

Towards a Theology of Reconciliation between the Roman Catholic Community in Canada and First Nations

Based on a talk by Marie Zarowny, SSA given at St. Joseph's Parish, Ottawa, March 19, 2009

The historic Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (2007) mandated the Government of Canada to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (www.trc.ca). The Commission was initially appointed in 2008 with a broad mandate to inform *all Canadians* about the 130 year history of the schools and to guide and inspire a process of reconciliation and renewed relationships based on mutual understanding and respect. The continuing work of the Commission compels us as followers of Jesus Christ to reflect anew on the meaning of reconciliation between groups and individuals when an historic injustice has been suffered by members of a particular group within a society. What responsibility do those members of the society who are not part of the group that suffered the injustice have in a new moment of history? What is the role faith communities and those in positions of leadership or education in those communities?

We are accustomed to thinking about reconciliation as between two individuals. A rupture in a relationship has occurred, been acknowledged and in some way "repaired;" a new relationship is formed. The process of reconciliation between groups of people that have inherited a situation of wrongdoing or injustice towards one of the groups is somewhat similar but much more complex. The historic situation of the Indian Residential Schools and the resulting broken relationships require such a process. To do so we need to acknowledge that such an injustice not only existed in the past but has compounded and continues to exist.

Members of Canada's First Nations and other Aboriginal Groups have invited leaders and members of the Roman Catholic Church to enter into a process of reconciliation with them and to join them in striving to bring about a more just Canadian society. Although it is the legacy of the Indian Residential Schools that prompted recognition of a need for reconciliation, both the need and the process are embedded in a much broader context that dates back to the early stages of contact and colonization.

In 1996 the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples published its report, *People to People – Nation to Nation*. In their introduction, the Commissioners stated:

Canada is a test case for a grand notion - the notion that dissimilar peoples can share lands, resources, power and dreams while respecting and sustaining their differences. The story of Canada is the story of many such peoples, trying and failing and trying again, to live together in peace and harmony.

But there cannot be peace or harmony unless there is justice. It was to help restore justice to the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada, and to propose practical solutions to stubborn problems, that the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was established. In closing the report, the Commissioners stated:

We talk at some length about new structures of governance, new strategies for economic development, new kinds of social programs. But at heart, what we want to do is something more radical. It is to bring about change in human lives. It is to ensure that Aboriginal children grow up knowing that they matter - that they are precious human beings deserving love and respect, and that they hold the keys to a future bright with possibilities in a society of equals.

The Royal Commission asked for a 20 year commitment...an act of national intention...to build a renewed relationship between First Nations and Canada built on the *principles of recognition, respect, sharing and responsibility*. I invite you to reflect on what has changed. If you were a member of a First Nations, how do you think you would answer that question?

I invite you to also reflect on your personal/parish/civic community relationship with First Nations. How have you/we responded to their pleas for recognition and respect? What steps have we taken to learn their concerns and to act in solidarity with them?

Historical Context

The current situation of broken relationship and injustice is the product of our history of colonization, built on attitudes of superiority, discrimination, racism, and entitlement. Addressing this history is not only a political, economic and social challenge; it is also a religious and spiritual imperative.

René Fumoleau, an Oblate priest who has lived and worked with the Dene in Canada's North for over 50 years, described the colonization and oppression of the First Nations of these lands as *Canada's original sin*. This "sin" has endured throughout the centuries and provides the context and the lens through which we understand both the Residential Schools and Canada's other acts of injustice and discrimination. These attitudes of superiority, discrimination and entitlement gave rise to structures which further embedded the attitudes into all aspects of the civic and even faith community, from one generation of the dominant, settler population to the next and which continue today.

