

# Christological Ecclesiology & Reconciliation: A Way Forward for the Catholic Church

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**Abstract:** This article explores the Catholic Church's response to Canada's Indian<sup>1</sup> residential school system; namely, how it has chosen to frame and understand its role and responsibility in the harm inflicted upon Indigenous persons and communities. The predominant approach has been to spare the Catholic Church itself of culpability while focusing on that of *individual* Catholics and institutions (e.g., dioceses and religious orders). At the root of this perspective appears to be the distinction between the Church, which is holy, and her members, who are sinners. This article, however, argues that this view is insufficient in light of a christological ecclesiology: Church institutions and members form *one* body in Christ with two natures, divine and human, which should neither be divided nor confused. With this view in mind, it is argued that reconciliation efforts can and should be made on behalf of not only individual Catholics and institutions, but the Catholic Church as a whole.

**Keywords:** Indian Residential Schools, Catholic Church, Reconciliation, Ecclesiology

Canada's Indian residential schools have generated tremendous interest in recent years due to the damaging legacy of colonialist and assimilationist programs, increased awareness of the abuse suffered by many, and discoveries of graves at school sites. Catholic involvement in residential schools has been prominent in media due to the participation of about sixteen Catholic dioceses (out of seventy) and thirty-six religious communities<sup>2</sup> – the context of Pope Francis' apologies on Canadian soil – and accusations that religious bodies are withholding records and have neglected their financial obligations to survivors. Articles have frequently accused “the Catholic Church” of offences like these,<sup>3</sup> while some Catholic bishops have pointed out that only a portion of the Church was involved (e.g., a minority of dioceses), that each diocese and religious community is legally and corporately autonomous, and that

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1. It is important to note that the term “Indian,” when used in reference to Canada's Indigenous population, has been criticized in recent decades as an offensive and problematic remnant of Canada's colonial legacy. However, the term is still widely used by Indigenous peoples, the Canadian government, and scholars in reference to the residential school system, so its usage has been retained here. For more on this, see Harvey A. McCue, “Indian,” in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, online at <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/about>.

2. Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCC), “Indian Residential Schools and TRC,” CCCC website, n.d., accessed July 15, 2021, <https://www.cccb.ca/indigenous-peoples/indian-residential-schools-and-trc/>.

3. E.g., Tom Cardoso, “‘A Great Injustice’: Indigenous Leaders Call for Reparations from Catholic Church for Residential Schools Abuses,” *The Globe and Mail*, August 9, 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-a-great-injustice-indigenous-leaders-call-for-reparations-from/>; Tavia Grant, and Tom Cardoso, “The Catholic Church in Canada is Worth Billions, a Globe Investigation Shows. Why Are its Reparations for Residential Schools so Small?” *The Globe and Mail*, August 7, 2021, updated August 9, 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-catholic-church-canadian-assets-investigation/>; Mark Gollom, “Why Retrieving Former Residential School Records has Proved so Difficult,” *CBC News*, June 30, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/residential-school-records-indigenous-1.6083493>; Jason Warick, “Petition Demands Catholic Church's Charitable Status be Suspended over Residential School Response,” *CBC*, August 5, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/petition-catholic-church-charitable-status-1.6130064>.

leaders of these institutions have apologized.<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, too, has emphasized the involvement of individual Catholics and Christians in abuses against Indigenous persons,<sup>5</sup> later explaining that his apologies were made “on behalf of the Church.”<sup>6</sup> At the heart of these discourses are differing conceptions of the Catholic Church, which have led to differing conclusions about how to approach accountability and reconciliation. There is, in this way, a very practical problem.

In this paper, I argue that a helpful way forward is to approach ecclesiology in a fundamentally christological way; an approach strongly rooted in the Catholic tradition, and one which provides theological justification and impetus for truly catholic (i.e., universal) reconciliation efforts among and on behalf of, not only particular Catholics and institutions, but the Church as a whole. With this foundation, I then consider whether it is theologically tenable to say that “the Church” can sin, err, be dysfunctional, etc., and whether reconciliation efforts (e.g., apologies) can be made on behalf of the Church as a whole.

