



# **Background for Catholics**

## **Residential Schools**

August 2021

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Over the past several months, there has been a national conversation on the tragic history of residential schools in Canada. The role of the Catholic Church in the residential school system has been a part of that discussion.

We acknowledge the terrible suffering that took place and condemn the system, established by the federal government and operated by faith communities, which separated children, often forcibly, from their parents and attempted to strip away their language, culture and identity.

The Catholic Church must atone for our involvement in this dark history. It is undeniable that some Catholic teachers (priests, religious men and women and lay staff) entrusted to care for children at residential schools assaulted the dignity of the students through mistreatment, neglect and abuse.

We echo the words of one of the original apologies made by the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate in 1991:

*“We apologize for the existence of the schools themselves, recognizing that the biggest abuse was not what happened in the schools, but that the schools themselves happened...We wish to apologize in a very particular way for the instances of physical and sexual abuse that occurred in those schools...Far from attempting to defend or rationalize these cases of abuse in any way, we wish to state publicly that we acknowledge they were inexcusable, intolerable and a betrayal of trust in one of its most serious forms. We deeply and very specifically, apologize to every victim of such abuse and we seek help in searching for means to bring about healing.”*

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## 1. How many residential schools were there and where were they located? Did the Catholic Church run all these schools?

While the federal residential school system began around 1883, the origins of the residential school system can be traced to as early as the 1830s (long before Confederation in 1867), when the Anglican Church established a residential school in Brantford, Ont. It is estimated that 150,000 children between the ages of three and 16 were forced to attend federal residential schools, operated in Canada between 1883 and 1996.

Of the 139 residential schools identified in the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), 46% (64 schools) were operated by Catholic entities; approximately 16 out of 70 Catholic dioceses in Canada were associated with the former residential schools, in addition to about three dozen Catholic religious communities.

In British Columbia, there were 18 residential schools: 10 were operated by Catholic entities; 3 by the Anglican Church; 4 by the United Church; and 1 was non-denominational.

Five residential schools were located in the Diocese of Victoria:

- Christie Residential School (1900 – 1983), operated by Catholic entities on Meares Island near Tofino
- Kuper Island Residential School (1890 – 1975), operated by Catholic entities on Penelakut Island, near Chemainus
- Alberni Indian Residential School (1920 – 1973), operated by the United Church in Port Alberni
- Ahousaht Indian Residential School (1901 – 1950), operated by the United Church on Flores Island near Tofino
- St. Michael's Indian Residential School (1929 – 1975), operated by the Anglican Church in Alert Bay

To view a map of residential school locations and religious affiliation, click [here](#).

## 2. What was the goal of residential schools?

Residential schools were established pursuant to federal government policies and legislation designed to control and assimilate Indigenous people. From the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission \(TRC\) Final Report](#):

*For over a century, the central goals of Canada's Aboriginal policy were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease*

*to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada. The establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this policy. The federal government's residential schools were part of a horrendous assumption that it was in an Indigenous child's interest to be taken from his or her parents and to be culturally and linguistically reconstructed.*

- *The federal government never established an adequate set of standards and regulations to guarantee the health and safety of residential school students.*
- *The federal government never adequately enforced the minimal standards and regulations that it did establish.*
- *The failure to establish and enforce adequate regulations was largely a function of the government's determination to keep residential school costs to a minimum.*
- *The failure to establish and enforce adequate standards, coupled with the failure to adequately fund the schools, resulted in unnecessarily high death rates at residential schools.*

### **3. What were the causes of death for students at residential schools?**

*(Information below has been sourced from the [Truth & Reconciliation Report – Volume 4 – Missing Children & Unmarked Burials](#))*

- Approximately 150,000 children attended residential schools in Canada. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has identified 3,200 deaths on the Named and Unnamed registers of confirmed deaths of residential school students. Since the TRC report was published in 2015, the number of deceased children has most recently been updated to at least 4,100. Due to poor record keeping by the churches and the federal government, we may never know the total loss of life.
- For just under one-third (32%) of the 3,200 deaths identified in the TRC report, the government and the schools did not record the name of the student who died. For just under one-quarter of these deaths (23%), the government and the schools did not record the gender of the student who died. For just under one-half of these deaths (49%), the government and the schools did not record the cause of death. Aboriginal children in residential schools died at a far higher rate than school-aged children in the general population. (TRC Volume 4 – Missing Children & Unmarked Burials – Page 26-27)
- In cases where the cause of death was reported, tuberculosis was the dominant cause of death, representing 48.7% or 896 of residential school deaths. The next highest were influenza and pneumonia.

