

Wait continues for Pope Francis visit to Canada

Those hoping a recent change in the leadership of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops would lead to a change of heart about Pope Francis visiting Canada to apologize in person for the Church's role in Canada's former residential school system for indigenous people will have to wait longer for that to happen.

While the new president of the CCCB, Winnipeg Archbishop Richard Gagnon, says the Pope knows he is always welcome in Canada, a formal request for a visit tied into Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) on First Nations is not on the CCCB's agenda at this time.

Gagnon said when the pope visits a country it is always tied into stressing an issue such as the plight of the poor, and that he is aware that there are those calling for the Pope to visit Canada in relation to the TRC's Calls To Action. That report specifically called on the Pope to visit Canada to apologize in relation to the residential schools issue as one of its 94 recommendations.

Gagnon said that within the Canadian Catholic Church at "an appropriate time it would be open to that."

"There are those who are very much in favour of inviting (the pope) to Canada," Gagnon said. "But the Holy Father just doesn't go for a visit."

One of the TRC's co-chairs, Senator Murray Sinclair – a former judge – has been critical of Canada's bishops for not pushing for a papal visit in light of the commission's report from 2015 and its recommendations.

After former CCCB president Bishop Lionel Gendron issued a letter to Canada's First Nations saying Pope Francis can't personally issue an apology for residential schools after the commission's recommendations were released, some individual Canadian bishops expressed disappointment.

In a statement to the media, Saskatoon Bishop Mark Hagemoen said, "I recognize that the recent letter to the indigenous peoples of Canada from the president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops is a disappointment to many people in our community."

Among those who have asked that Canada's bishops formally invite the Pope to visit in relation to the residential school issue include the federal government and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Trudeau asked Pope Francis in a

2017 meeting at the Vatican to apologize on Canadian soil on behalf of the Church in Canada as called for by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

In his letter to the indigenous peoples of Canada, Gendron said at the time that "after carefully considering the request and extensive dialogue with the bishops of Canada, he (Pope Francis) felt that he could not personally respond."

However, Gendron said in his annual yearly president's report to a Plenary Assembly of the CCCB this past September that reconciliation with Indigenous peoples is an ongoing and important issue for Canada's bishops.

Gendron said issues related to reconciliation with First Nations were discussed over the course of the plenary assembly held in Cornwall, Ont., with an emphasis being put on action and not just words.

"It must go beyond superficial offerings," Gendron said. "It must touch Indigenous Peoples and make a real difference in their communities and lives."