

Bringing a Culture of Encounter to Truth and Reconciliation

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The culture of encounter which characterized Pope Francis' penitential pilgrimage to Canada was most evident when he interacted with residential school survivors. Afterwards, both he and some of the survivors spoke about how they had been changed by the encounters.

The transforming energy which flows from such deep encounters is perhaps easiest to recognize at the individual level through personal interactions. What happens on the collective or societal level is more complex and the transforming energies must be discerned. But this discernment is critical for the work of reconciliation.

In this short article, I want to highlight one theme of encounter which can illustrate its potential for transformation at a societal level: *To listen deeply is the first step toward change*. It's a theme which points to the interwoven dynamics of dialogue, contemplation, and action.

Sometimes, an indirect dialogue can initiate an encounter. While offering his first apology and speaking of his sorrow and shame, Francis framed the history of abuse in terms of the harmful acts of many individual Christians within a residential system initiated by the federal government. While many survivors appreciated the apology, others were disappointed by the lack of responsibility taken by the institutional Church.

Senator Murray Sinclair, a Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner, cut to the heart of the issue when he insisted, "It is important to underscore that the church was not just an agent of the state, nor simply a participant in government policy, but was a lead co-author of the darkest chapters in the history of this land [...] In many instances, it was not just a collaboration but an instigation. There are clear examples in our history where the church called for the government of Canada to be more aggressive and bold in its work to destroy Indigenous culture, traditional practices, and beliefs."

I don't know the specific examples to which Senator Sinclair refers but I don't think he would make such a statement lightly. His words compel me to pursue the truth and, since they are addressed to the church as a whole, we are all urged to do the same. A culture of encounter encourages us to listen deeply, to ask questions, to open to new possibilities, and to search for truth – no matter how jarring or disturbing.

I am reminded of these words from David Whyte's poem, *Vulnerability*: "To run from vulnerability is to run from the essence of our nature, the attempt to be invulnerable is the vain attempt to become something we are not and most especially, to close off our understanding of the grief of others."

The need for a contemplative practice becomes clear. How else can we truly inhabit difficult emotions and open toward unknown truth? True encounter, and the vulnerability it creates, require that we ground ourselves in a Love which is not defensive but opens

to listen to another's point of view. And this listening to another, becomes more transformative to the degree we're aware of the assumptions operating in our own thoughts and emotions, allowing these assumptions to be questioned so our consciousness can continue to evolve.

The "search for truth" in which the Pope counsels us to engage, takes us down a demanding road. But, if we allow a culture of encounter to become our way of life, we will find ourselves walking toward a new future with Indigenous peoples.

Above all, Pope Francis calls the church to act. Reconciliation can emerge only from a transformation of the ways we are in relationship, not only with Indigenous peoples but also with land and water, and all who dwell therein.

A culture of encounter leads to political and social love; it guides us to join with others to co-create justice (Fratelli Tutti 180) so that, together, we might discover new ways to approach problems and change social structures. (FT 183). All this flows from a culture of encounter; from authentic social dialogue which includes "the ability to respect the other's point of view and to admit that it may include legitimate convictions and concerns." (FT 203).

A culture of encounter creates a clear path between deep listening and social change. And so, as we discern how best to respond after the Pope's visit, let us be attentive to the calls for action emerging from Indigenous communities including, but not limited to, the leading Indigenous voices quoted in the Global News article below. They offer us many actions to consider:

<https://globalnews.ca/news/9028012/pope-francis-apology-advocates-response/?s=09>