- Several of the schools were overwhelmed by the influenza pandemic of 1918–19. All but two of the children and all of the staff were stricken with influenza at the Fort St. James, British Columbia, school and the surrounding community in 1918. Seventy-eight people, including students, died. (TRC Report Summary, page 119)
- Underfed and malnourished students were particularly vulnerable to diseases such as tuberculosis and influenza (including the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918–19). In large part due to the federal government underfunding the system, food was low in quantity and poor in quality.
- Students also died as the result of suicide and accidents. Statistical analysis identified six suicides. The TRC report also identified 57 drownings, 40 deaths in school fires and 20 deaths due to exposure. 38 students died in a variety of other accidents, including vehicle accidents and falls. At least 33 students died while running away: they would have died from a variety of causes, the most common being exposure and drowning.
- According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, parents frequently were not notified of a student’s death, and the bodies of students who died at residential schools were rarely sent home unless their parents could afford transportation. In an effort to limit expenses, the Department of Indian Affairs (as it was then called) was opposed to shipping the bodies of deceased children to their home communities.

#### **4. I’ve heard a lot about unmarked graves on the sites of former residential schools. How do I better understand these “lost” burial sites and those that may be present in other locations?**

We can expect that there will be burial grounds on most, if not all, land in close proximity to residential schools. Ground penetrating radar has been used to identify individual graves. The technology does not identify human remains.

According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

*“Sometimes virtually no cemetery information is readily available within the archival records, but knowledge of the existence and location of cemeteries is locally held.”*

Faith communities, including Catholic entities, who operated residential schools should have done more to respect those who died, providing information to family members and respecting the dignity of every child entrusted to their care. Church leaders have spoken publicly about the need to dialogue with Indigenous leaders to

ensure appropriate memorials are constructed to remember and honour those who died, including names of the deceased wherever possible.

Children were often interred with simple wooden crosses that have deteriorated and disappeared over the decades. At present, remains at the former residential school burial sites have not been identified. Local

Indigenous leaders as well as historians have noted the need to identify the children buried on these sites. The school-related burial sites may also include the remains of lay teachers and their own children, as well as nuns, priests and other members of the community.

From the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report:

*In the 1940's, Indian Affairs was prepared to cover the burial costs of residential school students who died in hospital. It was not, however, prepared to pay for the transportation of the body to the student's home community. The Social Welfare section of the 1958 Indian Affairs field manual provided direction on the burial of "destitute Indians." Burial costs were to be covered by Indian Affairs only when they could not "be met from the estate of the deceased." There was no fixed rate of payment.*

*Instead, the "amount payable by the local municipality for the burial of destitute non-Indians is the maximum generally allowed." Those who died away from their home reserve were to be buried where they died. "Ordinarily the body will be returned to the reserve for burial only when transportation, embalming costs and all other expenses are borne by next of kin. Transportation may be authorized, however, in cases where the cost of burial on the reserve is sufficiently low to make transportation economically advantageous..."*

*Given that schools were virtually all church-run in the early years of the system, Christian burial was the norm at most schools. Many of the early schools were part of larger, church mission centres that might include a church, a dwelling for the missionaries, a farm, possibly a sawmill and a cemetery.*

*The church was intended to serve as a place of worship for both residential school students and adults from the surrounding region. In the same way, the cemetery might serve as a place of burial for students who died at school, members of the local community, and the missionaries themselves.*

*For example, the cemetery at the Roman Catholic St. Mary's Mission, near Mission, British Columbia, was intended originally for priests and nuns from the mission as*

*"We are committed to assist First Nations communities in the work of searching for loved ones who went missing at the residential schools in our Diocese"*

