ARC Canada Statement on Church Apologies

December 2, 2024

"I'm sorry."

Many of us know the profound healing effect of hearing these or similar words spoken, in sincerity and truth, by someone who has in some way wronged us. Many of us also know the deeply humbling feeling of being the one who offers a genuine apology.

In recent years several churches have offered formal apologies to individuals and communities of people who have been harmed – sometimes traumatically – by our words and deeds. In Canada, for example, Catholic and Anglican leaders have formally apologized for our churches' role in the destructive system of Indian Residential Schools.

Do such apologies make any difference? What makes an apology genuine? Why apologize in the first place? These are some of the questions we've heard people inside and outside of our churches ask, and they're among the questions we've asked ourselves in preparing this latest work of the Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue of Canada, which also includes Lutheran and Eastern Catholic participation.

This document explores the idea of apology through the lenses of scripture, theology, and history. We hope that this study might help the members of our churches reflect on the meaning and importance – and limits – of making formal apologies to those whom we have wronged. It can also be a resource for church leaders who may be called upon to offer such an apology on behalf of the church to which they belong.

A user guide offers suggestions on some of the different ways this study might be used in your own local context, and we encourage you to find ways to do so. The season of Lent, with its penitential focus, would be a particularly appropriate time to reflect on some of these questions with the help of this document.

When an apology is genuinely offered, the hope is that it will be genuinely accepted and that it will mark a new beginning in the relationship between the one forgiven and the one forgiving. Such forgiveness is at the heart of our common Christian faith – confessing sometimes painful truth in the hope that we might know reconciliation with one another and with God.

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Status of this document

This document is produced in the name of the Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue of Canada (ARC Canada) and does not necessarily represent the official views of the Anglican Church of Canada (ACC) or the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB). The ARC Canada dialogue is, however, formally sponsored by the ACC and CCCB, and its members are appointed to it by those bodies to undertake this work.

Introduction

The Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue of Canada (ARC) has been in existence since 1971. Over the years it has published various statements, messages, and educational resources on topics of ecumenical interest for these two churches in the Canadian context. With the deepening of full communion relations between Anglicans and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada over the last two decades, recent years have seen the appointment of two Lutheran participants in the dialogue, serving as Lutheran members within the Anglican contingent. The addition of perspectives from Eastern Catholic churches has also enriched the dialogue.

Inspired by the historic visits to Canada in 2022 of Pope Francis and Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, the Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue of Canada has been exploring the reality and history of church apologies. An initial round of presentations by six smaller ARC working groups reviewed aspects of what we understand by apology in Scripture, church doctrine, church history, penitential traditions, sources beyond the church, and Eastern Christian perspectives. A conversation with members of the ARC Bishops Dialogue in October 2023 led to our decision to produce a document that could help church leaders who may be called on to make new apologies, as well as to assist church members reflect on the meaning and significance of church apologies. We hope that the following text fulfils that twofold purpose. It is accompanied by a user guide that offers suggestions for how it might be studied and used. What this document is not, is a "how to" manual on the process of acknowledgement, apology and resulting action. Nor is it an extensive analysis of any single instance of apology.

The post-Second World War era has seen the rise of truth commissions, official public apologies, monuments, memorials, commemorations, and other acknowledgements of political injustice. These initiatives respond to the realities of past wars, genocide, dictatorship, racism, and systemic abuse of Indigenous Peoples. In this culture of confession and apology for human rights violations, churches, too, have been called to account for the broken parts of their histories.

Turning to their own biblical and theological traditions, many churches have sought ways to respond that are faithful to their self-understanding yet responsive to the signs of the times. In line with civic society, recognition of specific violations of the fundamental rights of persons and communities has been a critical element in the several apologies issued by various churches over the years. Statements expressing shame, regret, and contrition have been made with respect to a variety of historic and more recent failings, including, for example, intra-Christian persecution, antisemitism and the Holocaust/Shoah, sexual abuse in the church, and the church's role in colonialism. For Catholics, the Millennium Day of Pardon was a high-profile example of a

global and comprehensive act of repentance addressed to various groups, including women, ethnic, cultural, and religious communities. These apologies prompt questions about the meaning of apologies on behalf of a church, the elements of these apologies, and whether and how these can lead to reconciliation, transformed relationships, and healing of memories.

Scripture

It is significant to note that apology, in the narrow sense of the word, is almost entirely absent from the biblical narrative. This is likely the result of cultural differences of the times and places when and where the scriptures were written. The community figures much more prominently in relation to seeking right relations in biblical contexts than is commonly the case in our times which tend to be oriented far more towards the individual. However, related terms such as confession and repentance are regular themes. The subject of "reconciliation," as another specific example, permeates scripture. It is understood as the responsibility of restoring right relations between the community and God on the one hand, and among members of the community on the other. Indeed, one could see this as one of the most fundamental threads of the biblical narrative woven throughout.

The Bible also seems to be far more interested in actions that right wrongs than it is in verbal expressions about those actions. There may be a verbal acknowledgement of wrongs as one part of a larger process, but the emphasis is much more on contrition and repentance being displayed through restitution and making amends. This is a pertinent observation because some form of this sentiment often emerges in discussions of apology in the churches today: Saying words is important, but now show me your words in action.

In the Eastern Christian traditions, the priority of the Psalms within the Scriptures, particularly with their attention to petitions for both judgment and mercy from God in response to certain actions and situations, offers much ground for fruitful reflection. The public recognition of sin was an important part of the corporate worship life of the People of Israel, which can be instructive to Christians in its own way as well.

