

BEWARE OF REPORTS ON CATHOLIC WRONGDOINGS

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Over the past several decades, there have been many reports on alleged wrongdoings by members of the Catholic community. Unlike most Catholics, I have had the time to read a good number of them—it's part of my job—and I am fortunate enough to have the training as a sociologist to read them with a seasoned eye. My decades of dealing with the media have also enabled me to critically evaluate their coverage.

The media know that the average person has neither the time, the interest or the training necessary to read these reports. Regrettably, there are many reporters who, either out of laziness or malice, take what the executive summary of these reports has to say and treat it as if it were the gospel truth.

No one denies that there have been injustices committed by religious orders of men and women, and by members of the hierarchy. As Catholics we acknowledge that all of us are sinners, and that a sinless Church is a fiction. It is also true, however, that too many of us are gullible, accepting reports issued by academics or government bodies on alleged wrongdoing as if they were flawless.

The latest example of this is the way the media treated the Report by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada on alleged abuses of Indigenous children in the country's residential schools, some of which (slightly less than half) were run by Catholic religious orders; the others were run by the government or by Protestants.

It was the government that authorized placing Indigenous children in the residential schools where they would live and

learn. They did so because they regarded Indigenous persons to be primitive, if not savages. Accordingly, they felt it was their duty to assimilate them into Canadian society. [See pp. 4-5 for more on this subject.]

Aboard the papal plane coming home from Canada, a reporter asked Pope Francis why he didn't rescind the "doctrine of discovery," or the 15th century papal decree that granted discovery rights to land discovered by European colonizers. The pope was put on the defensive and did not offer an explicit response. That's too bad because the "doctrine of discovery" was officially repudiated by the Catholic Church in 1537.

Before, during and after the pope's visit, the media in America, Canada and Europe made much hay out of alleged "mass graves" of children that were found on Catholic grounds. But this myth had already been exploded by anthropologists and historians: not a single corpse has ever been found. In short, there was no genocide.

The media were aglow with reports of killings and molestation, but as discussed in this issue (see p. 5), they were false. A reporter for the Washington Post claimed that Indigenous children were subjected to "hunger" and "sexual violence." I checked the Report and found that the only references to hunger were in an Anglican school and a public school. In the 535-page Report, there are three vague references to "sexual violence"; none came from the testimonials of the Indigenous persons.

Often forgotten in these accounts was the goal of the missionaries. Even the Report admits that their goal was "to bring Christianity and civilization to the Indigenous peoples of the world," and that this was "a sincerely and firmly held belief." Unfortunately, this admission was not given the kind of high profile it deserved.

Buried on p. 68 of the Report is an even more important admission. The missionaries opposed integrating the Indigenous children into the public schools. Why? They did so for three reasons: "1) teachers in public schools were not prepared to deal with Aboriginal students; 2) students in the public schools often expressed racist attitudes towards Aboriginal students; and 3) Aboriginal students felt acute embarrassment over their impoverished conditions, particularly in terms of the quality of the clothing they wore and the food they ate."

In other words, the Indigenous students no doubt fared better in the Catholic residential schools than in the public schools. As detailed in the Report, the priests and nuns had beneficent intentions. Yet the media completely ignored this aspect—it would have gotten in the way of their narrative about the horrendous consequences of the residential schools.

Did reporters read this part of the Report and not say anything about it? That would make them totally biased. Or did they not bother to read the Report, relying on snippets of compressed information spoon-fed to them by Canadian officials? Either way, they did a disservice to the public.

Then there is the issue of what the missionaries were dealing with. University of Chicago anthropologist Lawrence H. Keeley writes that "Depictions of precivilized humans as saints and civilized folks as demons are as hypocritical as they are erroneous." Reporters who deny this are part of the problem.

It is a credit to the Catholic missionaries that they acted in the best interest of the people they served. It is also a credit to the Indigenous persons that they persisted in maintaining some of their more noble customs and traditions.