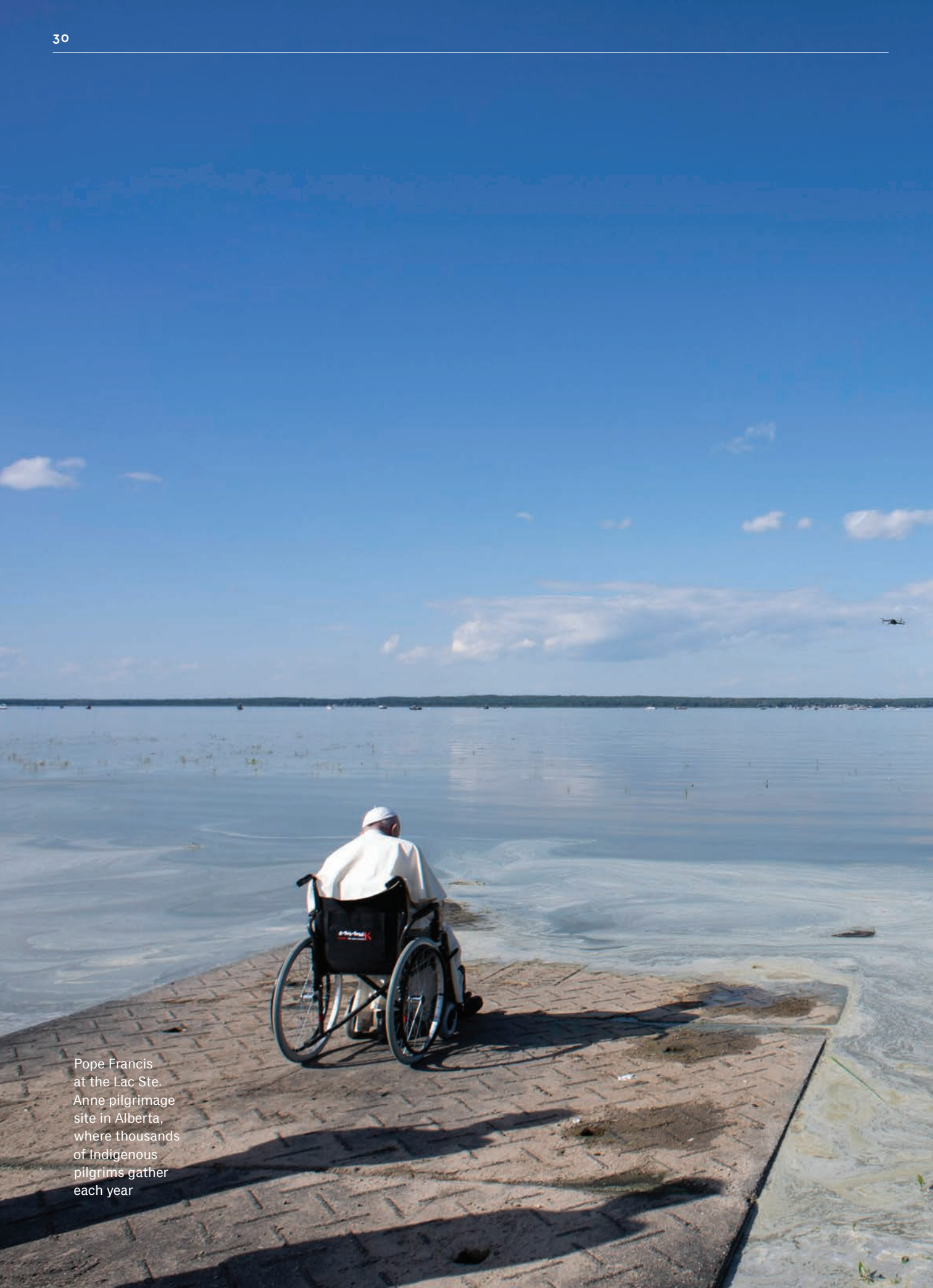


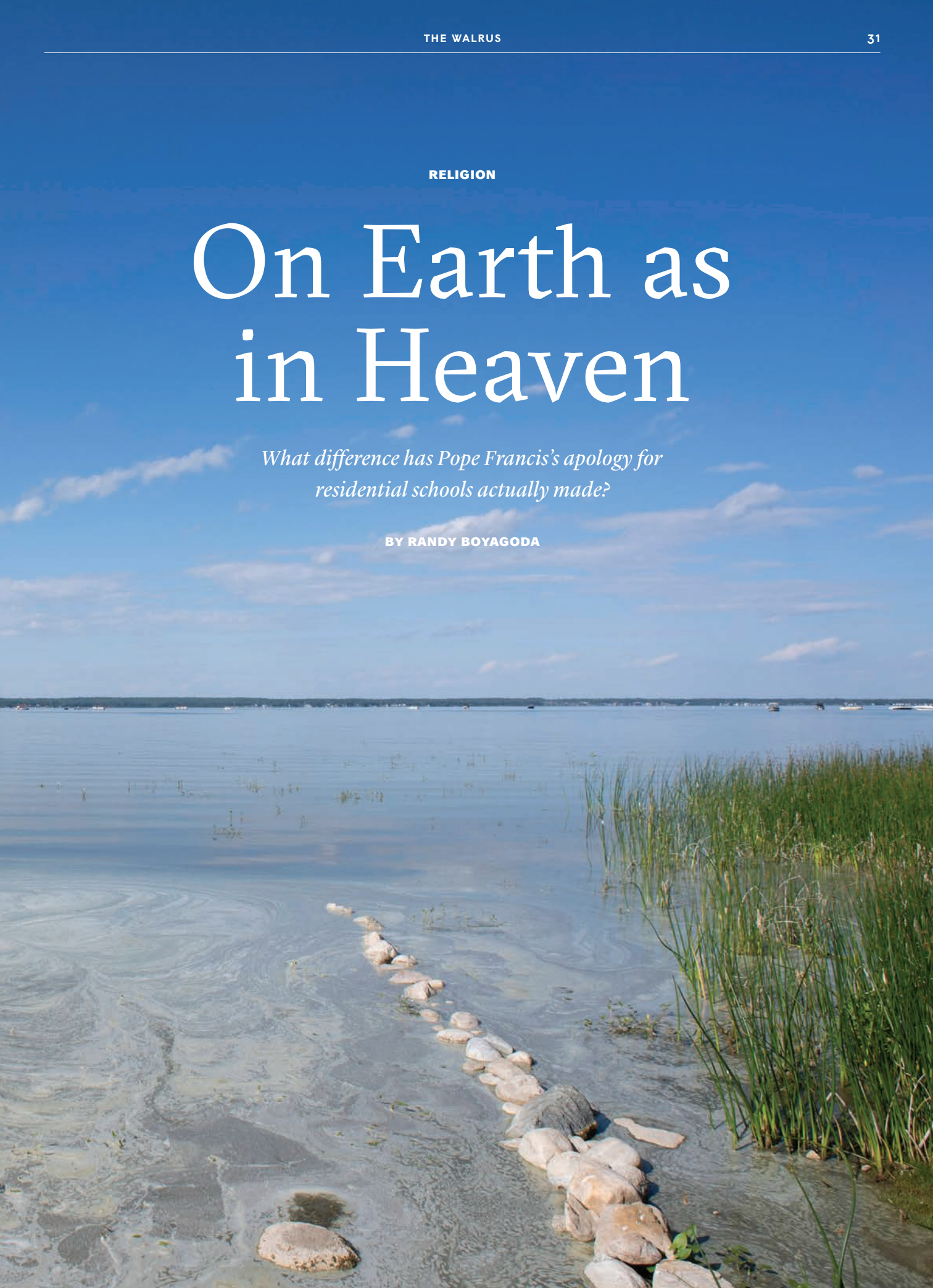
Pope Francis at the Lac Ste. Anne pilgrimage site in Alberta, where thousands of Indigenous pilgrims gather each year

