“It’s about one human being’s life and that’s very precious:”

A Pro-life Analysis of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Commitments

Towards Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples

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Introduction

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released its final report.1 As part of this report, it released 94 Calls to Action to “redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation.”2 A year later, in its response to Call to Action 48, which focused on the adoption and implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops set forth eight commitments.3 Recommended by its Commission for Justice and Peace, these commitments reflect “the hope and desire to continue to walk together with Indigenous Peoples in building a more just society where their gifts and those of all people are nurtured and honoured.”4 These commitments focus on education, health care, the criminal justice system, and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

In this paper, I will examine the following commitments made by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops:

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2 Ibid., 320.


4 Ibid.
4. Encourage partnerships between Indigenous groups and existing health care facilities to provide holistic health care, especially in areas where there are significant health needs.

6. Support the current national inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls and work with others towards a healthier society where just relations flourish in families and communities, and where those most vulnerable are protected and valued.  

Using the framework of a consistent ethic of life, as explained by Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, along with papal encyclicals and documents from the Second Vatican Council, I examine these commitments using a pro-life lens. I argue that the Church has a responsibility towards working to fulfill these commitments due to its belief that all life is sacred and that all human beings have dignity. In doing so, I aim to contextualize the commitments within the existing framework of the pro-life movement and to provide a further impetus for both clergy and lay Catholics to engage in reconciliation.

I will first explain Cardinal Bernardin’s understanding of the consistent ethic of life and illustrate how this perspective, along with encyclicals and the Second Vatican Council, form the basis of the pro-life perspective used in this paper. From here, I will discuss the commitment to advocate for holistic health care for Indigenous peoples, especially in places where there are significant health needs, through partnerships between Indigenous groups and health care facilities. To do this, I will review some Indigenous peoples’ experiences with the health care system to justify the need for this commitment and connect it to the pro-life beliefs of the Catholic Church. I will then examine the commitment to support the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, and to work with various groups towards the creation of a society where the most vulnerable are protected. I will provide some context into this issue and the Inquiry, as well as explore some of the controversies that surround the Inquiry. From here, I will examine how the Canadian clergy has declared its support for the Inquiry, and

5 “A Catholic Response to Call to Action 48.”
describe how the Church can continue to support the Inquiry and to create a society where all peoples are supported and valued.

**What does it mean to be pro-life?**

For this paper, the definition of “pro-life” I will use stems from what Joseph Cardinal Bernardin refers to as the “consistent ethic of life.” He argues that:

> The protection, defense, and nurture of human life involve the whole spectrum of life from conception to death, cutting across such issues as genetics, abortion, capital punishment, modern warfare and the care of the terminally ill. Admittedly, these are all distinct problems, enormously complex and deserving individual treatment. No single answer and no simple response will solve them all. They cannot be collapsed into one problem, but they must be confronted as pieces of a larger pattern.6

This perspective involves the protection of “the right to life of the weakest among us” and “the quality of life of the powerless among us.”7 His understanding of the right to life is in accordance with the Catholic Church’s belief that the human person is sacred and has dignity, and this belief permeates through various encyclicals from the Vatican. The dignity of the human person begins at his creation, because each person is “created by God in his image and likeness as well as redeemed by the most precious blood of Christ, the person is called to be a ‘child in the Son’ and a living temple of the Spirit, destined for the eternal life of blessed communion with God.”8 Each person is also unique and irreplaceable, thus meaning that the dignity of each human person is his “indestructible property.”9

The belief in the sanctity of human life also affects the foundations of society. The dignity of the person extends beyond the individual to the societal level, for it “constitutes the

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7 Ibid., 52.
foundation of the equality of all people among themselves.”

Furthermore, it recognizes that all people in society, “even if weak and suffering,” are “splendid gift[s] of God’s goodness.” Thus, the sanctity of life requires all people to “‘show care’ for all life and for the life of everyone.”

Finally, the sanctity of human life is reflected in the commandment “you shall not kill.” This commandment comes from the belief that human life is “sacred and inviolable,” just as God is inviolable. Thus, God will severely judge any transgression of this commandment.

