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Members of the Assembly of First Nations perform in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican March 31. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino, file)

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Marie-Anne Day Walker-Pelletier, a former chief of the Okanese First Nation in Saskatchewan, will be attentive to Pope Francis' words during his trip to Canada and to the church's actions in the wake of the historic visit. She'll also be watchful for one simple act.

This spring, Walker-Pelletier was part of the delegation of Indigenous Canadians who traveled to the Vatican and met the pope. While there, she gave Francis two pairs of small moccasins. "He knows he needs to bring them back when he apologizes here," the 68-year-old Walker-Pelletier told NCR.

"It's not about the moccasins. It's about the graves of the children who were never found, the kids who were abused, raped and died at residential schools, the babies who were incinerated." The shoes "are a symbol of the children who never came home," she said.

In anticipation of the July 24-29 papal trip — which is likely to be one of the most painstaking of Francis' 37 travels abroad as pontiff — Walker-Pelletier is among the many Indigenous Canadians reflecting on the history of the residential school system, the ongoing trauma the schools inflicted and what they hope will be the lasting impact of the pope's time in the country.

Her expectation for a concrete action from the pope echoes expectations of other Indigenous that Francis will do more than simply make an expected apology for the Catholic Church's involvement in the abusive residential school system.

Marie-Anne Day Walker-Pelletier, a former chief of the Okanese First Nation in Saskatchewan, presented Pope Francis with these pairs of small moccasins as part of a meeting with a delegation of Indigenous Canadians earlier this year. (Courtesy of Marie-Anne Day Walker-Pelletier)

As Erica Beaudin, a member of the Cowessess First Nation who also was part of the delegation to Rome, told NCR: "I believe there is goodwill, but it's what the church demonstrates through actions that can bring healing."

"If the Holy Father gives direction to the church and dioceses and the Canadian bishops do what they can to enable Indigenous people to regain their identity, language and culture, that would be the greatest tale to tell," said Beaudin.

Stories of immense suffering

Walker-Pelletier was 10 years old when she entered a church-run residential school. The first day her hair was cut, her clothes discarded, and she was forced to wait her turn, naked, before being told to climb into a bathtub with abrasive mint soap. The

experience was common and foretold a persistent stripping-away — of language and culture, religion, family bonds, and innocence.

"My grandparents had raised me gently and they never treated me like that — never yelled or pushed," recalled Walker-Pelletier. "I wondered why I was there and just wanted to go home."

Marie-Anne Day Walker-Pelletier of Okanese First Nation speaks as Assembly of First Nations delegates meet the media outside St. Peter's Square after a meeting with Pope Francis at the Vatican March 31. (CNS/Paul Haring)

In the late 19th century and much of the 20th century, First Nations, Inuit and Métis children were, like Walker-Pelletier, removed from their families and communities and placed in Canadian residential schools. At least 150,000 children passed through their doors.

The government sponsored the schools, but churches — Catholic, Anglican, United, Methodist and Presbyterian — ran them. The Catholic Church operated by far the most: approximately 60% of the nearly 140 schools. (By comparison, an estimated 18% of Native American boarding schools in the United States were run by Catholic

groups.)

Most of the Catholic-administered schools were overseen by the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, a French order sent to Canada in 1841, and staffed by women religious, particularly the Sisters of Charity, the Sisters of Providence, the Sisters of St. Anne and the Missionary Oblate Sisters of the Sacred Heart and of Mary Immaculate. The church's primary involvement in the schools ended in 1969, though the schools continued to operate until the late 1990s.

Linc Kesler, who established the First Nations and Indigenous studies program at the University of British Columbia, explained that the Canadian system was inspired by the U.S. version. A model was Pennsylvania's Carlisle Indian Industrial School, founded in 1879 by Civil War veteran Lt. Col. Richard Henry Pratt.

