

Pope apologizes to Canadian Indigenous for church abuse

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Pope Francis wears a headdress presented to him by Indigenous leaders during a meeting at Muskwa Park in Maskwacis, Alberta, Canada, on July 25, 2022. (Photo by AFP)

Ottawa, July 26 (RHC)-- Pope Francis has offered a sweeping apology to Indigenous people on their native land in Canada over church-run residential schools that became gruesome centers of abuse, forced assimilation, cultural devastation and death for over a century.

Addressing a large crowd of Indigenous people, some wearing traditional clothing and headdresses, in Maskwacis, Alberta, the site of a former residential school, the pope said a feeling of “shame” had lingered since he apologized to representatives of Indigenous people in April at the Vatican.

He said he was “deeply sorry” for the ways in which “many Christians supported the colonizing mentality of the powers that oppressed the Indigenous peoples.” The residential schools separated children from parents; inflicted physical, sexual and mental abuse; erased languages; and used Christianity as a weapon to break the cultures, and communities, of Indigenous people.

Francis said that “begging pardon is not the end of the matter,” adding that he “fully” agreed with skeptics who wanted actions.

Between 1881 and 1996 more than 150,000 indigenous children were separated from their families and brought to residential schools. Many children were starved, beaten and sexually abused in a system that Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission called “cultural genocide.”

While Canada’s leaders have known about high numbers of children dying at the residential schools since 1907, the issue was thrust to the fore with the discovery of suspected unmarked graves at or near former residential school sites last year.

Many have called for financial compensation, the return of indigenous artifacts, the release of school records, support for extraditing an accused abuser, and the rescinding of a 15th-century doctrine justifying colonial dispossession of indigenous people in the form of a papal bull, or edict.

First Nations leaders expressed their dissatisfaction over the arrangements of the trip, saying they felt left out. “They have not been really including us in the proper planning of this process. It’s been very unilateral and we don’t feel that it has been about survivors,” of residential schools, she said.

“It has been more about the Church.” Victoria Arcand, an elder from Alexander First Nation, said the visit was long overdue. “I think this visit is kind of long overdue. Maybe it’s something that should have happened many, many years ago. Maybe the start of reconciliation would have started then,” she said.

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