



Lemkin Institute Statement on the Visit of Pope Francis in Canada

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The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention voices its appreciation regarding the recent visit of Pope Francis in Canada as sign of apology and repentance regarding the egregious residential school system which killed thousands of Indigenous children and left thousands of others traumatized and suffering. We also want to emphasize that there is still much work to be done within the Roman Catholic Church to recognize and take responsibility for its involvement in supporting and justifying European expansionism, colonialism, slavery and genocide in the Americas.

On the 1st of April 2022, Pope Francis apologized for the first time and expressed his “shame – sorrow and shame – for the role that a number of Catholics, particularly those with educational responsibilities, have had in all these things that wound you.” This formal apology amounted to a first step in making amends and put an end to multiple decades of denial and secrecy pertaining to residential schools in Canada.

According to the *Papal Visit*, the Holy See’s website related to the Pope’s journey to Canada, this event represents a “significant step on the road to truth, understanding and healing” and will contribute to reconciliation, as we suggested in our previous *Statement on Indigenous Child Graves in Canada*. The goal of this “penitential pilgrimage” is to renew the Church’s apologies to Canadian Indigenous peoples whose children suffered a wide range of abuses in residential schools by members of the Catholic Church.

Between the late nineteenth century and the most of the twentieth, more than 150,000 Indigenous young people are estimated to have been forcibly separated from their families in order to attend these residential schools, where they were forced to deny and forget their cultural roots as a way to assimilate them better to Canada’s then Christian society. These events took place during the troubled Canadian colonial era after the adoption of the Indian Act in 1876 which, combined with other discriminatory laws, imposed harsh control measure over the lives of members of the First Nations. As a consequence, more than 139 residential schools were built and managed by Catholic missionaries for most of the twentieth century.

In these educational facilities, Indigenous children were not allowed to speak their native language and they were prohibited from practicing their cultural and religious rites. The racist Canadian colonial regime was convinced that the “European civilization” and Christianity were superior to all indigenous beliefs and cultural practices which were deemed barbaric. This education policy, which destroyed social and political indigenous institutions and forbade the

transmission of traditional Aboriginal religious and cultural values, was finally defined as “cultural genocide” by the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) in 2015.

Investigations that were conducted concluded that children “were beaten, verbally and sexually abused, and thousands died from disease, neglect and suicide” (*The Guardian*, September 6, 2021). Recently, mass graves were found in diverse parts of the Canadian territory. Moreover, recent discoveries and reports made available by the TRC of Canada raise the death toll to more than 4,000 children.

The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention wishes to highlight that this Papal trip is a significant step towards reconciliation and represents a sign of goodwill from the Catholic Church. However, the road to truth and healing remains long and painful, which is why the Canadian government and the Church still have the undeniable responsibility to provide all necessary tools and financial resources in order to investigate and restore the truth and seek further reconciliation. The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention urges both institutions to pay reparations, grant more funds to uncover unmarked graves and missing Indigenous children, and advance structural reforms that acknowledge indigenous sovereignty, dignity, and value.

Moreover, the Canadian government’s recognition of the Residential School system as genocide is long overdue. The work conducted by the TRC and the evidence gathered over the decades can no longer be overlooked by the Canadian authorities.

In 2015, the Commission acknowledged that “reconciliation requires constructive action on addressing the ongoing legacies of colonialism that have had destructive impacts on Aboriginal peoples’ education, cultures and languages, health, child welfare, the administration of justice, and economic opportunities and prosperity.” The Lemkin Institute highlights the need to build a more inclusive, just, and equitable society in Canada and calls on the Canadian government to increase its efforts to bridge the multiple social, economic, and cultural gaps between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Canadians. Only a just society can hope to flourish and thrive in peace and harmony.