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Dear Archbishop LeGatt,

I am writing today in the spirit of reconciliation.

As MLA for St Boniface, Leader of the Manitoba Liberal Party, and simply as a human being, I beseech you to consider the request, made by First Nations, that the Holy Father, Pope Francis, recognize the wrongs and harms of the past that were the result of Residential Schools, and ask First Nations in Canada, as well as other Indigenous peoples, forgiveness for the harms that were done.

I see this as an incredibly an important act of healing, reconciliation and justice.

I recognize there were other churches involved - the Anglican Church and the United Church, and that, above all, I believe the Government of Canada is ultimately responsible for the funding and conduct of Residential Schools.

The Government of Canada was warned, more than a century ago, that what was happening in Residential Schools was a betrayal of the treaties, and a betrayal of First Nations as wards of the Crown.

James Bryce set out his objections in his 1922 treatise, "A National Crime" which made it clear that the interventions taken against tuberculosis in particular at Residential Schools, were a fraction of the effort made in cities like Hamilton and Ottawa, that had reduced cases and death rates, despite the absence of effective vaccines or other treatments at the time.

At the same time, the Catholic Church played a role in administering the Residential Schools, and because of that, I hope the Church can also play a unique role in healing and reconciliation.

I do not have to tell you that Catholic Church is an extraordinary and exceptional global institution.

I want to start by making a distinction between a "mere" apology - which is an admission of error or an expression of regret, and something more profound, which is to admit wrongs, seek forgiveness and commit to making amends.

On the issue of an apology - an apology alone appears to be a one-sided gesture between two parties. Asking forgiveness is an exchange that requires the forgiveness to be granted. It is not certain.

Not acknowledging the specific harm of Residential Schools can be seen as reluctance to acknowledge history, and not just culpability, or that there is something to fear from the truth.

This is, I believe, because in our society, we tend to equate justice with punishment - an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, that suffering must be met with suffering. There are other paths to justice - forgiveness, mercy and redemption.

I see it as an opportunity - an opportunity for the Church to recognize a truth that has been silenced, and stories that weren't believed, from people pushed to the margins of society by Canadian governments.

Recognizing that truth rights a wrong, because for decades those truth tellers were disbelieved, or dismissed.

The weak and the oppressed face a greater burden when they are attacked or injured by the powerful. They are attacked, and mistreated because they are seen as inferior - and when they seek justice that is promised to all, it is denied to them because they are not believed.

It is assumed, and often asserted, that people who are powerful and wealthy came to their position through hard work, honesty and clean living, while poverty is often cruelly and falsely associated with sloth or vice.

These are all assumptions that Christ rejected, at every turn.

I believe this is an opportunity for the Church to validate, recognize and redeem the truth and dignity of those who suffered indignities in Residential Schools.

I also cannot deny the fundamental contributions of the Church. On a personal level, St Boniface Hospital saved my father's life in 1977. École Sacre Coeur was where I learned French, which made so much of my current life possible, including . Both the hospital and the school only exist because of Catholic Sisters, who changed my life, and that of tens of thousands of Manitobans, for the better.

In Manitoba, we have Numbered treaties because of visionaries like Abbé Ritchot, who negotiated Manitoba's entry into Confederation, and requested that treaties be made with First Nations to achieve peace.

I say this not just to recognize the Church's good works, but to emphasize that these accomplishments risk being blotted out, so long as resistance to an apology is seen as resistance from acknowledging history.

There is a saying from Shakespeare "The evil that men do lives on - the good they do is oft interred with their bones."

I also want to make my case in Christian terms.

I do not want to falsely present myself as being more faithful than I am. I am not religious, but there are lessons of faith that I staunchly believe in. In particular, the events that led to directly to Christ's crucifixion, and the beliefs that drove Jesus at that time.

There is a body of scholars who argue that Christ was calling, not just for eternal salvation, but for timely and worldly salvation: that when Christ went to Jerusalem, he was calling for a Jubilee Year - the Year of the Lord - to be proclaimed, and for the poor especially to be freed from their debts.

In Bethlehem, He returned from the wilderness, went to His Synagogue and read from the Torah, the book of Isaiah - proclaiming a Jubilee year, in the ancient tradition. He wanted his fellow worshippers to live by their own values and traditions, from which they had strayed.

Christ then travels to Jerusalem. But along the way, he meets two rich men. One says he follows all the commandments, but wants to know how to be saved. When Christ tells him "give everything you have to the poor," the man balks - and is told "that is why it is harder for a cable to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven"

Then He meets another man, who has just given half of his property to the poor, and Jesus tells him he will be saved.

Then Christ goes to the temple, where money is being changed and animals sold, so debts can be settled. And He overturns the tables and lashes the moneychangers, because they should be forgiving the debts of the poor, but they are taking from them instead.

The moneychangers tried to trap Jesus into challenging the authority of Rome, which would get him arrested and killed. They asked, "Since you don't think the poor should repay their debts to us, do you think they shouldn't have to pay their taxes to Rome either?"

Jesus refused to be trapped. He held up the Roman coin with Caesar's head on it - and said to give Caesar what was his, and give God what was his - not prayers, but to cancel the debts of the poor - because repaying the debts of the poor is seen as repaying our debt to God.

"He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the LORD" (Proverbs 19:17).

The moneychangers plotted to kill Christ. He was framed, betrayed with a kiss, then tormented and tortured. He asked, "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?"

I have to wonder - of the children who died or suffered at Residential School, how many of them had that feeling of isolation and despair in their hearts - "Why have I been forsaken?"

How many First Nations parents, brothers, sisters, grandparents had that despair when they learned their children had died, alone at a school, taken against their will?

Christ went to Jerusalem knowing he would be betrayed and killed. But He did it anyway, to save others. Because He so believed that His message of love and sacrifice and forgiveness would endure beyond His death, and because of His Death. It has.

As Canadians, we owe Indigenous people a moral debt that must be acknowledged and addressed.

We know that human beings are flawed. That out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.

We know that human beings can be cruel, and immoral, and weak. We also hope, they can be forgiven or redeemed, that we can appeal to the better angels of our nature, and grow stronger in virtue.

I have always felt that redemption, and justice, cannot be a matter of an eternal reward alone.

For the Church to recognize the historical reality, and ask forgiveness would not be an ending, but a beginning : an act that could make the process of healing possible.

Acknowledging wrongs and asking forgiveness would be an act of recognition and of elevation - that elevates First Nations and Indigenous peoples and takes a step toward granting them the full dignity as human beings that they always deserved, and are continually denied.

I will not pretend there is an easy solution to this, but the path of reconciliation and healing cannot be travelled alone. We must all embark on it together.

I hope you accept this letter in the spirit of openness with which it was intended. If you are interested in meeting to discuss this further, I would be honoured to work with you.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read 'Dougald Lamont'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Dougald Lamont