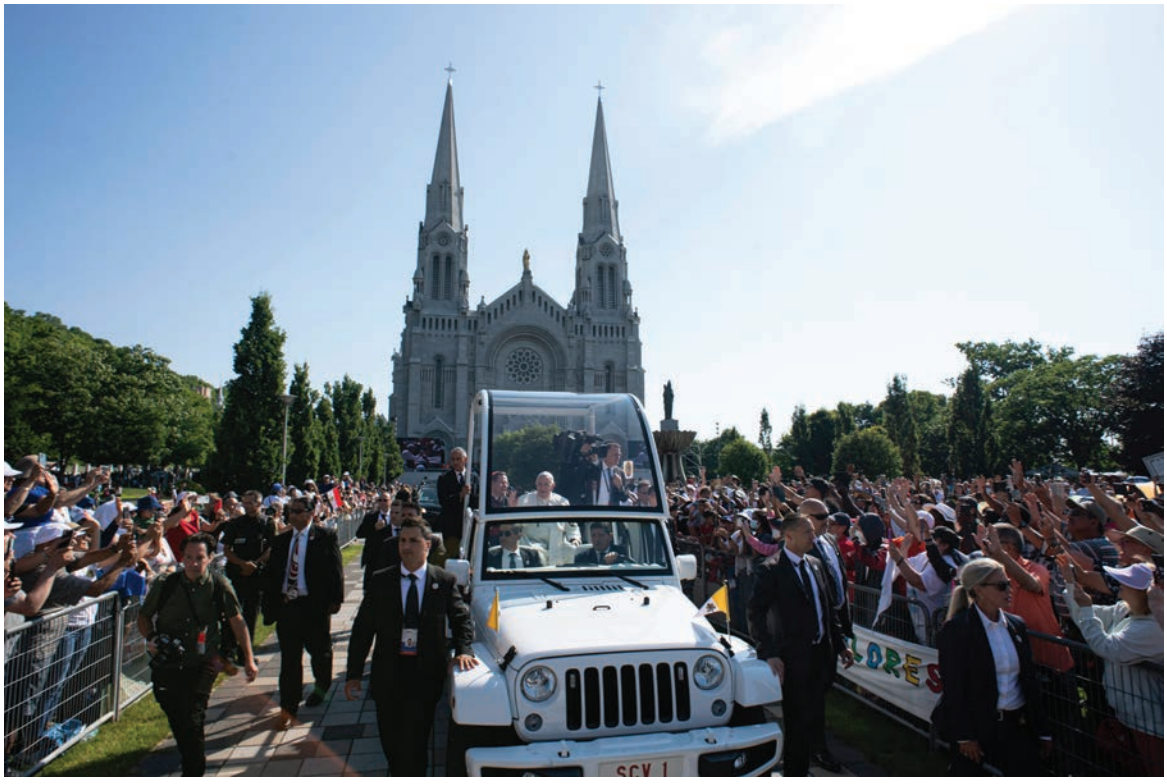
RELIGION

On Earth as in Heaven

What difference has Pope Francis's apology for residential schools actually made?

