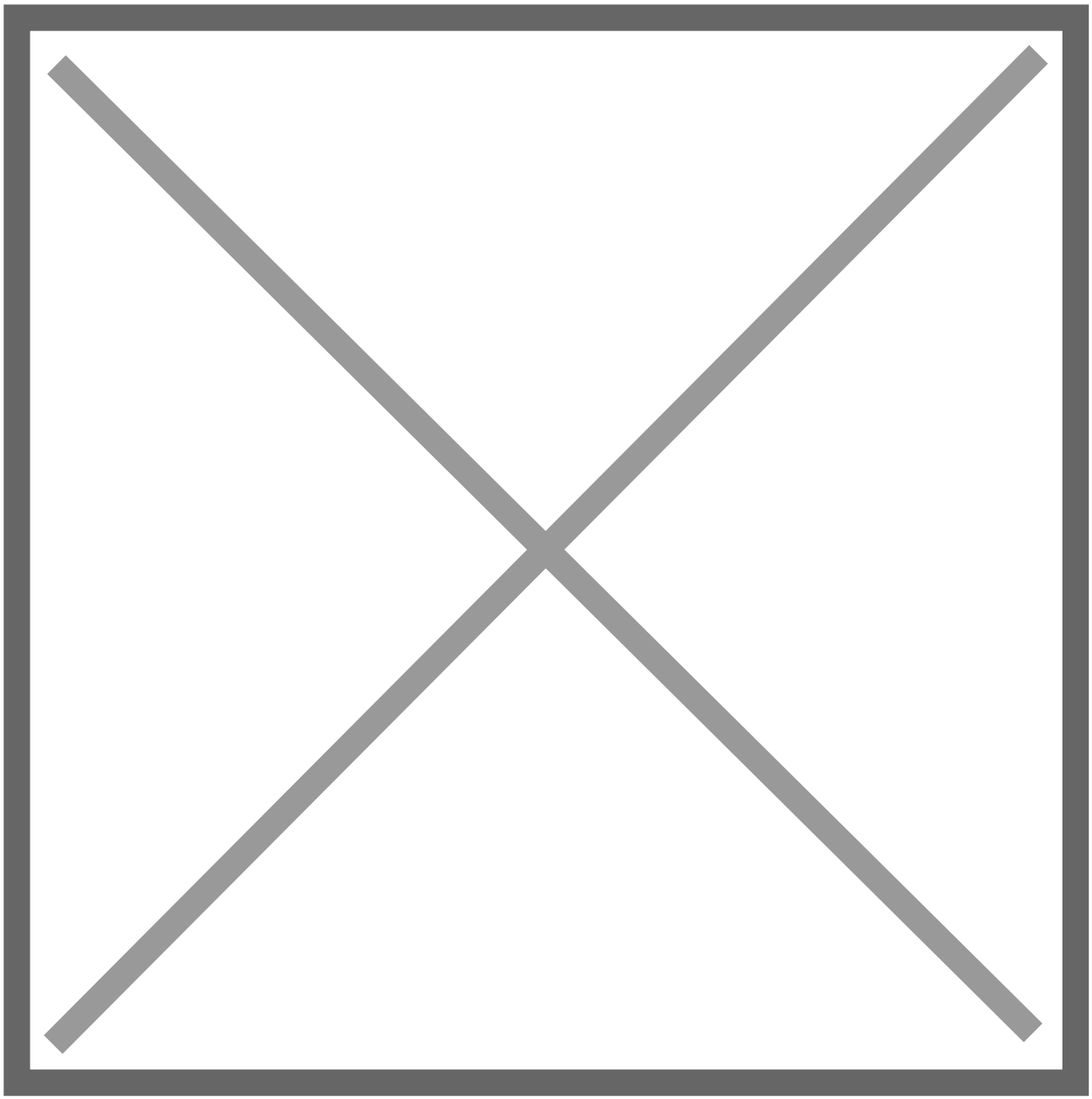
News



Demonstrator in Syracuse, N.Y., place children's shoes, toys and flowers at the base of the Columbus Monument during the "Every Child Matters: Walk for Justice for Our Ancestors" July 31, 2021. The event was organized by members of the Onondaga Nation. (CNS photo/Chuck Wainwright, The Catholic Sun)



Renée K. Gadoua

Contributor

View Author Profile

Katherine Long

View Author Profile



Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

SYRACUSE, N.Y. — August 13, 2021

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

More than 100 people walked about 6 miles from the Onondaga Nation to Columbus Circle in downtown Syracuse to honor victims and survivors of residential schools for Indigenous children.