ARC's study in this area also leads us to the insight that one potential limitation of the biblical material is that there can be a tendency to highlight how the activity of the offender makes things right between them and God, while the corresponding reparation for the victims does not receive as much attention. In the contemporary discussions of church apology, the latter dimension tends to be much more in view.

Reflections on Biblical episodes of confession, conversion, and community.

While it has already been noted that there are few if any instances of apology in Scripture, there are strong themes of repentance, confession, conversion, and community throughout. The stories of Zacchaeus and the Prodigal Son, along with Psalm 51, provide helpful starting points for conversation along these lines.

Luke 19 – Zacchaeus

The encounter with Zacchaeus, while it does not involve an apology from an offender to a victim, is perhaps the closest analogue in the New Testament. In a setting where restitution was more significant than verbal apology, Zacchaeus' commitment to restitution highlights both his public acceptance of guilt and his initiative towards repairing relationships with those he has wronged. The first part of his offer is to give half of his possessions to "the poor." This is not a specific compensation to individuals he has wronged, but it can be read as a recognition by Zacchaeus that his bad acts have harmed the community as a whole and impoverished many of its members.

The second part of Zacchaeus' offer promises fourfold restoration to anyone he has wronged directly. In general, Jewish law provides for double compensation in the case of simple theft: typically, this is interpreted as imposing on the thief the same loss which the thief would have caused to the victim. The only specific example of fourfold restoration comes in Exodus 22:1, where the theft of a sheep requires four sheep in recompense. Zacchaeus' offer to repay four times what he has stolen is, on the one hand, an acknowledgement that he was more than a simple thief; and on the other hand, it is an appeal to his community to receive him back with proportionate generosity. Since one aspect of Torah details the ways in which the community cares for its poor, this offer can also be seen as expressing a desire to be restored as a member of that community.

The story also does not directly feature any victims of Zacchaeus's career in white-collar crime. We are left to wonder what their response might be, and what their role is in the restoration of community.

Luke 15 – The Prodigal Son

The responses of the father and the older son present two different responses to the confession of the one who has harmed them. On the one hand, the father's response is immediate, perhaps even premature – the forgiveness begins even before the confession is spoken – and unequivocal. The older son's response is quite the opposite: reluctant (some would say angry) and expressing the ways he feels that he has been wronged.

Once the son is honest about the troubles he has made for himself, he makes a plan to return home with a confession: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you." While "before you" is somewhat ambiguous – is he recognizing the hurt he has caused his father or is he simply expressing his shame at being seen in such a state by his father? – the confession acknowledges that there are other parties involved and that his actions have affected those other parties.

The son's confession is somewhat ambiguous in its motives. He could be offering a confession that is rooted in a realization that he has harmed his father (and brother?), or he could be offering a thinly veiled attempt to get back home to a roof over his head and some food on the table. Putting aside the question of the motive, the son's confession could be seen as a step back into community. The confession could also be heard as a desire for a changed relationship in that

community. Perhaps we could read "Treat me as one of your hired hands" as an intention to re-enter the household in a new way, as a servant rather than as a master.

There is a third party involved as well, and we could ask whether the older son has also been wronged, even if indirectly. There is no contact between the sons in the story, but their relationship has clearly been affected. Is a confession complete, or can healing begin to happen, if some relationships in the community are left unaddressed?

Psalm 51 – Against you only have I sinned

Psalm 51 raises another perspective concerning third parties. The psalmist confesses to God: "Against you, you alone, have I sinned." On the one hand, the confession is helpful in its acknowledgement that a sin against another is a sin against God. This makes God not simply an observer or judge, but one of the parties affected by the sin. The community that is broken does not consist only of the one who is harmed and the one who has been harmed. Rather, the community includes God as well, and when relationships between people are broken the relationship with God is in some way broken. Matthew 25 works this out even more explicitly.

The confession is *incomplete,* though, in that it does not acknowledge the one who has been directly harmed, and throughout the psalm, the psalmist does not seem to suggest that a change in behaviour or some kind of direct restitution is needed. So the victim is still isolated, the perpetrator expresses no intention to right what has been wronged, and the community – the psalmist, the one wronged, and God – is still broken.

As with the story of Zacchaeus, we are also left to wonder what the response of the victim might be, and what role their voice will play in the healing of broken relationships.

Theological Considerations

Christian people share a common belief in the dignity of every human being as being created in the image of God. The church bears an innate responsibility to uphold human dignity in a common commitment to resisting and overcoming injustices for the sake of every person and the integrity of creation. God's grace enables the church and its people to face their fault in harms done to others, seek forgiveness, and work towards reconciliation.

In their reflection on the central importance of grace in Christian life and mission, members of ARC Canada turned to the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JDDJ),[1] a consensus document solemnly signed by representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church in Augsburg, Germany on October 31, 1999. Officially recognized and mutually received by the respective church bodies, this agreement has great ecumenical significance as it effectively resolves one of the key theological conflicts of the Reformation.

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1 https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Joint%20Declaration%20on%20the%20Doctrine%20of%20Justification.pdf

Since then, the JDDJ has been affirmed by the World Methodist Council, the Anglican Consultative Council and the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

It states: "By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works" (JDDJ, 15). Our shared faith in the justifying grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ gives assurance of God's grace, forgiveness of sins, and liberation from the power of sin and death. God's grace enables the faithful to hear God's promises anew, confess their sins, participate in life in Christ, and be exhorted to live in righteousness. This grace empowers our churches to reflect upon wrongs committed in the name of the church against individuals and groups of people, admit our failures, and seek forgiveness from those who may have been harmed by actions of the church or its members.