BY RANDY BOYAGODA





The country south of Edmonton looked like an infinite chessboard: giant flat squares of farmer's green and canola yellow broken up here and there by stands of tall trees. Above, the great sky was an old, lasting bruise: darker and lighter shades of purple and grey spread everywhere, sharp sunlight curving down like a sickle. I was looking out the window of an air-conditioned media bus, going to an unprecedented event in Indigenous, Canadian, and Catholic history.

A few thousand people were making their way to the First Nations community of Maskwacis that July morning. The majority of them were survivors—and their descendants—of Canada's federally mandated residential school system, which was largely administered, in arrangement with government authorities, by members of the Catholic Church. Over 130 schools had housed some 150,000 Indigenous children from 1831 to 1997, tearing those children from their parents and rupturing families across multiple generations through sibling separation, linguistic and cultural suppression, and sexual and physical abuse. According to the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), children were too ashamed to speak of what had happened to them or were dismissed by school authorities. Among the families that had adopted Christianity, many parents "could not believe that the people of God looking after their children would ever do such things."

In recent decades, such disbelief has become harder to sustain. The gap between the Church's sense of itself as a divine institution and the appalling actions of some of its proponents on earth has become all too apparent to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. This is especially so following successive revelations of the sexual, physical, emotional, and psychological abuse perpetrated by clergy members. The scope of the abuse, with accusations dating back to at least the middle of the twentieth century, is staggering: thousands of priests were involved, along with hundreds of thousands of children and others. Countries where it happened include Ireland, the United States, France, Australia, and Canada—where, according to the 2021 census, Catholicism remains the nation's dominant religion. As a result of accumulated scandals, the Church is criticized and reviled like no other global body, even while its reach and impact remain unmatched by any other faith—or secular institution, for that matter. Around the world, the Church is associated with thousands of schools and hundreds of universities, in addition to running hospitals, clinics, orphanages, and homes for the poor and homeless as well as for the elderly and infirm.

All of this suggests the high stakes for the supreme pontiff, the servant of the servants of God, the 265th successor of St. Peter, making his way to Maskwacis that July morning. Pope Francis was coming to tour the site of the former Ermineskin Residential School, one of Canada's largest, to visit a cemetery of the same name and to meet and address Indigenous peoples gathered at the Bear Park Powwow Grounds. This wasn't like John Paul II returning to his native Poland in 1979, in the middle of the Cold War, to preach for individual rights to worship and free association, in a deeply Catholic country then controlled by an authoritarian, atheist communist regime. Nor, for that matter, was this like John Paul II's visit to Canada in 1984, the first by any pope, which also began in Edmonton and featured a sundown drive to the city's cathedral, during which he blessed cheering crowds and was flanked by kids on bikes racing the Popemobile along Jasper Avenue.

As a result of accumulated scandals, the Church is criticized and reviled like no other global body.

No, Francis's coming to Canada last July was, as he put it, a "penitential pilgrimage." As the leader of a 2,000-year-old global religion and its 1.3 billion adherents, Francis would subject himself, and the institution he leads, to a rare form of public self-reckoning and forgiveness seeking. I was present for the visit as a writer, with formal press credentials, and as an academic who writes and teaches about contemporary Catholicism; I was also there as a lifelong Catholic and second-generation South Asian immigrant uncertain about what my personal role is in the permanently fraught story of how my Church and my country have impacted the Indigenous experience.

Like many Catholics, I looked to the pope as a guide and an example. What would he offer to the Indigenous people he was to meet? How would it be received? How would *he* be received? Francis has repeatedly likened the Church to a "field hospital,"

LEFT Pope Francis blesses the crowd outside the Shrine of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, Quebec.

RIGHT Pope Francis in a moment of prayer at the Ermineskin Cree Nation Cemetery, in the community of Maskwacis, Alberta.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF VATICAN MEDIA

suggesting his sense of the dramatic need for immediate healing in the midst of a great battle. But what would it mean for a hospital to offer healing to those harmed by its very care?

To reach the heart of Maskwacis, we drove down a long road off the highway, passing simple one-storey houses dotting large tracts of open land. We were taken off the bus and guided to our assigned seats at the powwow site. To our right were row after row of blue portable bathrooms, followed by a beige teepee and a white registration tent set up, according to the signage, for those experiencing mental health or cultural challenges associated with the papal visit.

We stood in the ringed overhang that surrounded the open-air arbour where most of the attendees were gathering. They ranged from the very young to the very old, and they arrived in jeans and light lumber jackets and ball caps and T-shirts, noticeably but not exclusively orange, and also in diaphanous and beaded shirts and skirts and animal-skin vests. Many were smiling, even laughing, calling out to others in the crowd, going over for hugs and shoulder claps and more jokes, and otherwise checking their phones and snacking and smoking. The complimentary packets of tissue that Salvation Army volunteers were distributing were received as indifferently as the plastic-cased rosaries and prayer cards being handed out by Catholic volunteers. The only clamoured-for giveaways were the clear plastic rain slickers. The wind was blowing hard as rain came down in torrents in the main area that was filling up. On video screens flanking the main stage, Francis could be seen leaving the cemetery by wheelchair elsewhere on the same grounds. He began making his way toward us.

