The Unmarked Burial Sites of Canada’s Residential Schools

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The Setting:
The Children of Residential Schools

1. May 27, 2021: the Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation announced discovery of 215 potential burial remains near the site of the former Kamloops Residential School in British Columbia.

2. June 24, 2021: the Cowessess First Nation announced the discovery of 751 unmarked graves near the location of the former Marieval Residential School, in Saskatchewan.

3. June 30, 2021: the Ktunaxa Nation announced the discovery of 182 unmarked burial sites near the location of the former St. Eugene Mission School in British Columbia.

4. July 12, 2021: the Penelakut Tribe announced the discovery of 160 unmarked graves near the residential school site (Kuper Island Residential School) on Penelakut Island in British Columbia.
Cowessess First Nation, gravesites and unmarked burials – photo by author, 2022.06.25
1. The Setting: Public Response

**Churches Burned**

1. June 21, 2021: Two Catholic church buildings in British Columbia (BC) were destroyed in fires
2. June 26, 2021: Two Catholic church buildings in BC were destroyed in fires
3. June 26, 2021: An Anglican church damage by fire in BC
4. June 28, 2021: A Catholic church in Alberta was damaged in a suspicious fire
5. July 1-2, 2021: Two fires destroy churches in BC, one was 108 years old
The Setting: Public Protests

Memorials Vandalized

1. July 1, 2021 – Statue of Queen Victoria toppled
2. July 1, 2021 – Statue of Queen Elizabeth II toppled
3. July 7, 2021 – Statue of Egerton Ryerson toppled at Ryerson University, Toronto
Overview: Issues of Concern

1. Catholic Church Response
2. Sources of Records – Oblates, O.M.I. (Order of Mary Immaculate) Lacombe
4. NCTR Responses
5. Indigenous Responses
March 28 April 1, 2022: First Nations, Metis and Inuit delegations were invited to Rome to meet Pope Francis II.

Pope Francis: “I feel sorrow and shame for the role that a number of Catholics, particularly those with educational responsibilities, have had in all these things that wounded you, the abuses you suffered, and the lack of respect shown for your identity, your culture and even your spiritual values.”

Natan Obed President of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, representative organization of the Inuit: “the Holy See must apologize for the church's role in residential schools”
Pope Francis at Masckwacis with Headdress presented by Grand Chief Wilton Littlechild, July 25, 2022

“...I ask for God’s forgiveness and I want to say to you with all my heart: I am very sorry. And I join my brothers, the Canadian Bishops, in asking your pardon.” Pope Francis.
The Role of Archival Records: Mandate of the TRC

a. Acknowledge Residential School experiences, impacts and consequences;

b. Provide a holistic, culturally appropriate and safe setting for former students, their families and communities as they come forward to the Commission;

c. Witness, support, promote and facilitate truth and reconciliation events at both the national and community levels;

d. Promote awareness and public education of Canadians about the IRS system and its impacts;

e. Identify sources and create as complete an historical record as possible of the IRS system and legacy. The record shall be preserved and made accessible to the public for future study and use.
Difficulties of Research: Dispersed Sources

104 church repositories
  - Sisters of Charity of Halifax
  - Presbyterian Church in Canada
  - United Church General Council
  - Les Oblats de Marie Immaculée du Manitoba / Oblates of Manitoba

47 sets of Government records
  - Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development
  - Royal Canadian Mounted Police
  - Privy Council Office
The Archival Records of the Oblate Order

1. Oblate records Locations:
   - Provincial Archives of Alberta (ca. 1,000 boxes)
   - Société historique de Saint-Boniface (ca. 1,000 files)
   - Royal BC Museum (archives) (ca. 10s of boxes)
   - Vancouver Diocese (ca. 10s of boxes)
   - Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan
   - Archdiocese of Keewatin / The Pas
   - Deschatelets Archives (over 100 boxes)
   - General Administrative Archives - Rome
   - RC Diocese of Kamloops
   - Diocese of Regina
   - Archdiocese of St. Boniface
WHEREAS the Oblates, under the name Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, first arrived in Montreal in 1841. They have had an ongoing and transformative relationship with First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples in the area known today as Canada. The Oblates administered 48 residential schools with locations in seven provinces and territories during the period that the Canadian government oversaw the residential school programme;

WHEREAS the Missionary Oblates - Grandin Province, Les Oblates de Marie Immaculee du Manitoba, Oblates of Mary Immaculate- St. Peter's Province and Order of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in the Province of British Columbia, and their antecedents, operated and were otherwise involved with 43 Indian Residential Schools in Canada. OMI Lacombe Canada was
3.7 To recognize that all of the Oblates records that document the administration and operation of residential schools shall be made publicly open for discovery, access, reference and use with exception of a selection of records from the subset of records known as personnel files. Discovery, access, reference and use of a select portion of this subset of Oblate records shall be articulated in a separate agreement.

5.5 Ensure all Records received from the Oblates are appropriately managed for purposes of discovery, access, use, and preservation in such a manner that the NCTR Archives are recognized as the principal repository for OMI Lacombe Canada Records which document the history of the administration and operations of residential schools.
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Legislative and Legal Framework to Investigate

1. UNDRIP Article 12 (Canada Act C-15)
   Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the use and control of their ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of their human remains.

2. Order of American States Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
   Indigenous peoples have the right to preserve, protect, and access their sacred sites, including their burial grounds, to use and control their sacred objects and relics, and to recover their human remains.

3. Joinet-Orentlicher Principles

4. Bournemouth University *Mass Grave Protection and Investigation Guidelines*

5. International Court of Justice

6. Special Interlocutor - Canada

7. National Administration Committee - Canada

8. Crown-Indigenous Relations – Canada

9. Document Acquisition Committee – Canada
Indigenous Social Memory

- Ozhoshko Binesi Kwe, Elder Florence Paynter, has observed these discoveries represent the voices of children whose spirits remain unsettled. The value of community social memory is beginning to carry weight beyond community. Combined with the documentary records of archival repositories, community knowledge of the residential school experience can create a greater understanding of this colonial history. It can provide reason and understanding, an argument for a decolonizing society.

- Giizih-Inini, Elder Harry Bone, NCTR Spiritual Guide, “the Oblate Order clearly has a different conceptualization of sin.” This is the time to address these worldviews to find a complimentary path. “To sit together as friends – reconciliation must go both ways – first and foremost reconcile with our traditions and ways of life. There are two sides to reconciliation: within Indigenous communities; within the Oblate Order.