

## **THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF CANADA AND THE SOCIETY OF JESUS**

*Philip Shano*

**A**DOLFO NICOLÁS, THEN SUPERIOR GENERAL of the Society of Jesus, wrote a letter to Jesuits worldwide on 8 September 2014. It was a follow-up to letters he had requested earlier from Jesuits and their partners around the globe. He asked them to offer reflections on major conflicts in our cultures. He spoke of strife, divisions and the most evident sufferings of our world. Given how international the Society of Jesus is, what Fr Nicolás received was a comprehensive view of the crying need for reconciliation throughout the world. His letter referred to the thirty-fifth Jesuit General Congregation, with its proposal of ‘reconciliation and bridge building as contemporary ways of deepening our mission’.<sup>1</sup> Decree three of the General Congregation speaks of the need to ‘establish right relations with God, with one another, and with creation’ and to ‘build a new world of right relationships, a new Jubilee reaching across all divisions so that God might restore his justice for all’.<sup>2</sup> Fr Nicolás also pointed out that the Formula of the Institute of 1550 presented reconciliation as a ministry proper to the Society.

Many Canadians assume that their peaceful and wealthy nation is free from conflicts that demand reconciliation. However, Canada has recently concluded a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) aimed at uncovering the facts about a dark part of its history—a system of residential schools for indigenous children. The Jesuits have been part

<sup>1</sup> Adolfo Nicolás, ‘Reply to *Ex Officio* Letters 2014’ (commonly known as the ‘Letter on Reconciliation’), 8 September 2014, *Acta Romana Societatis Iesu*, 25 (2014), 1032–1038.

<sup>2</sup> Society of Jesus, General Congregation 35, decree 3, nn. 56, 60, in *Jesuit Life and Mission Today*, 746, 747.

of the process because of their involvement in that school system. They are challenged to be part of a more hopeful and just future for indigenous peoples in Canada.

### ***Residential Schools and the TRC***

Many Canadians were shocked in late May 2015 to hear their Supreme Court Chief Justice, Beverley McLachlin, and other leaders use the phrase *cultural genocide* to describe the experience of generations of indigenous youth in residential schools established by the federal government and operated by major Christian denominations.<sup>3</sup>

The residential school system existed from the late nineteenth century until the late twentieth. The number of schools reached 80 in 1931 but decreased after that, increasing again in the 1950s. The last federally operated school closed in 1996. In total, about 30 per cent of indigenous children, roughly 150,000, passed through the residential school system, and over 3,200 of them died while attending the schools. Many were buried in unmarked graves, without the notification or consent of their parents.<sup>4</sup> The historical consensus is that the schools did significant harm to indigenous children who attended them, by removing them from their families, depriving them of their ancestral languages and exposing many of them to physical and sexual abuse. The aim of the government was the assimilation of indigenous children.

The Roman Catholic Church operated over 60 per cent of the schools on behalf of the government. Several religious orders were involved, including the Jesuits of English Canada. They operated just one, the Garnier Residential School in Spanish, Ontario, whose roots go back to a log-built school in Wikwemikong on Manitoulin Island. In those days, the Jesuit school educated young people in their native tongue and was a day school. This existed from 1850 to 1911. But then it burned down, and a new school was established in the town of Spanish in 1913.

<sup>3</sup> Beverley McLachlin, 'Reconciling Unity and Diversity in the Modern Era: Tolerance and Intolerance', 7, available at [http://www.pluralism.ca/images/PDF\\_docs/APL2015/APL2015\\_BeverleyMcLachlin\\_Lecture.pdf](http://www.pluralism.ca/images/PDF_docs/APL2015/APL2015_BeverleyMcLachlin_Lecture.pdf), accessed 27 February 2017. It should be noted that, although Ms McLachlin was the most prominent Canadian to use the expression 'cultural genocide', historians and members of the First Nations have used it for many years to describe how Canada has treated its indigenous peoples.

<sup>4</sup> See *Truth and Reconciliation Committee of Canada Final Report* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens UP, 2015), volume 4, *Missing Children and Unmarked Burials*, available at [http://www.myrobust.com/websites/trcinstitution/File/Reports/Volume\\_4\\_Missing\\_Children\\_English\\_Web.pdf](http://www.myrobust.com/websites/trcinstitution/File/Reports/Volume_4_Missing_Children_English_Web.pdf), accessed 27 February 2017. Tuberculosis was the predominant reported cause of death, but in 49 per cent of cases no cause of death at all was recorded.



