

**Two timely issues of special importance to Indigenous People
where Catholic parishes, missions and organizations can offer practical assistance**

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB), in consultation with the Canadian Catholic Aboriginal Council and Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle, is proposing that Catholic dioceses/eparchies, parishes, missions and organizations offer assistance on two key issues which are of special importance to Indigenous People and of concern for all Canadians:

1. Identifying, documenting, commemorating and protecting residential school cemeteries and related burial sites
2. Assisting the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls

Both issues are timely and are noted of special importance by the Canadian Catholic Aboriginal Council. They are also among the Calls to Action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (see attached Calls to Action 73-76 on the cemeteries and burial sites, and Call to Action 41 on the inquiry). Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle is the recently established Catholic coalition of Indigenous people, Bishops, clergy, lay movements and institutes of consecrated life, engaged in renewing and fostering relationships between the Catholic Church and Indigenous people in Canada. The CCCB and the Canadian Catholic Aboriginal Council are members of Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle.

The suggestions are being circulated and proposed in the same spirit that the followers of Christ are called to share and participate in the “griefs and the anxieties” of the poor and afflicted in our day (Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, 1). They are opportune and practical ways to express love and concern through the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy – which include burying the dead, comforting the sorrowful, praying for the living and the dead.

1. Burial sites associated with the former Indian Residential Schools

In addition to any local ongoing efforts and plans, Catholic dioceses/eparchies, parishes, missions and organizations are invited to consider the following possible projects:

- 1) Offer to assist families of former students and Indigenous communities in identifying, documenting, commemorating and protecting residential school cemeteries and related burial sites. These rural locations have often been abandoned or forgotten, and their records which date back more than a century are often inadequate, difficult to find, or missing. Diocesan archives and parish records may be helpful for supplementing any historical documentation from the former residential schools.
- 2) Collaborate with the families and communities in commemorating those buried at these sites. Depending on the history of the particular residential school and the wishes of the communities and families, offers to assist in the commemorations may include helping to arrange and plan ecumenical or interfaith services or to place commemorative plaques in local churches.

- 3) Invite the clergy and faithful of the local parishes and missions to pray for those buried at these sites. These intentions can be included in the Prayers of the Faithful or at the commemoration of the departed during the Eucharistic Prayer.
- 4) Look for opportunities by which dioceses/eparchies and their parishes or missions can cooperate with the federal or provincial government, local municipalities or Indigenous communities in erecting and maintaining local monuments to mark the locations of former graveyards or burial sites.
- 5) Encourage all clergy and the faithful to remember in prayer not only the children who died while at a local residential school, but to pray for all the former students, many of whom suffered because of separation from families, estrangement from language and culture, and at times neglect and abuse, as well as for the personnel who worked in the schools and had to cope with government underfunding and unjust policies as well as social indifference and prejudice.

2. Assistance for the Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls

The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls is underway (<http://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca>). Its hearings will be informal and held in circles at friendship and community centres. The Canadian Catholic Aboriginal Council has proposed 10 possible ways that Catholic dioceses / eparchies, parishes, missions and organizations may undertake to promote and assist the inquiry, and to provide comfort and hope to the families of the missing and murdered as well as to the local community:

- 1) Offer the use of parish halls or centres where the inquiry can hold its various hearings – advisory, family, regional or national.
- 2) Work with local councils of The Catholic Women’s League and the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Indigenous groups such as the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC), or other Churches, ecclesial communities and faith groups, to provide transportation and hospitality for family members and survivors participating in the hearings.
- 3) Collaborate with these groups in highlighting the importance of the issues surrounding missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and in assisting in the process so everyone who wishes has equal opportunity to share and participate.
- 4) Promote the Annual Sisters in Spirit Walk (organized by the NWAC) by establishing links within the parish or mission and throughout the local community, and by encouraging local participation.
- 5) In case this has not already been considered, Bishops may wish to write letters in support of local hearings by the inquiry (for example, see the statement issued by Archbishop J. Michael Miller, C.S.B., at <http://rcav.org/s-inquiry/>).

- 6) Encourage Catholics to participate in local ceremonies and events marking the inquiry.
- 7) Educate Catholics about the continuing problem of human trafficking, and invite them to become involved in local efforts to combat this exploitation and enslavement, as well as to participate in search and rescue operations for missing women and children.
- 8) Encourage the families and communities of missing and murdered women and girls to participate in the inquiry's hearings, and assist in efforts to identify, document and commemorate the missing and those murdered.
- 9) Remember during the liturgy and in personal and communal prayer the missing and murdered.
- 10) Use and promote the message for the 2017 National Day of Prayer in Solidarity with Indigenous People which will focus on missing and murdered women and girls from First Nations, Metis and Inuit communities; this message will be published later this year by the Canadian Catholic Aboriginal Council.