Justice Minister to urge him to criminalize “[residential school denialism](#)”—any criticism of the established narrative that the Indian Residential Schools were genocidal houses of horror.

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How has the Catholic Church reacted to charges of abuse at the schools?

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The Catholic Church has responded to the recrimination, including the charge of genocide, with mournful verbal repentance, an understandable reaction given that showing remorse has always been a crucial part of its path to salvation.

Such repentance for alleged residential school sins slowly began in 1984 with a quasi-penitential apology by Pope John Paul II at the Yellowknife Airport in the NWT, where he mentioned the “faults and imperfection” of the Church’s treatment of Aboriginal people. Still, most of his address was full of [glad tidings](#), contrary to the current near total negative narrative about the Indian Residential Schools:

I know of the gratitude that you yourselves, the Indian and Inuit peoples, have towards the missionaries who have lived and died among you. What they have done for you is spoken of by the whole Church; it is known by the entire world. These missionaries endeavoured ... to be like you to serve you, and to bring you the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Whatever faults and imperfections they had, whatever mistakes were made, together with whatever harm involuntarily resulted, they are now at pains to repair. But next to this entry, filed in the memory of your history, is the record, with endless proofs, of their fraternal love.

That marvellous rebirth of your culture and traditions which you are experiencing today owes much to the pioneering and continuing efforts of missionaries in linguistics, ethnography, and anthropology ... Yes, dear Indians and Inuit, the missionaries have always shared in your cultural and social life.

In 2009, [a second papal apology](#) was delivered by Pope Benedict XVI, who invited representatives of Indigenous communities, Catholic dioceses, and religious orders to a meeting at the Vatican to discuss their experiences at residential schools. The Pope listened attentively and expressed his regret and sadness for the suffering of Indigenous people. However, he did not formally apologize for the Church’s role in assimilating and educating Indigenous children.

A third statement of contrition came during Pope Francis’s six-day [“penitential pilgrimage”](#) to Canada in July 2022. [In an address](#) on the grounds of the

Ermineskin Indian Residential School at Maskwacis in central Alberta, Pope Francis said:

I recall the meetings we had in Rome four months ago. At that time, I was given two pairs of moccasins [\[representing the bodies of missing children\]](#) as a sign of the suffering endured by Indigenous children, particularly those who, unfortunately, never came back from the residential schools. ... It is necessary to remember how the policies of assimilation and enfranchisement, which also included the residential school system, were devastating for the people of these lands. When the European colonists first arrived here, there was a terrific opportunity to bring about a fruitful encounter between cultures, traditions, and forms of spirituality. Yet that did not happen. Again, I think back on the stories you told: how the policies of assimilation ended up systematically marginalizing the Indigenous peoples; how also through the system of residential schools your languages and cultures were denigrated and suppressed; how children suffered physical, verbal, psychological and spiritual abuse; how they were taken away from their homes at a young age, and how that indelibly affected relationships between parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren.

In the face of this deplorable evil, the Church kneels before God and implores his forgiveness for the sins of her children.

Though based on identical past events, each of these statements of repentance has been more extreme than the previous one, a feature partly rooted in the growing level of hateful recrimination from activists.

But Pope Francis's statement was not only full of remorse. It also implied that the gospel of Jesus Christ has no higher standing than traditional Indigenous spiritual beliefs—indeed that pre-contact polytheistic Indigenous religions are equivalent to established Catholicism, damning the Roman Church and its 2,000-year-old evangelical mission in the process.

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How credible are the charges against the Catholic Church?

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Recrimination against the Catholic Church should not be unexpected. At its height around 1930, the Indian Residential School system, which operated under the auspices of the government of Canada between 1883 and 1996, represented about 83 institutions, with the Roman Catholic Church managing about 43 percent of them, the highest of any denomination.

But how true are the accusations of widespread abuse? And how do they compare to abuse outside the residential schools and to what took place in non-Indigenous boarding and ordinary community day schools during the same period?

