



June 4, 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

In the wake of this past week's discovery of the remains of indigenous children at the Kamloops Residential School a very painful part of the history of the Church in Canada has come to the fore once again. Many people have been shocked, saddened and disgusted; some have had their faith shaken, perhaps not their faith in God, but their faith in His Church.

I assure you that priests are not immune to such struggles, and I found myself at a loss for words through much of this week. This morning, though, as I was scrolling through the newsfeeds on my phone, I came across this article by David G. Bonagura Jr., an adjunct professor at St. Joseph's Seminary in New York, in *Catholic World Report*. Mr. Bonagura's article is not dealing with the issue of residential schools in particular, but with failings of the Church's members and Her leaders in general.

I offer the article in full for your perusal, and I hope it gives you some insight as it did for me.

I remain faithfully yours in Christ:

Fr. Ian Duffy.

“Love is an act of the will, a decision that we make to give our best to another. Love is often associated with romance and sweeping emotions, but it need not be. When we take care of a sick family member, lend an ear to a needy friend, or carry out a physically demanding task as a favor, we are performing acts of love that are born not of romantic feelings, but of self-sacrifice.

Love towards our mothers is of this kind. The exuberant love of young children for their mothers eventually ebbs as they reach adolescence; as children begin to assert their independence, they often run into conflict with their mothers' will for them. Occasionally, these conflicts harden and strain the mother-child relationship for years to come. But, more often than not, as children enter adulthood and become parents themselves, their relationships with their mothers become affective again, as they realize that, through all the quarreling, their mothers only wanted what was best for them.

Now, as adults, though conscious of their mothers' shortcomings, they are grateful for the love and the countless acts of self-sacrifice that they received from their mothers over so many years.

This gratitude then propels them to take care of their aging mothers as they decline in health. Feelings of affection may again wane in the rigors of life's final moments, yet the acts of love, the decisions to sacrifice for their mothers in return for all they have received from them, triumphs.

Our relationship with our holy mother the Church is similar. The excitement we might have experienced as young children when we entered a church building, received our first holy communion, or celebrated Christmas fades over time. As we age, we become aware of sins committed by our fellow Catholics and by the Church's leaders, actions directly contrary to what they profess. We can be dragged down by this reality and overwhelmed by sin's horrific effects. We can also come into conflict with the Church's teachings as we assert our independence. Our conflicts can harden and prompt us to withdraw from the Church for a time.

As with our natural mothers, we can again have a strong relationship with our spiritual mother. That is, we can love the Church. This love is an act of the will, and it begins when we recall the incredible gift that the Church has given each of us: communion with Jesus Christ, our savior.

The incarnation of the Son of God was the definitive event of human history. So definitive that it had to be perpetuated through all subsequent time. The Church is Christ's chosen instrument for keeping Him present to all people until He comes again. In the words of the third-century bishop St. Cyprian of Carthage, "No one can have God as his Father who does not have the Church as his mother."

As our spiritual mother, the Church gives us the inestimable gift of divine life. As such, she is worthy of our love, our support, and our continued patronage. Through all life's travails, including those we experience within her bosom, the Church remains a gift and a blessing.

Loving the Church does not mean that we ignore or discount the sins of Church members, bishops, and priests. Rather, we must work to heal the sin present within her, just as we work to take care of our natural mothers when they become ill. We achieve this, in the first place, through cultivating holiness within ourselves through prayer, frequent reception of the sacraments, acts of sacrifice, and acts of charity. Only then are we prepared to help our fellow members of the body of Christ, including our priests and bishops.

We first have to pray; only then are we spiritually prepared to call out sins, to help our fellow members acknowledge and confess them, and then to establish a firm purpose of amendment never to sin again. These are the four steps that are needed—and have always been needed—to reform the Church. Structures are important, but they are only as effective as the people who live by them. The only sure way to combat sin is with God's grace.

This returns us to the paradoxical state of the Church that is simultaneously divine and human, the storehouse of grace and the refuge of sinners. So long as human beings run the marathon to heaven, there will be failures, sins, and scandals. Just as our natural mothers need us to remain steadfast in our commitment to them when they are ill, so must we remain for our holy mother, the Catholic Church. Though her members may fail, she herself will never fail, for Christ

remains at her head, guaranteeing her as His means of salvation, even at the darkest moments of our journeys.”

David G. Bonagura, Jr. teaches at St. Joseph’s Seminary, New York. He is the author of *Steadfast in Faith: Catholicism and the Challenges of Secularism* and *Staying with the Catholic Church: Trusting God’s Plan of Salvation*.