



OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

Mass for the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation

*Homily*

[*Isaiah 43:5-7; Psalm 51; Ephesians 2:13-22; Luke 15:11-32*]

Last week, at the end of their plenary meeting, the Bishops of Canada issued a statement of apology to the Indigenous Peoples of this land. Now, my Indigenous friends have taught me that relationships do not heal and grow by a simple exchange of words communicated on a piece of paper. They need to come alive through personal encounter. Therefore, I would like at this moment to deliver those words personally to all of you. I pray that you hear in them the deeply felt sentiments arising in the heart of every Bishop in this land, including my own.

***We, the Catholic Bishops of Canada, gathered in Plenary this week, take this opportunity to affirm to you, the Indigenous Peoples of this land, that we acknowledge the suffering experienced in Canada's Indian Residential Schools.***

***Many Catholic religious communities and dioceses participated in this system, which led to the suppression of Indigenous languages, culture and spirituality, failing to respect the rich history, traditions and wisdom of Indigenous Peoples.***

***We acknowledge the grave abuses that were committed by some members of our Catholic community; physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, cultural, and sexual.***

***We also sorrowfully acknowledge the historical and ongoing trauma and the legacy of suffering and challenges faced by Indigenous Peoples that continue to this day.***

***Along with those Catholic entities which were directly involved in the operation of the schools and which have already offered their own heartfelt apologies, we, the Catholic Bishops of Canada, express our profound remorse and apologize unequivocally.***

These words of apology are followed in the statement by an invitation to Indigenous Peoples, one that I believe echoes the hope residing right now in the hearts of many people across this country. It is an invitation to enter together into a new “era of reconciliation”. Yet,

while there is a strong and widely-shared desire to move toward reconciliation, the way to arrive at that destination is not at all clear. What are the right paths to follow, and the ones to avoid? Where are the signposts to direct us? How long is this journey we must undertake?

These and other similar questions now face us and must be addressed. Thanks be to God, we do not have to figure out the answers on our own. We already know the One who can show us the way to the reconciliation we desire, because he himself is the Way. As St. Paul reminds us, Jesus is our reconciliation; he is our peace. In him, the Crucified and Risen Lord, all barriers of hostility and separation come down and we are given the way to one another. But what does that way look like? Well, Jesus himself shows us exactly what the way forward looks like in the familiar and beloved parable of the Prodigal Son. As we consider what it teaches us, I draw our attention to some specific aspects of the parable that speak directly to what we are experiencing right now in our country.

First of all, it tells us that, at a certain point after he left his father and home, the wayward son “came to himself”. Other translations will say that he “came to his senses.” In other words, he came to the painful and shocking realization of the wrong he had done, and he knew, with conviction and contrition, that he needed to return home.

Since the news of unmarked graves at sites of former residential schools, there has been, I believe, a great awakening across this land. It is as if people everywhere are “coming to their senses”, and realizing with both shock and shame the grievous harm visited upon Indigenous Peoples by the residential school experience and everything it represents. My prayer is that this time of awakening not wane, and we seize this moment as an opportunity to return home to one another.

Embarking on the way to the “home” of reconciliation demands that we first acknowledge how far we are from it. As the son came to his senses, he saw with new eyes that he was in foreign territory, an alien land far from the house of his father. In the awakening now occurring in Canada, eyes are opening everywhere to the great distances separating the broader community and Indigenous Peoples, to the alienation from one another caused by vast expanses of racism, misunderstanding, and indifference. In this situation, a question imposes itself, one we simply cannot ignore: will we embrace as our own the son’s resolve to embark on the journey toward reconciliation, to the place where we have no longer lost sight of one another, but instead find each other as brothers and sisters in the one home of the Creator?

There is a lot at stake in our answer to this question. Real healing and true reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples have the great potential to serve as a beacon of hope not only

throughout all strata of Canadian society but also beyond its borders. What I'm getting at is this: Exercising sway everywhere these days is the attitude of the elder brother in the parable. His heart was not open to receive his brother. Rather, he pointed out his faults, and remained locked within his own sense of self-righteousness. Our country, indeed our world, is deeply divided right now. We have lost the ability to speak to one another as brothers and sisters, preferring instead to shout past one another, point fingers, and stand in judgment without first seeking an opportunity to listen to the other, confident that our "position" is the right one. To move out of this vicious maelstrom of vitriol and separation, we need examples of people coming together in openness and respect, that show with great clarity that reconciliation is possible, that division can be overcome, and that we can find the way home to restored and respectful relationships. I am convinced that when we, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people together, walk in solidarity along the way home to reconciliation, this will provide our country and world with the example needed to enlighten the path to restored relationships at all levels of human community.

The final point to observe is that Jesus told this parable while he was on his way to Jerusalem, while he walked along that pathway that led to the Cross, the true home of reconciliation. We can be sure that he walks with us now along our path, leading us to embrace the sacrificial self-gift we must make to one another if we are to be healed and reconciled. By the grace of the Eucharist we celebrate together this evening, may we humbly follow his lead, as he guides us home to God the Father, the Creator, where we discover ourselves anew, and welcome one another, as brothers and sisters.

Most Reverend Richard W. Smith  
St. Joseph's Basilica  
September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021