*– Bishop Gary Gordon, Diocese of Victoria – June 2021*

*well as for students from the residential school. Three Oblate bishops were buried there along with settlers, their descendants, and residential school students.*

*When the Battleford school closed in 1914, Principal E. Matheson reminded Indian Affairs that there was a school cemetery that contained the bodies of seventy to eighty individuals, most of whom were former students. He worried that unless the government took steps to care for the cemetery, it would be overrun by stray cattle. Matheson had good reason for wishing to see the cemetery maintained: several of his family members were buried there. These concerns proved prophetic, since the location of this cemetery is not recorded in the available historical documentation, and neither does it appear in an internet search of Battleford cemeteries.*

*From the Truth and Reconciliation Report  
(Volume 4 – Missing Children pg. 118-119, 121)*

The TRC report drew on the efforts of many investigators and consultants, including Dr. Scott Hamilton, a professor in the Department of Anthropology at Lakehead University, who worked from 2013-15 identifying residential-school-related gravesites across Canada.

His full, 44-page written report, “[Where are the Children buried?](#)” was made public only following Tk'emlups te Secwepemc Chief Rosanne Casimir’s announcement regarding the Kamloops discovery in late May 2021. In a recent [interview](#) with the *B.C. Catholic*, Hamilton said that he believes his study provides important detail and context for a public grappling with the implications of the Kamloops news. An excerpt from the *B.C. Catholic* story:

*Of particular concern to Dr. Hamilton is the fact that many news reports described the Kamloops gravesite as a mass grave, a term most often used to describe sites associated with war crimes or massacres in which people all killed at one time are buried en masse in a site that is then hidden.*

*In fact, deaths at Residential Schools accrued year over year, with “wild fluctuations” that probably reflected periodic epidemics, Dr. Hamilton said. The high death rates continued until the middle of the 20th century, when they finally fell to match those in the general population.*

*Hamilton said the “mass grave” description “misses the point with the Residential-School story,” a story that unfolded over more than a century and in which appalling conditions led to high death rates due to disease, the most devastating of which was tuberculosis.*

**Additional reading on this topic:**

[The process for identifying unmarked graves](#) (*The National Post* article – May 31, 2021)

[Where are the children buried?](#) (Report of Dr. Scott Hamilton, professor in Anthropology who contributed to the TRC report)

*Deceased students were often buried in simple graveyards near the schools because federal authorities provided no funding to send the bodies home or to conduct proper burials...His report found no evidence that school officials intended to hide the graves. He also wrote that, in some areas, it is likely that the remains of teachers and their own children, nuns, and priests will also be found in school-related cemeteries. At present, none of the remains in Kamloops has been identified.*

## **5. Is the Diocese of Victoria and the Vatican holding records in secret archives? Why not just turn over all the information that you have?**

- Most Catholic entities that ran residential schools started sharing their records years ago. Cardinal Thomas Collins, along with many Canadian bishops, has stated publicly that any Catholic entity with records relating to residential schools that have not yet been shared should do so.
- The archival records related to the two residential schools that were managed by the Diocese of Victoria (Christie and Kuper Island) were forwarded to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2008-2015), and remain available through the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. The Diocese holds no residential school records from other dioceses or Catholic entities.
- There is no evidence that secret files are hidden at the Vatican relating to residential schools. Records were kept by the religious orders and dioceses who ran the schools at the local level. Most groups have handed over records to the government or historical archives or committed to make this happen.
- Some records were lost over time. According to a 1933 federal government policy, school records could be destroyed after five years and reports of accidents could be destroyed after ten years. Between 1936 and 1944, the federal government destroyed 200,000 Indian Affairs files (as the ministry was then called).
- Records of both the government and those that operated residential schools were inconsistent and often incomplete. Fires in a number of residential schools also damaged or destroyed historical records in some locations.

## **6. I have read many stories that talk about the Catholic Church not apologizing for their role in residential schools. Why hasn't there been an apology?**

There has never been an apology from “The Catholic Church of Canada” because no such organization exists. The Catholic community in Canada has a decentralized structure, with each diocese and religious community corporately and legally responsible for its own actions.