A [1996 report](#) for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples partly based on archival research by historian John S. Milloy showed students mainly complaining about hunger, poor food, and physical abuse, with most of the sexual abuse confined to predation by fellow students.

More recent research has shown that of the thousands of Indian Residential School workers living in the schools during the system's entire 113-year government-funded existence, only 15 were [found guilty](#) of sexual abuse, including a lone Catholic priest.

Compared to [intra-Indigenous sexual abuse](#) occurring both on and off Aboriginal reserves, this is a very low figure.

Evidence like this has not prevented boarding schools like the Kamloops one from being labelled as concentration camps where scores of children were unceremoniously buried in shallow graves after being murdered, their fate carefully hidden from their parents, Chiefs, Band Councilors, medical professionals, and school inspectors who often visited residential schools.

If true, such an act could well be termed genocidal.

Thankfully, it is false, as a large and growing body of evidence that can be found [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#) has shown. Nor is there any confirmation of even a single child murdered at any Indian Residential School during the entire period these institutions were operated by various Christian denominations and other bodies under the direct supervision of the government of Canada.

Moreover, none of complaints about boarding school evils ever mentions similar negative experiences, including harsh corporal punishment such as caning and

strapping, being widespread in boarding and ordinary day schools for non-Indigenous students [across the world](#) during the same period.

There has also been no acknowledgement that attendance at residential schools was [voluntary until 1920](#), and after that date, attendance was rarely enforced. Not mentioned as well is that parents had to apply to have their children admitted to residential schools, and about half of the students between the 1880s and 1950 dropped out after Grade 1, with very few completing Grade 5.

Perhaps most important of all these declarations of abuse and their post-school legacy is the lack of acknowledgement that as the decades passed, more and more students arrived at residential schools already scarred by the sorrows, abuses, and traumas experienced in their home communities. Using archival data, [Greg Piasetzki](#) has recently pointed out that:

As painful as it may be to admit today, most native children attending residential schools during the post-war period suffered from social ills, family hardships, and health concerns that were far more serious than those faced by most other children in Canada. In particular, the devastating inter-generational effects of alcoholism and parental dysfunction on reserves had turned residential schools into a *de facto* native child welfare system. Had the government shut these schools down in the 1940s, as it very much wanted to, those children would have been left at grave risk of injury or death. There was, quite simply, no other place for them to go.

As an example, in 1975, children from “broken or immoral homes” constituted a sizable proportion of the student populations at three Saskatchewan residential schools: Gordon’s Residential School (83 percent), Cowessess Residential School (80 percent), and Muscowequan Residential School (64 percent).

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Residential school realities

“Whatever faults and imperfections they had, ... were overwhelmed by “the fraternal love of” Indigenous people and much admiration of indigenous culture and traditions.”

Though most of the negative evidence is unconfirmed, proof of compassionate Indian Residential School treatment by priests and nuns is as conclusive as it is comprehensive. But, in his zeal to embrace repentance, Pope Francis has ignored his own Church records and the reports of thousands of priests, nuns, brothers, and other missionaries, many of them Indigenous people, who gave a lifetime of work compassionately and patiently caring for and teaching thousands of Aboriginal children, nearly all with their parents’ or guardians’ consent, and indeed their blessing, so they could more easily adapt to life in a rapidly changing Canadian society.

Anyone trying to objectively understand the historical record of the Roman Catholic Church’s work with Indigenous children in residential schools will find that “Whatever faults and imperfections they had, whatever mistakes were made, together with whatever harm involuntarily resulted” were overwhelmed by “the fraternal love of” Indigenous people and much admiration of indigenous culture and traditions.

This love is most clearly revealed by the actions of the Catholic Sisters, the main teachers and nurturers of Indigenous children in the residential schools. Many of these nuns kept detailed diaries of their daily events, which were then stored in Church archives. Similar records, called codices, were kept by the priests and brothers who served in residential schools. Most of these chronicles were sent to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Still, the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, created as part of the Commission’s mandate, has not made them available to the public.