### The Body and Bride of Christ: A Christological Ecclesiology

The organic analogy has been a prominent motif in the Christian tradition since the Pauline Epistles were written: the Church is the Body of Christ formed of many members, with Christ as head.<sup>7</sup> Up through the early medieval period, the term “mystical body” (*corpus mysticum*) was applied to the Eucharistic host. In the eleventh century, the term “true body” (*corpus verum*) was used as well, and by the thirteenth century, it overtook “mystical body,” which came to refer to the Church instead. At the same time, “mystical body” took on more socio-political associations: the Church, as a mystical body, came increasingly to be seen socio-politically, and political communities came to be called “mystical bodies.”<sup>8</sup> Thomas Aquinas was involved in this development, for he applied the organic analogy to both civil and ecclesiastical commonwealths. However, he also maintained the distinctiveness of the two: “only the civil commonwealth

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4. Tom Yun, “Canadian Archbishop Says Trudeau Comments on Church’s Role in Residential Schools ‘Unfair,’” *CTV News*, June 6, 2021, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/canadian-archbishop-says-trudeau-comments-on-church-s-role-in-residential-schools-unfair-1.5458553>; CCCB, “Indian Residential Schools and TRC.”

In September 2021, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops issued its own apology for the involvement of “[m]any Catholic religious communities and dioceses” in the residential schools, as well as abuses at the hands of “some members of our Catholic community” (CCCB, “Statement of Apology by the Catholic Bishops of Canada to the Indigenous Peoples of This Land,” CCCB website, Sept. 24, 2021, <https://www.cccb.ca/letter/statement-of-apology-by-the-catholic-bishops-of-canada-to-the-indigenous-peoples-of-this-land/>).

5. Pope Francis, “Meeting with Representatives of Indigenous Peoples in Canada: Address of His Holiness Pope Francis,” Vatican website, April 1, 2022, accessed August 25, 2022, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/april/documents/20220401-popoli-indigeni-canada.html>; Pope Francis, “Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Canada (24–30 July 2022) – Meeting with Indigenous Peoples: First Nations, Métis and Inuit: Address of His Holiness,” Vatican website, July 25, 2022, accessed August 15, 2022, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/july/documents/20220725-popolazioniindigene-canada.html>; Pope Francis, “Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Canada (24–30 July 2022) – Meeting with Indigenous Peoples and Members of the Parish Community of Sacred Heart: Address of His Holiness,” Vatican website, July 25, 2022, accessed August 15, 2022, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/july/documents/20220725-incontroedmonton-canada.html>; Pope Francis, “Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Canada (24–30 July 2022) – Meeting with Civil Authorities, Representatives of Indigenous Peoples and Members of the Diplomatic Corps: Address of His Holiness,” Vatican website, July 27, 2022, accessed August 15, 2022, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/july/documents/20220727-autorita-canada.html>.

6. Pope Francis, “General Audience,” Vatican website, August 3, 2022, accessed August 15, 2022, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2022/documents/20220803-udienza-generale.html>.

7. See Rom. 12:4–5; 1 Cor. 12:12–31; Eph. 1:22–23, 3:6, 4:1–16; Col. 1:18, 2:18–19.

8. Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957), 195–203, 207ff.

was a *corpus politicum*.” It was of natural origin and bound by natural law, “while the Church, as a *corpus mysticum*, the mystical body of Christ,” was of supernatural origin and bound by divine law.<sup>9</sup>

The Church is also portrayed in Scripture as the Bride of Christ; a motif directly linked to the Church *qua* Body of Christ. Just as “the husband is the head of the wife” so too is Christ “head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour.” And this marital headship has implications: “the church is subject to Christ,” “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,” and he “nourishes and tenderly cares for it [...] because we are members of his body.” This is, the author of Ephesians writes, “a great mystery.”<sup>10</sup>

The precise nature of the Church *qua* Body or Bride of Christ, and the relationship between Christ and the faithful, has been a subject of intense theological debate. Indeed, as J. R. Nelson argues, “the Body of Christ is either a very suggestive, though often limited and misleading, metaphor, or else it is the name of a supernatural entity, possessing both human and divine nature, which is related to Christ in a way which may be called ‘mystical’ or ‘mysterious.’”<sup>11</sup> We may say the same for the Church *qua* Bride of Christ. Given these christological motifs, it is certainly necessary to frame ecclesiology with reference to Christ. Not only, though, should it be christocentric, but it is also appropriate for it to be christological.<sup>12</sup>