In March 2019, representatives of Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Reformed, and Roman Catholic churches met at the University of Notre Dame to explore the implications of their shared adherence to the JDDJ. They issued a joint statement affirming:

> "that justification calls for sanctification, a holiness of life which is both personal and social, and advances a common commitment to resisting and overcoming injustices, which should lead to a life of justice in the world, recognizing and defending human dignity and the integrity of all that God has created."[2]

Christians believe that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, redeemed in Christ, and called to communion with God. All share an equal and inalienable dignity which is not dependent on any accomplishment or membership in any group and cannot be lost by any birth defect, disease or crime – it just is. The implications of this core belief are spelled out in the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,[3] which states:

> "With respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, colour, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent" (art. 29).

In this context, the specific character of the wrongs committed in the name of the church against individuals and groups of people is clearly identified. Recognition of specific violations of the fundamental rights of persons and groups has been a key element in the several apologies issued by various churches over the years.

Furthermore, our churches agree that sin can be characterized as personal sin committed by an individual; corporate sin committed by a group or organization; and structural or systemic sin that is embedded in a society. In its ecclesial identity, the church in its visible form is "one body," and the responsibility for wrongs committed in the name of the church transcends the

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[2] https://news.nd,edu/assets/315013/jddj_final_statement.pdf

[3] https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

limitations of time. The Vatican's International Theological Commission document *Memory and Reconciliation* quotes Pope John Paul II:

> "because of 'the bond which unites us to one another in the mystical body, all of us, though not personally responsible and without encroaching on the judgment of God who alone knows every heart, bear the burden of the errors and faults of those who have gone before us.'"[4]

In 2006 the Church of England apologized for its complicity in the transatlantic slave trade, which was abolished in 1807. During a debate about the apology at the Church of England's General Synod, then-Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams made a similar point about the need for the present-day church to accept responsibility for the sins of its past:

> "The Body of Christ is not just a body that exists at any one time; it exists across history and we therefore share the shame and the sinfulness of our predecessors, and part of what we can do, with them and for them in the Body of Christ, is prayerful acknowledgment of the failure that is part of us, not just of some distant 'them'."[5]

In recent decades our communions of churches have reflected on past errors committed in the name of the church and sought to take responsibility according to the biblical principles of confession, repentance, and amendment of life.

Picking up on the Jewish tradition as expressed in the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:1-17; Deut 5:1-22), the Gospels frequently remind the Christian community that their relationship with God is intimately linked to how they relate to one another. For example, the last judgement scene leaves no doubt that "whatever you did to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did it to me" (Mt 25:40), and the First Epistle of John states clearly, "those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen" (1 Jn 4:20). In light of the above, Matthew's Gospel offers practical advice which can be seen as a direct response to questions about the importance of apologizing for injury inflicted on a neighbour: "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember you brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled with your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Mt 5:23-24). Further, as Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus makes clear, repentance for past wrong-doing includes reparation and commitment to a new way of life (Lk 19:1-10).

In human experience, apology is an important step – but only a first step – in rebuilding relationships between individuals and groups. In the theological understanding of our communions of churches, apology is accompanied by repentance (turning around) and conversion (amendment of life) evidenced by faith active in love towards God and our neighbours. The sincerity of any apology will be judged by actual changes in behaviour. As the old adage states: "I can't hear what you're saying because what you're doing is ringing so loud

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[4] https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000307_memory-reconc-itc_en.html

[5] http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1783/bicentenary-of-the-act-for-the-abolition-of-the-slave-trade-speech-to-general-synod.html

in my ears." With this in mind, apologies usually include commitments to take action to correct wrongs leading to concrete change, healing and reconciliation towards right relationships. In apologies by the churches, actions towards reconciliation may be specific to the group wronged and may be developed in dialogue with representatives of the wronged party. The depth and effectiveness of the apology will be judged not only by the wronged party's response but also by the degree of transformation within the church as it bears witness to the gospel of Christ in word and action.

Archbishop Michael Peers, in the 1993 apology of the Anglican Church of Canada to Indigenous Peoples for its role in the Residential Schools of Canada, speaks for all our churches, when he says,

> "I know that it is God who heals, and that God can begin to heal when we open ourselves, our wounds, our failures and our shame to God. … I know how often you have heard words which have been empty because they have not been accompanied by actions. I pledge to you my best efforts and the efforts of our church at the national level, to walk with you along the path of God's healing."[6]

Historical Church Apologies

Confession of wrongs and sins carried out by members and leaders of the church is by no means only a modern phenomenon. However, during the second half of the 20th century, there was a significant increase in public actions and admissions to acknowledge past harms and failings. This has continued into the first two decades of the 21st, and it seems clear that a penitential emphasis will remain significant to the vocation of the churches for the foreseeable future, across a range of traditions and communions.

Church apologies often come with very difficult stories surrounding them, and these can be painful to review. Yet this process is instructive towards a better understanding of the thinking that goes into the apologies, the range of feelings about how they have been received, and their potential subsequent impact on and meaning for others. Reflecting on such stories ecumenically can perhaps help our churches to learn from one another's experiences in this common area of responsibility in our time. While in no way exhaustive in scope, the sampling below will seek to draw out contemporary lessons and perhaps derive some common insights that will help us to engage in this work of confession and repentance appropriately as needs continue to arise in the future.