A consistent ethic of life thus recognizes the dignity of the person from conception to death and ensures that this dignity is recognized at every stage of life. In analyzing two of the commitments made by the Catholic Church in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I seek to illustrate that the Church needs to take action on these issues because it professes a consistent ethic of life. I begin by examining the commitment to health care.

Indigenous Health Care

Historical and Contemporary Experiences in the Health Care System

The first commitment that I will examine focuses on promoting partnerships between Indigenous groups and health care facilities to ensure that holistic health care is provided to all Indigenous peoples, but particularly in areas where there are specific health needs. Historically, the need for this partnership is reflected in how health care facilities are unequipped to address the needs of Indigenous peoples. When providing health care to Indigenous peoples, facilities often focus on the alcoholism within Indigenous communities, rather than examining the broader

10 John Paul II, Christifideles Laici, sec. 37. Emphasis original.
13 Ibid., sec. 53.
14 “A Catholic Response to Call to Action 48.”
causes that lead to these issues.\textsuperscript{15} This is exemplified in the life of Frank Paul, who was a survivor of the residential school system.\textsuperscript{16} He had an extensive medical record that documented his “seizures, head traumas, alcohol dementia, broken bones, and various symptoms classified as ‘mental illness.’”\textsuperscript{17} Despite this, his medical concerns were not fully addressed, which ultimately led to his death. Paul was taken into police custody twice on December 5, 1998 and was released. Police surveillance video shows that he was dragged in and out of the police station and dropped off by police officers in an alley, where he later died.\textsuperscript{18} Paul was not supported adequately by the health care system, much like other Indigenous peoples. There is an institutional failure to provide the proper support and resources to Indigenous communities: “Personal accounts describe the failure to get ambulances to come to reserves, the negligence and contempt of doctors and nurses, and an institutional failure of hospitals to communicate with Indigenous communities and families.”\textsuperscript{19} This is rooted in the belief that Indigenous people are “undeserving of services and of respect” because of alcoholism and dysfunction in their communities.\textsuperscript{20} These ideas are ultimately rooted in racism and prevent Indigenous peoples from receiving the services they deserve.

Today, health care systems continue to be ill-equipped in addressing Indigenous health needs. A report from the auditor general of Canada, released in the fall of 2017, showed that First Nations and Inuit populations suffer nearly twice as much as non-Indigenous peoples from dental disease. Furthermore, Health Canada while aware of this issue, does not have any solutions to

\textsuperscript{15} Sherene H. Razack, \textit{Dying from improvement: inquests and inquiries into Indigenous deaths in custody} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015): 4
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 39.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 57.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 115.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 116.
address it. Though there is a Children’s Oral Health Initiative, which focuses on reducing and preventing oral disease in youth, this initiative was only provided in 238 of 452 eligible communities. Furthermore, an ill-equipped health system for Indigenous people led to the death of Keith Wynne, from Kashechewan First Nation. He visited his community’s nursing station on July 17, 2017, complaining of back pain, but was sent home with Tylenol and Advil. He made five trips over the next month, complaining of the same symptoms and receiving the same medications. On his fifth visit, his mother demanded a blood test, which showed that something was wrong. He was flown to a hospital in Kingston from Moose Factory. On August 30, he was diagnosed with leukemia, and he died on October 6. There is historical and contemporary evidence indicating that there is a need for partnerships that can address the systemic violence faced by Indigenous peoples and take the history of colonization into account when providing treatment.

_A Pro-life Response: Fulfilling the Commitment_

A consistent ethic of life seeks to protect the quality of life of the powerless; in this case, Indigenous peoples’ quality of life has been affected by the lack of proper health care. Thus, a consistent ethic of life would call on the promotion of the bishops’ commitment to support partnerships between health care providers and Indigenous communities. Much of the discourse in the pro-life movement has focused on the protection of the rights of the unborn and the dying. While Bernardin recognized the value of this perspective, he also noted that, in the United States, millions of people who are poor are often unable to seek medical care until it is far too late to

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22 Barton, “Health Canada doesn’t know.”
24 Ibid.
benefit from this care. He said, “We allow the poor to die in our hospitals, but we don’t provide for their treatment in the early stages of illness – much less make preventative care available to them.”\textsuperscript{25} This claim can be applied to the experiences of Indigenous peoples in Canada, because they either have not had access to preventive care, or they have had their concerns ignored, as was demonstrated by Keith Wynne’s experience.

