

Reconciliation a journey, not destination

After decades of turbulent history with the Catholic Church, indigenous peoples are now committed to healing the fractured relationship, says the former national chief of the Assembly of First Nations.

And a significant part of the reconciliation process will be a full, public apology from the Pope – on Canadian soil – for the Church’s role in operating residential schools for the Canadian government.



Phil Fontaine Photo: Andrew Ehrkamp | Grandin Media

“I think a lot of people are anxious to experience that,” said Phil Fontaine, adding he is “confident” that under the leadership of Pope Francis it will happen.

“We’ve both had a big struggle in the last number of years trying to figure out how we’re going to move forward together, how to re-establish the traditional relationship between Catholic entities and indigenous groups in every part of the country.”

Fontaine was the guest speaker Nov. 30 at the Star of the North, an Oblate retreat centre in St. Albert.

A three-term national chief, Fontaine helped establish the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which detailed the history of residential schools and a path toward reconciliation through 94 recommendations covering child welfare, health, education and political changes. An apology from the Pope on Canadian soil was one of those recommendations.

Over 150,000 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children were placed in residential schools. Many were forbidden to speak their language or practise their own culture. An estimated 80,000 former students are living today, and the impact of the trauma and abuse they suffered continues to be felt.

“That just doesn’t disappear,” said Fontaine, who attended an Oblate residential school on the Sagkeeng First Nation, 150 kilometres north of Winnipeg. “To think that, at this point and time in our history, that those will just vanish into thin air is very much wishful thinking.”

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission reports there were 139 government-run residential schools across Canada, most of which were administered by Catholic

religious orders or other entities, starting in the mid-1800s. The last residential school closed in 1996.

Alberta had 25 residential schools, more than any other province. Two Catholic ones were located within the Archdiocese of Edmonton: Ermineskin at Hobbema (now Maskwacis), operated by the Oblate fathers and Sisters of Assumption; and the Youville school in St. Albert, operated by the Grey Nuns.

Each diocese and religious community is autonomous and Canadian Catholic bishops, as well as leaders of men and women religious communities, have issued apologies.

Canadian bishops say they are focused on their ongoing response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but a future papal visit was not a major topic at their annual plenary Sept. 25-29.



Fontaine speaks at Star of the North in St. Albert Nov. 30 Photo: Andrew Ehrkamp | Grandin Media

Fontaine met privately with Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI in 2009, in which he received a “wonderful and reaffirming” statement of regret for the Church’s role in residential schools. He also suggested that acts of contrition might go both ways.

“We believe there is still is significant room in this process of reconciliation to have the Church collaborate with our community to reaffirm this historic relationship,” said Fontaine.

“We’ve been pretty harsh too. We’ve been very angry. We’ve been bitter. We’ve come out swinging quite often. That doesn’t speak well about forgiveness.”

Fontaine stressed that First Nations want to return to a “very positive” relationship with the Catholic Church, which historically helped protect and advance indigenous rights.

“The Catholic Church was every bit a victim as we were,” Fontaine said. “The challenge is how to build up communities, how to take whatever steps necessary to ensure that communities flourish.”

What those steps will look like, depends on the community.

In Winnipeg, Fontaine co-chairs a committee with Emeritus Archbishop James Weisgerber that is looking at creating garden of reconciliation, sweat lodge or tee pee on land entrusted to First Nations.

In Calgary, it’s a commitment by the University of Calgary to increase the

indigenous presence among students and faculty.

In the Archdiocese of Edmonton, the Office of Aboriginal Relations was established in November 2016.

“We need to show our amendments through action, and I think that’s how this office came about,” said coordinator Gary Gagnon. “As indigenous people, we needed a voice here in the Catholic Archdiocese and not only here, but in other religious communities. We’ve always had dialogue with the Church, but we never had a voice at the table to strategize.”

For Gagnon, reconciliation between the Church and indigenous people means healing together.

“I don’t believe we should ever forget what has happened, but we need to go forward. The wind goes forward. It never goes backward. We need to move ahead and forge good relationships.”

That will take time, and Fontaine cautions against expecting anything “dramatic”. The difference now is that the relationship with the Church will be a collaborative effort.

“The transformation we’re looking for is not going to happen overnight,” Fontaine said. “It will be a long, difficult process because the fractured relationship came about through decades and decades.

“I’ve seen not just apologies. I’ve seen forgiveness. I’ve seen people that have been really hurt reach out to the other side. Once you forgive, I think it’s possible to take the necessary steps toward reconciliation.”

For more information on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its recommendations, visit: <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=905>

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops lists some of the apologies that have been made over the years by Catholic organizations in Canada: <http://www.cccb.ca/site/eng/media-room/files/2630-apology-on-residential-schools-by-the-catholic-church>