Intra-Christian Persecution

Throughout history, the divisions that have emerged between Christians have at times devolved even further into shameful acts of persecution and violence against one another. Unfortunately, there is no shortage of evidence to this end, at least as far back as the fifth century following the third and fourth Ecumenical Councils which sought to define Christological doctrine. In the latter

[6] https://www.anglican.ca/tr/apology/english/

half of the 20th century, an interesting acknowledgement of and contrition for this history can be observed. A few examples show this clearly.

In 1204, during the Fourth Crusade, armies of Western Christians marched on the Byzantine capital of Constantinople. Parts of the city were destroyed, its wealth was looted, large numbers were killed, and some of its residents were taken away as prisoners and slaves. This was a military attack by Catholic Christians upon their Eastern Orthodox siblings in Christ and one which has long served as a symbol of the fullest expression of the East-West schism. That is why it was so significant when in 2001, during a visit to Greece, Pope John Paul II referenced these events and publicly called the church to a "liberating process of purification of memory." In his address, the "assailants" were explicitly identified as "Latin Christians," and there was a clear recognition that they were directly targeting people who should have been understood as "their own brothers in the faith." The pope suggested that all Catholics corporately should today feel "deep regret" for these events, should acknowledge God's "judgment" upon them as a result, and therefore implore divine mercy to help them "heal the wounds." Importantly, these words of confession were officially received by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I a few years later, on the 800th anniversary, in 2004.

Beginning around 1410, a Bohemian priest by the name of Jan Hus began to articulate several major reforming ideals which would come to greater prominence in the Western church over the next 200 years. While Hus always sought to remain loyal to the church, his criticisms and challenges drew considerable suspicion from ecclesiastical powers. He was called to the Council of Constance in 1415 and promised safe passage to openly express his views. However, upon arrival, he was arrested, tried, excommunicated, and ultimately burned at the stake as a heretic. In 1999, at a gathering in present-day Czechia, Pope John Paul II publicly recognised Hus' "moral courage" in expressing the convictions of his conscience and called his condemnation and execution at the command of the Council a "cruel death." He expressed "deep regret" for the way that this violent act had created a "wound" upon the minds and hearts of the Bohemian church and people, which itself contributed to the divisions in the church in that region from that point on. A desire for "reconciliation" and a commitment to seeking "renewed relationships" was also made. Significantly, John Paul II made a point of stating that he felt compelled to make this acknowledgement on the eve of the turn to the third millennium, and in connection with several other penitential words and actions which he offered during the liturgical events associated with the Reformation period.

The persecutions, torture, and deaths of both Roman Catholics and dissenting Protestants in England during the English Reformation and following are widely known, not only for their scope but also their ferocity. The Catholic Church officially commemorates over 300 martyrs from this period, and there were undoubtedly thousands more between the years 1534 and 1681. In 2017, as part of the commemorations of the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation era in Europe, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York together issued a message of confession and remorse for these acts. It spoke of the "defiance of the clear command of Jesus Christ to unity and love," and called for an attitude of "repentance" for the part which leaders of the Church of England played in advocating this violence in the name of their cause.

Significantly, it was named that this repentance must be of a tangible kind, "linked to action aimed at reaching out to other churches and strengthening relationships with them."

Of course, tensions and violence between divided Christians in Reformation-era Europe ran deep not only along Roman Catholic and Protestant lines. There were also persecutions among the different reforming movements who disagreed about the extent to which the reforms must go and how best to bring them about. In this regard, the Lutheran majority in Germany was responsible for considerable atrocities carried out in the name of eliminating the so-called radicalizing Anabaptists as an illegitimate expression of reformation, including heavy persecution and even penalties of death. And so, in 2010, after a period of mutual study and dialogue between contemporary Lutherans and Mennonites, the Lutheran World Federation felt called to account. That same year, the LWF issued an expression of "deep regret and sorrow" for this chapter of their history. Notably, the statement explicitly "asks for forgiveness – from God and from our Mennonite sisters and brothers," while also pledging commitment to continued education, dialogue, and partnership, as a means of seeking "a healing of our memories and reconciliation." These words were issued not just in the abstract, but in the context of a prayerful ceremony, and with Mennonites present to hear and respond to the words and actions.

Antisemitism and the Holocaust

Another area where there have been several public expressions of corporate contrition from churches in past decades is in connection with the church's role in contributing to antisemitism and the persecution of Jewish people. Post-Holocaust awareness of the need for Christians to take their share of responsibility in this regard and seek to ensure that such evils could never happen again undoubtedly contributed to these actions.

The writings of Martin Luther have been controversial in this regard, particularly from later in his life when he seems to have directly advocated the destruction of Jewish places of worship in Christian lands, restrictions of the practice of their faith, and even outright violence. This aspect of Luther's legacy began to be faced in a focused way during the 1990s, and various Lutheran jurisdictions have sought to do so in honest and forthright ways. For example, in 1995 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) acted to publicly repudiate Luther's latent antisemitism, particularly the way that it was coopted in later generations to justify genocide. The statement recognised that the ELCA "deplores" and "grieves" this element of Luther's teaching, sees it as a "contradiction and an affront to the Gospel," and recognises the way it has made the church "complicit" in the history of hatred and violence.