Furthermore, when addressing Indigenous peoples’ health concerns, they need “more than technically proper care. They need humanity. They need heartfelt concern.”\textsuperscript{26} Neither “humanity” nor “heartfelt concern” was shown to Frank Paul and Keith Wynne. Their health concerns were disregarded and their experiences with systemic violence were not addressed in the few attempts to support them. Second, health care personnel are called to be “guardians and servants of human life.”\textsuperscript{27} These events illustrate that health care personnel have been unable to fulfill this role, especially as it relates to Indigenous peoples. Paul and Wynne were unable to receive the help and support that they needed to live. To guard and serve human life means seeing all concerns and addressing them to the best of one’s abilities. The health care personnel who interacted with Frank Paul disregarded the larger systemic violence that he had faced, and that affected his overall health, while the medical personnel serving Keith Wynne did not fully examine him. These failures ultimately led to their deaths, which indicates that these medical professionals did not fulfill their roles as “guardians and servants of human life.” Thus, in supporting partnerships between health care facilities and Indigenous communities to provide holistic health care, Catholics can advocate for a health care system that recognizes Indigenous

\textsuperscript{25} Bernardin, “The Consistent Ethic of Life and Health Care Systems,” 51.
\textsuperscript{27} John Paul II, \textit{Evangelium Vitae}, sec. 89.
peoples’ experiences with systemic violence, and allows their spiritualities and ways of life to be supported in the system.

Finally, if this issue is examined in the perspective of a consistent ethic of life, there is a need to advocate for respectful partnerships. Bernardin argues that Catholic institutions “will lobby for preventive health programs for the poor,” if they take the consistent ethic of life seriously. Preventive health programs for Indigenous peoples, especially those that respect their distinct traditions and histories, would ensure that the health care provided is holistic and addresses their physical, mental and spiritual needs. It would ensure that the health care provided would address the systemic violence faced by people like Frank Paul and that the health concerns of people like Keith Wynne would not be disregarded. A holistic health care system for Indigenous peoples would provide support to them in a way that recognizes their dignity as human beings.

Supporting the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls

Historical Context

The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls\(^{28}\) was created to respond to the violence faced by Indigenous women and girls. There is no sure way of knowing the real number of missing and murdered Indigenous women. In 2010, the Native Women’s Association of Canada first stated that 582 Indigenous women were missing or murdered.\(^{29}\) In 2013, Dr. Maryanne Pearce, as part of her doctoral thesis, identified 824 missing or murdered Indigenous women between 1946 and 2013.\(^{30}\) The Royal Canadian Mounted

\(^{28}\) From here, this will be referred to as “the National Inquiry”


\(^{30}\) Ibid.
Police’s 2014 National Overview noted that there were 1200 Indigenous women who went missing between 1980 and 2012.\(^{31}\) It is likely that the numbers are much higher than each of these estimations.\(^{32}\) These statistics are more sobering because Indigenous women and girls make up four percent of the female population in Canada.\(^{33}\) However, they are more susceptible to violence than any other female population in Canada. According to Dr. Tracy Peter, “Indigenous women are 12 times more likely to be murdered or go missing than any other women in Canada, and 16 times more likely than Caucasian women. In Manitoba and Saskatchewan, they are 19 times more likely than Caucasian women to be murdered or missing.”\(^{34}\) Indigenous women are also three times more likely to be physically or sexually assaulted, or robbed than non-Indigenous women, and experience more partner violence at a more severe degree than them.\(^{35}\) As a result of these statistics, the various narratives that were released in order to spread awareness about this issue, and advocacy work from Indigenous families, the National Inquiry was created.

*The National Inquiry*

The National Inquiry was created to foster a deeper understanding of these issues, as well as proposing solutions that would provide better support to Indigenous women and girls. The stated purpose of the inquiry is: to “look at services that are meant to create healthy, protective and livable communities across Canada. We will look at how Indigenous women, girls and LGBTQ2S as well as families with lost loved ones are affected by such programming.”\(^{36}\) They will examine the following issues: systemic violence, including sexual violence and their causes.

