

# “He Will Wipe Every Tear from Their Eyes”: The Church’s Call to Native American Boarding School Truth and Healing

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## Abstract

*This paper argues that the Catholic Church must support and participate in Indigenous-led truth and healing efforts for the ways that the Church perpetrated abuses and trauma through Native American boarding schools. The paper begins by examining the Church’s historical role in boarding schools and the ways that Native American Catholic schools today differ from their historical predecessors. The paper then discusses the lack of apology from the institutional Church for Native American boarding schools in the United States and various movements in the Church and Church teachings that support a commitment to truth and healing. Using the example of Red Cloud Indian School, the paper concludes with a vision of what the Church’s support of boarding school truth and healing could look like and why that is essential for the Church’s mission.*

“If Jesus were to come to the village, I have no doubt in my mind  
that he would be crying.”<sup>1</sup>

- Elsie Boudreau, Yup’ik, Survivor of Clergy Abuse

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<sup>1</sup> *Frontline*. "The Silence." Written by Mark Trahant. Aired April 19, 2011, on PBS. Accessed October 31, 2021. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/the-silence/>.

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“He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away.”<sup>2</sup>

### Revelation 21:4

In the Book of Revelation, John encounters the New Jerusalem, the union of God’s people in the world to come. In this sacred place, all the suffering of the world passes away, and God lives in full union with God’s people. All sin and pain are cast aside, and anyone who does “abominable things or tells lies” is cast out from the city. God gives light forever and banishes the darkness.<sup>3</sup> In the New Jerusalem, God’s people find total healing and reconciliation to be one with God and each other. The Kingdom of God is fulfilled. This image of the New Jerusalem seems impossible when facing the atrocities and abuses of this world, particularly those perpetrated by the Church which still remain raw and unaddressed. Between 1879 and 1965, hundreds of thousands of Native American children were taken from their families and placed in Native American boarding schools designed to, as General Richard Pratt said, “Kill the Indian in him and save the man.”<sup>4</sup> In boarding schools, Native American children had their tribal cultures, languages, and identities stripped from them. Speaking tribal languages was forbidden, boys had their long hair cut, children had their clothes from home taken from them and replaced with uni-

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<sup>2</sup> NABRE.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. 21. NABRE.

<sup>4</sup> Adams, David Wallace. *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995. p. 52.

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forms, and many students were re-named.<sup>5</sup> Many students also experienced physical and sexual abuse in addition to the psychological abuse of having their culture torn from them. An estimated eighty boarding schools were operated by the Catholic Church.<sup>6</sup> These schools aimed to convert Native Americans to Catholicism and continue the work of prior missionary efforts.<sup>7</sup> While they varied in their methods and their levels of engagement with the cultures of their students, Catholic schools participated in this process of colonization and assimilation. The intergenerational trauma of the Native American boarding school era remains in Native American communities today, and boarding school survivors and their descendants continue to clamor for truth and healing.

Today, around twenty-five Catholic schools serve Native American communities in the continental United States, many of which were originally founded as Native American boarding schools. In contrast to their historical predecessors, these schools work to integrate tribal and Catholic identities, spiritualities, and cultures and provide a quality education for Native students which is rooted in their communities and spurred on through local leadership. Modern-day Native American Catholic schools bring together the Catholic and tribal identities of their students in a variety of ways: integrating tribal languages into the school, incorporating the spirituality of the religious order present in the school, providing teachers who model the Catholic faith and tribal identities, implementing religion curricula that include tribal cultures

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<sup>5</sup> Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 97-135.

<sup>6</sup> "American Indian Boarding Schools by State." Infographic. In *Healing Voices Volume 1: A Primer on American Indian and Alaska Native Boarding Schools in the U.S.*, 2nd ed., by The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, 8-9. Minneapolis: National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, 2020. Accessed October 31, 2021. <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/list/>.

<sup>7</sup> Prucha, Francis Paul. *The Churches and the Indian Schools, 1888-1912*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979. p. 3.

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and spiritualities, and fostering active parish life. Each school has a unique identity depending on the tribal nation or nations with which they work, their histories, their student demographics, and their spiritual identity; however, they have many goals, values, and challenges in common.<sup>8</sup> In its own context, each school must grapple with the histories of abuse in Native American communities through the Church which remain an open wound in the communities in which they serve.