Roman Catholic recognition of this history and the church's responsibility in it came to greater prominence after the Second Vatican Council and subsequent interreligious work. During the 1970s and 80s, various national conferences of Catholic bishops in Europe began processes of examination of conscience and confession of sin in relation to antisemitism and its effects during the Second World War. A particularly significant example is that of the Catholic bishops in France, a majority of whom not only failed to oppose but even actively aided the occupying Nazi regime. This acknowledgement culminated in 1997 with the reading of a public apology from French church leadership in the presence of Jewish leaders. The statement not only

acknowledged fault in relation to the events of 1941-44 but also recognised the ways in which the Catholic Church's own teachings had contributed to laying the foundation for modern antisemitism and the Holocaust itself. The language was very honest and explicit in its contrition, as the following quote makes clear: "We confess our fault. We implore the pardon of God and ask the Jewish people to hear our words of repentance."

Church promotion of antisemitism also predates the 20th century. In 13th-century England, a series of provisions were passed that strongly discouraged social connections between Christians and Jews, imposed fines on Jewish people for their religious nonconformity, and forced Jews to wear badges on their clothing to publicly identify themselves as Jewish. Subsequent laws forbidding the construction of new synagogues and even the expulsion of over 3,000 Jews from England can also be traced to these decisions of the church. In May 2022, 800 years after the Synod of Oxford at which the original directives were issued, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby called upon the Church of England to "repent" of its part in advancing anti-Judaism and antisemitism in the past and to "reject" them still in the present. Commentators on this action have observed that it is somewhat unique in that it seems to have emerged not from advocacy for it by the Jewish community in England, or wider society, but rather the initiative of the church itself as a tangible expression of recent repudiations of harmful theological distortions about Jewish people and Judaism that are named in the 2019 document *God's Unfailing Word*.[7]

Sexual Abuse

Apologies for sexual abuse experienced within the church and at the hands of leaders of church communities and organizations are tragically numerous. Such sins are especially heinous, and therefore the way the church has acknowledged or failed to acknowledge them is a matter of utmost importance today.

Perhaps among the most notable examples of a 2010 public confession for church-based sexual abuse is that of Pope Benedict XVI to Irish victim-survivors and families. In this case, a seven-page letter was written and then publicly read at all masses in Ireland. The pope called the abuses "sinful and criminal," acknowledged that he is personally "truly sorry," and, in the name of the whole church, expressed "shame and regret." While the church itself was not described as sinful, the text was very explicit in naming the abusive and predatory actions of clergy and members of religious communities, who were acting in the name of the church, as sins. Interestingly, a series of corporate acts of penance (fasting, works of mercy and charity, etc.) were also proposed to the Catholic Church in Ireland as a means of making "reparation for the sins of abuse." In this latter charge, there seems to be a clear recognition of the corporate nature of sin in the church and that the sins of individual members can in some sense be carried and responded to by the repentance of the wider whole. Commitments were also made that the letter would be followed by an "apostolic visitation," a thorough and formal investigation into several Irish dioceses in which abuse and other sexual misconduct was believed to have become especially chronic. Several

[7] https://www.churchofengland.org/media/18977

years later, Pope Francis also travelled to Ireland to personally meet with groups of victim-survivors, at their request, as a further act of ecclesial contrition.

Colonialism and Canada's Residential Schools

A major priority for many of the churches descended from European Christendom is facing up to the legacy of complicity in colonialism. Following Confederation, the Canadian government pursued a policy of cultural assimilation towards Indigenous Peoples, seeking to eradicate their culture and identity. The residential school system, initiated by the government and run mainly by the Catholic, Anglican, United, and Presbyterian churches, removed Indigenous children from their families, often subjecting them to harsh conditions, abuse, and loss of culture.

Apologies and Statements to Indigenous Peoples of Canada

1970 – *Corporate Confession to Indigenous Peoples*, Conference of Mennonites in Canada, Winkler

1984 – *Speech to Aboriginal and Inuit Peoples*, Pope John Paul II, St. Anne de Beaupre, Québec

1986 – *Apology to the Native People of Canada*, 31st General Council, United Church of Canada

1987 – *Address to the Native Peoples of Canada*, Pope John Paul II, Fort Simpson

1991 – *Statement by the National Meeting on Indian Residential Schools*, Saskatoon (Catholic dioceses and other entities)

1991 – *An Apology to the First Nations of Canada*, Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate

1992 – *500 Years After Statement*, Mennonite Central Committee

1993 – *Apology to Native Americans for Past Mistakes*, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, SJ, Superior General, Society of Jesus (Jesuits)

1993 – *Message to the National Native Convocation, Minaki, Ontario*, Archbishop Michael Peers, Primate, Anglican Church of Canada

1994 – *Confession Regarding Injustice Suffered by Canada's First Nations Peoples*, 120th General Assembly, Presbyterian Church in Canada

1998 – *Apology to former students of Indian Residential Schools and to their families and communities*, Rt. Rev. Bill Phipps, General Council Executive, United Church of Canada

2008 – Archbishop Gerald Pettipas, Archbishop of Grouard-McLennan, Alberta

2009 – Archbishop Murray Chatlain, Bishop of Mackenzie-Fort Smith, Inuvik

2013 – *Statement on behalf of Congregations of Women Religious involved in the Indian Residential Schools of Canada*, Marie Zarowny, SSA

2019 – *An Apology for Spiritual Harm,* Archbishop Fred Hiltz, Primate, Anglican Church of Canada

2022 – Pope Francis (Rome, Maskwacis, Edmonton, Québec, Iqaluit)

2022 – Archbishop Justin Welby, Church of England (Prince Albert, Saskatchewan)

2024 – *Apology for Complicity in Colonization and the Residential School System*, 149th General Assembly, Presbyterian Church in Canada

The reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)[8] highlight the widespread problems within residential schools: inadequate education, poor care, and severe discipline, with most becoming sites of abuse despite the positive intentions of some staff. While the government aimed to assimilate Indigenous children, Indigenous leaders stressed that schooling should foster economic development, not assimilation.

