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First Nations protesters demand to know location of residential school graves

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VANCOUVER — Two dozen First Nations protesters rallied outside Easter services at Vancouver's Roman Catholic cathedral on Sunday demanding to know where the bodies of children who died in residential schools are located.

Friends and Family of the Disappeared served the church with an eviction notice in a similar protest on March 16. Now, the group says the church is a squatter because the deadline to vacate was last Wednesday.

Spokesman Kevin Annett said Sunday's protest was designed to draw attention to the plight of children who were forced into both Catholic and Protestant residential schools.

"It's time the Catholic church pulled their head out of the sand and responded to the victims and the things people are asking for ... a return of the children who died, their remains, and an identification of who's responsible," Annett said. "As they would do for anybody."

He claimed there are mass graves of children.

Rick Lavallie said his brother was killed in a Portage la Prairie, Man. residential school.

"I was only four years old and they killed my brother when he was five years old with a cattle prod and whip," Lavallie said. "It still makes me sad and this is why I want this church to apologize to us the right way.

"I was raped too, burned in the fingers. Tortured, hit in the head with a cattle prod. This was Catholic priests" he said. "They should pay all of us residential school survivors money for this but they're not going to."

The protest was not without incident. Police had to remove three protesters from the church.

In a written appeal handed out on the cathedral steps, the group asked parish members to withhold financial contributions from the church until it begins to deal with the situation.

"It is time for Archbishop (Raymond) Roussin to acknowledge what he knows is true and to work with us to start healing the wounds and deaths caused by both Protestant and Catholic churches in our country," the statement said.

No one from the archdiocese could be reached for comment.

However, in the March 17 edition of B.C. Catholic online, the bishop is quoted as apologizing.

Roussin noted in his remarks that five residential schools were operated by others within the archdiocese's territory over the years, with positive as well as tragic results.

None was operated by the diocese, he said.

He called the system "deeply flawed."

"Removing children from their culture and their families is a profound moral concern," the archbishop said. "It is especially painful to know that some children suffered sexual and physical abuse at the hands of their teachers and caregivers.

"As archbishop of Vancouver, I express my deep regret and I apologize for any wrongs committed here."

Parishioners, for the most part, hurried past the protesters on Sunday. Some took leaflets.

"The faithful should not be bothered," said one woman, indicating church leaders should deal with it.

A visitor from Texas to the cathedral said the protesters had every right to their protest.

"I imagine most people will walk past (the protest)," Pam O'Toole said. "You feel bad for what happened. I didn't do it."

Annett said only a handful of those responsible have had to defend their actions in court.

"We think there has to be more pressure put on the government and the churches to do the right thing here."

Similar protests have taken place across the country in the past few weeks against Catholic, Anglican and United churches.

The group's demands include the churches withdrawing from all aboriginal territories and surrendering their buildings to hereditary chiefs.

They also want the churches to identify the burial places of all children who died in residential schools and hospitals.

The schools, which opened in 1840, were a hotbed of physical and sexual abuse and illness.

The students were between seven and 16 years old.

In 1998, the federal government issued an apology, citing "attitudes of racial and cultural superiority which led to a suppression of aboriginal culture and values."

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