

Cultural roots:

Our relationship with the indigenous peoples

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When Fr. Gustave proposed at Regional Council that at this assembly each one of us would give a reflection on our cultural roots, I responded by saying that we ought not forget the deeper cultural roots in Canada, which is with the aboriginal peoples. When I proposed this reflection, the discovery of the unmarked graves at former residential schools was uppermost in the minds of the country. If we are to talk about cultural roots and what that means in Canada, we have to take into account that outside of our birth cultural roots and the French and English cultural roots – our Canadian roots – there is another factor, another enrootedness, that we have tended to overlook. This is the relationship with the aboriginal peoples of Canada. We cannot be Canada and Canadian unless we delve into our past and assume a relationship with the aboriginal peoples. We cannot get ahead as a nation, as a people, unless we go back in our search for roots by uncovering the past of Canada and owning it in a new way. This awareness is of recent date although there has been a pervasive, unmentioned consciousness of this reality.

An instance of this recent uncovering of the past has become the statement at many of our gatherings acknowledging that this gathering is taking place – as is the case here in Arnprior – on undeeded territory of the Algonquian peoples. This territory belonged/belongs to the Wendat people. This acknowledgement is one application of the 94 recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation report of 2015. As you probably know, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established to come terms with the terrible experience and repercussions of the Residential Schools. It was made public in the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement of 2008 and the formal apology of the Prime Minister. That experience of approximately 150.000 aboriginal peoples beginning around 1830 – but more intently from 1883 to 1996 has been described by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a “cultural genocide”.. The report contains many memories of the so-called survivors of these schools and they have attracted a lot of attention from the media. However, the report on the Residential

Schools' experience is not what I think is the real import of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission report sees the settlement of the Residential school legacy as the culmination. However, it is clear that the report reaches much deeper and requires a much more incisive shift of perspective in Canada. And it is about this that I want to speak and present here as a moment of discussion among us.

The Report calls this more radical shift of perspective: reconciliation. One of the first reactions to the report was the following announcement from the Prime Minister:

that Canada will work with leaders of First Nations, the Métis Nation, Inuit, provinces and territories, parties to the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement, and other key partners, to design a national engagement strategy for developing and implementing a national reconciliation framework, informed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations.

What is this “national engagement strategy for developing and implementing a national reconciliation framework”? That is much more than seeking to find ways to deal with the harm caused to individual aboriginal people at the residential schools or with the discovery of unmarked graves. Reconciliation, as we understand it, is a process of healing of relationships. The process, the commission says is about “public truth sharing, apology, and commemoration that acknowledge and redress past harms”. So, what are some of the truths that harm the relationship with the Aboriginal peoples that need to be shared, acknowledged and redressed? In the report a number of these truths are outlined. I limit myself to three points

1. The mental attitude of colonialism
 - History books on Canadian history when I studied it at the University began with the arrival of Europeans. They began with John Cabot's explorations of the coast of Newfoundland and North America in 1497 and the three exploratory journeys of Jacques Cartier of the Saint Lawrence River starting in 1534, and with Samuel de Champlain and the settlements of Hochelaga and Quebec. These books talked about the discovery of Canada and the claiming of the land in the name of King Henry VII of England or the king

of France. (We would now add the Norse visit to Vinland in the 11th century.) That is a totally colonialist version of history. The land laid claim to, we read, became a colony of France and then of England. These claims of France and England was based on a Doctrine of Discovery. The land was designated as a “terra nullius”, a land belonging to no one. At least in the mentality of Europeans. So, they claimed it. But that right of the Doctrine of Discovery, even validated by a Pope, is no right at all. There were people living on this land. That is why most aboriginals call all immigrants “settlers”: we who are non-aboriginal are guests to the land. One of the first things that the government must do, according to the Truth and Reconciliation Report, is to “repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous peoples and lands and must reform those laws, policies, and litigation strategies that rely on such concepts”. That involves a reconsideration of the understanding of all property rights in this country. What is our relationship to the land and to ownership of the land? The aboriginal peoples have a totally different relationship to this land than the notion of private property that has developed in Europe since the end of the Middle Ages. All of our notions have come about since the Enlightenment. These notions are not shared by the aboriginal peoples. Reconciliation means to re-examine our relationship to this land.