*Dormitory at the Garnier Residential School in Spanish, Ontario*

This became the first residential high school for aboriginal boys in 1946. It closed in 1958 and was demolished in 2004.<sup>5</sup> The historian David Shanahan has researched the history of the school. He says that the federal government consistently underfunded education for aboriginals and that the Jesuits of the time were overextended. He sums up the situation:

All the signs pointed to a massive failure of the people at Spanish to produce a high school of sound academic learning. Priests and Brothers were becoming disillusioned and exhausted by the continual drain on their spiritual, emotional, and physical resources. Questions began to be asked. What were the Jesuits doing at Spanish in the first place? Was it simply an orphanage/reform school run on behalf of the Indian Department?<sup>6</sup>

Many leaders and writers have described the existence of the residential schools as one of the most shameful aspects of Canadian history. Perry Bellegarde, the national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, refers to it

<sup>5</sup> A good summary of the Spanish residential school is offered in Michael Stogre, 'The Jesuits' Ministry to the Native People in Canada', in *Builders of a Nation: Jesuits in English Canada, 1842–2013*, edited by Jacques Monet (Toronto: Novalis, 2015). Pages 58–65 deal specifically with the educational dimension of the ministry to indigenous peoples. A first-hand account is Basil Johnston's *Indian School Days* (Norman: U. of Oklahoma P, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> David Shanahan, *The Jesuit Residential School at Spanish: 'More Than Mere Talent'* (Toronto: Canadian Institute of Jesuit Studies, 2004), 199.

as 'the darkest chapter of our shared history'.<sup>7</sup> Chief Justice McLachlin spoke of 'the most glaring blemish on the Canadian historical record'.<sup>8</sup> The then prime minister, Stephen Harper, offered a public apology on behalf of the government of Canada on 11 June 2008, just a week after the establishment of the TRC.<sup>9</sup> The Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair, Manitoba's first aboriginal chief justice, oversaw the commission. Two other commissioners assisted him: Dr Marie Wilson and Chief Wilton Littlechild. The commission gathered statements from residential school survivors through public and private statement-gatherings across the country. These gatherings allowed over 6,750 survivors to share their stories and put them on record. Through its travels, hearings and interviews, the TRC uncovered stories of physical, psychological and sexual abuse as well as neglect.

The first truth commission, the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, was held in Argentina in 1983 to investigate the kidnapping and murder of thousands of people under the country's military dictatorship. The one that is etched in the minds of most people is the commission in South Africa that dealt with the shameful reality of apartheid. Such commissions move from the haunting stories of injustice and criminality to a more hopeful future. Writing before the establishment of the Canadian TRC, Daryold Corbiere Winkler, an indigenous Canadian, wrote of the need for such a process in relation to the First Nations:

Hailed as a modern miracle, the South African experience testifies to the possibility of new ways of bringing justice and of restoring dignity to persons and communities .... our First Nations peoples are searching for the restoration of their political, cultural and spiritual identities and the healing of their communities.<sup>10</sup>

He offers wisdom from Archbishop Desmond Tutu: 'If we are going to move on and build a new kind of world community there must be a way in which we can deal with a sordid past'.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Perry Bellegarde, 'Truth and Reconciliation: This Is Just the Beginning', *The Globe and Mail* [Toronto] (1 June 2015), A12, available at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/truth-and-reconciliation-this-is-just-the-beginning/article24705066/>, accessed 1 March 2017.

<sup>8</sup> McLachlin, 'Reconciling Unity and Diversity', 7.

<sup>9</sup> The TRC is found at <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=15>.

<sup>10</sup> Daryold Corbiere Winkler, 'Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Lessons from Canada's First Nations', in *The Challenge of Forgiveness*, edited by Augustine Meier and Peter VanKatwyk (Montreal: Novalis, 2001), 28–29.

<sup>11</sup> Archbishop Desmond Tutu, quoted in Winkler, 'Forgiveness and Reconciliation', 29.

