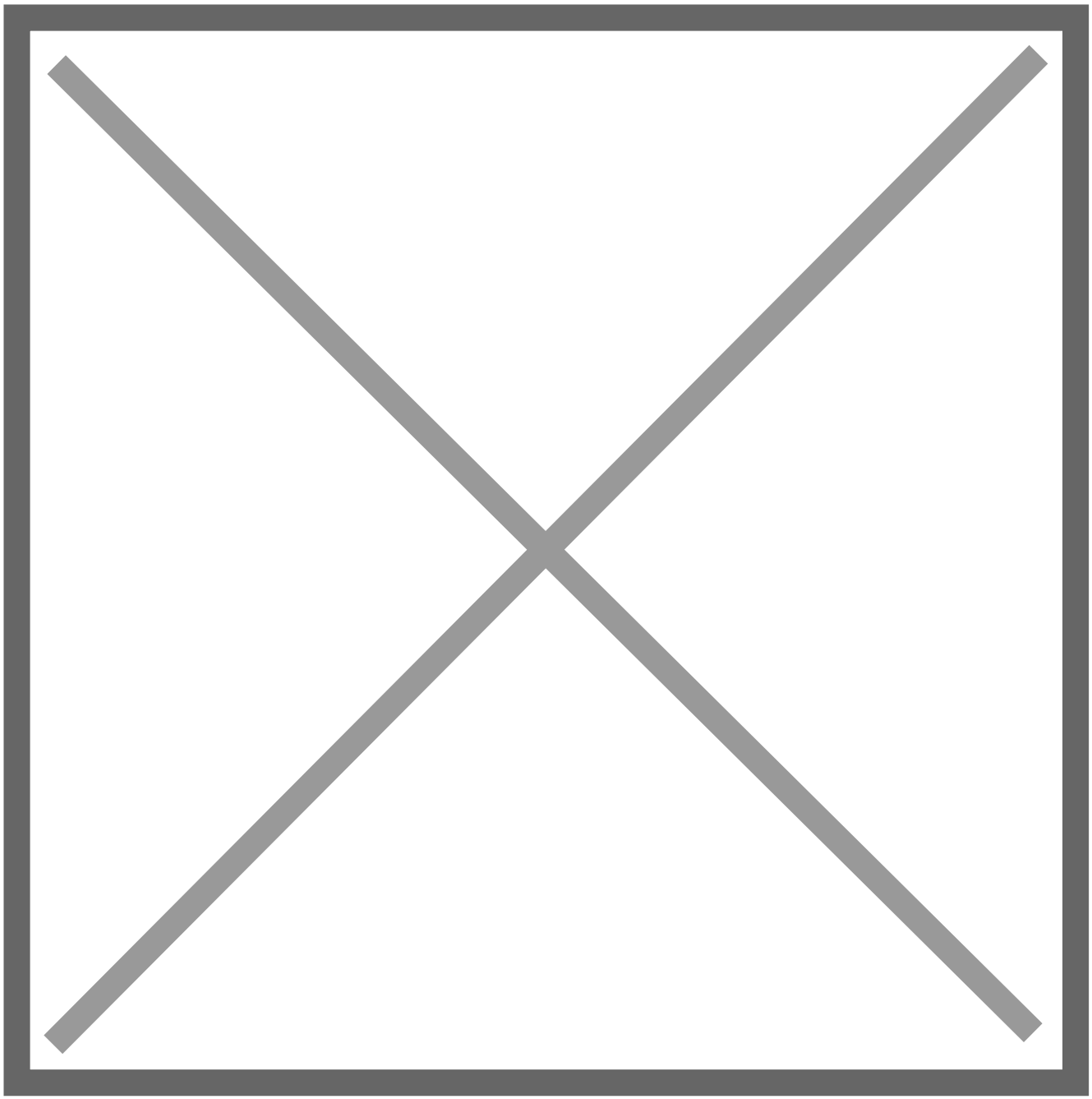
Vatican



Pope Francis answers questions from journalists aboard his flight from Iqaluit, in the Canadian territory of Nunavut, to Rome July 29, 2022. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



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ON BOARD THE PAPAL FLIGHT FROM CANADA — Pope Francis on July 29 said that the Catholic Church's treatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada amounted to a cultural "genocide" and warned against a colonialist mindset that continues to view Native peoples and customs as "inferior."

Francis said that "taking away the children, changing the culture and mentality" and erasing "an entire culture" was effectively a "genocide."

