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Pope Francis in Canada: The gift of tears

Many images captured Pope Francis' Penitential Pilgrimage to the land of the indigenous people, and offered a window onto the moments that put the focus on the path of healing and reconciliation of peoples who have greatly suffered and who today encounter a new face of the Church.

By Massimiliano Menichetti

In today's society, there are images that go around the world in a matter of seconds, shared on social media thanks to phones and PCs: thousands, millions, if not billions of people often unwittingly find themselves looking at the same snapshot. There are lines,



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colors and shapes that vanish in the swirl of sharing, others remain etched in the memory forever, and still others are kept exclusively in the heart.

In Pope Francis' trip to Canada (24-30 July), there are many of these snapshots that tell much more than an event: they open spaces, show silences, pain, and suffering, but also show belonging, acknowledgement, encounter, hope.

The Pope, as he himself pointed out, made a penitential pilgrimage to a land that has witnessed the martyrdom of indigenous peoples whose children were torn from them at the time of the policies of assimilation and enfranchisement. Pope Francis set out, bearing the light of Christ, of the Church that sees, that is not afraid of the truth and of asking for forgiveness, that embraces, listens, loves. A Church that is close to every needy person, without hesitation, without doubt, without hesitation, without obstacles.

In six days the Pope traveled across Canada touching the peripheries of the heart as well as the geographical ones, reaching as far as the edge of the Arctic Circle where the largest Inuit community on the planet lives. In Iqaluit he met with residential school alumni at one of the four elementary schools - the dreadful institution created to re-educate indigenous people torn from their families, sites of atrocities and violence. Pope Francis entered a room in this structure, which resembles a large white box, with portholes distributed on the faceted and protruding walls.

He entered in silence; a few dozen people were waiting for him, arranged in several rows, in a circle. Most of them were elderly, dressed simply, some in traditional clothes. Hands creased by years went to their faces. Tears slowly flowed down their motionless, almost expressionless faces, with gazes fixed on the Pope. In that snapshot - repeated many times during the journey - there is much more than a single life. There is the stifled cry of a people. Men and women who, also because of Catholics, have experienced horrors, and who in that encounter saw themselves recognized, touched, embraced and loved. Tears that expressed chasms, sufferings, hopes before which one can only be silent, open one's arms and welcome.

In the days of the Apostolic Visit, the Pope pointed to a path of reconciliation and healing, as he did in recent months at the Vatican when he received representatives of First Nations, Inuit and Métis indigenous peoples. He initiated a process, a horizon that must be reached, that must be built and nurtured.





The Pope and Chief Littlechild

The Pope's presence was a "blessing and a gift," said Chief Wilton Littlechild, stressing that now "the work begins." Littlechild is the indigenous chief survivor of the residential schools, now 78 years old, who gave the Pope an Indian headdress at the meeting at Bear Park Pow-Wow Grounds in Maskwacis.

It was an extraordinary photograph, that of the pontiff with the eagle feathers, but the heartfelt snapshot is several frames earlier - when this gesture of sharing was made possible. And to understand it, one must completely review the scene. It led to that gift that indicates recognition - which cost Chief Littlechild considerable physical effort, since he ordinarily walks with the aid of crutches or moves in a wheelchair - instead, he walked a few meters by himself, climbing the stairs to get to the stage where the Pope was - because the Indigenous peoples reopened their hearts and ears to the Gospel, to the reality of a living Church, different from the one that humiliated and crushed them.

Also shown to the Pope was a long red banner with the names of the victims of the residential schools written on it, as the sound of drums went through the bodies and merged with the heartbeat of each one. Unforgettable also, was the image of grief, emotion and anger of Si Pih Ko, standing straight in front of the Pope with the admiring crowd around her, and the indecision of the security men as she sang, in an unscheduled manner, a song that in its sounds, recalled the Canadian anthem.





The indigenous woman crying as she sang before the Pope in Maskwacis

Then, the Pope sat in a wheelchair before the silence of Lac Ste. Anne, a place dear to the indigenous people, where thousands go on pilgrimage each year. And there, as Pope Francis spoke, the hands of the grandparents clasped those of the younger ones to mutually support each other.

Images of suffering, pride, passion, identity, dances, silence, prayer, and tears thus accompanied this penitential pilgrimage, which begins a new perspective and assigns tasks and goals to individuals and institutions, but which also represents an opportunity for all of humanity, for all of us, to follow paths of sharing and fraternity, to listen and set our gaze on humanity and Creation, realizing that we are all children of God.

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