

Catholic women grapple with how to move ahead in reconciliation

Like other Canadians, Catholic women struggle to find ways they can personally contribute to reconciliation with their Indigenous sisters and brothers.

How can we learn from each other? How do we begin respectful conversations? How should we build bridges to genuine friendship? Can we ever heal from the legacy of the Indian Residential Schools?

These questions arose during a lively discussion following a presentation from Archbishop Gerard Pettipas at the recent convention of the Alberta Mackenzie Provincial Council of the Catholic Women's League in Grande Prairie.



Archbishop Gerard Pettipas preaches at opening Mass of CWL Convention. Lorraine Turchansky, Grandin Media

Pettipas spoke on the CWL's current national theme, Care for Our Common Home, inspired by Pope Francis' encyclical on ecology, *Laudato Si*. In Chapter 4, the pope addresses cultural ecology, and the Archbishop placed it in the context of Indigenous Peoples.

"The pope's first statement about this is that in many cases, some peoples have esteemed their own culture as superior to that of other peoples," Pettipas said. "So much so, that they have shown a deep disdain for the culture of the other. This has been and continues to be a grievous sin. To the extent that it kills the soul, it is a mortal sin. Mortal to the sinner. Mortal to the one being sinned against."

The subject is close to Pettipas' heart. His entire Archdiocese of Grouard-McLennan lies on land covered by Treaty 8. There are 19 First Nations and four Métis settlements in his in northern Alberta diocese. And he chaired the board

of 50 Catholic Entities that were party to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), which provided compensation to former students and laid the groundwork for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

“Despite the many advances and opportunities that have followed in recent years from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s 94 final recommendations, and the 231 calls for justice emanating from the Commission report on Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls, Canada still has a serious problem with interracial and intercultural relations,” Pettipas said. “This is part of our nation’s sin history. It cries out for reconciliation.”

Pettipas learned a lot about the issues through his IRSSA work, and readily admits he still has a long way go.

“I knew nothing, really nothing, about our history in this regard before finding myself at the centre of this process,” he said. “The learning curve that engaged many of my energies over the seven years of my engagement in this endeavour has had a profound effect on me and my reflections since.”

While painful at times, that learning curve did uncover points of hope and common ground, especially the depth of Indigenous spirituality.

“Native Canadians believe in God, whom they name the Creator. They believe in the spirit world. They believe that there are spirits that coexist with us, and that often manifest themselves in varied ways, and can interact with us. So strong and consistent is this belief that I have yet to meet an Indigenous Canadian who is an atheist.”

The belief that all creation comes from God is also a given in the Catholic faith. Pettipas noted that the seven traditional teachings of the elders – Wisdom, Love, Bravery, Honesty, Humility, Respect, Truth – are virtues shared with Christian scripture, such as in St. Paul’s letter to the [Colossians 3:12-17](#). “The one God of us all inspires all truth and wisdom,” he said.

Pettipas acknowledged that people in many Indigenous communities continue to suffer disproportionately from depression, suicide, domestic violence, substance abuse, and premature death.

“All too often, breaking news in our country will speak of multiple suicides on reserves, especially among the young, even the very young. The action usually taken in these circumstances is that a team of counsellors will be brought into the community. The suicides will abate, and the problem seems resolved. But I am left wondering, what did these counsellors discover? What caused such despair in the first place? I never hear. My conclusion is that such communities lack what they need most: hope.

"In Christian teaching, hope is a virtue. Like all virtues, it is a building block for what is truly human life. Hope allows you to see meaning and value in your pursuits. Hope convinces you that God loves you, and that life is worth living. With hope, you see at least a glimmer of light, even on your darkest days. Hope provides you the courage to step beyond your own life and its concerns, to reach out and touch in a positive way the life of others."

He conceded that he looks at the issues through the lens of Christian faith, which many might see as imposing a foreign framework, but said it was his Christian understanding that allowed him to make sense of it all.

"The framework of the theological virtues stands out to me as a way to understand and cherish the call to care for our common home: faith, hope and love. It is about a spirituality that recognizes the fundamental reality of God who is creator and source of all life and goodness. It is about a hope by which the present and the future can be faced with confidence and courage. It is about a love that truly cherishes all persons as children of God and therefore worthy of deep respect and honour. This is the foundation for all interpersonal relationships."

In a question-and-answer session following his talk, Pettipas shared that according to some students, residential school was not a bad experience.

"It's one of the struggles of representing the dioceses of religious orders that worked in the schools. Like most institutions, when they're being questioned about their practices, it's hard to speak about the good things, because everybody's focused on the bad, the horrible things. As I said one time to (TRC Commissioner) Justice Sinclair, I don't want to whitewash what happened in the schools. I believe the stories that have come from there. But what is missing is the balance."

In its interim report, the commission acknowledged that many of those who worked in the schools were positive, dedicated teachers who wanted to do the best they could for their students, Pettipas said. "And many of the priests and nuns who worked at the schools had been telling me that they cared about their students and they had a different story to tell, but people weren't interested in hearing it."

He cited the example of Barney Williams, an elder who used to pray before and after each meeting of the Catholic Entities group. One day, he put up his hand to speak, the first time he had said anything other than prayer.

"And he told a story about him and his friends, who recently had heard that a nun who had taught at their school was near death. And he said, 'A bunch of us wanted to get together and go see her before she died and thank her for what she did for us.' There's more than just one story about the residential schools."

A number of delegates shared similar stories, including Melody McLeod of

Yellowknife. She left her home community in the Northwest Territories after Grade 8 to continue her education at Grandin College in Fort Smith. She wanted to share her experience at the TRC hearing in Saskatoon, but was told it wasn't the right time.

"I feel very safe in this environment to say that I had a very good experience in residential school," said McLeod, who met her husband, (now NWT Premier) Bob McLeod, there.

"Most of the graduates of Grandin College became our future leaders – MLAs, premiers. There are good stories out there, but nobody wants to really hear them."

"It needs to be heard. I think eventually the time will come when those good stories come out, because there are a lot out there. There are many, many orphans in the North who would never have survived if the nuns and priests hadn't looked after them. I can say that with great certainty."



Melody McLeod speaks with CWL sisters.Lorraine Turchansky, Grandin Media

When it comes to what CWL members can do to build relationships and reconciliation with their Indigenous sisters, the only agreement seemed to be that there is much to do.

Pettipas suggested that league members might try reaching out to Indigenous women's groups.

“I think they would respond to you in a way that they might not with me,” he said. “You know, get a man in there and they’ll just muck it up.”

June Fuller, past president of the provincial council, said some work has been done in educating CWL members through workshops and programs such as the [Blanket Exercise](#). On Fridays they wear red, in recognition of murdered and missing Indigenous women.

“We have to start looking out,” she said. “It’s actually a conversation we need to start having from the national level down. It’s a conversation for all Canadians.”

As if to underline the point, the following session at the convention was suddenly interrupted by an obviously distraught Indigenous woman who charged the stage and shouted “I’m here on behalf of native culture, on behalf of all the native people that got killed today! What about all the native people who were murdered today? What about them?”

Some delegates eventually managed to calm the woman. She was escorted out, but her appearance made an impact:

“It was like the Holy Spirit came by to say, ‘You know what, girls?’” said Judy Look, the new president of the provincial council. “It just pointed out to me that we don’t have a clue about how to talk. Not one of us had anything in our toolbox to say something to her.”

“I found that really interesting, but I also found that she was our reality. When we began over 100 years ago, our reality was immigrant women, because they were in need. We now have this body of people, and they’re in need.”

“We want to do something, but we don’t know what to do.”

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