Meanwhile, inside the arbour, chiefs, bishops, and cardinals assembled at different ends. To the north, where the pope would eventually sit in a white chair on a white stage, was the Catholic hierarchy—older, scholarly looking men in glasses, wearing sweeping black cassocks and silver or gold pectoral crosses. These were members of the Vatican entourage and leaders of the Church in Canada. A soaring reddish-brown pole bisected the wind-whipped space in between the Catholic authorities and the people gathering at the southern and eastern ends of the arbour: the chiefs, whose dress included black-tipped white-feather headdresses over ornate shirts and pants and boots. At the front stood George Arcand, Jr., grand chief of the Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations; he had first greeted Francis in an airport hangar the day before, alongside the governor general and the prime minister.

> **"I am here," said Pope Francis, "because the first step of my penitential pilgrimage is that of again asking forgiveness."**

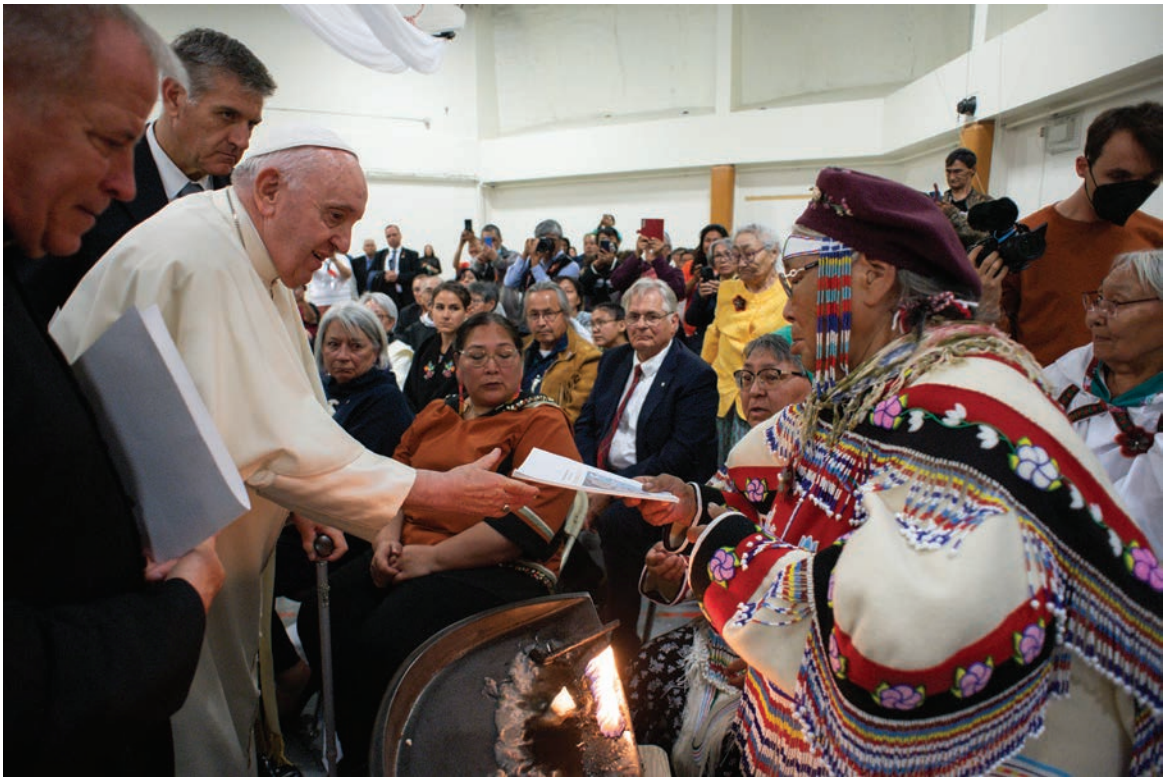
"Is there going to be a mass?" asked someone standing behind me in the press group. His tone was more worried than hopeful. The weather was blustery and wet and was getting colder and colder: for the first time in my life, I was shivering in late July.

There definitely wasn't going to be a mass. The whole point of Francis starting his visit this way, in this place, was to make it clear he was not here for a liturgical celebration. Accompanied by chiefs and surrounded by clerical aides and Italian security, Pope Francis approached in his wheelchair—an eighty-five-year-old with one functioning lung and one bad knee. His physical struggles could be seen throughout his time in Canada, a trip he kept despite cancelling a preceding visit to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan for health reasons. Phones were raised, filming and snapping. Francis shuffled a few steps and, with great effort, leaning on a cane, stood in front of a white chair. The pope in place, a drum circle started playing—strong, driving, matched by powerful, urgency-filled voices—which became what emcee Elmer Rattlesnake, a Cree Elder, called a "Grand Entry Song." The chiefs progressed toward the pontiff, many stamping their feet to the rhythms. As Francis rose to greet the chiefs on stage, the emcee introduced the final "healing dance," conducted by four dancers to the "heartbeat" of the drum. Eventually, Francis sat down.

