

One of my most favourite scripture passages is the Road to Emmaus. Jesus encounters two disciples on the road who are confused, discouraged and very saddened by the news of the death of Jesus and the apparent vanishing of his body. The first thing that the Risen Lord does is to walk with them and listen to their story. As they speak, the healing process begins. The Emmaus story is about listening and transformation.

Like those disciples, we too have received news that has filled our nation with great sadness. The discovery of the remains of 215 children at the Kamloops residential school hurts us all deeply as we ponder what was done to these children and their families. This discovery may also provoke feelings of anger and disgust. Whatever we may be feeling, if we look to Emmaus, our first response should be to listen.

We need to walk with the Indigenous Peoples in Canada and to listen. They have significant stories that we need to hear. This will help the process of reconciliation and healing with our brothers and sisters.

As Bishop of St. Catharines, I offer my profound sorrow and apologize for all the pain and suffering experienced by the children who were forced to attend these schools run by Catholic bishops, priests and nuns. Words fail to adequately convey the impact of this tragedy.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that was active in Canada from 2008 until 2015, was a genuine attempt to begin the process of bringing into the light what had been kept in the dark for so long. For 6 years the TRC travelled across the country and listened to over 6,500 witnesses, with a specific focus on the experiences of former students and their families. The TRC also hosted a number of public events in order to educate people about the legacy of pain and suffering associated with the residential school system.

The TRC not only wanted to educate the public, it also created organizations like the Missing Children Project. Their mandate is to identify the children who died while attending residential schools. The discovery of the graves in Kamloops is a result of this initiative.

In December of 2015 the TRC issued a final report that contained 94 calls to action. Calls to action 73-76 addressed burial sites and called upon the federal government to work with churches and Indigenous community leaders to identify, commemorate, and protect burial sites.

There were specific Calls to Action that were addressed to the Roman Catholic Church in Canada. There is no Catholic Church of Canada, as you would find with the Anglican, Presbyterian and United Church. This is why there have been a number of apologies and responses from various Religious Orders, dioceses, and from bishops, both individually and as a group. As a diverse Church, we are answering these calls; however, more can be done.

Call to Action 58 asks the Pope to deliver an apology to survivors of residential schools and their families. For the past two years the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has been working with the Vatican in response to this call. It is hoped that in the very near future, a delegation of Indigenous people will meet with Pope Francis in Rome in order to foster meaningful encounters of dialogue and healing.

Monday, June 21 is National Indigenous Peoples Day. It is the 25th anniversary of celebrating the heritage, diverse cultures and outstanding achievements of First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples. On this day and every day, let us walk together and listen to one another with patience, love and respect. This is the most fundamental call to action.