

Dear Class Member,

Humbling himself before Indigenous people in Canada, Pope Francis last week said he was “deeply sorry” for the church’s role in operating boarding schools for Native children -- schools whose purpose was to take away the students’ language and culture and replace them with English and white culture. His long trip and his sorrowful remarks give us a chance to think about our own need to confess sin and apologize for what we should not have said or done. So that will be the focus of our next class.

If you wish to start thinking about our topic in advance, here is the lesson.



The Pope Apologizes to Indigenous People in Canada

The Wired Word for the Week of August 7, 2022

In the News

Pope Francis journeyed to Canada in late July to meet with Indigenous people and their leaders and offer apologies for the way church-run boarding schools sought to raise children to fit into a non-tribal, essentially white society by stripping away their culture and language and removing them from their families. One often-used motto for this work was developed in opposition to the adage "The only good Indian is a dead Indian": that instead, the Indian people should be integrated into the dominant society. One founder of a school with that intention used the maxim "Kill the Indian in him, and save the man." Some shortened this to "Kill the Indian, save the man," while others now assert that the concept is genocidal rather than beneficent.

These government-sponsored, but often church-operated, boarding schools were found in many places in both the United States and Canada. Indeed, in May of this year the U.S. Department of the Interior released a report (see the link to it below) that begins to describe the scale of what happened -- including death -- to Native children in many boarding schools. That report identified more than 400 such schools that were supported by the U.S. government and more than 50 associated burial sites, including some that were mass graves and some unmarked graves.

While in Canada, Pope Francis visited the grounds where the Ermineskin Indian Residential School operated from 1916 to 1975. It was one of the largest government-funded schools run by the Catholic Church.

"I am deeply sorry," the pope said. "In the face of this deplorable evil, the church kneels before God and implores his forgiveness for the sins of her children."

As the newspaper *Indian Country Today* reported, "When the apology finally came nearly 150 years after the first Indigenous children were snatched from their families to face abuse and neglect, it drew applause and a few whoops from the hundreds of people gathered to hear the Pope at Maskwacis in the heart of the Cree First Nations and other Indigenous communities."

The immediate question for some was whether the apology was sufficient. An ICT account noted this: "For some, the apology was not enough for the generations lost to the trauma of residential schools, some of whom remain in unmarked graves on school grounds. For others, it was a start toward healing that would begin with forgiveness."

The long history of the church approving of the colonization of Indigenous people can be traced back at least to the "Doctrine of Discovery" (see a link to it below), issued by Pope Alexander VI in 1493. That papal bull said that any land not inhabited by Christians was available to be "discovered," claimed and exploited by Christian rulers. It also urged that "the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself."

That broad license led to countless abuses of Indigenous people in many places and, eventually, to the recent papal apology in Canada. All of which raises the question for Christians today about when apologies might be needed and how they can be offered in a way that will heal whatever was broken. That includes apologies from institutional churches as well as from individuals. It's the topic of such apologies that this lesson considers.

(In an interesting coincidence of timing on Indigenous matters, one of the 20th century's greatest athletes, the late Jim Thorpe, a member of the Sac and Fox Nation, received what could be considered a posthumous apology last month when the International Olympic Committee reinstated him as the sole gold medal winner of the 1912 Olympic decathlon and pentathlon. You can read about that here

(https://www.espn.com/olympics/story/_/id/34245374/ioc-reinstates-jim-thorpe-sole-winner-1912-olympic-decathlon-pentathlon).)

More on the papal apology can be found at these links:

Pontiff Says He's 'Deeply Sorry' to Canadian Residential School Survivors. *BBC*

(<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-62296834>)Papal Visit: Apology at Last in Canada. *Indian Country Today*

(<https://indiancountrytoday.com/news/papal-visit-apology-at-last-in-canada>)Pope's Canada Trip Proves Vatican Isn't the Only One Who Thinks in Centuries. *Crux*

(<https://cruxnow.com/news-analysis/2022/07/popes-canada-trip-proves-vatican-isnt-the-only-one-who-thinks-in-centuries>)Papal Visit: It's Going to Take a Long Time. *Indian Country Today*

(<https://indiancountrytoday.com/news/papal-visit-its-going-to-take-a-long-time>)The Doctrine of Discovery. *Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*

(<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/doctrine-discovery-1493>)Federal Indian Boarding School Investigative Report. *Indianz.com* (<https://www.indianz.com/News/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/11/FIBSIMay2022.pdf>)

The Big Questions

1. When, if ever, has your congregation or denomination offered an apology for something, and how was it accepted?
2. Is the hardest part of offering an apology recognizing that one is needed, or is it the act of offering it?
3. Can you describe what happened when you failed to apologize when you should have or when someone failed to apologize to you?
4. In the case of Pope Francis in Canada, did it sound more like he was making an apology to God than to Indigenous people, or did he make it clear he meant both? What responsibility do we have when, like the pope, we're asked to apologize for something we didn't do but to which we may feel connected in some way? When are such apologies appropriate?

5. Once an apology is offered and accepted, what obligations do the parties have to move toward genuine reconciliation? Or is simple acknowledgment of the hurt enough?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Psalm 51:3

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. (No context needed.)