Starting in the early 1990s, Catholic dioceses and religious orders that were involved in operating the federal government’s residential schools began issuing a series of apologies. A brief timeline is below:

*“On behalf of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Victoria, I apologize for the harm caused due to our complicity involved in the operations of the residential schools. I am committed to the process of healing, reconciliation, and education regarding this tragic history.*

*– Bishop Gary Gordon, Diocese of Victoria – June 2021*

- 1991** Apology by Catholic Bishops and Leaders of male and female religious communities:
- “We are sorry and deeply regret the pain, suffering and alienation that so many experienced. We have heard their cries of distress, feel their anguish and want to be part of the healing process.” – March 15, 1991*
- Other apologies from bishops and religious orders followed, to begin the path to reconciliation. You can read these apologies by visiting: [www.cccb.ca/indigenous-peoples/indian-residential-schools-and-trc/](http://www.cccb.ca/indigenous-peoples/indian-residential-schools-and-trc/)
- 2006** Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) signed. The agreement (which went into effect in 2007) called for apologies from those responsible for operating residential schools. The desire was not only for an apology but a more important, ongoing journey to true reconciliation.
- 2008** Then Prime Minister Stephen Harper made an apology in the House of Commons and announced the creation of the Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
- 2008** Bishop Gary Gordon, then the Bishop of Whitehorse, apologized to the people who suffered from their attendance at residential schools in his diocese, and “to all the students and families who suffered hurt to your culture and human dignity” during the residential school era.
- 2009** Following a period of ongoing dialogue and a desire for a more direct connection to the Pope regarding residential schools, 40 Indigenous

groups, led by the Assembly of First Nations, were received by Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican.

Media reports quoting Indigenous participants in the encounter with the Holy Father indicated that it was an appropriate response to the federal government's apology along with those of other centrally organized churches (the United Church, Anglicans, etc.).

One such example:

CTV News – Pope apologizes for abuse at Indigenous schools -

[www.ctvnews.ca/pope-apologizes-for-abuse-at-native-schools-1.393911](http://www.ctvnews.ca/pope-apologizes-for-abuse-at-native-schools-1.393911)

Quotes from Indigenous and church leaders following the 2009 meeting with Pope Benedict XVI can be found here:

[www.cccb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/2009\\_quotes.pdf](http://www.cccb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/2009_quotes.pdf)

*“We hoped to hear the Holy Father talk about the residential school experience, but also about abuses and hurts inflicted on so many and to acknowledge the role of the Catholic Church,” [Chief Phil] Fontaine said in a news conference following the meeting. “We wanted to hear him say that he understands and that he is sorry and that he feels our suffering, and we heard that very clearly.”*

**2012** Bishop Richard Gagnon, then the Bishop of Victoria, issued a statement expressing his sorrow and apologizing “for the harm done and the role the Church has contributed toward the painful legacy of Residential Schools”.

**2015** Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) re-examines the apologies from the Catholic Church. Without rejecting the 2009 process, it called for Pope Francis to come to Canada within a year to offer a Catholic apology in the name of the universal church.

**2017** Prime Minister Trudeau extends the request to Pope Francis on a visit to the Vatican. In the past St. John Paul II visited Canada on three occasions: in 1984, 1987 (joining Indigenous Peoples in a spiritual celebration in Fort Simpson, Northwest Territories) and for World Youth Day in 2002.

**2018** Pope Francis replied that he could not “personally” come to Canada at this time, as requested by the TRC.

**2019** In light of the understandable disappointment that a papal visit was not possible at the time, the Canadian bishops engaged in another process of consultation to arrange a second papal meeting with Indigenous survivors. Discussions commenced to arrange a delegation of Indigenous leaders, Elders and residential school survivors to meet with Pope Francis

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in Rome. The visit was to have taken place in 2020, but because of the pandemic, the timetable was delayed due to ongoing travel restrictions.

**2021** On June 6, Phil Fontaine, former Chief of the Assembly of the First Nations (AFN) who participated in the 2009 encounter with Pope Benedict XVI, spoke to the media and related that he felt an apology from Pope Francis was certainly possible and that activity was going on “behind the scenes.” A few days later, Perry Bellegarde, AFN National Chief, told the media that the meeting between survivors and Pope Francis was supposed to have taken place last year.