To this day, there has been no formal apology from the Catholic Church for the abuses that Native American peoples have experienced through boarding schools in the United States. Recent movement in the Church shows the possibility of widespread truth and healing efforts: certain religious orders<sup>9</sup> and conferences of bishops<sup>10</sup> have apologized for the Church’s role in boarding and residential schools in the United States and Canada, and Pope Francis met with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis residential school survivors at and issued an apology for the Church’s role in Canadian residential schools.<sup>11</sup> The apology from Pope Francis included acknowledgement of the evils of boarding schools and the Church’s role in them and a request

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<sup>8</sup> Ward, Katie. "The Formation of Identity and Culture in Native American Catholic Schools," *Journal of the West* 59, no. 3 (Summer 2020).

<sup>9</sup> For example, the Oblate Conference of Canada issued a formal apology in 1991 to the First Nations of Canada: <https://omilacombe.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AN-APOLOGY-TO-THE-FIRST-NATIONS-OF-CANADA-BY-THE-OBLATE-CONFERENCE-OF-CANADA-w-intro-1991.pdf>. Other movements from religious orders have included expressions of sorrow and commitments to truth efforts such as this 2021 statement from the Jesuit Conference: <https://www.jesuits.org/press-release/statement-on-boarding-schools-for-indigenous-students/>.

<sup>10</sup> The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a formal apology in 2021: <https://www.cccb.ca/letter/statement-of-apology-by-the-catholic-bishops-of-canada-to-the-indigenous-peoples-of-this-land/>

<sup>11</sup> Francis. "Meeting with Representatives of Indigenous Peoples in Canada." Vatican. Last modified April 1, 2022. [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/april/documents/20220401-popoli-indigeni-canada.html?fbclid=IwAR20c7Gpe8LLcWmCnhX39PF\\_tEyrRlnDpfzukxC2\\_z1qkea3wqheaVi5Ew.](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/april/documents/20220401-popoli-indigeni-canada.html?fbclid=IwAR20c7Gpe8LLcWmCnhX39PF_tEyrRlnDpfzukxC2_z1qkea3wqheaVi5Ew.); Shivaram, Deepa. "The Pope Apologizes for Abuse of Indigenous Children in Canada's Residential Schools." NPR. Last modified April 1, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/01/1090213962/pope-francis-apology-indigenous-people-canada>.

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for pardon.<sup>12</sup> It also addressed the ongoing work that would need to be done, as Pope Francis encouraged the Canadian bishops, “to continue taking steps towards the transparent search for truth and to foster healing and reconciliation.”<sup>13</sup> This statement serves as an important step for the prioritization of truth and healing work in the Catholic Church in Canada, particularly in its specific call to action. An apology from the Church about Native American boarding schools in the United States context would help the Church in the United States to take similar steps to commit to truth and healing.

As the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition stated in their response to Pope Francis’ recent apology for boarding school abuses in Canada, “the Roman Catholic Church and other religious denominations involved in operating these assimilative institutions must now turn to the atrocities committed in the United States in its own Indian Boarding School policy era. Acknowledging harm in one country while not taking similar, measurable steps in another country continues to perpetuate the harm against Native American, Alaska Native, and other Indigenous survivors of boarding schools and their descendants.”<sup>14</sup> Especially now as the United States is working to confront its boarding school history through the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative that includes examining the role of faith-based organizations,<sup>15</sup> the lack of apology from the Church on boarding school abuses in the American

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<sup>12</sup> Francis, "Meeting with," Vatican.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, "NAB's Statement on Apology from Pope," news release, April 1, 2022, <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/nabs-statement-on-apology-from-pope/>.

<sup>15</sup> United States Department of the Interior, *Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report*, by Bryan Newland, [Page #], May 2022, [https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi\\_investigative\\_report\\_may\\_2022\\_508.pdf](https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi_investigative_report_may_2022_508.pdf).

