

Archdiocesan Commission for Truth and Reconciliation (ACTR) 2019 Report

The ACTR continues to have ongoing efforts and initiatives to strengthen our relationships with Indigenous Peoples, and responding to the TRC Calls to Action within: 1) schools and academic institutions; 2) parishes; 3) formation for those in leadership; 4) ecumenical and interfaith partners and other agencies in the wider community in the pursuit of justice for Indigenous Peoples.

The most striking “Phoenix story” of 2019 is the relationship between the Archdiocese and Cowessess First Nation. In the summer of 2018, Chief Cadmus Delorme had written to Archbishop Don, in accord with TRC Calls to Action 73, 74, 75, asking the Archdiocese’s financial assistance in restoring the cemetery at Cowessess, which was connected to the grounds of the Marieval Church on the Reserve, and was part of the residential school that operated at Cowessess for many decades. While a conversation was under way with Chief Cadmus and Archbishop Don, the relationship became more complicated in November of 2018, when the Marieval Church burned to the ground. What could have led to a deterioration of relationships in fact led to new openings. In dialogue between the Archdiocese and the local parishes, it was agreed not to rebuild the Marieval Church. Archbishop Don asked to meet with Chief Cadmus, and was invited to a meeting of the band Council. In that context, Archbishop Don heard about some of the painful legacy of the residential school that had been on the Reserve, and about unresolved hurt connected to the actions of a pastor of Marieval almost 50 years earlier, who in a conflict with Cowessess leadership at the time, had taken a bulldozer to parts of the cemetery, damaging and burying a number of headstones. Archbishop Don communicated the decision not to rebuild the church, and that some of the insurance funds should be designated to repairing and renewing the cemetery grounds. He also relayed the Archdiocese’s intent to return the land on which the church had stood back to Cowessess, and expressed sadness at the painful legacy of the residential school. Conversations followed, and eventually a decision was made to give a sizeable amount of the insurance settlement to Cowessess and the cemetery fund. The tender shoots of a budding new relationship were strengthened with Archbishop Don and Sr ReAnne and some members of the local parish were invited to Cowessess Flower Day Ceremony at the end of May, where every year the graves are cleaned and the deceased loved ones are remembered, honored and Feasted in a traditional way. Chief Cadmus warmly welcomed the catholic delegation at the Feast, and spoke about the possibility of a new relationship based on mutual steps towards reconciliation. He invited Archbishop Don to speak to those present, and that too allowed a little step forward in a deepening relationship built on healing and reconciliation.

In the Fall of 2019, several members of the Archdiocesan Truth and Reconciliation Committee who are originally from Cowessess, joined Chief Cadmus and Archbishop Don in a meeting, to begin to flesh out the details of a 4 year commitment to walk together towards healing and reconciliation. The symbol of the “Phoenix bird” is very poignant. Under the creative and inspiring leadership of Chief Cadmus, members of his community and members within the ACTR are continuing the conversations and discernment. There is a shared desire to work together for the restoration of the cemetery, to create encounters of healing for survivors impacted by residential schools, and to bring something new that will arise from the ashes of the church that will indeed be a sign of new hope and the beginnings of reconciliation in action.

Another area that came to life at the end of 2019 was a project that the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB) is working on, which is resource on Indigenous spirituality, in part responding to TRC Calls to Action 48 n. ii and 60, and to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The goal is to provide bishops and potentially Catholic parishes across the country with a better understanding of Indigenous spirituality. The resource is being prepared in consultation with Indigenous elders and spiritual leaders, with the help of Indigenous researchers and writers. One section of the resource is being drafted here in Regina with a core group including some members of the ACTR. The beginning stages of this project came to life through a Pipe ceremony and Feast in November of 2019, and we look forward to where this initiative will lead in the future. It is life giving to be part of an initiative in which the Archdiocese of Regina is taking a lead role on a National project for the Church of Canada.

Parishes and other groups like Lay Formation have opened their doors and hearts to hearing the painful stories of Residential School survivors and learning about Indigenous perspectives, culture and spirituality. Formation and education combined with personal story-telling have built bridges of understanding and new relationships. From the ashes of the painful experiences of colonization, and residential schools, new healing and reconciliation are arising!