Pratt, said Kesler, was a member of a "friends of the Indians" group who argued that Indians "were indeed humans who could be integrated into U.S. society" — if they shed Native cultures and customs. The lieutenant colonel coined the infamous refrain "Kill the Indian, save the man."

A classroom at Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, circa 1901-1903 (Library of Congress)

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released a report affirming the schools supported a "policy of cultural genocide" and documenting how children were subjected to psychological, physical and sexual abuse.

Bev Sellars is a former chief of the Xat'sull (Soda Creek) First Nation and the author of *They Called Me Number One*, a memoir of her childhood in a residential school and its effects on generations of women in her family.

The trauma she experienced at St. Joseph's Mission, established in British Columbia by the Oblates, caused her to wet the bed nightly as a child.

"Every day would start with me lining up for the strap," recalled Sellars. "They told me I was too lazy to go to the bathroom. But I tried and tried so many things. It was an emotional response; I just couldn't help it."

'It was a culture, a sickness'

Indigenous communities did not use corporal punishment, "so the dominant European way of raising and disciplining children was devastating," said Archbishop Donald Bolen of Regina, Saskatchewan, who accompanied the delegates to Rome and has worked with Indigenous Canadians for years.

Bolen told NCR the commission report reflects the real and profound suffering of Indigenous people at residential schools. "Today ... we understand the church never should have been involved in a project of assimilation," Bolen said.

Linc Kesler is a retired historian at the University of British Columbia who established the First Nations and Indigenous studies program there. He also helped found Oregon State University's ethnic studies department. (Courtesy of Linc Kesler)

Based on discussions with survivors, Kesler believes the schools at best "were places where children were told they were worthless over and over; at worst were where physical and sexual abuse was routine." By 2015, almost half of all living survivors had reported claims of abuse at the schools.

"It was not just some individuals acting badly," said Beaudin, 50. "It was a culture, a sickness that was perpetuated."

Children often were taken against their will and at times without their family's knowledge.

"There were instances where during the day people showed up at the village school with a boat, truck or plane and scooped up children out of the school," Kesler said. "At the end of the day, the parents would wonder why their kids weren't back. Some never saw their children again."

Malnutrition was common, leading to weakened immune systems and disease. Indigenous children in the schools died at far higher rates than other Canadian children at the time, according to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, and many were buried in unmarked graves rather than returned to their families.

In the past few years, new ground-penetrating radar and other technologies helped identify unmarked graves, mostly containing children, at several former residential school sites.

The most recent discoveries caught the attention of people worldwide, and "that's a good thing," said Sellars. "But Indigenous people always knew there were unmarked graves, because many had been forced to dig them as children." In the past, "we weren't believed or it was brushed aside."

In front of steps of Vancouver Art Gallery, rows of children’s shoes and toys are seen Jan. 30 as a memorial to the 215 Indigenous children whose remains were found buried on unmarked side near the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia, Canada, in May 2021. (Dreamstime/Leszek Wrona)

Not surprisingly, the schools led to intergenerational trauma, addiction, self-harm and poverty, said Beaudin, who is executive director of Regina Treaty/Status Indian Services, which provides assistance, training and advocacy for First Nations.

When students were released from the schools their language was gone "and they were so psychologically damaged that no one wanted to deal with them," said Kesler. "They were stigmatized and drifted out to urban centers with no skills, a shattered psyche, limited literacy and unresolved trauma issues."

"I don't think healing will be over anytime soon," Kesler said. "But I think it can be significantly better. And the pope's recent actions are steps in the right direction."

More than an apology

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission report includes 94 calls to action — steps to be followed in order to achieve "true reconciliation." No. 58 is a specific request for the pope to provide an apology in Canada "within one year of the issuing of this report."

While it took seven years for a pope to come, the trip is "hugely significant," Bolen told NCR.