Looking to the decrees of the early ecumenical councils we can, therefore, draw important insights. The Council of Nicaea (325) and Council of Constantinople (381) affirmed that Christ is fully God – one in essence (*ousia*) with God the Father – and fully human, with the Third Council of Constantinople (680-681) explaining that this meant that Christ had both divine and human wills and energies.<sup>13</sup> In a similar way, the Church is both divine and human: both ontologically and functionally. It is divine because it is the Body and Bride of Christ, both of which signify the Church’s spiritual union with its Head and Spouse via the Holy Spirit, who also guides it. The Church is also divine in the sense that it was divinely ordained: it was founded by Christ with certain essential elements, including the sacraments and ecclesiastical offices (e.g., priesthood, episcopacy, papacy), which the Church cannot change. The Church is human, in turn, in that it is formed of fallible, sinful human beings, including – infallible declarations excepted – those who exercise and practice these essential elements, and in that it also contains man-made offices, codes, and practices, which can change.<sup>14</sup>

Some theologians, especially from Protestant traditions, have differentiated between the invisible and visible Church: the former is all the elect – those predestined to salvation – through time, while the latter is formed of elect and non-elect members of earthly churches, along with numerous visible institutions and structures. The invisible Church is (or will be) truly holy, due to the grace of God gifted to his

9. Katherine E. Van Lier, “Vitoria, Cajetan, and the Conciliarists,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58, no. 4 (1997): 599-600. Cf. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*, 200ff.

10. Eph. 5: 23, 24, 25, 29, 30, 32 (NRSVA).

11. J. R. Nelson, *The Realm of Redemption*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Epworth Press, 1963), 101.

12. See Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, 8, Vatican website, November 21, 1964, accessed July 10, 2020, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html); Pope Pius XII, *Mystici corporis Christi*, 64, Vatican website, June 29, 1943, accessed July 10, 2020, [https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_29061943\\_mystici-corporis-christi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_29061943_mystici-corporis-christi.html).

13. For the decrees of these councils, see Norman Tanner ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1 (Washington: Georgetown UP, 1990).

14. See Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, 8: “While Christ, holy, innocent and undefiled knew nothing of sin, but came to expiate only the sins of the people, the Church, embracing in its bosom sinners, at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, always follows the way of penance and renewal.”

elect, while the visible Church is formed of holy and unholy persons, and visible, often reformable, features.<sup>15</sup> The Catholic tradition, however, along with the Eastern Orthodox, has traditionally rejected this division; rather, the one Church is, in its essence, both invisible and visible. As the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) taught:

The one mediator, Christ, established and ever sustains here on earth his holy Church [...] as a visible organization through which he communicates truth and grace to all [people]. But, the society structured with hierarchical organs and the mystical body of Christ [...] are not to be thought of as two realities. On the contrary, they form one complex reality [...] This is the sole Church of Christ which in the Creed we profess to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic.<sup>16</sup>

As Pope Pius XII explained, citing Leo XIII: “as Christ, Head and Exemplar of the Church ‘is not complete, if only His visible human nature is considered [...], or if only His divine, invisible nature [...], but He is one through the union of both and one in both [...] so is it with His Mystical Body.’”<sup>17</sup> The Orthodox theologian, Vladimir Lossky, similarly uses christological language to explain why this must be so. To embrace the Protestant view, he says, is to have a “Nestorian ecclesiology, the error that would divide the Church into distinct beings: on the one hand the heavenly and invisible Church, alone true and absolute; on the other, the earthly Church (or rather ‘the churches’) imperfect and relative.”<sup>18</sup> Nestorianism was a christological view of which there were multiple interpretations. According to one, Christ’s two natures were so distinct that He was, effectively, two different persons; this is the view to which Lossky seems to be referring. The Council of Ephesus (431), however, rejected this view; it condemned Nestorianism and, following the lead of Cyril of Alexandria, affirmed the doctrine of the hypostatic union, i.e., that Christ is one person (*hypostasis*) who has 2 natures (human and divine) that are fully united. The Council of Chalcedon (451) would affirm this view. There is “one and the same Christ [...] acknowledged in two natures which undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no separation; at no point was the difference between the natures taken away through the union, but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single person and a single subsistent being; he is not parted or divided into two persons, but is one and the same only-begotten Son, God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>19</sup> In this way, the Incarnate Christ could both suffer, physically and spiritually (a human capacity), and perform miracles (a divine capacity), while remaining one indivisible person.