Fortunately, the chronicles of the Sisters of Providence on the Siksika First Nation and the Sisters of Charity on the Kainai First Nation were deposited in the Provincial Archives of Alberta where extensive excerpts were recently transcribed and translated by Eloi DeGrace and are now available on the [Indian Residential School Records site](#). To illustrate what these records say, here are two of hundreds of examples from the Sisters of Charity:

June 4, 1916—All the Indians came to attend High Mass; the Church was full. All sang at the services; they pronounced Latin quite well, recited the Rosary in Montagnais [Cree]; the hymns were also mostly in that language.

July 30, 1916—The school was closed; typhoid fever had already claimed 10 victims among the children. The Sisters, during the whole time that the epidemic lasted, made numerous visits to the sick scattered on the

reserve. Their rounds were sometimes quite long. It was during these excursions that they got to know the faith, the good spirit, the confidence in the Priest or the Sisters of their dear Montagnais, their sensitivity to signs of affection and devotion. But also, they were more than once able to observe uncleanliness, the disorder of their grown-up children in the woods, their carelessness and little care for their sick. The little authority that the parents exercise over their children in general.”

On the “[Student Activities](#)” pages of the Indian Residential School Records, we read about many field trips by Indian Residential Schools students, like those in a dance troupe that travelled to Mexico City in 1964, and of students from several schools attending Expo 67 in Montreal.

Also, many schools had bands and choirs. Several school administrators recorded the residential school children singing in English and their Indigenous languages. The documents also report that schools had bought radios and phonographs for the students’ entertainment. There were also games, movie nights, dances, and parties.

One section is dedicated to “[School Reunions](#),” including the one held in 1977 to commemorate the Indian Residential Schools at Kamloops, British Columbia.

Over 280 former students and staff attended the Kamloops reunion. Among them was Canada’s first status Indian Member of Parliament, [Len Marchand](#); the Reverend Adam Exner, Bishop of Kamloops; Kamloops physician Dr. Ivan Smillie; Chief Victor Adolph of the Fountain Band and Chief Harvey McLeod of the Upper Nicola Band.

In short, the historical record clearly shows that Indian Residential School students were allowed, even encouraged, to speak their native languages in religious services and outside school classrooms. These facts have not been acknowledged in the Truth and Reconciliation Report, recent reports from the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, or even in Pope Francis’s hyperbolic statement of remorse.

The [historical evidence](#) also shows no support for the claim of children missing from or murdered at the Kamloops Residential School or institutions like it elsewhere in Canada. This is understandable for an educational system that was freely embraced

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School Reunion [newspaper clipping](#) from 1977.

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by most Indigenous people, a place where the teachers and supervisors guided students on field trips, organized dance troupes, sports clubs, native language singing, along with native customs, and built ice rinks and swimming pools for them.

None of this is to deny that European colonization caused profound changes in Indigenous cultural and social organization, including legal prohibitions of [practices like polygamy, slavery](#), the purchase of wives, torture, and the potlatch. Of course, Catholic missionaries were deliberately engaged in proselytizing, and the residential schools were the primary instrument of assimilation to Western cultural norms. But even so, most Indigenous children never attended any residential school despite the [declaration of Murray Sinclair](#), former head of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to the United Nations in 2010 that: “For seven generations every Indigenous child in Canada was sent to a residential school. They were taken from their families, tribes, and communities, and forced to live in those institutions of assimilation.”

In 1920, the federal government tried to bring the Indigenous population into compliance with provincial compulsory school attendance laws by amending the Indian Act to say:

Every Indian child between the ages of seven and fifteen years who is physically able shall attend such day, industrial or boarding school as may be designated by the Superintendent General ... Provided, however, that such school shall be the [nearest available school of the kind required](#).

In fact, [fewer than one-third of school-age Indigenous children](#) ever attended residential schools. More children attended on-reserve day schools or, in later years, integrated public schools in local communities. Before the mid-20th century, as many as one-third of Indigenous children did not attend any school at all, arguably the greatest tragedy of all.