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context continues to inflict injustice on communities. This makes the truth and healing work in Native American communities, particularly through existing Catholic schools, that much more difficult. How can Catholic institutions such as schools and parishes approach truth and healing work with communities that have suffered through boarding schools without an acknowledgement from Church authority of the Church’s role in these abuses?

In work for truth and healing, the Church must act firmly on the knowledge that God stands with and suffers alongside the poor, marginalized, and abused. In *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI says, “The injustice of certain situations cries out for God's attention.”<sup>16</sup> The suffering of Native peoples and cultures through the boarding school system is a situation such as this. God hears the cry of God’s people and knows deeply their suffering. As God’s people on earth, the Church must likewise hear the suffering of those who experienced boarding school abuses and their families and respond with an active commitment to uncovering truths of what happened in those institutions and supporting indigenous healing movements for boarding school survivors and their descendants. In *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXIII says, “The rights of all should be effectively safeguarded and, if they have been violated, completely restored.”<sup>17</sup> Standing alongside boarding school survivors and descendants and engaging in truth and healing efforts is the first step to the Church restoring what can be restored from that which was taken in boarding schools. This manifests in community-based truth and healing efforts where the Church listens to boarding school survivors and their descendants and puts the resources and knowledge

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<sup>16</sup> Paul VI. "Populorum Progressio." Vatican. March 26, 1967. [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_26031967\\_populorum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html).

<sup>17</sup> John XXIII. "Pacem in terris." Vatican. April 11, 1963. [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_enc\\_11041963\\_pacem.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html).

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of the Church at the feet of those who have experienced oppression to communally work towards healing.

Red Cloud Indian School, a Lakota Catholic school on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, has begun this process of truth and healing to confront its past as Holy Rosary Mission. Makħa Akaŋ Nažiŋ Black Elk, Executive Director of Truth and Healing at Red Cloud, describes this process saying, “Uncovering our past requires Red Cloud to take an in-depth look at ourselves, hold up a long-needed mirror, and open our hearts and minds to the stories we wish we could forget.”<sup>18</sup> Red Cloud has committed to key actions which help uncover the truths of their past and offer the possibility of healing for their community: digitizing their archives, bringing ground-penetrating radar to their campus, providing students with curriculum that addresses Red Cloud’s boarding school history, supporting efforts from the U.S. Department of the Interior for national truth and healing processes, and engaging in dialogue with boarding school survivors and descendants on how Red Cloud can provide transparency and accountability with them.<sup>19</sup> These concrete actions take place through the collaboration of the Jesuit community which ministers at Red Cloud, organizations which support truth and healing such as the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, and, most importantly, the local community, especially boarding school survivors and descendants. Red Cloud’s work offers one example of the necessary work the Church must do, not only in Native American Catholic schools, but in parishes, dioceses, and the global Church. The Church must

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<sup>18</sup> "Truth and Healing: Opening Dialogue on Red Cloud's Boarding School History." Red Cloud Indian School. Accessed October 31, 2021. <https://www.redcloudschool.org/pages/truth-and-healing?erid=8679367&trid=3c9086dc-356b-46ba-b830-d8bd869e34ef>.

<sup>19</sup> "Truth and Healing," Red Cloud Indian School.

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enter into solidarity with boarding school survivors and descendants and work with Native American tribal communities to unveil the hidden truths of the past and move towards healing and justice.

When overcome with the horrors of Native American boarding schools, the abuses which the Church has inflicted, and the ongoing injustices that Native American communities experience as a result of colonialization, it can be difficult to hope. The possibility of healing and transformation can seem out of reach, obscured by the evils of human beings and ongoing failures to acknowledge them. In these moments, God’s people can return to the image and promise of New Jerusalem. God wipes “every tear” from the eyes of survivors who cry out from the abuses of Native American boarding schools. Liberation replaces “the old order” of colonization and oppression as God makes all things new. Those who abused Native children in boarding schools and cover up the truths of the evils which occurred there are cast out to “the second death.”<sup>20</sup> God’s healing light comes upon those who have experienced injustices and oppression, and reconciliation brings God’s people back together. New Jerusalem offers hope in the world to come through truth, reconciliation, and healing.

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<sup>20</sup> Rev. 21. NABRE.



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