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\(^{31}\) National Inquiry, “Interim Report.”

\(^{32}\) Ibid.

\(^{33}\) Ibid.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 7-8.


“ongoing social economic cultural, institutional, and historical violence,” and “Institutional policies and practices that have been implemented because of the effectiveness of increasing safety.”

The Commissioners will also examine inappropriate or illegal behaviours from police, social workers, and other groups and report their findings to appropriate Ministers from the federal and/or provincial governments, and, if needed, to international bodies of power. They will also examine how police officers handled reports of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. The Commissioners cannot solve outstanding cases involving missing or murdered Indigenous women, girls, and LGBTQ2S or solve crimes against survivors. They will, however, refer new evidence that they may find to the appropriate authorities, who can then reopen the case. They will seek to follow traditional protocols and values in the community hearings and provide safe and healthy spaces through Indigenous ceremonies taking place at the same time as hearings and having Elders and/or health workers present for testimonies. The Interim Report was released on November 1, 2017.

The National Inquiry, though well-intentioned, has been fraught with controversy. First, five staff members have left the commission, and Commissioner Marilyn Poitras has also resigned from her position. In Thunder Bay, community hearings were scheduled for December 4-6, 2017 but these were the only ones scheduled for northern Ontario. The support for the Inquiry in this area is divided: the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, which represent 49 First Nations in

38 Ibid.
39 Ibid. “2S” is added to the LGBTQ acronym in recognition of Indigenous Two-Spirit people.
41 National Inquiry, “Interim Report.”
the region, support the inquiry, while many families belonging to its territories do not. The National Inquiry has also been criticized for not providing enough emotional support for those who participate, and in response to this, the Ontario Native Women’s Association has offered to provide support to survivors and their families for the Community Hearings in Thunder Bay. Other issues include a lack of transparency, and difficulty communicating with the commission staff, and families applying to tell their stories. In response to these and other controversies, 180 family members and 80 supporters have signed a petition asking Justin Trudeau to restart the National Inquiry. Despite the controversies, there are still supporters of the National Inquiry, such as Chief Ernie Cray, from Cheam First Nation. He argues that, despite criticism, the National Inquiry has to continue, since families have waited for years for an inquiry. The National Inquiry has been long-awaited by Indigenous communities in Canada, but it has polarized Indigenous peoples due to its policies.

*Pro-life Response: Fulfilling the Commitment*

The issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls is about the very existence of life. Both Indigenous and Catholic groups have recognized that life is sacred, and one Indigenous woman, Theresa Sims, has spoken avidly about the sanctity of life. At a Sisters in Spirit vigil in Windsor, she issued a statement to non-Indigenous Canadians: “Come to our vigils. Join us, because a lot of times our voice is not heard. ‘Oh, they’re just making a row again. They’re gonna do another Oka again.’ No, it’s more than that. It’s about one human

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44 Humphrey, “It’s too late in the game.”
45 Ibid.
47 Prokopchuk “‘A lot of mixed emotions.’”
being’s life and that’s very precious.” This recognition from an Indigenous woman about the sanctity of life illustrates that there is common ground between the pro-life beliefs of the Church on the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. Thus, Catholics are called to participate in vigils commemorating this issue and to support the National Inquiry.

The Catholic Church in Canada, through the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and individual dioceses, have issued statements in support of the Inquiry. In May 2017, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops released a document developed with the Canadian Catholic Aboriginal Council and Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle. This document focuses on residential school cemeteries and related burial sites, as well as supporting the National Inquiry. Catholics are called to support the National Inquiry through providing transportation and hospitality to those wishing to participate, spreading awareness about Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and human trafficking, participating in the Annual Sisters in Spirit Walk, and praying for those participating in the National Inquiry and the Indigenous women who have fallen victim to this phenomenon. The Archbishop of Vancouver and the then-Bishop of Mackenzie-Fort Smith have also issued statements in support of the National Inquiry. Both called Catholics to pray for the Commissioners and to work towards reversing any “systemic causes that contribute to people turning to the streets through prostitution, human trafficking, and expanded drug and alcohol addiction.” These two examples illustrate that the Catholic Church

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in Canada has begun showing its desire to fulfill the commitments set forth by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops on a local and national level.