*"Many Catholic entities in dioceses across Canada have apologized publicly for their role in the operation of residential schools. What survivors and their families seek is something separate from these important acts...As we approach the 13th anniversary of the apology of the Government of Canada for the legacy of residential schools, we call on Pope Francis to deliver the apology that Indigenous peoples deserve."*

*– ITK President Natan Obed (National Voice of Canada's 65,000 Inuit) – June 8, 2021*

## **7. When will the delegation to Rome happen and who will be part of it?**

On Tuesday, June 29, 2021, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops announced the delegation will meet with the Holy Father in Rome from December 17-20, 2021.

*"Pope Francis is deeply committed to hearing directly from Indigenous Peoples, expressing his heartfelt closeness, addressing the impact of colonization and the role of the Church in the residential school system, in the hopes of responding to the suffering of Indigenous Peoples and the ongoing effects of intergenerational trauma. The Bishops of Canada are deeply appreciative of the Holy Father's spirit of openness in generously extending an invitation for personal encounters with each of the three distinct groups of delegates – First Nations, Métis and Inuit – as well as a final audience with all delegates together on 20 December 2021."*

Below is an excerpt from the June 10, 2021 statement from the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops:

*This pastoral visit will include the participation of a diverse group of Elders/Knowledge Keepers, residential school survivors and youth from across the country. The event will likewise provide Pope Francis with a unique opportunity to hear directly from Indigenous Peoples, express his heartfelt closeness, address the impact of colonization and the implication of the Church in the residential schools, so as to respond to the suffering of Indigenous Peoples and the ongoing effects of intergenerational trauma.*

## 8. Will the Catholic Church pay financial reparations to those harmed by residential schools?

The Catholic dioceses and religious orders that operated residential schools, including the Diocese of Victoria, were part of the 2006 Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA). Together, the 50 or so Catholic entities which were part of the IRSSA agreed to pay \$29 million in cash, and provide \$25 million of “in-kind” services over 10 years.

The Catholic entities also agreed to use their best efforts to try and raise an additional \$25 million through a seven-year Canada-wide fundraising campaign. This project, known as the “Moving Forward Together” campaign, was an opportunity for all the dioceses and religious orders and associations in Canada, as well as individual Catholics, to support healing and reconciliation for former residential school students and their families and communities. Unfortunately, this campaign only managed to raise \$3.7 million.

A judicial review in 2015 deemed that the Catholic entities had fulfilled the requirements of the Settlement Agreement. Following this review, the Canadian government released the entities from further legal obligations.

Many people feel that Catholics still have a moral obligation to continue raising funds to support residential school survivors and their communities. **One option to do so is the BC Bishop’s Appeal in Support of Healing and Reconciliation, which was announced in July 2021 (<https://www.rcdvictoria.org/special-announcements/bc-bishops-appeal-in-support-of-healing-and-reconciliation>).**

The Diocese of Victoria and the other Catholic entities involved in the IRSSA, together with other dioceses, institutes and national Catholic organizations, also continue to be involved in efforts across the country to provide in-kind contributions which go well beyond the scope of the IRSSA.



### **Together We Pray**

For the children who died in residential schools throughout Canada and for all those who continue on a journey through the darkness, that there may be healing founded on truth and that the Spirit will inspire our ongoing commitment to reconciliation.

God, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, continue to offer us correction so that your grace might change and transform us in our weakness and repentance.

Give us humility to listen when others reveal how we have failed and courage to love others as ourselves, mindful of your love for the weakest and most vulnerable among us. Amen.

**Also see:**

- [www.ourladyofguadalupecircle.ca](http://www.ourladyofguadalupecircle.ca) - Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle
- <https://nctr.ca/records/reports/> - Reports from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. The site includes the full TRC report, Executive Summary, Calls to Action and numerous other reports and accounts from survivors
- [www.nctr.ca](http://www.nctr.ca) - National Centre for Truth & Reconciliation (University of Manitoba)
- [www.nccie.ca](http://www.nccie.ca) - National Centre for Collaboration in Indigenous Education