The arbour became quiet and tense when it was time for Francis to speak. And when he did, he spoke in Spanish. This made sense for a native Argentinian wanting to express himself as best he could in a major address. But what an unforced error. Even as many people watching the television coverage told me how dramatic and moving the address was, the actual crowd before Francis was immediately lost. A man sitting in front of me wearing a black "Native Veteran" baseball cap googled on his phone, "What is the pope's language?" Most people in the audience couldn't see the simultaneous English subtitles running along the bottom of the video screens. So, having waited a long time for the pope to come and speak to them, the crowd at Maskwacis had to wait even longer to know what he had to say, everyone hanging on the paragraph-by-paragraph translation by a priest at a nearby microphone.

"Today I am here, in this land that, along with its ancient memories, preserves the scars of still-open wounds. I am here because the first step of my penitential pilgrimage among you is that of again asking forgiveness, of telling you once more that I am deeply sorry. Sorry for the ways in which, regrettably, many Christians supported the colonizing mentality of the powers that oppressed the Indigenous peoples. I am sorry."

There it was. He said it. The apology. It was intended to fulfill a formal promise made to the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit delegations that had visited him in Rome months earlier, when, sitting



with some 200 visitors to the Apostolic Palace at St. Peter's Basilica, he had heard, first hand, of the individual and intergenerational experiences and the consequences of residential schooling. His words at Maskwacis also corresponded to a call to action from the 2015 TRC report, which had demanded, within a year of its release, an apology for the Church's involvement in residential schools.

There was silence when Francis delivered the apology in his deep, gravelly Spanish. He glanced up from the page but otherwise didn't lay any emphasis on his words. When rendered into English, the sentence was greeted by modest applause. But Francis had more to say. He spoke for several minutes about the "deplorable evil" of residential schools that had been "incompatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ" and asked, with "shame and unambiguously," for forgiveness for "the evil committed by so many Christians against the Indigenous peoples."

And now that he had finally said it, was it enough? Lori Campbell, a Cree Métis from Treaty 6 territory (Montreal Lake Cree Nation) and associate vice president of Indigenous engagement at the University of Regina, expressed frustration to me that the pope's visit was late by many years in relation to the call to action. Moreover, she observed, "in my mind, Francis did not come because of the TRC. He came because of the pressure that continued to happen." Campbell was referring to the detection, beginning in May 2021, of human remains at the former sites of several residential schools across Western Canada. The unmarked graves, believed to belong to Indigenous children, had dramatically shifted the national mood. Petitions and open letters and an array of wrenching and searching discussions in community, educational, religious, political, and media settings had followed, as had the vandalism of churches in British Columbia, Alberta, and Nova Scotia. For Campbell, it was that public pressure and the mounting anguish over the findings, more than any grassroots Indigenous activism, that had forced the Church's hand.

Hard for me to miss, however, was the Vatican's decision to time the visit to the late-July Feast of St. Anne. A major annual event for Indigenous Catholics in Canada, the feast represents the intersection of their religious devotion to the grandmother of Jesus with the high standing of their Elders. In other words, Francis came to Canada to deliver an apology on a timeline that resonated most meaningfully with Indigenous Catholic experience.

This point especially mattered to

Pope Francis receives the testimony of an Inuit Elder inside Nakasuk Elementary School in Iqaluit, Nunavut.

Cristino Bouvette, a Catholic priest of Cree Métis and Italian heritage, who was the national liturgical coordinator for the papal visit. Bouvette's kokum, or grandmother, was a residential school survivor and, by choice, a Christian. Her life, he has written, informed Bouvette's decision to become a priest, which currently involves serving as a university chaplain in Calgary. Given this, his was arguably the most demanding and difficult public role of anyone involved in Francis's visit. "I took nothing but heat," he told me, explaining how certain "liturgical and ceremonial elements were found displeasing to both traditionalist Catholics and Indigenous advocates." He noted, in particular, that the nationally televised papal mass at Edmonton's Commonwealth Stadium was criticized publicly for not including elements of Indigenous spirituality and religious practice that were distinct from Catholicism.

Despite these competing pressures, Bouvette focused much of his attention on a community that, he underscores, constitutes a minority amongst Indigenous peoples. According to the 2021 census, 485,320 of the 1.8 million Indigenous people in Canada identify as Catholic; the first conversions date back to the early seventeenth century, primarily in Quebec. Within those nearly half a million people who today identify as Indigenous Catholics, Bouvette told me, he is especially interested in serving those who are "reconciliation seeking." By this, he means Indigenous Catholics who "are hurting," much like Indigenous people who are no longer Catholic or not Catholic to begin with. But, for this particular group, staying Catholic, especially today, he said, is "a decision they make for themselves," as opposed to having it imposed upon them by Christian colonizers from the past.

And so, Bouvette reminded me, our capacity for making sense of a papal apology to Indigenous peoples depends on first acknowledging "vastly different realities" among Indigenous peoples in relation to the Church itself: for the practising Catholics among them, Bouvette observed, "the papal visit was perhaps the most monumental experience in their lifetime." He added that "though they are admittedly a numerically relative few, I am happy to have gone through all of it for them," and in turn, he's keen to devote his energy to supporting these Indigenous Catholics through the practices, offices, and resources that the Church can offer. As a priest with Indigenous heritage living and serving in Canada, Bouvette pursues all of this directly and in local terms. He does so as part of the larger Church, whose leader had come to Canada and made it clear that "begging pardon" was "only the first step, the starting point."

