News



President of the Metis community, Cassidy Caron, speaks to the media in St. Peter's Square after their meeting with Pope Francis at The Vatican, Monday, March 28, 2022. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

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VATICAN CITY — Indigenous leaders from Canada and survivors of the country's notorious residential schools met with Pope Francis on Monday and told him of the abuses they suffered at the hands of Catholic priests and school workers, in hopes of securing a papal apology from him and a commitment by the church to repair the harm done.

"While the time for acknowledgement, apology and atonement is long overdue, it is never too late to do the right thing," Cassidy Caron, president of the Metis National Council, told reporters in St. Peter's Square after the audience.

This week's meetings, postponed from December because of the pandemic, are part of the Canadian church and government's efforts to respond to Indigenous demands for justice, reconciliation and reparations — long-standing demands that gained traction last year after the discovery of hundreds of unmarked graves outside some of the schools.

Francis has set aside several hours this week to meet privately with the delegations from the Metis and Inuit on Monday, and First Nations on Thursday, with a mental health counselor in the room for each session. The delegates then gather Friday as a group for a more formal audience, with Francis delivering an address.

Caron said Francis listened intently as three of the many Metis survivors told him their personal stories, and showed sorrow but offered no immediate apology. Speaking in English, he repeated the words Caron said she had emphasized in her remarks: truth, justice and healing.

"I take that as a personal commitment," Caron said, surrounded by Metis fiddlers who accompanied her into the square. "We hope that in committing to us, committing to real action, the church can finally begin its own pathway towards meaningful and lasting reconciliation."

Caron was wearing a traditional handmade beaded jacket that was made for the audience, and members of the Metis delegation presented Francis with a pair of red, beaded moccasins.

The moccasins were being presented "as a sign of the willingness of the Metis people to forgive if there is meaningful action from the church," the group explained in a note. The red dye "represents that even though Pope Francis does not wear the traditional red papal shoes, he walks with the legacy of those who came before him, the good, the great and the terrible."

In a statement issued after Francis met with the Metis and then the Inuit delegation, the Vatican said each meeting lasted about an hour "and was characterized by desire on the part of the pope to listen and make space for the painful stories brought by the survivors."

More than 150,000 native children were forced to attend state-funded Christian schools from the 19th century until the 1970s in an effort to isolate them from the influence of their homes and culture, Christianize and assimilate them into mainstream society, which previous governments considered superior.

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The Canadian government has admitted that physical and sexual abuse was rampant, with students beaten for speaking their native languages. That legacy of abuse and isolation has been cited by Indigenous leaders as a root cause of epidemic rates of alcohol and drug addiction on reservations.

Nearly three-quarters of the 130 residential schools were run by Catholic missionary congregations.

Last May the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc Nation announced the discovery of some 215 gravesites near Kamloops, British Columbia, found using ground-penetrating radar. It was Canada's largest Indigenous residential school, and the discovery of the graves was the first of numerous, similar grim sites across the country.

Even before the sites were discovered, Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission specifically called for a papal apology to be delivered on Canadian soil for the church's role in the "spiritual, cultural, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis children in Catholic-run residential schools."

Francis has committed to traveling to Canada, though no date for a visit has been announced.

"Primarily the reconciliation requires action. And we still are in need of very specific actions from the Catholic Church," said Natan Obed, president of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, who led the Inuit delegation. He cited the reparations the Canadian church has been ordered to pay, as well as justice for victims of a Catholic Oblate priest accused of multiple cases of sexual abuse who is currently living in France.

"It goes beyond just opening the doors to records, it also goes towards a general willingness to use church resources to help in any way possible," Obed told the AP.

As part of a settlement of a lawsuit involving the government, churches and the approximately 90,000 surviving students, Canada paid reparations that amounted to billions of dollars being transferred to Indigenous communities.

The Catholic Church, for its part, has paid over $50 million and now intends to add $30 million more over the next five years.

The Argentine pope is no stranger to offering apologies for his own errors and what he himself has termed the "crimes" of the institutional church.

During a 2015 visit to Bolivia, he apologized for the sins, crimes and offenses committed by the church against Indigenous peoples during the colonial-era conquest of the Americas. In Dublin, Ireland, in 2018, he offered a sweeping apology to Irish women and others who were sexually and physically abused over generations by church officials.

That same year, he met privately with three Chilean sex abuse survivors whom he had discredited by backing a bishop they accused of covering up sexual abuse. In a series of meetings over the course of a week that echo those scheduled for the Canadian delegates, Francis listened, and apologized.

Phil Fontaine was national chief of the Assembly of First Nations in 2009 when he led an Indigenous delegation to meet with Pope Bendict XVI. At the time, Benedict only expressed his "sorrow at the anguish caused by the deplorable conduct of some members of the church." But he didn't apologize.

Standing outside St. Peter's Square, Fontaine said a full papal apology "would be a tremendous boost to these efforts by thousands of survivors that are still looking for healing. They're definitely anxious to see true reconciliation come about, but reconciliation will not be achieved without the truth."