As that occurred, what was passed on through the First Nations Communities was recurring, generational experiences of being discriminated against, considered inferior, rejected, shamed ...and especially in the experience of the residential schools, of families and communities being torn apart. A poignant part of the apology given by Prime Minister Stephen Harper on June 11, 2008 was his invitation for us to reflect on what it would be like in our towns and villages if there were no children ...not one child...between the ages of 5 and 17. Can you imagine the emptiness and loneliness? Parents, think about what that would be like. For those of you who are grandparents and live near your grandchildren or go to visit them from time to time ...can you imagine what it would be like if they were placed in a foreign institution, far away from you, where you might not see them again for 10 years, and when you did, they no longer spoke your language? Placed in a foreign institution where they learned "foreign ways" and were taught that your ways, your language and even your beliefs were wrong and evil?

For many, these were the experiences of the residential schools. The schools were what we could now call a sinful social structure.

Reconciliation

We in Canada are living in what Christians call a "graced time." It is our privilege as Canadians at this moment of history to be invited into a process of reconciliation by those whom Canada has victimized.

True reconciliation is initiated by the one or group that has been hurt, oppressed, discriminated against, or sinned against. During our times, the First Nations of this land have called on the Government of Canada, Canadians and the Churches for acknowledgement of what we have done to them; they have been pleading with us in a variety of ways to hear their pain and to acknowledge our role in it; to in some way provide reparation; and to enter into a new relationship built on mutual respect.

Very briefly, a Christian understanding of Reconciliation (as articulated in recent writings and talks by theologian Robert Shreiter, C.P.P.S) has three characteristics:

1. *God, the Divine, is the author of reconciliation:* We participate in what God is bringing about and in so doing we engage in something sacred... Members of First Nations express this well by the ceremonies and prayers that accompany gestures of reconciliation. Those of us who were in the House of Commons on June 11th 2008 or who watched it on television experienced the richness of such ceremony.

2. *God's first concern in reconciliation is for the healing of the victims.* – Not to make the wrongdoer feel better.

3. *In reconciliation, God makes of both victim and wrongdoer a new creation characterized by equity and trust;* In profound experiences of hurt, it is impossible to go back to where we were before; we can only go forward to a new place. In this process, God wants both the healing of the victim and the repentance/the conversion of the wrongdoer. Both need to be brought to a new place, a new creation.

How does this happen?

1. *Truth-telling*: The silence that hides the wrongdoing is broken; the lies and distortions that bring shame on individuals and groups of people and that isolate people from one another, in order that the power of one group can be exercised over another is revealed. I suggest that this truth-telling has been a critical goal, for many First Nations, of the litigation arising from the Residential Schools and is the primary goal of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Truth-telling, if it is to be part of God's process of reconciliation, must break the codes of silence that hide wrongdoing against poor and vulnerable members of a society; it must also be the whole truth, both for the victims and for the alleged wrongdoers.

2. *Pursuit of Justice*: Canada's history of colonization, of which the establishment of the Residential Schools was such a significant part, is a history of injustice. In Catholic Social Teaching we refer to social sin or structural sin. An example of social sin is when one group of people seeks to dominate another, to take away from the other its identity and culture. It becomes structural when institutions are put in place to achieve these goals and laws are made to uphold them. Is this not the history of Canada's relationship with First Nations and indeed of the Residential Schools? In 1991, (*Centesimo Anno*) Pope John Paul II stated that *"The decisions which create a human environment can give rise to specific structures of sin which impede the full realization of those who are in any way oppressed by them. To destroy such structures and replace them with more authentic forms of living in community is a task which demands courage and patience."* I would add that it is a task that also demands insight and determination. Throughout my over 30 years of working with First Nations communities, I have consistently heard the call for justice ...for adequate resources, health care, housing, education, self-determination and land rights. I am firmly convinced that unless we in Canada recognize and begin to dismantle the attitudes of superiority and structures of inequality that characterize our relationships with First Nations, we will not truly achieve reconciliation. We will not have become part of a new creation.