By the 1950s, many churches recognized the failure of residential schools, and by the 1980s and 1990s, several denominations began supporting Indigenous efforts for justice and reconciliation, leading to formal apologies acknowledging the harms inflicted, including intergenerational trauma.

The Anglican Church of Canada apologised in 1993 for its role in helping to operate Indian Residential Schools, acknowledging their part in a government program of assimilation of Indigenous Peoples and the elimination of Indigenous languages and culture. One area of harm which was not named at that time, however, was the spiritual harm which was an integral part of the Anglican Church's involvement in the wider colonial project. At the request of Indigenous communities and members of the Anglican Church, Archbishop Fred Hiltz took up this further call in the years leading up to the gathering of the General Synod of the ACC in 2019. At that meeting, while seated with a group of Indigenous elders from across the country, and in the presence of the whole body of the Synod, an *Apology for Spiritual Harm*[9] was read. Six times the phrase "I confess our sin" is followed by an account of very specific actions and an acknowledgement of the damage and hurt they caused. The words of the prayer of confession in the *Book of Common Prayer* are quoted:

> "We followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts… We have offended against thy holy laws… We have left undone those things which we ought to have done… And we have done those things we ought not to have done."

This is followed by an explicit naming of commitments to enact repentance, including steps to implement actions on the recommendations of the TRC's *Calls to Action*, affirmation of the articles of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*,[10] and the creation or continuation of other church-based programs of reparation, education, and Indigenous

[8] https://nctr.ca/records/reports/
[9] https://www.anglican.ca/news/an-apology-for-spiritual-harm/
[10] https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf

self-determination. After a period of discernment and consideration over the next few days, a response from the leaders representing those communities who were addressed was also received.

In the spring of 2022, Pope Francis met with Indigenous delegates in Rome and later visited Canada on a "pilgrimage of penitence." During his address in the Cree community of Maskwacis, he acknowledged the unique values of Indigenous culture, the enduring trauma caused by residential schools, and the need for authentic reconciliation, offering this apology:

> "In the face of this deplorable evil, the Church kneels before God and implores his forgiveness for the sins of her children.[11] I myself wish to reaffirm this, with shame and unambiguously. I humbly beg forgiveness for the evil committed by so many Christians against the Indigenous peoples."

Pope Francis spoke of "walking together" towards a future of healing, asserting that the "memory of those children urges us to ensure every child is treated with love, honour, and respect." He emphasized that the Catholic Church's commitment to reconciliation must go beyond words, with a dedication to mending relationships among Indigenous Peoples, Christians, and Canadian society.

Throughout his visit, Pope Francis reiterated that asking for forgiveness "is not the end of the matter." He stressed the importance of investigating the full truth of what occurred in residential schools and supporting survivors in their journey to "experience healing." He also called for fostering relationships between "Christians and civil society," urging people to "accept and respect the identity and the experience of the Indigenous peoples… We are speaking of processes that must penetrate hearts." His apology expressed not only in words but through his presence and the support of Canadian bishops, stands as "a testimony to our will to persevere on this path." At their first plenary following Pope Francis' visit, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops issued "That We May Walk Together",[12] a series of four pastoral letters, one to each of the three indigenous delegations and one to the people of God, identifying specific commitments arising from the visit.

Contemporary Lessons from History

These stories are moving and powerful, and indeed there is something sacred in their retelling even in this abbreviated form. From this partial historical review, there are a few significant observations that can be made about how churches apologise and what seems to be part of the process when they are deemed to have done so most authentically.

Many of these apologies were presented in the presence of people representing communities which were historically mistreated and harmed and included opportunities for messages of confession and regret to be received and responded to by contemporary representatives of the wronged party. Some were developed after a period of mutual study and dialogue between

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[11] cf. John Paul II, *Incarnationis Mysterium* [29 November 1998), 11: AAS 91 [1999], 140

[12] https://www.cccb.ca/indigenous-peoples/that-we-may-walk-together-series-of-pastoral-letters-2023/

contemporary representatives of both parties. Both factors seem to convey a critical insight: It is perhaps not sufficient, or only minimally effective, for a church apology to merely be spoken into the abstract, even if that may have some value on its own. Rather, it is when such expressions can be made on the basis of and within the context of real relationships, they become far more fully authentic.

It is also worth recognizing that church apologies seem to be strengthened by the inclusion of a ritual gesture or liturgical element as part of public expression. Words only go so far. Of course, this only makes sense because human beings are bodies, minds, and spirits, and therefore the speaking or publishing texts should always be accompanied by actions that engage the whole person. Perhaps most importantly, apologies that make commitments to concrete changes to redress the harm done and to, as much as possible, ensure that it does not happen again are always far more powerful than simply voicing feelings of shame and grief.

Finally, while the degrees of emphasis placed within certain church traditions on varying theological principles and categories do sometimes result in differences of articulation about the relationship between the wrong done and its impact on the essential nature of the church, in practice there does seem to be an ecumenical consensus that it is possible for members of the church in the present to carry a genuine collective responsibility for these sins of their predecessors in the past. Because that is held to be true, therefore, how we talk about and respond to these failings and offences in the present can have a spiritual significance for the past, the present, and the future. This also implies that actions of restitution and redress undertaken on behalf of our forebears are not only possible but perhaps even necessary.[13]

Conclusion

During our study on church apologies, ARC Canada has met in person three times in Chateauguay, Quebec (May 2022), Halifax, Nova Scotia (October 2023), and Edmonton, Alberta (November 2024), and online four further times. We also consulted regularly with the ARC Bishops' Dialogue, which has helped focus this report on church apologies, their meaning, and their significance.