This psalm is said to have been an expression of David's remorse about raping Bathsheba and arranging for the death of Uriah. The prophet Nathan had challenged David about this matter, so David, in effect, apologizes to God and asks that his transgressions be blotted out.

Questions: If we are conscious of our sins being "ever before" us, do we really need someone to point them out to us before we apologize? And when is it our business to point out the sins of others -- whether those sins are individual or corporate in nature?

Matthew 5:23-24

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. (For context, read Matthew 5:21-26 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+5%3A21-26&version=NRSVUE>).)

This passage comes as an extension of the Beatitudes in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus describes in a countercultural way how to live a blessed life. He knows, of course, that no person will always be in harmony with the kingdom of God, so he describes what should happen when people go astray and need to repair relationships.

Questions: What might it mean for you today to "leave your gift" at the altar and go from there to try to be reconciled with someone? What, in other words, might you have to stop doing or paying attention to so you can pay attention to the person you've harmed? If you don't "leave your gift" at the altar, will you ever get around to apologizing?

James 5:16

Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. (For context, read James 5:13-16 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=James+5%3A13-16&version=NRSVUE>).)

The book of James is full of practical advice for how this new community of Christ-followers is to live together in harmony and be about the work Jesus asked his disciples to do. James is not suggesting here that people shouldn't confess sins to God, but he asks that they go beyond that and acknowledge their shortcomings to other members of the church as a way of building community and trust.

Questions: Should the church today encourage members to confess their sins in some public way and offer apologies for them? Or is simply acknowledging one's sins and errors in corporate prayers of confession enough? If you know of a broken relationship in your congregation or community that could be healed starting with a sincere apology, what obligation do you have to raise the issue with the affected parties?

Genesis 8:20-22

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the LORD smelled the pleasing odor, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humans, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done." (For context, read Genesis 7 and 8 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+7-8&version=NRSVUE>)).

Some people see this as God apologizing for the flood, in effect saying it was wrong to get so angry at humanity that, except for Noah, his family and the animals on the ark, God destroyed "every living creature." That, God said, won't happen again.

Elsewhere, the Hebrew Bible contains several instances in which people challenge God, even bargaining with the Divine. An example occurs in Genesis 18. There, Abraham argues with God about whether Sodom should be destroyed, at one point saying, "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (v. 25).

Questions: How might you have felt if you were Noah and had just been saved by God's grace from the harrowing experience resulting from God's anger? Do you find it hard to think about God apologizing for anything? If so, do you disagree that this passage from Genesis can be read as something of an apology from God?

Would you have the nerve to confront God in the way Abraham did if you thought God was wrong and needed to apologize? How do such stories help shape our vision of who God is and how we are to be in relationship with the Creator?

For Further Discussion

1. What do you know about the Indigenous people who live in your area? There are nearly 600 federally recognized tribes of Native Americans. Which tribes think of the land on which your church building sits as ancestral land? Is it time for your church to offer a "land acknowledgment (<https://readthespirit.com/explore/land-acknowledgment-is-a-first-step-toward-justice-for-our-native-american-neighbors/>)"?
2. Discuss this from a TWW consultant: "Many people claim that other cultures should not be judged by the standards of our own culture (for the most part), but should be judged by their own cultural norms. It doesn't take much historical digging into the late 19th- and early 20th-century political culture to realize that the 'Indian boarding school' idea was considered very well-meaning and even the best possible political situation

at the time. I suspect that in the late 1800s, a pope with the moral sensitivity of Francis would be all in for these schools as the best way to help and support the Indians." And this: "While we have no reason to believe that Pope Francis' apology wasn't sincere and well meant, there have been criticisms that he is making a fake apology to gain social status. Some suggest he is apologizing not for himself, but for people no longer alive. The idea is that in doing so, he is comparing himself to others and finding them lacking. How might Pope Francis have made a statement that did not invite self-serving comparisons between himself and the operators of the Roman Catholic Indian schools?"

3. TWW team member Bill Tammeus wrote about the "Federal Indian Boarding School Investigative Report" when it was released in May. You may read his reflection here (<https://bit.ly/3wfhS0o>). Were there such boarding schools in your area? If so, do you know whether mass or unmarked graves of children have been located there?

4. Have a look at the Catholic Church's "Sacrament of Reconciliation" (<https://www.beginningcatholic.com/sacrament-of-reconciliation>) and see if some or all of it might be adapted for use in your congregation.

5. Discuss this experience of an apology from TWW team member Joanna Loucky-Ramsey: "I have apologized to someone because that person was offended by something I did, even though my actions weren't wrong or sinful. The relationship was not repaired, unfortunately, but I grew up spiritually as a result. I learned to take responsibility and to initiate the attempt to make peace. 'As far as it is possible with you, live at peace with all.'"

Responding to the News

What long-delayed apologies do you need to make? Following the example of Pope Francis, now might be a good time to offer them and thus begin some healing.

Prayer

Eternal God in Christ, who reconciled the world to you, have mercy on us as we consider the apologies we need to make. Show us the hurt we've caused and guide us so that in trying to fix things we don't make them worse. We pray this in the healing and saving name of Jesus. Amen.