Applying this christology to ecclesiology, we can affirm that the Church has two natures – divine and human – in its “one complex reality.” The Church is simultaneously holy and sinful, elevated by grace and fallen. (There is, in this way, a difference from Christ, who is completely sinless and unfallen.) Also like Christ, however, who is one *hypostasis* in two natures (the Logos, with a divine nature, who took on human nature), the universal Church, according to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, citing Church Fathers, “precedes creation,” that is, it existed prior to the particular churches and their human members, and thereafter took on a human nature when it was manifested temporally at Pentecost.<sup>20</sup> It is,

15. See, e.g., Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.1., <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.vi.ii.html>.

16. Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, 8.

17. Pope Pius XII, *Mystici corporis Christi*, 64; quoting Leo XIII, *Satis cognitum*: A. S. S., XXVIII, 710.

18. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1991), 186.

19. Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, 86.

20. See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion,” 9, Vatican website, May 28, 1992, accessed July 10, 2022,

however, not a mere sum of these divine and human parts, a sort of Nestorianism in which its natures are only loosely linked. Rather the Church is “one complex reality,” analogous to a *hypostasis*, in which there is a unity of order – i.e., as in real and socio-political bodies, particular functions by and relationships among the head and members exist and are directed toward common end/s. Significantly, there is also a unique unity by the Holy Spirit, who guides the Church and joins the faithful to Christ and one another in him.<sup>21</sup>

Just as Christ’s human will is *per se* subordinate to his divine will, the Church *qua* human ought to be subordinate to its divine features, viz., Christ, her Head and Spouse, and his will, as made known by Apostolic teaching and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, whose will is always one with Christ and the Father. That the Church has not always been subordinate to Christ – despite being led by the Holy Spirit – is a scandal, and one which reaffirms the limitations of a christological ecclesiology. The Church and its natures, while united to Christ, are only like Christ and his natures; there is not an unequivocal parallel.

### Ecclesiology, Sin and Reconciliation

In this christologically-oriented ecclesiological context, it is appropriate and helpful to address the Church’s involvement in the abuses committed at the Indian residential schools. A number of Catholic dioceses and religious orders in Canada agreed to participate in an institution with systemically racist elements, including the eradication of Indigenous culture. Many individual Catholics, too, often clergy and religious, committed abuses against school attendees: emotional, physical, sexual, and spiritual.<sup>22</sup> Was there, in this way, harm caused by both Catholic individuals and institutions, some of the latter of which are an essential feature of the Church (e.g., dioceses<sup>23</sup>) and others not (e.g., religious orders)? Yes, but this is primarily the case, especially with essential institutions, insofar as their structures were used *by individuals* for these errant purposes. It is also possible for human-made, non-essential institutions to be systemically discriminatory or dysfunctional. The same is also possible for essential institutions (e.g., divinely ordained ones) with respect to those features that are human-made and not essential to them. For instance, the papacy, which Catholics believe is a divinely ordained and essential feature of the Church, was thought to bear not only the spiritual sword but also the temporal sword by divine right, which the pope delegated to rulers.<sup>24</sup> While the Church has since shifted away from this view on the temporal sword<sup>25</sup> – it

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[https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_28051992\\_communionis-notio\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_28051992_communionis-notio_en.html).

21. See Thomas Aquinas, *Truth*, vol. 3, trans. R. W. Schmidt (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1954), q. 29, a.4; *Mystici Corporis Christi*, art. 61–63; Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), art. 688, 737.

22. See, e.g., CCCB, “Indian Residential Schools and TRC”; The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, vol. 1: *Summary* (Toronto: Lorimer, 2015) 1–6, 105ff.

23. Dioceses (or “particular churches”) are the “daughters” of the universal Church, arising therefrom, and the latter is expressed in the former (see CDF, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion,” 9). “[I]t is,” moreover, “in these [particular churches] and formed out of them that the one and unique Catholic Church exists” (*Lumen gentium*, 23). At the same time, though, “the churches [are] in and formed out of the Church” (Pope John Paul II, *Address to the Roman Curia*, 9, Vatican website, December 20, 1990, accessed July 20, 2022, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/fr/speeches/1990/december/documents/hf-jp-ii\\_spe\\_19901220\\_curia.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/fr/speeches/1990/december/documents/hf-jp-ii_spe_19901220_curia.html)).

24. See Pope Boniface VIII, *Unam sanctam*, November 18, 1302, accessed July 30, 2022, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/bon08/b8unam.htm>.