### ***The Recommendations of the TRC***

Canada's TRC wrapped up with several days of formal and informal gatherings, addresses, statements from the parties, ceremonies, rituals and prayer services in Ottawa from 31 May to 3 June 2015. Central to this process was the release of the commission's interim report and a series of calls to action. Like others before them, the commission described the residential school system as a form of cultural genocide and argued that the schools' purpose was 'to kill the Indian in the child'.<sup>12</sup> In other words, indigenous children were to be assimilated into the white population, thereby destroying their original culture. The TRC final report states:

To the Commission, 'reconciliation' is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country. For that to happen, there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour.<sup>13</sup>



*An early image of the girls' school at Spanish*

<sup>12</sup> This phrase is often used to summarise the policy of the Canadian government even prior to confederation. It was probably first used by a US army officer, Richard Henry Pratt, in the nineteenth century. See Julia V. Emberley, *The Testimonial Uncanny: Indigenous Storytelling, Knowledge, and Reparative Practices* (New York: SUNY, 2014), 50.

<sup>13</sup> *Truth and Reconciliation Committee of Canada Final Report*, volume 6, *Reconciliation*, 3, available at [http://www.myrobust.com/websites/trcinstitution/File/Reports/Volume\\_6\\_Reconciliation\\_English\\_Web.pdf](http://www.myrobust.com/websites/trcinstitution/File/Reports/Volume_6_Reconciliation_English_Web.pdf), accessed 2 March 2017.

The TRC called on Canada to move from apology to action, and issued a long list of recommendations to help with that movement. Among the 'guiding principles' is that steps be taken to improve the economic and educational situation of indigenous Canadians.<sup>14</sup> Can we build a Canada where indigenous citizens are just as likely as other Canadians to enjoy economic success? The key to that is improving educational opportunities.

To provide redress for the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of reconciliation, the TRC offered 94 recommendations, both specific and broad. The calls to action are divided between two volumes of the report: *Legacy* and *Reconciliation*. The 42 recommendations in *Legacy* cover child welfare, education, language and culture, health, and justice. The remaining 52 recommendations deal with reconciliation. They start by calling upon various levels of government 'to fully adopt and implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the framework for reconciliation'.<sup>15</sup> The recommendations that follow seek reconciliation between levels of government and the indigenous peoples of Canada.

Of particular relevance to the Jesuits and the Christian Churches are recommendations 58–62. These cover church apologies, and call upon the Churches,

... to develop ongoing education strategies to ensure that their respective congregations learn about their church's role in colonization, the history and legacy of residential schools, and why apologies to former residential school students, their families, and communities were necessary.<sup>16</sup>

The commission also asks the Churches to ensure that their formation programmes leading to ministry include elements that help with reconciliation. They speak of,

... the need to respect Indigenous spirituality in its own right, the history and legacy of residential schools and the roles of the church parties in that system, the history and legacy of religious conflict in Aboriginal families and communities, and the responsibility that churches have to mitigate such conflicts and prevent spiritual violence.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Reconciliation*, 16.

<sup>15</sup> *Reconciliation*, 28 (n. 43).

<sup>16</sup> *Reconciliation*, 102 (n. 59).

<sup>17</sup> *Reconciliation*, 110 (n. 60).

An important part of this process is that it should take place in collaboration with indigenous spiritual leaders.

The recommendations that have received most attention are those involving education. The commission speaks of two general areas of education. In the *Legacy* section, educational reform seeks to close the tremendous social gap between aboriginals and non-aboriginals in Canada. 'We call upon the federal government to develop with Aboriginal groups a joint strategy to eliminate educational and employment gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians'.<sup>18</sup> When the commission deals with education in the *Reconciliation* recommendations, it is concerned with ensuring that curricula are amended to include teaching about residential schools, Treaties, and aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada.<sup>19</sup>

### ***The Society of Jesus and the TRC***

Even before the establishment of the TRC the Jesuits of English Canada were cooperating fully with indigenous peoples, the government, the legal system, and other church organizations in working towards reconciliation. Father Rye, the assistant to the Canadian Jesuit Provincial, appeared before the Quebec National Event of the TRC in Montreal on 25 April 2013 and issued a 'Statement of Reconciliation'. He said:

I stand here on behalf of the Jesuits to say that we are truly, deep within our hearts, sorry for what we did to injure individuals, families and communities by participating in the Canadian Residential School system.

He referred to more than four hundred years of involvement between the Jesuits and the First Nations of Canada and called the residential schools 'a terrible cloud on our legacy of friendship'. He continued:

It has been a struggle for the Jesuits to recognize that we became an active part of a system aimed at the assimilation of your traditional culture. It was not until it was much too late that we realized the harm that we had done.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Truth and Reconciliation Committee of Canada Final Report*, volume 5, *Legacy*, 74 (n. 7).

