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Sexual abuse of Indigenous children (Canada) - Pope Francis, we don't accept your hollow apology. Here's why

Monday 1 August 2022, by [PALMATER Pamela](#) (Date first published: 26 July 2022).

Remarks in Alberta omitted Catholic Church's complicity and cover-up of the sexual abuse of thousands of Indigenous children and its role in genocide.

The apology we heard from Pope Francis in Maskwacis this week [[1](#)] was indeed historic, but predictably lacking in substance.

In what sounded like a very carefully worded apology, the Pope skipped over the Catholic Church's complicity and cover-up of the sexual abuse of thousands of Indigenous children over many generations. His failure to acknowledge the church's role — both at the individual level and as an institution and governing body — not only deflects responsibility, but also serves to put more children at risk. His failure to also recognize its role in genocide was a glaring omission that hurt many Indigenous Peoples.

The Pope's "penitential pilgrimage" to Canada and his apology meant a great deal to some Indian residential school survivors and their families. These survivors — who have experienced horrific acts of violence, racism and oppression at the hands of Catholic priests, nuns, clergy and staff, deserve to have whatever they need for their own personal healing journeys. This papal visit is a very painful and triggering time for Indigenous Peoples and we must continue to support them.

At the same time, it is important that we acknowledge that many other survivors, families and communities want more than an apology — they want justice. Indigenous Peoples have said countless times that true reconciliation must include substantive actions by the church to end the ongoing abuse and make reparations for the harms done. Apologies are empty sentiments without corresponding action. In other words, this trip should have been about penance (actions), not just penitence (regret).

A careful reading of the apology shows an attempt to soften or deflect the church's culpability for the devastation experienced by Indigenous Peoples, by situating residential schools within the larger context of "policies of assimilation and enfranchisement," presumably those of the government.

He referred to stories told to him about "how the policies of assimilation ended up systemically marginalizing the Indigenous Peoples" and how the "system of residential schools" denigrated Indigenous languages and cultures. While this is all true and caused irreparable damage and loss, what the Pope fails to do is explain how the rampant physical and sexual abuses, tortures and deaths of thousands of Indigenous children and babies at the hands of Catholic priests, nuns, clergy and staff, had nothing to do with government policies of assimilation.

This sexual abuse was about racism, white supremacy, power, domination, exploitation and

depravity — not “indifference” as stated by the Pope. The pattern of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy is an evil that was well-known by the church and covered up for generations — thus clearing the path for the abuse to continue unabated. The Pope’s failure to acknowledge this problem and accept responsibility for it not only leaves sexual abuse survivors without an apology that recognizes their traumas, but also creates barriers within the church to ending sexual abuse worldwide.

As the saying goes, you cannot change what you refuse to acknowledge. That is evident by ongoing sexual abuse that continues unabated because it is facilitated by cover-ups within the church as an organization. Numerous reports, inquiries, commissions and admissions by church officials indicate that the church is more concerned about its image than protecting children against sexual abuse by its members.

The church cover-ups at the higher level include the destruction of documents; the refusal to disclose documents; aggressive litigation tactics and countersuits against survivors and their families; and/or the refusal to hold their members to account — even when the church itself knows exactly which of its clergy are “credibly accused of child sexual abuse.”

The same criticism of the apology applies to the Pope’s failure to acknowledge that the atrocities committed against Indigenous Peoples in North and South America not only amount to genocide, but were in fact authorized by the church.

The so-called “Doctrine of Discovery” was a Catholic declaration of sorts, which purported to say that by law and divine intention, Christian rulers (Catholic) were empowered to claim and exploit lands inhabited by heathens (Indigenous Peoples). This is reflected in a series of papal bulls, including the one issued by Pope Alexander VI in 1493 authorizing the claim to all non-Christian lands “discovered” by Christian rulers and directed them to ensure that all “barbarous nations be overthrown.” In effect, these bulls claimed to grant the Americas to Spain and Africa to Portugal; while other European countries (England and France, for example) rushed in to claim what others had not yet discovered.

While the Holy See has tried to distance itself from the papal bulls of the 1400s — stating that the documents have “had no value whatsoever for centuries” — the Pope has so far refused to officially rescind, repeal and/or repudiate the doctrine. This is despite the fact that he has also acknowledged that this doctrine has been incorporated into various legal systems.

Today we know that this doctrine is at the heart of colonization — the unlawful assertion of European sovereignty over Indigenous lands, and the violent and often lethal acts of genocide against Indigenous Peoples. The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls confirmed that the genocide continues and called for the full implementation of all Calls to Action from the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which included calls for both the Catholic Church and the federal government to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery.

Even the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (now recognized as applicable in Canadian law) confirms that this doctrine is legally invalid and morally condemnable. This is an important part of real reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples and why so many Indigenous survivors, advocates and leaders are demanding the Pope (and Canada) officially repudiate it. His failure to do so is, ironically, an example of the very indifference that the Pope counselled against in his apology. He instead chose to shift focus on “the evil committed by so many Christians” while reminding everyone that charity was also present.

Reconciliation cannot happen without repudiation. Simply skipping over the genocidal parts of the church’s involvement in the many injustices against Indigenous Peoples won’t cut it. All Indigenous

Peoples have been harmed by this doctrine, whether or not they attended Indian residential schools, day schools or other Catholic-run institutions. The Pope owes Indigenous Peoples both penitence and penance for all of it.

If history is any indication, we likely won't see the church hold itself responsible for historical and ongoing sexual abuse, any more than it will admit to being the instigator of genocide against Indigenous Peoples. So, no, we don't have to accept his hollow apology — even if it was meaningful and necessary for some. Apologies are best shown through concrete actions that must come before any request for forgiveness.

Let's see what the Catholic Church chooses to do once the Pope gets back to the Vatican. Its actions or lack thereof will be the true test of its commitment to reconciliation.

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P.S.

- Special to the Star. Tue., July 26, 2022. Article was updated 5 days ago:
<https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2022/07/26/pope-francis-we-dont-accept-your-hollow-apology-heres-why.html>
- Pamela Palmater is a Mi'kmaw lawyer and currently serves as Professor and Chair in Indigenous Governance at Toronto Metropolitan University.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2022/07/25/it-was-history-making-but-pope-franciss-apology-has-many-asking-what-comes-now.html?rf>