25. See, e.g., Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, 76: “The Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system [...]. The Church and the political community



was, it seems, a human-made feature of the papal office – this view was used, in part, to issue the Bulls of Donation (1493),<sup>26</sup> which were a foundation for colonialism in the Americas, including the residential schools.<sup>27</sup> In these ways, therefore, Catholic institutions can have systemic flaws, but this is always a feature of the Church’s human nature, not its divine nature.

Given that, in all these cases, it is or would only ever be *particular* Catholics or institutions in the Church that are sinful, errant, or dysfunctional, is it ever appropriate to attribute these flaws to “the Church”? Magisterial pronouncements overall appear to indicate not. For instance, according to *Gaudium et spes*: “among her [i.e., the Church’s] members, both clerical and lay, some have been unfaithful to the Spirit,” nonetheless, “by the power of the Holy Spirit *the Church* will remain the faithful spouse of her Lord and will never cease to be the sign of salvation on earth”<sup>28</sup> Rooted in this distinction, too, Pope John Paul II “implored forgiveness” not for the Church as such, but “for the past and present sins of [the Church’s] sons and daughters.”<sup>29</sup> And the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops made a similar statement, acknowledging and apologizing for the participation of “[m]any religious communities and dioceses” in the Canadian residential schools and the “grave abuses that were committed by *some members* of our Catholic community.”<sup>30</sup> The International Theological Commission seems to frame this as a distinction between “*holiness of the Church*” versus “*holiness in the Church*.”<sup>31</sup>

With Pope Francis, though, a potential shift has appeared. In an address in Bolivia, he said, “I humbly ask forgiveness, not only for the offense of *the church herself*, but also for crimes committed against the native peoples during the so-called conquest of America.”<sup>32</sup> The ecclesiological justification behind this reference to “the church herself” is unclear; as is, therefore, whether it signifies a true development in magisterial thinking. This interpretive problem is intensified given that Pope Francis apologized in Rome and Canada for abuses carried out by individual Catholics and Christians against Indigenous persons and communities in Canada, but not for the involvement of the Church as such.<sup>33</sup> At a General Audience back in Rome, he again noted that various Christians had “participated in programmes that today we understand are unacceptable and also contrary to the Gospel.” But then, he continued, “And this is why I went to ask forgiveness, *on behalf of the Church*.”<sup>34</sup> Is this a continuation of Francis’ Bolivian shift? It seems not; rather,

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in their own fields are autonomous and independent from each other” (Vatican website, December 7, 1965, accessed July 30, 2022, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)).

26. See, for instance, the language used in Pope Alexander VI’s bull, *Inter caetera*, May 4, 1493, accessed July 30, 2022, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/alex06/alex06inter.htm>.

27. See The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, vol. 6: *Canada’s Residential Schools: Reconciliation* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 2015), 29ff.

28. *Gaudium et Spes*, 43; emphasis added.

29. Pope John Paul II, *Incarnationis mysterium*, 11, Vatican website, November 29, 1998, accessed July 20, 2022, [https://www.vatican.va/jubilee\\_2000/docs/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_doc\\_30111998\\_bolla-jubilee\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/docs/documents/hf_jp-ii_doc_30111998_bolla-jubilee_en.html) (emphasis added).

30. See CCCB, “Statement of Apology by the Catholic Bishops of Canada to the Indigenous Peoples of This Land” (emphasis added).

31. International Theological Commission, *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*, 3.2, Vatican website, December 1999, accessed May 18, 2022, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000307\\_memory-reconc-itc\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000307_memory-reconc-itc_en.html) (emphasis in original).

32. “Pope Francis Asks Pardon for Church’s ‘Crimes’ Against Indigenous Peoples,” *Associated Press*, July 10, 2015, [www.cbc.ca/news/world/pope-francis-asks-pardon-for-church-s-crimes-against-indigenous-peoples-1.3146010](http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/pope-francis-asks-pardon-for-church-s-crimes-against-indigenous-peoples-1.3146010) (emphasis added).

33. For citations, see footnote 5.

34. For citations, see footnote 6.

it points to how, on Canadian soil, he declared: “*the Church kneels* before God and implores his forgiveness for the sins of her children (cf. JOHN PAUL II, Bull *Incarnationis Mysterium* [29 November 1998], 11: AAS 91 [1999], 140).”<sup>35</sup> We have here the traditional magisterial distinction.