If well intended, the line didn't land as such. Writing in a searing tone for *The Conversation*, Campbell rejected the apology on the grounds that it drew convenient distinctions between the wrongdoings of individual members of the Church and the institution itself: "This was not the Catholic Church taking responsibility for acts of genocide and spiritual, emotional and physical abuses. Apologizing for individuals versus the establishment that upheld not only the assimilation policy, but also protected—and continues to protect—the people who committed the crimes is horrifying at worst and an insult at best."

Taking a different tack, Matthew Wildcat, an assistant professor at the University of Alberta and a member of Ermineskin Cree Nation, wrote in the *Globe and Mail* that the apology served "as a crossroads" for Indigenous nations. One path, he wrote, was to finally disengage from the Church and focus on "long haul" relationships with Canadian governments and society. It was a path Wildcat supported. He acknowledged that demanding material reparations from the Church was valid but, practically speaking, saw more promise in treating the papal apology as a kind of closure.

As for the pope himself, the apology clearly wasn't meant to close things; in fact, in the fuller context of papal and Church history, it belonged to a lineage of contrition. Francis wasn't just reiterating, as might be expected, his earlier direct apologies to Indigenous delegations from Canada in Rome, nor his related apology to Indigenous peoples while

on a visit to Bolivia in 2015, nor Benedict XVI's private-audience apology to Phil Fontaine and other Indigenous delegates in 2009.

Instead, Francis was calling back to a 1998 papal bull, or public decree, by John Paul II, in which he had represented the Church as kneeling before God to "implore forgiveness for the past and present sins of her sons and daughters." That bull led to John Paul II declaring "A Day of Pardon" in March 2000, part of what the *New York Times* called "the most sweeping apology ever, repenting for the errors of his church over 2000 years"—an apology that made specific reference to Indigenous peoples.

This is what it means for a pope to speak and act out of plenitudo potestatis, or "the fullness of power," as the Church has long understood it. Pope Francis leads not as himself, based on his singular sense of things, but in continuity with his predecessors. He is part of the living and unbroken tradition of teaching and practice that makes up the magisterium, the authoritative mind of the Church itself. This likewise means that, when answering future requests for apology and restitution from Indigenous peoples in other parts of the world, Francis's successors will be informed by his Maskwacis address—not just next year but next century and the centuries after that, just as Francis's predecessors, reaching back two millennia, have shaped his own efforts.

The Roman Catholic Church is the world's oldest continuous institution, dating from its first-century origins in the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean regions of the Roman Empire. It is anchored in the transformative experiences that a series of Jewish men and women had with Jesus of Nazareth during his life and then with his close group of followers after his death by crucifixion and, as Christians believe, his bodily resurrection three days later. And if that institution is inseparable today from the papacy, it's because of their shared origins in Christ's words and decision, at a site near the present-day Golan Heights, as recounted in the Gospel of Matthew: "And so I say to you, you are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church." Whether it is led by a first-century Jewish fisherman or a one-lunged Argentinian who used to take the bus to work when he was the archbishop of Buenos Aires, the Catholic Church conceives of itself as the mystical perfect vessel of God's will upon earth.

Given its divine founding, the Church believes it does not—cannot—err in matters of faith, only its members can, a distinction Lori Campbell and others find offensive. Indeed, there is one especially consequential way in which many around the world believe the Church did err—and continued to do so until quite recently. This has to do with a series of centuries-old papal bulls: *Dum Diversas* (1452), *Romanus Pontifex* (1455), and *Inter Caetera* (1493). Taken together, these documents are widely accepted as the original sources of what's come to be called the Doctrine of Discovery. At the time, the bulls constituted Church sanction for competing Spanish and Portuguese expeditions to extra-European lands: Spanish and Portuguese explorers could claim territory with papal approval—provided any non-Christians encountered would be converted.

But the term "Doctrine of Discovery" was first codified in a secular context: an 1823 US Supreme Court ruling decided that the United States had "discovered" the land it now occupied as a nation-state, thus nullifying the capacity of Native American nations to sell land to individuals. This judicial decision was consistent with centuries of earlier practice and assumptions dating back to those papal bulls, which, critics of the Church argue, provided backing for the harms done to Indigenous peoples in Canada. Even if the Church didn't formally uphold the Doctrine of Discovery by the time the residential school system was put into place, it didn't need to: the doctrine's assumptions had been normalized as much by the secular state as by the Catholic individuals involved in those schools.

Repeated calls for the Vatican to rescind the offending bulls were made in the TRC and likewise by many Indigenous

and non-Indigenous leaders, activists, and thinkers before, during, and after Francis's time in Canada. Francis never responded to these calls, seemingly ignoring them until March 30, nearly eight months after his 2022 visit, when the Vatican issued a statement formally repudiating the doctrine, stating that its conceptions "did not adequately reflect the equal dignity and rights of Indigenous peoples."

Why the delay, especially given the clear sense of contrition Francis conveyed during his visit? Why didn't he just repudiate it and, in this way, free the Church, at least formally, of its long-standing association with the Doctrine of Discovery in Canada and elsewhere?