- Europeans as colonizers justified their presence because they thought that their civilization was superior to the aboriginal culture which many qualified as savage. In the Dialogue Guide of the Jesuit Forum for Social Faith and Justice we read:

European writers and politicians often arranged racial groups in a hierarchy, each with their own set of mental and physical capabilities. The ‘special gifts’ of the Europeans meant it was inevitable that they would conquer the lesser peoples. Beneath the Europeans, in descending order, were Asians, Africans, and the Indigenous peoples of the Americas and Australia. Some people held that Europeans had reached the pinnacle of civilization through a long and arduous process. ... Through a civilizing process, Europeans could, however, raise the

people of the world up to their level. (*Listening to Indigenous Voices: Jesuit Forum for Social Faith and Justice*)

To this we must add that the Christian churches provided first of all a moral justification for the colonization of other peoples' lands. But they also became the main missionaries and agents of this ideology. Preaching the Christian faith became the means of civilizing the aboriginal peoples who were considered "heathens". From the fifteenth century on, the Indigenous peoples of the world were the objects of a strategy of spiritual and cultural conquest that had its origins in Europe. That is how Residential schools were entrusted to Churches and religious communities and became one of the main ways of transforming aboriginal culture and world view. Missionaries were part of the European colonial project. Their presence helped justify the extension of empires, since they were visibly spreading the word of God to the heathen. If their efforts were unsuccessful, the missionaries might conclude that those who refused to accept the Christian message could not expect the protection of the church or the law, thus clearing the way for their destruction.

2. A relationship – reconciliation - based on a treaty

So, what is being proposed when in the Commission Report there is mention of Reconciliation? What do we need to understand as the basis of the relationship between the aboriginal peoples and the settlers? As we know "assimilation" as a policy has not worked and has created all the problems. The underlying idea of reconciliation is not to attempt to reach an agreement where the differences between the Aboriginal peoples and the settlers are whittled away and we reach a consensus. The idea is not to overcome the differences, but to understand the differences, respecting them, living with the differences.

One of the big differences is the relationship with the land, with the earth. For the aboriginal peoples this land was given them by the Creator and they were given the task

to safeguard the land: Mother Earth. They did not own the land. For them this is their most important relationship. As Jeanette Armstrong of the Okanagan Nation says: "In the Okanagan, our understanding of the land is that it is not just that we're part of the land, it's not just that we're part of the vast system that operates on the land, but that the land is us. In our language, the word for our bodies contains the word for land." It means that it is almost impossible for the aboriginal peoples to conceive ownership of the land, as we do as Westerners. The Aboriginal peoples do understand the way the settlers can gouge the earth with big machinery, or scar the earth as in the tar sands of Alberta or the ways of modern agriculture. The earth gives us food and riches, but it remains a gift which we must share with others. We must respect the earth as our "Mother". Creation is a gift or as we say in our theological tradition, creation is a relation. It is not a "making". And if it is given to all equally. That is why Aboriginal peoples cannot understand how the settlers have become so rich and they have so little.