In part I, we explored three passages: the encounter with Zacchaeus in Luke 19, the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15, and Psalm 51. In our review of these passages, we note the absence of anything that looks like an apology as we are familiar with in our own experiences. Instead, the biblical accounts emphasise actions that right wrongs and restore relationships rather than verbal expressions of regret. We asked ourselves how reading these accounts affects how we

[13] A more fulsome discussion on the elements that help form an authentic, victim-centred apology can be found in chapter 14 of the 2024 final report of the Independent Special Interlocutor for Missing Children and Unmarked Graves and Burial Sites associated with Indian Residential Schools: https://osi-bis.ca/osi-resources/reports/. See also this 2019 report on apologies issued by the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Guarantees of Non-recurrence: https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n19/214/38/pdf/n1921438.pdf.

"read" the episodes in our own lives and the lives of our communities that call for confession, repentance, and apology.

Our theological reflections in part II considered the patterns of conversion, confession, and repentance exemplified in Christian tradition and liturgy. In our shared understanding, apology is accompanied by repentance and conversion evidenced by faith active in love towards God and our neighbours. The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* reminds us that conversion and repentance are the work of the justifying grace of God. By grace, we are empowered to hear God's promises anew, confess our sins, and seek forgiveness from those we have harmed. Our Christian conviction that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, redeemed in Christ, and called to communion with God reminds us that every person shares equally in an inalienable dignity. Thus, wrongs committed by the church against the dignity of individuals and groups of people are particularly egregious. These violations are the subject of the apologies that we have studied over this phase of our dialogue.

We note a consensus among our churches that sin takes different forms: personal, corporate, and structural. Through our different theological formations, we share an understanding that sins committed in the name of the church are the burden of all members of the body of Christ. Each in their own way, Pope John Paul II and Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams remind us that our repentance for the sins of our forebears is "part of what we can do, with them and for them in the Body of Christ." To repent for the sins of the past is not to cast blame upon earlier generations, but rather "is prayerful acknowledgement of the failure that is part of us, not just of some distant 'them.'" Perhaps our repentance and apologies could be understood as prayerfully asking God by his mercy to forgive our forebears.

Part III of our report explores examples of apologies given in the name of the churches. The stories that we selected are not finished. The apologies, such as they are, are points in history that might, by God's grace, become turning points in the relationships broken by these tragic events. An apology marks not the end but rather the beginning of a long journey of truth and reconciliation that must be accompanied by actions that repair, heal and restore right relationships.

We offer these reflections on church apologies in the prayerful hope that our churches will continue to act to heal the wounds of our shameful histories. By God's grace, may it be so.

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How do I use this resource?

We envision Christians – Anglican, Lutheran, Roman Catholic – reading and reflecting on this document both personally but also in dialogue with others. However you choose to engage this resource, we encourage you to approach it in a spirit of prayer and with an openness to learning and being transformed. How do you feel as you read? What have you learned about your own or another tradition? How do these themes touch your own life and faith? How is God calling you to repentance and conversion, personally and as a community or tradition? These are just some of the questions that we hope you will reflect and pray on.

Some suggestions:

There are questions for reflection provided at the end of the user guide that may be used for personal or group prayer and reflection.

If you choose to reflect on this document with others, you might consider the following settings: (a) a parish-based faith-sharing group; (b) a grassroots ecumenical dialogue group; or (c) a seminary or theological school classroom. However you proceed, we'd encourage you to invite members of another church tradition to learn with you in this process.

Your reflection might benefit from breaking the document into two sections. For example, you might consider reading and reflecting on the Introduction as well as Parts 1 (Scripture) and 2 (Theological Considerations) in advance of a first group session. This first session could include a process of *Lectio Divina* (see below) and or a group discussion on how the biblical passages selected relate to or inform our respective traditions' doctrinal teaching and how both challenge us to personal and ecclesial conversion. A second session might focus on Part 3 (Historical Apologies and Contemporary Lessons) and begin with the suggested questions for reflection and end with a penitential service (see below). Alternatively, you might consider choosing one of the historical episodes and or an official statement associated with it to form the focus of your discussion (see the links in the document, for some examples).

Consider engaging in a process of *Lectio Divina*, either individually or in a group setting. Choose one of the three biblical passages in Part 1 and pray with it. Begin with a prayer to the Holy Spirit. Read the passage a first time and try to place yourself in the scene. Which word or short phrase stands out to you? Read the passage a second time. Rest in silence for a few moments and meditate on the following question: which one of the themes of repentance, confession, conversion, or community stands out to you today and why? Read the passage a third time. Rest in silence again for a few moments and meditate on the following questions: how is God speaking to me personally in this passage? What do I want to say to God in response? How am I called to change or live differently?

Consider organizing a public (and possibly ecumenical) penitential service that invites participants to confess their personal and ecclesial sins, to pray for God's mercy and forgiveness, and for the grace needed to walk the path of truth and reconciliation with others. In structuring this service, you might choose one or more of the biblical passages that form the focus of Part 1

and or utilize the Litany included below. When celebrated at the end of a process of group study and discussion, participants should feel empowered to highlight the issues and concerns that are most meaningful to them as a community.