The Catholic Church must continue to be involved in the National Inquiry. In doing so, they will able to “work with others towards a healthier society where just relations flourish in families and communities, and where those most vulnerable are protected and valued.”52 Catholics are called to promote human life and defend it against all attacks, “with clear and stronger conviction.”53 Thus, Catholics must speak out about the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, which is an issue that is “opposed to life itself.”54 They also need to support the National Inquiry, whose ultimate goal is to find ways to address the causes of an issue that is opposed to the existence of life. Since the National Inquiry has been fraught with controversy, Catholics need to call on its commissioners to address the controversies that are affecting its work, so that it is best able to address this issue.

A consistent ethic of life would also advocate for proactive measures to ensure that Indigenous women are able to find culturally-appropriate resources to help them heal from the violence that they have faced. Bernardin writes, “The purpose of proposing a consistent ethic of life is to argue that success on any one of the issues threatening life requires a concern for the broader attitude in society about respect for life. Attitude is the place to root an ethic of life. Change of attitude, in turn, can lead to change of policies and practices in our society.”55 In having a consistent ethic of life, Catholics are called to analyze society and look at the attitudes

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52 “A Catholic Response to Call to Action 48.”
that promote disrespect towards Indigenous peoples. From here, a change of attitude will occur and can lead to changes in policies and practices in Canadian society.

The issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls is about the recognition of the dignity of all human beings. Catholics need to remember that “values such as the dignity of every human person, respect for inviolable and inalienable human rights, and the adoption of the ‘common good’ as the end and criterion regulating political life are certainly fundamental and not to be ignored.” The recognition of the dignity and value of Indigenous women and girls would be a crucial step towards the recognition of all human rights. In ensuring that their lives are “defended and promoted,” a renewed society may be formed, one which has “unconditional respect for human life” as its foundation. In working towards this commitment, we are working towards placing the respect of human life at the core of a new society.

Conclusion

I examined two commitments that the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops have made in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada to illustrate that these commitments address the dignity of life and thus should be an essential part of pro-life activism. The first of these commitments focused on promoting partnerships between health care facilities and Indigenous groups to provide holistic health care. Health care facilities have been unable to provide the proper support to Indigenous peoples and have not considered the impacts of systemic violence on their health. Thus, their human dignity has not been recognized through a refusal to provide the appropriate support for their health care needs. The Catholic Church must then advocate for a system which encourages holistic health and considers the effects of colonization on Indigenous peoples. The second commitment I explored focuses on the National

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56 John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, sec. 70
57 Ibid., sec. 77
Inquiry for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. The Church has already demonstrated its support for the National Inquiry; however, since the Inquiry has faced criticism over its procedures, Catholics are called to ensure that the Inquiry is able to address these criticisms. In doing so, Catholics can begin placing respect for human life at the core of society.

I began by highlighting a consistent ethic of life as the framework for analyzing these issues. Bernardin notes that these issues need to be analyzed as part of a larger problem; I now make the claim that the issues analyzed in this paper must be examined in the larger scope of colonization and its ongoing impact on Indigenous peoples. Once these issues are analyzed within this context, we can then move towards reconciliation and building new relationships. Though the bishops of Canada made six other commitments beyond these, I was limited in scope and space to treat them. Rather than propose solutions, I seek to contextualize these issues into the framework of the pro-life movement. If the movement believes that all people have dignity and that their life is sacred, then there is room within the framework to advocate for meeting these commitments.

Addressing the issues of health care and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women requires a holistic understanding of the experiences of Indigenous peoples, so that a consistent ethic of life can be upheld. We must recognize the voice and agency of Indigenous peoples in addressing these concerns. Therefore, their voices must be privileged in the conversation surrounding the achievement of these commitments. There is a movement towards reconciliation in Canadian society, which allows us to respond to the needs faced by Indigenous peoples. Only then can we build new relationships based on love. As stated by Pope Benedict XVI, “To desire the common good and strive towards it is a requirement of justice and charity… The more we
strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbours, the more effectively we love them.”58

Bibliography