<sup>19</sup> *Reconciliation*, 121 (n. 62). The Treaties are constitutional agreements made from the eighteenth century to the present between the British crown and, later, the government of Canada and indigenous peoples regarding land and resources.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Bisson and Winston Rye, 'Statement of Reconciliation', available at: <http://image.jesuits.org/CANADA/media/statement-of-reconciliation.pdf>, accessed 27 February 2017.

Fr Rye said that the Jesuits are proud to call many former students from the school in Spanish friends and are humbly grateful for the fact that so many have not turned away from them. He acknowledged the many achievements of the students: 'We recognize that what they achieved as professionals, athletes and community leaders was not because of our efforts at the school—but through their own strength of character and love of knowledge'.<sup>21</sup> Fr Rye acknowledged the harsh conditions, poor food, brutal punishment and horrible incidents of sexual molestation.

He offered words which speak to the fundamental cruelty of the system of schools: 'Children who were much too young were taken from the love of their families and placed under the guidance of men and women who had little training and less compassion'. He vowed that this will never be 'the way things are' again. On behalf of the Jesuits in English Canada, he assured the TRC and survivors that the Jesuits have learned from what happened. Speaking of reconciliation, he said that the Jesuits 'are humbled by your love and forgiveness. We have never had to beg for reconciliation; you have offered it to us freely for so many years by your example.'<sup>22</sup>

The 'Statement of Reconciliation' also acknowledged the,

... terrible inequality that continues to exist between the educational opportunities for white students and students from First Nations in Canada. Young people are still being transported to white communities, to obtain an education in an environment that is foreign to them. That is exactly what happened in the past and we seem to be reliving it again.<sup>23</sup>

Fr Rye promised that the Jesuits will do all they can to help eradicate this continuing inequality and injustice.

### ***The Jesuits' Way Forward for Reconciliation***

Just as Jesuits were part of the problem in their involvement with the residential schools, they now want to be part of the solution. They have already committed themselves to a new way of relating to the aboriginal people with whom they work across the country. The calls to action of the TRC provide a focus for these efforts which, for the Jesuits of English Canada, mainly concern their continuing ministry in education, and the

<sup>21</sup> Bisson and Rye, 'Statement of Reconciliation'.

<sup>22</sup> Bisson and Rye, 'Statement of Reconciliation'.

<sup>23</sup> Bisson and Rye, 'Statement of Reconciliation'.



formation of young Jesuits who are heading toward that ministry as priests and brothers.

One of the TRC recommendations deals with the need to update educational curricula so that Canadians are taught the truth about their history and recognise the contributions of indigenous people today. The Jesuit provincial leadership has asked any educational institution connected to the Society in English Canada to update its curricula to meet the recommendations in the calls to action. In some cases, this had already started before the TRC requested it.

Several years ago, the Jesuits were involved with others in establishing the Mother Teresa middle school in Regina, Saskatchewan. The school educates the poorest children in that city and '90% of MTMS students are of Aboriginal ancestry'.<sup>24</sup> Before the TRC, the University of Sudbury in Ontario and Campion College (at the University of Regina) were already very involved both in the education of indigenous people and in ensuring that non-aboriginals were being taught the truth about Canadian history. The University of Sudbury has a vibrant department of indigenous studies and Campion College is associated with the First Nations University of Canada at its Regina campus. Both Jesuit institutions are involved in creative and dynamic projects with their indigenous colleagues.

Regis College, the Jesuit school of theology at the University of Toronto, has developed a new course in uniquely Canadian social justice issues, with a specific emphasis on aboriginal questions.<sup>25</sup> It will be a required course for Jesuits in formation. The province of the English



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<sup>24</sup> 'Mother Teresa Middle School: Highlights September 2016', available at <http://mtmschoolregina.com/pub/documents/Highlights%20September%202016-FINAL-1.pdf>, accessed 2 March 2017.

<sup>25</sup> See 'Injustices in Canada Today', at <https://regiscollege.ca/courses/rgt2891hf/>, accessed 2 March 2017.

Canadian Jesuits has also initiated an immersion programme for Jesuits in formation, starting from the summer of 2016. It is based at Campion College in Regina, in collaboration with the First Nations University. Participants have academic and pastoral experience with urban and rural indigenous people who are helped by the Jesuits in Regina. A significant aspect of the programme is that the Jesuits are formed and led by indigenous leaders.<sup>26</sup> Jesuit contacts in Saskatchewan are able to put the men in formation in touch with many aspects of aboriginal life in the West of Canada.

