

# Bishops push back as MPs consider call for Pope to apologize for residential schools

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB) is pushing back against “inaccuracies” in a proposed Parliamentary motion asking the CCCB to invite the Pope to apologize for Indian residential schools.

In a seven-page letter released to journalists April 16, the CCCB’s General Secretary Msgr. Frank Leo takes aim at “misunderstandings and factual errors” circulating after NDP MP Charlie Angus sent the proposed motion to Prime Minister Trudeau in an April 2 letter asking for government support for a motion that would call on the CCCB to invite Pope Francis to apologize in Canada as requested by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) Call to Action No. 58.

Negotiations are underway in the House of Commons to see if the motion can receive unanimous consent. If so, it could be introduced and passed immediately. Otherwise, it could take more than a month before the Commons schedule can accommodate a debate. There is also the possibility of a similar motion in the Senate.

A spokesman from the Conservative Party said no decision has been made on whether the party will support the NDP motion, but the issue would be raised at the weekly caucus meeting on April 18.



NDP MP Charlie Angus

A spokesman from Angus' office said they are awaiting the Conservative decision before introducing the motion.

The CCCB is expected to hold a news conference on April 18.

In an April 14 opinion piece to the *Toronto Star*, Angus said, "Traditionally, it is a country's bishops – in Canada, assembled in the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops – who must undertake the process of inviting the Pope to apologize on behalf of the Church. They have decided against this."

The CCCB General Secretary clarified that this is not the case.

"The Catholic Bishops of Canada, including the current and past Presidents of the Conference, have assured the Pope they would joyfully and gratefully welcome him in a visit to Canada," said Msgr. Leo.

"Likewise, in a number of instances, Canadian Bishops, individually and collectively, have formally invited Pope Francis to visit, including with specific reference to Call to Action No. 58."

"Such a visit, however, depends on many factors, including timing, nature, intention, human, structural and financial resources, as well as the surrounding protocol," he said.

Msgr. Leo went on to write Pope Francis' decision that "he cannot personally respond" to Call to Action No. 58 was made in consultation with Canada's Bishops as well as the Holy See's Secretariat of State.

"Pope Francis remains open to a future visit when it is opportune and after discerning the circumstances indicated above," Msgr. Leo wrote. "Sharing in the pain of Indigenous Peoples, he would certainly ensure such a visit includes meaningful encounters with them."

Msgr. Leo also disputed the perception the Catholic community has not apologized sufficiently for the schools.

"To suggest that the Catholic community has not accepted responsibility for its involvement in residential schools is simply inaccurate," he said. "The Catholic Church has apologized in the way it is structured."

The letter explains the Catholic Church's decentralized structure, noting each diocesan bishop is "autonomous in his diocese," and is not accountable to the CCCB.

Of 61 Roman Catholic dioceses in Canada, only 16 were involved in the schools; and out of more than 100 religious orders, only about three dozen participated in running schools, he said.

"Each diocese and institute is corporately and legally responsible for its own actions," he wrote. "The Catholic Church as a whole in Canada was not

associated with the Residential Schools, nor was the (CCCB).”

Msgr. Leo pointed out the TRC’s website provides links to numerous apologies from the various Catholic entities that ran the schools.

“The Bishops of Canada collectively, through the CCCB, have on a number of occasions expressed regret and remorse at the involvement by various Catholics in the former schools,” he said.

He also noted the apology of Pope Benedict XVI in 2009 and quoted the acceptance of Indigenous leaders who were present in the Vatican for the occasion.

The proposed motion also calls for the CCCB to make up the difference in the amount the Catholic entities raised in a best efforts fundraising campaign and the goal set out in the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA).

“The Holy See and the CCCB were never involved in running the former schools,” Msgr. Leo said. “The ‘Roman Catholic Entities’ named as parties in the IRSSA were legally deemed to have fulfilled the requirements of the settlement agreement by a judicial review.”

“Following this review, the former Conservative government released the entities from further obligations – a decision which the present Liberal government did not appeal,” he said.

Angus, in the *Toronto Star* op ed, described this as “a legal loophole” that allowed the Catholic bishops “to walk away from their legal obligation to pay \$25 million in compensation to support survivors of horrific physical and sexual abuse in Church-run schools.”

A spokesman from Angus’ office said April 17 the MP had received the CCCB’s letter but the MP did not publicly responded by our deadline.

Msgr. Leo outlines the financial requirements of the IRSSA that were paid by the Catholic entities, noting they had paid \$29 million, less legal costs, in cash; and more than the required \$25 million in “in-kind” contributions “which financially-speaking go well beyond the scope of the Settlement agreement.”

The Catholic entities, however, were only able to raise \$3.7 million in a “best-efforts” funding raising campaign that had a goal of \$25 million.

The proposed motion also calls for the CCCB to turn over all documents related to the schools.

“The CCCB does not have any residential school records,” Msgr. Leo wrote. “Nor does the CCCB have authority over any of the Catholic entities which may hold records.”