In the apologies we heard in the House of Commons (June 11, 2008), there were at least hints of recognition from party leaders that justice needs to be pursued; in almost all the responses I heard from Aboriginal Leaders, the need to follow the apology with concrete actions that lead to mutually respectful and just relationships was loud and clear. To quote but a few:

The AFN National Chief, Phil Fontaine: *"There are many fights still to be fought. What happened here today signifies a new dawn in the relationship between us and the rest of Canada."* Chief Fontaine, in his words to the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops in September, 2008 stated even more clearly: *For our people, reconciliation means the eradication of First Nations poverty ...and doing so will require the support and engagement of all Canadians.* He reiterated that we in the Catholic Church have a significant role to play, especially in using our *influence, experience and commitment to help lift native people out of poverty.*

Mary Simon, speaking for the Inuit, stated: *Let us not be lulled into an impression that when the sun rises tomorrow morning the pain and scars will miraculously be gone. ...But a new day has dawned, a new day heralded by a commitment to reconciliation and building a new relationship with Inuit, Metis, and First Nations. Let us now join forces with a common goal of working together ...We need the help and support of all thoughtful Canadians and our governments to re-build strong, healthy families and communities.*

In a statement to the Senate the day after the apology, the Inuit stated: *The magnitude of yesterday's historic apology and request for forgiveness will be measured in the future actions of government. So much of our past relationship with governments has been diminished by unfulfilled promises.*

Role of Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will be the *space it creates for truth-telling and the historic documentation it will provide for future generations.* Hopefully, it will raise consciousness in Canadians about our historic and continuing attempts to treat First Nations and some others in our society as inferior and will lead us to seriously examine our attitudes of superiority, discrimination and domination.

The words and even the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will be meaningless, however, if we as Canadians do not tirelessly pursue social and structural justice and in this way enter into the *relationships of equity and trust* that are part of the 3rd phase of biblical reconciliation.

Role of Individuals and Communities

Because the harm was institutionalized, reconciliation needs to occur on a structural level, as described above, nation to nation; peoples to peoples; governments to governments; Church organizations to First Nations communities, with real change and a new relationship emerging.

Abuse, pain, isolation and discrimination, however, are experienced within individuals, one by one and affect generations of families. Louis Frank, an elder from Ahousat on Vancouver Island, said in conversation recently that we need to start with people; that this is not about solving a problem or about politics; it is about people who have been hurting and about relationships. For decades now, Aboriginal Communities across this land have been creating programs to heal from the effects of residential schools and some of these have led to processes of reconciliation, especially with Church groups and individuals. These experiences are community-driven and occur when the community wants it and is ready for it.

I am convinced that the real work of healing and reconciliation will occur at the many community initiatives that engage people with one another and in the mutually respectful relationships that are tenderly re-woven. (for example, see www.returningtospirit.org). There is a continuing role for parishes, dioceses, church organizations and Religious Congregations. How can we enhance our engagement with groups of First Nations? How can we as individuals and as a parish/organization influence Government Leaders to recognize and respond to the injustices still experienced by many First Nations?

As part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, the Catholic organizations involved in the schools committed themselves to best efforts to raise twenty million dollars to fund healing and education projects established in partnership with Aboriginal Communities. By contributing to the campaign every Catholic individual and organization can be directly involved in the reconciliation process. The campaign, entitled *Moving Forward Together*, (www.movingforwardtogether.ca) will include a "pew collection" in every parish. Besides providing Catholics with the opportunity to contribute, these collections provide all leaders and educators with a wonderful opportunity to inform their congregations of the history of colonization and of the schools and to engage members in working to change current unjust structures and policies.

In closing, I return to an earlier comment: I believe that the time is NOW to truly, as Canadians, enter into this process of reconciliation. On our part it will require the ability to listen empathetically and non-defensively; to accept responsibility for the actions of our predecessors, some of our contemporaries and perhaps even ourselves; to make retribution in some way; to create structures that ensure recognition of the rights and dignity of all people; and to walk together into the future in a new relationship.

Let us not miss this graced moment.

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