REFLECTION: FATHER CHARLES, NATIONAL ECCLESIASTICAL ASSISTANT



TORONTO PUBLIC LIBRARY: *Graphic inspired by the concept of "Every Child Matters" from the* ***Orange Shirt Society***

Dear CLC Friends,

I began to write (at least in my intentions) this reflection on the Feast of St. John the Baptist, the Forerunner of the Light of the world. The theme we were asked to write on was the Ignatian500 year celebrating the anniversary of St. Ignatius' conversion as well as the invitation to all Canadians to a conversion of heart following the recent painful tragedies of the discovery of the unmarked graves of children at a residential school for Indigenous children in Kamloops, B.C., and now even more tragically, a new discovery of unmarked graves in Saskatchewan, near a former residential school on the land of the Cowessess First nation.

*"Conversion" **– to have a change of heart and behaviour** – is challenging to anyone of us. Yet it is at the heart of the message of John the Baptist (aka "repentance and forgiveness of sin) and the fundamental proclamation of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry – "Be converted (repent) and believe in the Good News." It is a thoroughly biblical word that runs through the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, I do remember from my upbringing that the popular meaning of this word was a change from one "religion" to the roman catholic church. Thankfully, with the biblical, liturgical and ecclesial renewal voiced and communicated in the documents of Vatican II council, we are much more aware of the richness of this word, **conversion**, and that it is not a once-for-all event but an ongoing process to which we are all called day by day.*

It is no accident that the Jesuit leadership has chosen this theme for the Ignatian500 year, inspired by St. Ignatius' own experience after the battle of Pamplona. His conversion began then and continued until his death. Jesuits and all the Ignatian family are invited to engage in this process of conversion which leads us to deeper following of Christ, our Way, Truth and Life. Conversion is a radical change of attitudes and behaviour that is in keeping with the reign of God,

a reign of justice, love, peace and joy. It continues to turn our lives upside down, as it were, breaking us free from self-centred, self-interested concerns towards the good and well-being of others, esp. those most vulnerable and marginalised. After 62 years as a Jesuit, I still hear this challenge to be converted more deeply to the mind and heart of Christ.

As citizens of Canada, we have become painfully aware of our attitudes and injustices towards the Aboriginal nations and peoples. As one Indigenous leader put it – we [Canadians] have been ignorant and unconsciously racist in our relationships with First Nations' people. The recent discoveries of unmarked graves from the residential schools are but a part of the injustices done to our Indigenous sisters and brothers. The Truth and Reconciliation commission has clearly stated the actions that Canadians need to attend to.



Graphic: Manitoba First Nations School System

Does this not involve a deeper conversion on our part to the way we have thought about and responded to our First Nations? Part of the conversion process is recognizing the failures of the past and expressing our sorrow for the wrong done. But then we need to move into the present and onward into the future by the change of attitude of mind and heart (overcoming our ignorance, our lack of understanding, our uncompassionate judgements, etc.) toward our Aboriginal sisters and brothers and take more action to overcome these past failures, so that we can walk together in greater respect and justice, in deeper solidarity and peace.

As Christians in the Roman Catholic tradition, we must share the responsibility of what our forebears did in the residential schools, even if in ignorance and being unconsciously racist, so that more truth and reconciliation can occur among all Canadians. Let us continue to pray for this grace of conversion at every level.

Your brother in Christ, Charles