In his 'Letter on Reconciliation', Fr Nicolás names four elements in the reconciliation process: forgiveness, healing, empowerment and mission. He describes the unique power of each:

**Forgiveness**, so as not to remain helplessly fixed on past offenses.

**Healing**, so as to restore to the offended or the exploited their dignity and their humanity, a process that requires much time and patience.

**Empowerment**, so that every person can help establish filial bonds that recreate God's family around a common table.

**Mission**, because a person restored in dignity places himself or herself at the service of humankind in a multitude of ways.<sup>27</sup>

The Canadian TRC has provided the Society of Jesus in English Canada with a powerful and, ultimately, hopeful reminder of the importance of being attentive to the ongoing need for reconciliation. The educational and pastoral presence of the Canadian Jesuits for indigenous peoples should include each of Fr Nicolás's elements, with a special emphasis on empowerment.

### **Closing the Gap**

Aboriginal and non-aboriginal leaders and writers use different language, but they all see the TRC as a *kairos* moment in the relationship between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians. The national First Nations chief, Perry Bellegarde, writes:

I believe reconciliation is about closing the gap—the gap in understanding between First Nations and Canadians and the gap in the

<sup>26</sup> See Joanne Kozlowski, 'Jesuit Immersion Experience', at <http://campioncollege.ca/alumni/alumni-online-magazine/jesuit>, accessed 2 March 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Nicolás, 'Reply to Ex Officio Letters 2014'.

quality of life between us .... What will Canada look like if we act on this agenda [the TRC recommendations]? We will see justice, respect and healing for residential school survivors; First Nations thriving and enjoying the richness of their traditional territories; elders whispering their languages in the ears of their grandchildren; and the widespread recognition that First Nations rights are human rights, the rights that Canadians champion around the world. That is reconciliation.<sup>28</sup>

The 'gap' is explained in more detail in a document presented to the main Canadian political parties by the Assembly of First Nations ahead of the 2015 federal election:

*The Gap* is the vast difference in the quality of life experienced by First Nations people and non-Indigenous Canadians. *The Gap* is a fundamental human rights issue, inclusive of First Nations' collective rights to land and self-determination. *The Gap* should not exist in a country as rich as Canada. *The Gap* is holding all of us back from building healthy and thriving First Nations and a stronger Canada. Now is the time for reconciliation. We can only achieve reconciliation with *closing the gap*.<sup>29</sup>

John Ralston Saul, a major non-aboriginal Canadian thinker and writer, says that the treatment of Canada's aboriginal population 'is the great issue of our time, the great unresolved Canadian question upon which history will judge us all'.<sup>30</sup> The conclusion of the TRC and its 94 recommendations provide a clear and precise mandate. The historian Ken Coates wrote in response to Chief Justice McLachlin's reference to cultural genocide, that her use of the phrase had changed the national vocabulary, and was now part of the national agenda. He likened it to the prime minister's apology for the residential schools in 2008:

A new Canada can be seen on the horizon .... Canada needs a new relationship with aboriginal people. A shared understanding of what happened in the past—and a recognition of the lingering, multigenerational effects of colonialism, paternalism and racism—is only a starting point for real reconciliation and partnership.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Bellegarde, 'Truth and Reconciliation'.

<sup>29</sup> 'Closing the Gap', available at: <http://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/closing-the-gap.pdf>, accessed 2 March 2017.

<sup>30</sup> John Ralston Saul, *The Comeback: How Aboriginals are Reclaiming Power and Influence* (Toronto: Viking, 2014), 2.

<sup>31</sup> Ken Coates, 'McLachlin Said What Many Have Long Known', *The Globe and Mail* [Toronto] (29 May 2015), available at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/mclachlin-said-what-many-have-long-known/article24704812/>, accessed 15 March 2017.



*Archbishop Desmond and Mpho Tutu*

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who chaired the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and his daughter Mpho have written an important book about the forgiveness process. They are convinced that with each act of forgiveness, whether small or great, we move toward wholeness. They say that forgiveness is how we bring peace to ourselves and to the world. Forgiveness is the greatest gift we can give to ourselves when we have been wronged. Of the South African TRC, Archbishop Tutu writes, 'The process we embarked on ... was, as all real growth proves to be, astoundingly painful and profoundly beautiful'.<sup>32</sup> Canada now has a better picture of the pain, and the closing ceremonies of the TRC in Ottawa give some indication that we have glimmers of beauty. Closing the gap will make that beauty shine more brightly.

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<sup>32</sup> Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 2.