It appears possible and necessary, however, to go further; to affirm that the Church, as such, does have flaws (e.g., sin and error). This is a corollary of the Church as one body: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ [...]. As it is, there are many members, yet one body.”<sup>36</sup> If a person throws a rock at a window, it is technically his or her arm, one member of the body, that threw it, but we assign the action to the person. Similarly, therefore, when a particular Catholic or institution sins or errs, it is possible to assign it to the Church, to say that the Church sins or errors. But this does not mean that each member is personally guilty of that offence or error. If the thrower uses his right arm to volley the rock, it is *per se* not the left arm that does it. Similarly, when only one Catholic does a particular wrong, other Catholics *per se* do not. However, the identity of the arm or the Catholic is directly tied to its membership in its respective body: the arm is the arm of a body, and a Catholic is Catholic precisely because he or she is a member of the Church. Thus, as Paul wrote in the Corinthian context: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.”<sup>37</sup> Or as Pope John Paul II similarly explained, “Because of the bond which unites us to one another in the Mystical Body, all of us, though not personally responsible and without encroaching on the judgement of God who alone knows every heart, bear the burden of the errors and faults of those who have gone before us.” Indeed, for Pope John Paul, this does not mean that “the Church” sins or errors when its members do.<sup>38</sup> However, it seems that it is a theologically grounded and appropriate next step to acknowledge such; a move that the Second Vatican Council embraced in part when it acknowledged that “the Church already on this earth is signed with a sanctity which is real although imperfect.”<sup>39</sup> And there is precedence for this acknowledgement. Augustine of Hippo, for example, wrote:

The Church as a whole says: Forgive us our trespasses! Therefore she has blemishes and wrinkles. But by means of confession the wrinkles are smoothed away and the blemishes washed clean. The Church stands in prayer in order to be purified by confession and, as long as men live on earth it will be so.<sup>40</sup>

Analogous to the christological communication of idioms, one can say that the Church *qua* “one complex reality,” the one Body and Bride of Christ, with many human members and structures, has sinned or erred in different cases *in its humanity*, but one cannot say that it has sinned or erred in its divinity. This distinction maintains the core of magisterial teaching that the Church will remain undefiled and faithful, while its members are sinful, but with a needed emphasis that the Church and its members, as well as ecclesial institutions, are always one body. Apologies and other reconciliation efforts can, therefore, be made on behalf of the whole Church in this way; a way that is, indeed, nuanced, but which could be quite fruitful. Efforts to withhold such efforts because the Church is divine, in contrast, risk falling into either a sort of monophysitism – one which not only prioritizes the Church’s divine nature but risks rejecting

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35. Pope Francis, “[Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Canada \(24–30 July 2022\) – Meeting with Indigenous Peoples: First Nations, Métis and Inuit: Address of His Holiness.](#)”

36. 1 Cor. 12: 12, 20 (NRSVA).

37. 1 Cor. 12: 26 (NRSVA); see Pius XII, *Mystici corporis Christi*, 15.

38. *Incarnationis mysterium*, 11.

39. *Lumen gentium*, 48.

40. St. Augustine, *Sermo* 181, 5,7: PL 38; 982; cited in International Theological Commission, *Memory and Reconciliation*.

(however implicitly) the human; or a Nestorianism – one which unduly separates the Church *qua* divine and indefectible from its members *qua* human and sinful, sundering the Church, which is confessed to be one, into two.

### Conclusion

The Catholic Church has been making ever greater strides in the process of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples in Canada, efforts primarily made at the level of individuals, parishes, dioceses, religious orders, and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. Pope Francis' meeting with Indigenous delegations at the Vatican, trip to Canada, and subsequent speeches have aided and will aid this process at the level of the universal Church and encourage greater efforts at local and national levels. After the pontiff issued his apologies for the sins of individual Catholics and Christians who harmed Indigenous persons and communities in Canada, some called for him to go further, to apologize for *the Church's* involvement<sup>41</sup> (as he did in Bolivia). As I have attempted to show, a clear apology in this way would be highly appropriate, not only pragmatically – to aid healing and reconciliation – but theologically. And it is still possible.

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41. See, e.g., Taylor Hutchison, "An Indigenous Youth Delegate Met with the Pope. Here's What She Wants Him to Do Next," *NPR*, April 10, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/03/1090609734/first-nations-delegate-pope-francis-apology-residential-schools>; Call to Action 58 in Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Canada's Residential Schools: Reconciliation*, 101.



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