Many marchers, including Onondaga leaders, wore orange shirts declaring "They Were Children" and "Every Child Matters." Participants also carried signs, flowers, stuffed animals, and children's shoes, which they placed around the base of the Columbus Monument across from the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception.

A child-sized wooden coffin, marked with painted handprints and filled with orange flowers, stood in front of the speaker's platform. Nearby, a sign marked E. Onondaga Street, a reminder that the city of Syracuse and the cathedral stand on the ancestral lands of the Onondaga Nation.

"I have personally been suffering great sorrow for many years, hearing these tales that were told by the people that are survivors. Very sad, heart-wrenching stories," said Jeanne Shenandoah, a member of the Onondaga Nation, at the rally following the July 31 walk.

"Really the only thing I can do, in one way, is to stand with you in your tears and in your sorrow," Syracuse Bishop Douglas Lucia said at the rally. He was among several speakers who denounced the abuse and generations-long trauma that church-run residential schools inflicted.

"Certainly, to see the coffin before me, with the bloodstained hands, reminds us of a history that my own church has been part of," he said. "As a bishop, I certainly deplore, decry and certainly weep and want to apologize for what has been done."

Members of the Onondaga Nation organized "Every Child Matters: Walk for Justice for Our Ancestors" following recent discoveries of more than 1,000 unmarked graves near former Catholic-run residential schools for Indigenous children in Canada. Indigenous peoples have participated in similar events across the U.S. and Canada.

Over 350 government-funded, and often church-run, residential boarding schools operated in the U.S. from 1869 to the 1960s, according to the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition.

The schools aimed "to culturally assimilate Indigenous children by forcibly relocating them from their families and communities to distant residential facilities where their American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian identities, languages, and beliefs were to be forcibly suppressed," according to a U.S. Department of the Interior news release.

"For over 150 years, hundreds of thousands of Indigenous children were taken from their communities," it said.

The U.S. bishops' conference said in June it will "look for ways to be of assistance" in a federal investigation of the history of U.S. boarding schools for Indigenous

children.

Speaker Virgil Brave Rock, a member of the Blackfeet Nation who now resides on the Onondaga Nation, described the abuse he experienced and witnessed during his years at a residential school, the Catholic-run St. Mary's Residential School on the Blood Reserve in the Canadian province of Alberta, according to a syracuse.com profile.

"We as children suffered abuses that took me many, many years to face," he said during the rally. "During those years, if we were caught speaking our language, we had to put industrial soap in our mouths until our tongues blistered." For infractions, "we were punished by whippings," he said.

Brave Rock acknowledged other survivors, saying, "I know the pain that is left and the scars that are left behind."

Tadodaho Sidney Hill, spiritual leader of the Haudenosaunee -- an alliance of six nations also known as the Iroquois Confederacy -- spoke of continuing struggles affecting Indigenous peoples and noted his pride in Onondaga youth learning Onondaga ceremonies, language and songs.

Advertisement

Lucia recently called on the Vatican and the U.S. Catholic Church to acknowledge the damage that 15th-century Vatican documents -- whose directives are collectively known as the Doctrine of Discovery -- inflicted on Indigenous peoples.

During a U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' discussion in June about a new proposed statement on Native American and Alaskan Native ministry and the discovery of unmarked graves at residential schools, he urged the body to address the doctrine.

He has called for church leaders "to reexamine" the documents that assert European Christianity's superiority and power over other lands. Those documents took away Indigenous people's "right to ownership. Literally. It was subjugating them. They became second-class citizens," he recently told The Catholic Sun, Syracuse's diocesan newspaper.

Vatican representatives have said that subsequent documents and papal apologies show the church no longer supports the Doctrine of Discovery. Numerous denominations have called for the Vatican to rescind the Doctrine of Discovery; Lucia appears to be the first U.S. Catholic bishop to publicly call for an apology.

The bishop ended his remarks at the rally with words of contrition: "I sincerely do apologize for anything that violates the teaching of Jesus Christ, who taught nothing but love, nothing but respect and care for those around him."