Questions and suggestions for reflection:

Scripture

With the help of the three biblical passages referenced above, we have reflected briefly on themes of repentance, confession, conversion, and community. How might these passages and their central themes help us "read" the episodes in our own lives and in the lives of our communities (church, neighbourhood, nation, etc.) that call for the same?

Are there other passages that speak to similar themes that resonate with you and why?

Theological Considerations

How and why do our traditions emphasize the importance of apology, including for past wrongs committed in the name of the church?

How does theology help us to understand why apology is only the first step in rebuilding relationships among individuals and groups?

Historical Apologies and Contemporary Lessons

What are some of the emotions you felt while reading this section of the document? Which of these historical episodes stand out to you and why? What lessons do these episodes teach us? Where and how are our own communities and traditions called to repentance and conversion today?

Reflect on an episode – personal or communal – from your own life history where you or someone else confessed wrongdoing, asked for forgiveness, and sought to restore right relationship. What obstacles did you face? What did you learn in this process? How does this episode relate to or shed light on this document's examples?

Which relationships are you and your community called to restore? What steps have you and your community already taken? How are you called to act in support of reconciliation now and in the future?

A litany to be used in conjunction with the ARC Canada Statement on Church Apologies

This litany draws on themes discussed in the ARC Canada Statement on Church Apologies. It may be used to accompany either individual or group study of the text. In the context of group study, it could be incorporated into a liturgical prayer of repentance or reconciliation. Planners may select from the petitions provided or may write new petitions specific to the setting where the litany is being used.

Opening prayer

God of all goodness, your grace calls our churches to reflect upon wrongs committed in your name, to admit our failures, and to seek forgiveness from – and restoration for – those who have been harmed by actions of the church or its members. You are ever faithful, even when we are unfaithful, forgiving our sins and granting that we may bear true witness to you. Gather our prayers and petitions into one; that our confession and repentance will be inspired by the Holy Spirit, that our sorrow will be conscious and deep, and that, humbly viewing the sins committed in the name of the church, we will be converted to your way of justice and reconciliation.

Together, we pray:

> Enable us to embrace anew your life-giving promises.
> Open our ears to the cries of the violated and wounded.
> Help us to see the depth of our fault.
> Give us words to confess our sin with integrity.
> Enflame our hearts in the fire of Christ's love,
> And turn us evermore towards truth and righteousness.
> Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.

Petitions

1. Merciful God, on the night before his passion your Son prayed for the unity of all who believe in Him; yet, the divisions which have emerged within the Christian family have at times devolved even further into acts of persecution and violence against one another. We deeply regret these events and ask forgiveness from you, and from all who have suffered from these shameful actions.

Let us pray that our recognition of the sins which have rent the unity of the body of Christ will facilitate the way to reconciliation and communion among all Christians.

Response: *Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.*

2. God of our ancestors, you chose Abraham and Sarah to bring your Name to the nations; yet, the history of relations between Christians and Jews is a tormented one. You call Christians to acknowledge the ways in which the churches' own teachings have contributed to laying the

foundations for antisemitism and the Holocaust itself. We confess our fault. We implore your pardon for our churches' harm to Jews, our elder siblings in faith.

Let us pray that as we acknowledge our churches' role in contributing to antisemitism and the persecution of Jewish people, we may be moved to ensure that such evils will never happen again.

Response: *Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.*

3. Holy God, you have created all people in your own image and likeness; yet, we know that this dignity has been violated and faith has been shaken by serious crimes of sexual exploitation and abuse of young or vulnerable persons by clergy and others in positions of responsibility in our churches. These crimes become even more heinous when church leaders fail to act upon the victims' claims of abuse or to report these crimes to the appropriate civic authorities.

Let us pray for those who have suffered abuse that they may find healing, health, freedom, and joy; and for those who have perpetrated abuse that they may repent of the harm they have done and seek healing and wholeness.

Response: *Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.*

4. Triune God, you commissioned your disciples to proclaim your gospel to all creation. Your love is shown in the life of Jesus who always invited but never demanded acceptance of his teachings; yet when Christians have settled throughout the world, our presence has often brought harm instead of healing, death instead of life. As we continue to learn and to struggle with the churches' alignment with colonizing powers in Canada, you call us to honesty, humility, a spirit of repentance, and a commitment to right relations between settlers, newcomers, and the first peoples of this land.

Let us pray that our words of truth and reconciliation will be not words alone, but will lead to actions that build new relationships of justice, peace, and friendship among all peoples who call this land home.

Response: *Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.*

5. God of truth and justice, you are opposed to every type of discrimination; yet many of our churches participated in the residential school system designed to separate Indigenous children from their families, their language, and their culture. While some church leaders have made heartfelt apologies to victims of residential schools and their descendants, you call us to walk together towards a future of healing, ensuring that every child is treated with love, honour, and respect.

Let us pray that residential school victims to the seventh generation will find healing and wholeness, and that all residents of this land will receive and offer dignity to every human being.

Response: *Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.*

Concluding prayer

Gracious God, trusting in your mercy and forgiveness, we commit here today

> to resist and overcome injustices,
> to defend human dignity and the integrity of all that you have created,
> to rebuild healthy relationships with those who have been harmed by our sinful actions,
> and to the steadfast pursuit of truth and reconciliation.

We pray that our churches will continue to act to heal the wounds of our histories and that you would enable and prepare us to walk together in a good way into the future. In your unfathomable grace, remake us in your image.

Amen.