As for the forced assimilation and cultural suppression posited by Pope Francis, the residential schools were committed to integrating Indigenous children into the broader Canadian society and culture, not to the eradication of their cultures and languages. The 1937 Indian Affairs Annual Report, for example, states: “Consideration has been given to ways and means whereby the Indian population can be encouraged to conserve still further their ancient values and skills and thus contribute to the cultural life of the nation.” It is worth saying again that many residential schools aided the survival of Indigenous cultures by incorporating traditional music, dance, and arts as school activities in a process called acculturation.

Indian Affairs reports are, in fact, filled with examples of Indigenous cultural expression.

- In 1938, at the Roman Catholic Crowfoot Residential School, close to Cluny, Alberta, students dressed in beaded outfits danced to the rhythm of Indian drums and war songs to an audience of over 300;
- [In 1963, St. Paul's Anglican school close to Cardston](#), a troop of Blackfoot actors showed a film on Blackfoot life in the early days, followed by a pageant about the [Sun Dance](#);
- As well, the choir from the United Church Residential School at [Portage La Prairie sang](#) in English and Cree at Expo '67 in Montreal;
- The Anglican Residential School at Punnichy, Saskatchewan, had a powwow dance troupe that travelled throughout Canada, the United States, and toured several European countries.

Considerable historical evidence also shows that the Indian Residential Schools actively and compassionately promoted the physical well-being of their students. For example, by the mid-20th century, the scourge of tuberculosis that ravaged Indigenous communities had been reduced, and while in the early decades residential school death rates were higher than in the general Canadian school-age population, by the mid-20th century, the death rates were virtually [identical](#).

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Conclusion

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No way forward for the Catholic Church

Over the lengthy period that Indian Residential Schools were operating, relations between Canada and her Indigenous people have been complex. On occasion, Indian Affairs suppressed traditional practices that were believed to be wasteful, dangerous, or inhumane. In commenting on the assimilation of Indigenous children, Pope Francis distorted and defamed this history. In so doing, he committed an injustice against his Church, the missionaries sent out to serve Indigenous people, and the Indigenous people the Church was trying to prepare for the challenges of a rapidly changing Canadian society.

If the legal recognition of Indigenous people had not existed, if there had been no Royal Proclamation in 1763, no treaties, and no Indian Act, would most Aboriginals not have been more fully integrated into the developing Canadian society? Instead, the identities of Canada’s first peoples were legally protected as were, to some degree, their languages and cultures [even in the residential schools](#), where they were educated mostly by Christian missionaries, a large proportion of whom were Roman Catholics.

If this enculturation had not been encouraged, is there reason to believe that Indigenous people would be better off today pursuing their traditional lifeways without the benefits of Western civilization: literacy, numeracy, scientific rationalism, capitalism, the rule of law, industrialization, urbanization, and modern medicine, to name just a few.

So far, the Roman Catholic apologies have not resulted in reconciliation with Canada’s Indigenous peoples. In fact, reconciliation may be impossible because the allegations against the churches are directed at [extracting compensation](#) from both the churches and governments.

Even so, decades after most schools were closed, the problems said to be caused by them have remained, if not expanded. Nationally, Indigenous children under 14 account for [about 54 percent of children in care](#), according to the 2021 census, despite Indigenous children being fewer than eight percent of the Canadian population of children. In Manitoba, 91 percent of children under the

care of family services agencies are Indigenous.

Reasonable people might wonder how the Roman Catholic Church's involvement in running Indian Residential Schools can continue to be blamed for ongoing tragedies like this, especially when most Indigenous people have no experience or family history of residential school involvement. What the historical record does show is a Church that did much to deliver a better way of life to many Indigenous children. Unfortunately, this same Church can no longer defend itself, fearing that this would label it as composed of callous and unrepentant [Indian Residential School denialists](#), historical truths be damned.



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