The pope's remarks came during an inflight press conference en route back to Rome after his July 24-29 trip to Canada, where he apologized on multiple occasions for the abuse that Indigenous children suffered at Catholic-run residential schools, as well as for the church's adoption of policies that stripped away Indigenous culture.

The phrase "cultural genocide" was used by the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission in its final report in 2015. During his first full day in the country on July 25, Francis apologized for the "cultural destruction" resulting from the residential schools, but stopped short of calling it a genocide.

"Genocide is a technical term," said Francis on his flight home, affirming that while he did not specifically use it during the trip, that what he had described in apologizing for the treatment of Indigenous peoples at residential schools could be characterized as such.

"I asked for forgiveness for this genocidal work," he added.

Francis was also asked about appeals to rescind the "Doctrine of Discovery," a policy dating back to the 15th century that offered a theological justification for the

colonization of Indigenous lands.

While church officials have maintained that the doctrine no longer has any legal merits, Canada's bishops' have been working with Vatican officials for a formal rescission of the policy, which has been an ongoing demand of many Indigenous advocates.

At various points throughout his time in the country, Francis was met with banners and shouts from protestors calling on him to take action, though he did not comment directly on the doctrine during his visit.

While he avoided discussion of the legal questions surrounding it, the pope told reporters that “this doctrine of colonization is evil and unjust and used today.”

“That mentality,” said Francis, that “we are superior and these Indigenous do not count, that is very serious.”

“Even today, we see the same kind of colonialism,” said Francis, adding that it was necessary to go back and fix “the wrong that was done.”

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Francis answered questions for just over 40 minutes and, for the first time during his 37 international trips as pope, remained seated for the duration of his exchange with journalists, due to his ongoing mobility issues stemming from a fracture in his knee.

For months, the pope has been dogged with questions regarding his health and a possible resignation, but Francis again denied that he had plans to step down any time soon.

At the same time, the 85-year-old pope acknowledged that his papacy has entered into a different phase, describing his six-day trip through Canada as “pretty intense” and an unsustainable pace for future travels.

“I don’t think I will be able to follow the same rhythm as previous trips,” he said, citing both his age and his limited mobility.

“I have to save energy to serve the church,” he said.

Francis confirmed that he would like to travel to Ukraine, which senior Vatican officials have hinted could take place in the coming months, and that he intends to also make a September visit to Kazakhstan to participate in the Congress of World and Traditional Religions.

There, he is likely to hold a meeting with Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, a key backer of Russian President Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine, who is also set to attend the congress.

The pope also reiterated his desire to travel to the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan, where he was scheduled to visit in early July, but was forced to postpone due to complications with his knee.

"I have all the good will," he told reporters. "Let's see how my leg goes."

At the same time, he seemed to admit with ease that there could come a time when he could no longer carry on with the demands of the papacy.

"I have to discern, to understand what the Lord wants," he said. "And it might be that the Lord wants me to step aside."

"That wouldn't be a catastrophe," he surmised. "You can change the pope; that's not a problem."

Francis also discussed several internal matters of church life, saying that the unsigned communication from the Vatican earlier this month on the German "Synodal Path"— which warned that the country could not move ahead with certain propositions ahead of the Vatican and the universal church — was a message that should have been signed by the Secretariat of State.

Francis said the unsigned nature of the communication was a simple clerical error.

To date, some leaders of the "Synodal Path" have expressed an openness towards women deacons and priests, the blessing of same-sex unions and the relaxation of the rule for mandatory celibacy for most Latin-rite Catholic priests.

In responding to the question regarding the situation in Germany, the pope again cited his 2019 letter to German Catholics that emphasized that synodality is a process that requires listening to the Holy Spirit, rather than prioritizing particular issues or outcomes.

Francis also demurred when asked about the possibility of reexamining church teaching against contraception.

While the pope defended the work of theologians who have called for such a change, saying “one cannot do theology with a ‘no’ in front of you,” he said the church’s Magisterium “helps to understand the limits.”

While not addressing the question of contraception directly, Francis went on to note that there are plenty of areas of church teaching that have changed over time, saying that “a church that does not develop its thinking in an ecclesial way is a church that goes backward.”

“That is the problem of many today who claim to be traditionalists. They are not traditionalists, they are backwardists,” said the pope. “Tradition is the root of inspiration in order to go forward in the church."

This story appears in the **Pope Francis in Canada** feature series. View the full series.
A version of this story appeared in the **Aug 19-Sept 1, 2022** print issue under the headline: Pope: Church committed cultural 'genocide'.