One answer might be that the Church had already done so—repeatedly. The bulls have been refuted by subsequent pontiffs over the centuries, beginning in 1537 with Pope Paul III who, responding in part to an anti-colonialist, pro-Indigenous Spanish bishop living in Hispaniola, issued the papal bull *Sublimus Deus*, in which he declared that "Indians and all other people who may later be discovered by Christians" should, "freely and legitimately, enjoy their liberty and the possession of their property; nor should they in any way be enslaved; should the contrary happen, it shall be null and have no effect." Different popes have explicitly upheld these words: notably in 1639, 1741, 1839, and 1888. The most recent papal affirmation took place in Fort Simpson, Northwest Territories, when John Paul II visited in 1987. "My presence among you today," he said to those gathered, "marks my reaffirmation and reassertion of [Paul III's] teaching."

A more procedural reason Francis didn't bring up the Doctrine of Discovery might have been that it is not actually an expression of Catholic faith, a confusion the Vatican referred to in its repudiation statement. The doctrine appears nowhere in the Church's extensive set of related rulings and teachings. While those early bulls undeniably informed what became the Doctrine of Discovery, that concept itself evolved separately from Church and papal teachings. Indeed, a 2010 statement made at the United Nations by the Holy See, the Vatican's diplomatic arm, insisted that, for the Church, the early documents "had no value whatsoever for centuries."

But these kinds of clarifications never met Indigenous expectations, as attested to in a 2018 report by the Assembly of First Nations. Entitled "Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery," the report acknowledges that, in 2016, the Conference of Canadian Catholic Bishops released a public statement rejecting the doctrine but concludes that "Discovery started with the Pope and First Nations are owed the respect of having the Pope himself apologize." Hearing it from the pope—not the Canadian bishops, not the Holy See's representative to the UN—matters. After all, the Church's leader is the most recognizable authority-bearing religious figure in world history.

The impact of the doctrine on the papal visit, and on ongoing Indigenous–Canada discourse, is a source of exasperation to Douglas Sanderson (Amo Binashii), a member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation, who holds the Prichard Wilson chair in law and public policy in the faculty of law at the University of Toronto. Coming out of what he describes as a difficult time, personally, following the release of the TRC report, and through conversations with family members who were themselves academics and artists, he decided to draw on his training as a scholar to make sense of the history of Indigenous relations with the French and English, dating from the contact period.

"What I came to learn was that almost everything that we know about Indigenous and settler contact is not true," he told me. "It's completely not reflective of the historical record." He has yet to come across a single reference to the Doctrine of Discovery in any land-related dealings, which, he notes, feature "chains of titles that go all the way back to Indigenous sellers," alongside treaties with settlers and, for instance, the 1811 Wampum Belt that the British brought to the Haudenosaunee to confirm an alliance in advance of the War of 1812. "It's not the Doctrine of Discovery" that

broke these connections, he insists, but "the rise of this nation-state," Canada. "What the doctrine does is it allows us to blame someone else for things that are clearly Canada's fault," says Sanderson. "It shifts the treatment away from nationalism, from our own institutions, to some foreign power from a long time ago."

Finnish historian Pekka Hämäläinen's *Indigenous Continent*, a major new history of Indigenous peoples in North America over the 400 years leading up to the twentieth century, is likewise silent on the doctrine as compared to the significance of nation-to-nation dynamics. Hämäläinen devotes a great deal of attention to Catholic missionary activity in North America, but he ignores popes and their bulls. He regards the major lines of change and conflict as running between and among Indigenous nations, imperial Europe, and the nation-states of North America.

As for Sanderson, he is not Catholic and did not attend a residential school—his mother did. He said the papal apology was significant but not in relation to the Doctrine of Discovery. Instead, "it's about something personal, it's about something spiritual, it's about the way people understand their relationship to themselves and the Creator and this planet, and that's something that we should honour and value."

Following his apology in Maskwacis, Francis was fitted with a headdress by chief Wilton "Willie" Littlechild, former grand chief of the Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations and member of Parliament for Wetaskiwin, Alberta. Acknowledging backlash on social media for doing so, Littlechild—a residential school survivor and one of the three commissioners who heard thousands of fellow survivors speak at the TRC—defended his gift in an interview with the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network as a "gesture of reconciliation" and "not about politics."

Other Indigenous people saw it differently. Kevin Tacan, a Sioux Valley Dakota Nation knowledge keeper from Manitoba, told the CBC that Littlechild's act was "disappointing." Tacan regarded it as a political gesture that, looking ahead, threatened to be an empty one: "[People] have to prove themselves constantly. They have to continue to prove themselves going into the future, that they still deserve to have it." Campbell told me about the pain she imagined generations of family members would have felt seeing the pope receive a headdress from an Elder. She also wrote in *The Conversation* about the frustration of watching "Indigenous political leaders give away headdresses, pipes and drums as symbolic, performative gestures to those who continue to harm us."

Francis was received, and received gifts, less controversially later that afternoon, when he travelled to Edmonton's McCauley district to visit the Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples, an Indigenous Catholic church that fosters immigrant faith groups until they are established enough to have their own parishes. After being greeted by drummers, Francis entered the church to deliver his second address of the day. He commended the teepee poles housing the altar as a deeply Indigenous and Catholic response to John's gospel account of Christ's coming into the world: "He pitched His tent amongst us." In turn, the pope resituated reconciliation in an explicitly Christian context—the crucifixion. Francis reflected that Christ carried out the definitive reconciliation for all people in all places at all times: he joined, in his very person, suffering and salvation, life and death and new life.

