

Canadian official: pope should apologize to First Nations

by [Rob Gillies](#) in the [June 30, 2021](#) issue



Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau visits a memorial at the Centennial Flame on Parliament Hill in Ottawa on June 1. (Sean Kilpatrick/The Canadian Press via AP)

Canada's Indigenous services minister has asked Pope Francis to issue a formal apology for the role the Catholic Church played in Canada's residential school system after the remains of 215 children were located at what was once the country's largest such school.

Chief Rosanne Casimir of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation in British Columbia said the remains of 215 children were confirmed in May at the school in Kamloops, British Columbia, with the help of ground-penetrating radar. So far none has been excavated.

The Kamloops Indian Residential School was Canada's largest such facility and was operated by the Roman Catholic Church between 1890 and 1969 before the federal government took it over as a day school until it closed in 1978. Nearly three-quarters of the 130 schools in Canada were run by Catholic missionary congregations.

A papal apology was one of the 94 recommendations made by the truth and reconciliation commission set up as part of a government apology and settlement over the schools. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau personally asked the pope to consider such a gesture during a visit to the Vatican in 2017.

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops stated in 2018 that the pope could not personally apologize for residential schools, even though he has not shied away from recognizing injustices faced by Indigenous people around the world.

"I think it is shameful . . . that it hasn't been done to date," Indigenous services minister Marc Miller said. "There is a responsibility that lies squarely on the shoulders" of the Catholic bishops in Canada, he added.

Indigenous relations minister Carolyn Bennett added that an apology by the pope would help those who suffered to heal.

"They want to hear the pope apologize," she said.

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops didn't immediately respond to a message seeking comment for the latest call for a formal public apology by the pope. When Pope Francis made remarks to the faithful gathered at St. Peter's Square in Vatican City on June 6, he said he was following the news "with pain" and that the discovery of the children's remains "adds to the awareness of sorrows and sufferings of the past." But he did not issue an apology.

From the 19th century until the 1970s, more than 150,000 First Nations children were required to attend state-funded Christian schools as part of a program to assimilate them into White Canadian society. They were forced to convert to Christianity and were not allowed to speak their native languages. Many were beaten and verbally abused, and up to 6,000 are said to have died.

The Canadian government apologized in Parliament in 2008 and admitted that physical and sexual abuse in the schools was rampant. Many students recalled being

beaten for speaking their languages. They also lost touch with their parents and customs.

The archbishop of Vancouver apologized after the remains were uncovered in Kamloops.

“I am writing to express my deep apology and profound condolences to the families and communities that have been devastated by this horrific news,” Archbishop Michael Miller tweeted. “The Church was unquestionably wrong in implementing a government colonialist policy which resulted in devastation for children, families and communities.”

First Nations leaders are calling for an examination of other former residential schools.

Trudeau’s ministers said the government will help preserve grave sites and search for potential unmarked burial grounds at other former residential schools. But the government has stressed the need for Indigenous communities to decide for themselves how they want to proceed.

“We will be there to support every community that wants to do this work,” Bennett said.

The government previously announced \$27 million Canadian (US \$22 million) for the effort. Bennett called that a first step.

“I know people are eager for answers, but we do have to respect the privacy and mourning period of those communities that are collecting their thoughts [and] putting together protocols on how to honor these children,” Marc Miller said.

Indigenous leaders plan to bring in forensics experts to identify and repatriate the remains of the children found buried on the Kamloops site. Perry Bellegarde, chief of the Assembly of First Nations, spoke with Trudeau in early June and urged him to work with First Nations “to find all the unmarked graves of our stolen children.”

Murray Sinclair, the former chair of the reconciliation commission, said more sites will be found.

“We know there are lots of sites similar to Kamloops that are going to come to light in the future. We need to begin to prepare ourselves for that,” Sinclair said.

The reconciliation commission has records of at least 51 children dying at the school between 1915 and 1963. It identified about 3,200 confirmed deaths at schools throughout Canada but noted that in almost half of them, the schools did not record the cause of death. —Associated Press