

How is one to respond to the discovery of unmarked graves at the former Residential Schools?
Submitted by Beth and Graydon Nicholas, June 28, 2021

We will begin with two passages from Scripture.

Isaiah 56: 6-8

6. And foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, To love the name of the LORD, to become his servants— All who keep the sabbath without profaning it and hold fast to my covenant, 7. Them I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer; Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar, For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. 8. Oracle of the Lord GOD, who gathers the dispersed of Israel—Others will I gather to them besides those already gathered.

John 20: 29

29. Jesus said to him, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed."

After my first year of law school, I (Graydon) was part of a research team in Toronto which culminated in the publication of the book, **Native Rights in Canada,** in 1970. Part of the research I was assigned to do was on the relationship between the conquering Spaniards under King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, who were Roman Catholics, and the Indigenous Peoples. The Conquistadores were soldiers who were not necessarily learned in scripture. They may not have been aware of the above quoted passages.

Their actions were devastating to the Indigenous Peoples, who were made into slaves and deprived of their humanity, land rights and spirituality. The missionaries, who came after the soldiers, were sent to evangelize and invite the Indigenous Peoples to become followers of Jesus, whom they called a man of peace. There was very little success in converting the Indigenous Peoples who were victims of the violence of the soldiers.

Some of the priests who witnessed the brutal treatment of the Indigenous Peoples spoke out. One such voice was a Dominican priest, Fray Montesinos. The following is a quote from his homily on December 21, 1511, the fourth Sunday of Advent, in Santo Domingo:

Tell me by what right of justice do you hold these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude? On what authority have you waged such detestable wars against these people who dwelt quietly and peacefully on their own lands? Wars in which you have destroyed such an infinite number of them by homicides and slaughters never heard of before. Why do you keep them so oppressed and exhausted, without giving them enough to eat or curing them of the sicknesses they incur from the excessive labor you give them, and they die, or rather you kill them, in order to extract and acquire gold every day.

The congregation included many officers, soldiers and other Spaniards who were not respecting the Indigenous Peoples. One such person was Bartolomé de las Casas who had been sent there by his father to exploit the rich resources of the new land. He was moved by the homily and decided to join the Dominicans, was ordained a priest and later appointed as a Bishop. His was another voice advocating the rights of the Indigenous Peoples. However, like Fray Montesinos, he had limited success in changing the attitude of the officers, soldiers and the governing Spaniards. Las Casas asked his friend, Francisco de Vitoria, a fellow Dominican, who was a professor of Theology at the University of Salamanca, for his help. Vitoria gave the following opinion to King Ferdinand in 1534:

That the Indians were true owners of the land, both from the public and private point of view. The Indians' lack of belief in the Roman Catholic faith could not affect the question, as heretics in Europe were not denied property rights. He suggested that the Indians were no less intelligent than some Spanish peasants and therefore were equally fit to have legal rights. To the argument that the Pope had granted the New World to Spain, Vitoria replied that the Pope had no temporal power over Indian lands. Spain had no claim to the land through discovery, he said, because that notion only applied to unoccupied lands.

King Ferdinand did not accept this opinion because it challenged his assertion of Spain's Sovereignty in the New World. Vitoria did not stop there. He was encouraged by Las Casas to visit Pope Paul III who issued a Papal Bull, **Sublimis Deus,** on June 4, 1537 which said in part:

that the Indians are truly men and that they are not only capable of understanding the catholic faith but, according to our information, they desire exceedingly to receive it… notwithstanding whatever may have been or may be said to the contrary, the said Indians and all other people who may later be discovered by Christians, are by no means to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, even though they be outside the faith of Jesus Christ; and that they should, freely and legitimately, enjoy their liberty and the possession of their property; nor should they be in any way enslaved; should the contrary happen, it should be null and void and of no effect.

King Ferdinand did not want this statement by the Pope to be discussed in the New World. I was shocked by what I learned as I did my research because I was brought up as a Catholic in my First Nation community. I refer to this Papal Bull, **Sublimis Deus**, when I teach university

courses and when I have discussions with Priests, Bishops, Cardinals and others of our Catholic family. Unfortunately, not many Catholics know of this document because it is never mentioned in homilies or talks by the Clergy or other Catholic authorities.

When Saint John Paull II visited the Canadian Martyrs' Shrine in Midland, Ontario on September 15, 1984, he agreed to be smudged by an Indigenous Elder. The following is a quote from the homily he delivered that day on enculturation:

Thus the one faith is expressed in different ways. There can be no question of adulterating the word of God or of emptying the Cross of its power, but rather of Christ animating the very centre of all culture. Thus, not only is Christianity relevant to the Indian peoples, but Christ, in the members of his Body, is himself Indian.

The Pope delivered the following message in Yellowknife on September 18, 1984:

My presence in your midst today is intended to be another expression of the deep interest and solicitude which the Church wishes to show for the native peoples of the New World. In 1537, in a document entitled Pastorale Officium, my predecessor Paul III proclaimed the rights of the native peoples of those times. He affirmed their dignity, defended their freedom, asserted that they could not be enslaved or deprived of their goods or ownership.

Pope John Paul II returned to Fort Simpson in September 20, 1987 and repeated that same message:

Let me recall that, at the dawn of the Church's presence in the New World, my predecessor Pope Paul III proclaimed in 1537 the rights of the native peoples of those times. He affirmed their dignity, defended their freedom and asserted that they could not be enslaved or deprived of their goods or ownership. That has always been the Church's position (Cfr. Pauli III Pastorale Officium, die 29 Maii 1537: DENZ-SCHÖNM. 1495.

