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Pope's apology too late

Words little solace for aboriginals

By **MARK BONOKOSKI**

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When Karen Chaboyer saw the news from the Vatican yesterday of Pope Benedict XVI expressing his "sorrow" over the long-term suffering and abuse of thousands of aboriginal Canadians in the residential schools run by the Roman Catholic Church, her first emotion was one of anger.

It was, in fact, her first and only emotion.

And it remains a constant.

"Why did the victim have to go to the offender to get his apology?" she asks. "Why did Phil Fontaine (Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, and himself a residential school survivor) have to cross an ocean?"

"Why did the Pope not come to us? We're here, not there. And here is where it happened."

For Chaboyer, "here" was St. Margaret's residential school in the Northern Ontario outpost of Fort Frances, all within view of Couchiching First Nations, where she and her nine brothers and two sisters were uprooted from their off-reserve home, a log cabin on Rice Bay, and tossed into an environment that had only one purpose.

And that, as history now willingly but belatedly accepts, was to kill the Indian in the child.

What it achieved, instead, was the establishment of a plague of intergeneration trauma that is a clinical fact, not a fallacy, and a First Nation populace steeped in alcoholism, substance addictions, intra-family abuse, over-incarceration, suicide and diminished self respect.

Chaboyer, now 56, and program co-ordinator for Toronto's Centre for Indigenous Theatre, was only six years old when she was forced to enter St. Margaret's -- never to see her home, or her family, for the next nine years of her life.

"I remember other children being beaten because their only language was Ojibway," she says. "My brothers were abused, physically and sexually, and they grew up to be alcoholic and sick. But me? I remember very little of it."

"My memories have somehow been buried. But they will come out in time, as I continue my therapy, and hopefully I will get answers as to why I am what I am -- like why do I feel so much shame? Why do I feel so much anger?"

"The reasons are all there, hidden inside me, and suppressed for all these years."

Yesterday's statement from the Pope, in a communique issued by the Vatican, came almost a year after Prime Minister Stephen Harper stood in the House of Commons and offered a full apology on behalf of all Canadians to those First Nations people who were victims of more than 100 years of residential school abuses.

"His Holiness emphasized that acts of abuse cannot be tolerated in society," the communique read. "He prayed that all those affected would experience healing, and he encouraged First Nations peoples to continue to move forward with renewed hope."

Chaboyer scoffs at the rhetoric.

"It's so easy to say, isn't it?" she says. "What he didn't say, though, was why now? And why it took so long?"

Within minutes of the Pope's message being posted online, Chaboyer was also reading the mostly anonymous comments tagged on various websites and blogs, many of them so vitriolic and hurtful that she had to pause to regain her strength.

"You've read them, the hate and the racism being tossed at us," she says. "We're being called whiners. We're being told to 'get over it,' to 'move on.' I'd like for them to walk in our shoes for generations, and then have to read those kind of comments."

"There is so much ignorance out there, and so much intolerance," she says. "It continues to amaze me how so many people are able to know so little."

The Catholic church administered almost three-quarters of the 130-plus residential schools across this country, touching every territory and province except Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick.

But, up until yesterday, it had yet to apologize for the acknowledged abuses suffered in those schools by a great many of the estimated 90,000 former students who are still alive -- Karen Chaboyer and her siblings being 13 among those thousands, as were their parents before them.

Other Christian denominations have already expressed their mea culpas, and had done so years ago -- the United Church in 1998, the Presbyterian Church in 1994, and the Anglican Church in 1993.

But putting First Nations issues on the back burner is nothing new. For years, Corrections Ombudsman Howard Sapers has been asking for a deputy commissioner of corrections to be appointed, strictly to deal with the overwhelming number of aboriginal prison issues but, each year, his request has been ignored by the various cabinet ministers in charge.

The government's truth and reconciliation commission, established to examine the legacy of residential schools, has been in limbo now since October when, out of the blue, Justice Harry LaForme resigned as chairman.

Yet no new chairman has been appointed.

The two remaining commissioners, Claudette Dumont-Smith and Jane Morley, have both stated they will step down -- but not until June 1.

No wonder there is anger.

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