

Issue: Language and Culture (Decade of Indigenous Languages)

Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Calls to Action:

- #13: We call upon the federal government to acknowledge that Aboriginal rights include Aboriginal language rights.

Background:

- The Indian Residential School (IRS) system in Canada undermined and targeted First Nation cultures by disrupting family systems and severing the ties through which language and culture is taught. (Source: University of British Columbia – Indigenous Foundations).
- First Nations people lost their ability to speak their own languages as many residential school survivors were severely punished for speaking their language. The final report of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) call these actions a cultural genocide (Source: TRC Report).
- The impacts of IRS on First Nations languages can still be felt today. Statistics Canada reported in 2016 that although there was an increase of First Nations language speakers from 2006, there was still a 31% decline in the percentage of First Nations peoples who could conduct a conversation in their language. (Source: Statistics Canada).
- Revitalizing First Nations languages is important because language is the foundation of a culture and the knowledges embedded in them. Language is essential to First Nations as they assert their right to self-determination and jurisdiction over laws and systems of governance that are embedded languages, customs and traditions.
- The year 2022 is recognized internationally as the start of the *International Decade of Indigenous Languages* as declared by the United Nations, which recognizes among others, "the importance of indigenous languages to social cohesion and inclusion, cultural rights, health and justice and highlights their relevance to sustainable development and the preservation of biodiversity as they maintain ancient and traditional knowledge that binds humanity with nature." (Source: UNESCO)

Suggested Messaging:

- The Catholic Church must acknowledge its role in the IRS system (alongside the Canadian government) and its detrimental impacts on First Nations languages. The needs to be acknowledge of the active targeting of First Nations language speakers as a method of forced assimilation and conversion.
- The Pope must also recognize the importance of maintaining and revitalizing First Nations languages as a vital component to asserting the Indigenous right to self-determination since a representative of the Holy See publicly stated in 2018 that the Catholic Church strongly supports the right of all Indigenous peoples to self-determination. (Source: The Vatican News).
- The Pope should also reaffirm his stance to First Nations and Canadian leaders that speaking one's 'mother tongue' provides a defense against "ideological and cultural colonization" as stated in 2018. (Source: The Vatican News). Such a reaffirmation will offer substance to the apology given to First Nations peoples in Canada.
- The support of Pope Francis will go a long way in helping to secure the future of First Nations languages in Canada, and the full implementation of TRC Calls to Action 13 to 17, which deal with First Nations' languages and cultures.