This part of Church history is rarely taught in our churches, schools or universities. This strong message of Saint John Paull II seemed to fall on the deaf ears of our Clergy and other catholic leaders. CLC's are asked to discern **the signs of the times**. What are we to do as CLC'ers to begin to understand this tragic journey of contact between Indigenous Peoples and colonial powers which began at the dawn of the 1500s?

We are all shocked at the number of unmarked graves found on the sites of former Residential Schools operated by the Catholic Church. How did this happen? Why were Indigenous children forcibly removed from their families in the presence of the police? Why was there fear and condemnation of Indigenous languages, spiritual values and traditions? Why were Indigenous children neglected, mistreated and abused in the name of Jesus Christ?

The federal government enacted laws that made it mandatory for Indigenous children to attend these Residential Schools. It was a criminal offence if the parents did not cooperate. There were 130 Residential Schools in Canada which began to operate in 1886 and the last one closed in 1996. The Christian denominations that contracted with the Federal Government to operate the Residential Schools were Roman Catholic, Anglican, United Church, Presbyterian and

Baptist. There were an estimated 150,000 children, including First Nations, Metis and Inuit, who attended Residential Schools. Approximately 4,000 children were reported to have died at Residential Schools in Canada, but it is believed that the number was much higher. More than 1,100 unmarked graves have been recently discovered. There are likely many more unmarked graves which will be found.

During Saint John Paul II's visit to Midland, on September 15, 1984, he mentioned how the Jesuit missionaries were assisted by the Hurons and relied on their support. One such Huron was Joseph Chiwatenhwa. The Pope spoke of him by saying, **of great importance to the Church of Huronia is Joseph Chiwatenhwa, who together with his wife Aonnetta, his brother Joseph (who was baptized after Chiwatenhwa died with permission of the Jesuit priest) and other family members lived and witnessed to their faith in a heroic manner.**

This was probably the first time that the people of Canada heard of Joseph Chiwatenhwa. His story is contained in a book entitled **Friends of God**, written by Bruce Henry, in 1991. Chiwatenhwa was very touched by the teachings of the Jesuits when he met them in 1636. The sickness and epidemics that occurred among the Hurons were blamed on the Jesuits. Chiwatenhwa was baptized on August 16, 1637 by Father Jean de Breuf, after he recovered from his illness. He was given the Christian name, Joseph. His wife, Aonnetta, was baptized on March 19, 1638. Her Christian name was Marie. They had their marriage blessed on the same day. This was the first Catholic wedding in Ontario. Joseph became the first lay administrator of the Catholic Church in Canada in 1639. Joseph was impressed with the teachings of Saint Ignatius. He was the first lay person to do the Spiritual Exercises in Canada. During his eight-day silent retreat, he composed a prayer. In it, he spoke of his relationship with Jesus by stating: **You love us so deeply that all I can do in return is to offer myself to you. I choose you as my elder and chief. There is no one else**.



We believe that our path toward reconciliation requires us to pray and dialogue with Indigenous Peoples, pray and dialogue again and continue to pray and dialogue with Indigenous Peoples [brothers, sisters, Elders and Communities] and then discern with them, guided by **Our Lady of Guadalupe**. When I shared the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe with some Residential School Survivors in 2008, they wept, because they heard for the first time that, between December 9 to 12, 1531, the Mother of Jesus appeared as an Indigenous woman to bring a message of love and hope to Juan Diego, an Indigenous man, in his Indigenous language. They asked me: **why didn't the priests and nuns tell us about this? It would have brought us respect, dignity and hope rather than the pain, degradation and abuse that we suffered.**



Saint Juan Diego (Icon from St. Edward the Confessor Catholic Parish Blog, Clifton Park, N.Y.)

This will not be an easy process. There will be no shortcuts, no easy discussions, but a need for education, awareness, listening, deep prayer and meaningful dialogue leading to an open and ongoing discernment process that will, hopefully, result in appropriate responses. As followers of the **Risen Jesus**, we must continue to pray, be open to learn, seek the truth, express our sorrow and hope, and move forward with determination toward Reconciliation and healing.

The words of Fray Montesinos on December 21, 1511, the advocacy of Las Casas and Vitoria, the story of Juan Diego and Our Lady of Guadalupe in 1531, the message of **Sublimis Deus** in 1537, as endorsed by Saint John Paul II in 1984 and 1987, form part of our Catholic teachings that we are called to share with others, especially the Youth.

We began this discourse by quoting from Isaiah and John. Are we prepared for this journey or **enterprise**, as described in **Acts: 5:38-39? If this enterprise, this movement of theirs, is of human origin it will break up of its own accord; but if it does in fact come from God you will not only be unable to destroy them, but you might find yourselves fighting against God. [The Jerusalem Bible]**

We hope and pray that we will all respond to these **signs of the times** by being open to pray, listen, learn, dialogue and discern together with our Indigenous brothers, sisters, Elders and communities**. Let us always remember that EVERY CHILD MATTERS.**

Below is link to a podcast in which Graydon recently participated. The podcast is called "Resuming Debate", and the title of this episode is "Residential Schools, Reconciliation, and Indigenous-Catholic Relations".

https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/episode-6-residential-schools-reconciliation-indigenous/id1562896468?i=1000526507813



Cowessess First Nation discovers hundreds of unmarked graves at former residential school, Marieval . in Saskatchewan. (photo: CBC)