Related: Pope Francis set to embark for Canada, on a one-of-a-kind papal visit

Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis have issued abundant apologies, "but it's not normal practice for the pope to offer an apology in a particular place for what was done by church leaders, church members and religious communities," said the archbishop. "There is something new here."

Echoing other Indigenous leaders, Beaudin said she hopes Francis will explicitly acknowledge the culpability of the institutional church, not merely certain individuals, during the Canada trip.

Francis told the delegation in April: "For the deplorable conduct of ... members of the Catholic Church, I ask for God's forgiveness and I want to say to you with all my heart: I am very sorry."

Beaudin said "the pope was very genuine" in Rome, but if "he can address that it was systemic and a partnership with the Canadian government here, that would be critical."

Indigenous leaders and survivors say ultimately the church will demonstrate its sincerity through action, and the apology should be followed by, among other things, the release of residential school records, financial support with leadership from the Indigenous community, and the return of artifacts.

Pope Francis is pictured with Canadian Indigenous delegates and bishops representing the Canadian bishops' conference during a meeting at the Vatican March 28. (CNS/Vatican Media)

"If our community received back the items that were taken or gifted, it would be a sign that the church is helping us and our grandchildren know how they are connected back to their ancestors and land," said Beaudin. (Much of the Vatican's current collection of Indigenous artifacts are from Pope Pius XI, who held a world exposition in 1925 and asked missionaries around the globe to send him objects. More than 100,000 pieces went on display.)

School survivors and Indigenous leaders also would like to see more financial efforts to support Indigenous communities, efforts they say should be guided by Indigenous people themselves.

"They need to be placed in a position where they are really in charge of their lives, rather than being given grant money with strings attached, as often is the case," said Sellars. "We are the ones who need to decide how to make our communities whole again."

The day after the apology

As one of the elements of a 2006 settlement agreement, an entity incorporated by the Catholic Church agreed to pay more than $63 million to survivors, an Aboriginal healing foundation and a fundraising campaign.

According to the Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre at the University of British Columbia, a 2015 court ruling released the Catholic Church from its obligations to residential school survivors and communities, legally leaving millions from the settlement unpaid.

Other churches "stepped up quite fast and seemed to really embrace the settlement agreement," said Kesler. "Even though the Catholic Church fulfilled its legal obligation, many felt it did not act in the spirit of reconciliation. That was a pretty open wound for years."

Jonathan Lesarge, a spokesman with the Canadian bishops' conference, told NCR that Catholic entities "met all of their obligations" under the agreement.

The bishops' conference has pledged $30 million for projects that support healing and reconciliation, and it currently is accepting proposals. Lesarge said an update on funds raised is forthcoming.

Following the pope's visit, said Bolen, the church must continue to acknowledge the suffering that's occurred, find ways to support Indigenous cultures and recognize the beauty of Indigenous spirituality.

Archbishop Donald Bolen of Regina, Saskatchewan, participates in a smudge ceremony as Rita Means, tribal council representative with the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, holds a smoking bowl at the Church of Santa Maria in Traspontina in Rome on Oct. 18, 2019. (CNS/Paul Haring)

"Pope Francis points us in that direction," Bolen said. "In *Laudato Si*', he shows the ways Indigenous spirituality sees connectedness of all things," said the archbishop, referencing the pope's 2015 environmental encyclical letter.

Chief Cadmus Delorme of the Cowessess First Nation often talks about how "the most important day is after the pope's apology," Bolen said, "a day when the church in its local manifestation and more broadly becomes a bigger ally in the pursuit of justice."

Walker-Pelletier has been thinking about what should occur in the days after the apology — and about the bead-adorned moccasins she anticipates the pope will return. Bringing them back is a small undertaking, she said.

"But to me it's a way of showing the church in some sense understands that a whole generation of our language and culture is gone; it's a way of acknowledging all our children who cannot come home."

Read this next: US congregations face their complicity in trauma of Native boarding schools

This story appears in the **Pope Francis in Canada** feature series. View the full series.