For the aboriginal peoples the basis of their relationship with the settlers that respects both is called a treaty. Treaties between Indigenous nations and the Crown is for them the only way of establishing the legal and constitutional foundation of this country. Without Treaties, they maintain, Canada has no legitimacy as a nation. Treaties are a model for how Canadians can live respectfully and peacefully together on the lands we share. The Aboriginal peoples understand Treaties as a sacred obligation that commits both parties to maintain respectful relationships and share lands and resources equitably. The Aboriginal peoples hold that the Royal Proclamation of 1763, in conjunction with the Treaty of Niagara of 1764, established the legal and political foundation of Canada. Treaties are not intended to change ownership, giving up their relation to the land or a right to do with their land as one pleases. The relation to the Creator remains. Aboriginal

peoples maintain that the right to self-determination¹ is a central right for indigenous peoples from which all other rights flow. Treaties with other nations are intended to create mutual recognition and respect. Self-determination means that the indigenous peoples retain their own justice systems.. And reconciliation also means reparations for historical injustice. This reparation must include not only apology, financial redress, legal reform, and policy change, but also the rewriting of national history and public commemoration. As is clear from this, reconciliation is a multi-generational journey that involves all Canadians.

3. The apology from the Churches

The reconciliation process began in the 1980s with the church apologies, and was followed by the “findings of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples” and the “court recognition of the validity of the Survivors’ stories... It culminated in the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement” and the prime minister’s apology in 2008. In that light, Governments, churches, educational institutions, and Canadians from all walks of life are responsible for taking concrete action on reconciliation. To set the process of reconciliation in motion, the aboriginal peoples find it most important that there be official apologies from Canada and the churches, acknowledging that they have inflicted suffering on the aboriginal peoples. From 1986-1998: All four Settlement Agreement churches offered apologies or statements of regret in one form or another, for their attempts to destroy Indigenous cultures, languages, spirituality. The report acknowledges that the Roman Catholic Church in Canada does not have a

¹ S. James Anaya, UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: “Self-determination requires confronting and reversing the legacies of empire, discrimination, and cultural suffocation... to build a social and political order based on relations of mutual understanding and respect”

single spokesperson with authority to represent all of its many dioceses. The result has been a patchwork of apologies or statements of regret. That is why the Report insists that there be a “clear and emphatic apology in Canada for the abuses perpetrated in Catholic-run residential schools throughout the country” by the pope for the “spiritual, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse in Catholic-run residential schools”.

The Catholic Church as one party to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement is asked to develop and sign a Covenant of Reconciliation that would identify principles for working collaboratively to advance reconciliation. And together with the other parties the Church “must repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous peoples and lands (Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius) and must reform those laws, policies, and litigation strategies that rely on such concepts.” And to develop “ongoing education strategies to ensure that their respective congregations learn about their church’s role in colonization.” And “in collaboration with Indigenous organizations, [she] must develop on the need to respect Indigenous spirituality, the history of residential schools and the roles of the church parties in that system... and the responsibility that churches have to mitigate such conflicts and prevent spiritual violence. And as party to the Settlement Agreement the Church must establish permanent funding for Aboriginal people.”²

² Other Churches in Canada have endorsed many of the elements of the Report:

- 2013: General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Canada in 2013 endorsed a report on the development of a theological framework for Aboriginal spirituality within the church
- The Anglican Church has developed a vision for a self-governing Indigenous church to coexist within the broader institutional structure of the church
- 2006: United Church has also examined its theological foundation. A 2012 follow up report aimed to re-envision the church’s theological purpose and restructure its institutions by shifting from a theology of empire to a theology of partnership

4. Resolutions

- a. That each one of us, whether born in Canada or came to Canada as settlers from the different cultures represented consider himself a guest of the land. What is said in the Truth and Reconciliation Report pertains to all here present.
- b. In our ministry each one finds ways to help build the reconciliation with the Indigenous Peoples of this land. This relationship must be based on “mutual recognition, mutual respect, sharing, and mutual responsibility”
- c. Each one undertakes to read the Truth and Reconciliation Report with its 94 recommendations.
- d. The SCJ Region of Canada makes a sizable contribution to the reparations fund of the Roman Catholic Church.

John van den Hengel

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- 2015: United Church of Canada issued a statement, “Affirming Other Spiritual Paths”
 - Unlike the Protestant churches, the Roman Catholic Church in Canada’s approach to Indigenous spirituality has emphasized decision making at the local diocesan level