Talking about that moment with me, Bouvette observed that "if the Church understands reconciliation to be the coming back together again, then it implies that there was a time where we were together," which means, in turn, that the Church is seeking to restore something that has been hurt or damaged.

As for Campbell, she believes that the Cree word for reconciliation—kwayaskwastâsowin, or "to put things right"—matters more, because it speaks to material and structural changes that need to happen on the part of both Canada and the Church. After the visit, she sharply criticized the federal government

for a 2015 decision to discharge Catholic entities from completing a $25 million commitment to residential school survivors after an amount of only $4 million had been raised. When I spoke to her a few weeks later, she cited other things that could be set right: among them, the Church supporting Indigenous efforts to convince France to extradite retired Catholic priest Johannes Rivoire, accused in Canada of multiple acts of abuse, dating back to the 1960s and '70s, against Inuit children. The full array of tensions inherent in the pope's visit was evident the next day, when Francis celebrated mass for about 50,000 at Edmonton's green and yellow Commonwealth Stadium. It was the Feast of St. Anne, and there were many Indigenous people present. Following a reading from the gospel, Francis preached a homily in which he celebrated family itself as holy and to be honoured as nothing less than what he called a "school" of love.

A school!

I couldn't imagine the grim association wasn't known to the pope and his close advisers. Why talk about the Church's vision of family as a school of love in front of many people whose families, and experiences of love, were ruptured by members of this same Church? I put this question to Bouvette, who, with some strain, speculated that the pope may have been using irony to criticize the effects of residential schools on Indigenous family structures. Whether or not that was the case, no one seemed to pay very much attention to the pope's words, given the stadium acoustics that were better suited to football chants and rock anthems, never mind the throbbing sun and late-morning heat that were wilting everyone.

That afternoon, Francis went to Lac Ste. Anne to participate in the annual pilgrimage made to venerate the Virgin Mary's mother, an event in Indigenous Catholic experience that dates back to at least 1889. I didn't get a press pass, and while I could have gone as a pilgrim, I went to a matinee viewing of *Nope* and then watched the coverage of the pilgrimage on TV instead. This time, Francis visited those revered waters by wheelchair, taking the trip along a ribbon of concrete freshly poured on the lush green grass leading up to the dark-blue lake, and then he gave another address in the nearby chapel. I sort of followed along, appreciative of the religious experience it provided pilgrims. But I was becoming increasingly skeptical of what more there was to this visit beyond its obviously dramatic symbolism. Indeed, what had felt charged, uncertain, and viscerally real that first morning in Maskwacis had given way, more or less, to the usual features of a papal visit—in this case, the 2022 Canada edition. There was endless media coverage, often emphasizing the continuing frustrations of Indigenous peoples with the Church and the inadequacy of what Francis had said. There was political manoeuvring: the prime minister, with his sporty new haircut and empathic smiles, was little more than a decorative flourish in Maskwacis: noticeable, not really needed. Like many, many others, Justin Trudeau called on the pope to say more and do more about the legacies of the residential school system and also, of course, to annul the Doctrine of Discovery.

To that backbeat, Francis met with survivors, preached, prayed, and greeted cheering crowds.

Beyond papal recognitions, affirmations, and apologies—Francis even used the term "genocide" to discuss what had happened in residential schools—we can still wonder what the pope's visit actually meant, practically, for Indigenous peoples in Canada and elsewhere. Maybe there won't be any satisfying answers for a long time. For the Catholic Church, which thinks in centuries, that may be fine. But, for Indigenous peoples and settlers alike hoping for actual structural or institutional action, what evidence was there that the visit was more than an extended but futile sincere gesture or a hocus pocus act of holy theatre? One initial possibility might be evident in the February 2023 announcement, by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, of a series of commitments to "renewing and strengthening" relations with Indigenous peoples. These include an invitation for Indigenous Elders to share their spiritual wisdom in Catholic settings and working with local communities to address social challenges, such as addiction, suicide, and poverty. It also includes a pledge toward local projects in support of reconciliation, with $9 million already raised out of a $30 million five-year goal.

These commitments, if promising, speak of how much restorative work remains to be done. That such work has long been needed in Canada is undeniable; in fact, one of Francis's predecessors signalled as much decades ago. When John Paul II visited Fort Simpson in 1987, he called for Indigenous access to resources and land in support of more economic agency and for constitutional protections for Indigenous peoples. John Paul II then called for a "new covenant" to ensure basic Indigenous rights, including the right to self-government: "I pray that the Holy Spirit will help you all to find the just way so that Canada may be a model for the world in upholding the dignity of the Aboriginal peoples." No one I spoke to for this story was aware of John Paul II's words, and neither Campbell nor Sanderson—who thinks his grandfather might have been present for John Paul's address—was surprised by the lack of their impact. Both suggested that Indigenous advocacy then didn't have the national reach it does now, while the Canada of 1987 wasn't ready to take John Paul II's calls seriously. Whether Canada is ready now, and whether the Church is ready to play its full part, remains to be seen. What I return to was one of the most distinctive and affecting Indigenous presences in the pope's visit, a woman named Si Pih Ko. Unscripted and unplanned, she stood in front of Francis at the end of the Maskwacis event and sang. At first, many people thought she was singing "O Canada" in Cree. She was not. Hers was a raw and immediate response to the visit and the apology, not the carefully tuned work of rivalling and competing experts and activists and public leaders. Francis listened, smiling. Her face was ragged and raging. ✝

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