

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CATHY WURZER: And leading the program, Pope Francis is in Canada this week meeting with Indigenous communities to apologize in person for the abuses of the Catholic Church against Canada's First People. The Pope wants to atone for the role of Catholic missionaries in the forced assimilation of generations of Native children into Christian culture. A Canadian commission declared the Catholic boarding schools to be a form of cultural genocide.

Here to talk about the significance of his visit and what work lies ahead is Professor Brenda Child. She's the Northrup professor of American studies and American Indian studies at the University of Minnesota. And she's also a Guggenheim fellow for the coming year. Welcome, Professor Child. Good to hear your voice again.

BRENDA CHURCH: Yes. Thanks so much for inviting me.

CATHY WURZER: The Pope, as you know, publicly apologized for the Catholic Church's role last year. But this is a personal visit this week. Tell me what you take away from the Pope's trip to Canada.

BRENDA CHURCH: I think it's been in the works for several years. He's up in Alberta, so that means that he's in Cree country. And he's expected to, I guess, apologize in person for the church's role in Canada's residential schools, which were funded by the government of Canada but run by the Roman Catholic Church as well as other church organizations.

So my understanding is that the big Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada in which Indigenous people were very involved requested an apology from the Pope several years back, I think maybe 2015. And the Pope at the time responded by saying he was ashamed of the church's role in residential schools and promised to visit Canada. So that's partly why he's here this week.

CATHY WURZER: As a historian, how would you describe what transpired back then? And because Minnesota had at least, what, 16 facilities that drew kids from all 11 of the reservations within the state, what's Minnesota's role in this?

BRENDA CHURCH: Yeah. Well, Minnesota has a kind corresponding history when it comes to government boarding schools. Actually in Minnesota, we had one federal off-reservation boarding school over in Pipestone, Minnesota. But we did have a number of schools on reservations in addition to a school that operated for maybe about a decade over at Morris, what's now the Morris campus of the University of Minnesota. So we do have a related history. But our history is also kind of depart in significant ways from that of the Canadian residential schools.

CATHY WURZER: Tell me how.

BRENDA CHURCH: Well, I think there were a couple of ways in which they were very different. One was this point that I mentioned to you about the federal government and our government boarding schools that Indians attended. There were about 25 of those across the United States. Now, I'm just talking about the off-reservation federal boarding school system like Carlisle, like Pipestone, Flandreau, Haskell, those schools.

And so those schools were actually operated by the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. And so what you see happened in Canada was a little bit different in that they had residential schools for Native people. But the federal government farmed out Indian education to church organizations in Canada.

And we did not have the same kind of system. Even though there were expectations at the time that Indian people become Christians, the churches did not run the federal boarding schools. And so you can see with the Pope visiting Canada and why he's not in the United States visiting as well that that history is a little bit different.

And I'll just mention one other way in which the boarding school system was quite different in the United States and Canada. And that was in the United States, during the 1930s under the administration of Franklin Roosevelt, Native children began attending public schools far more than they did residential schools or boarding schools.

And the federal government kind of turned away from the boarding school policy in the 1920s, but especially in the 1930s under FDR. So I kind of look at the boarding school history as being very significant for a half century, that 50-year period from the establishment of Carlisle when there were still Indian wars taking place in the United States up until FDR.

And so for someone like me, my grandmother, my great grandfather went to government boarding school. But my mother went to a public school on the reservation at Red Lake. And so in the United States, public school dominated Indian education after FDR. But in Canada, the residential schools continued for another half century.

CATHY

I understand some native elders consider this period of time a disruption, emphasizing the fact that Native people are still here, Native communities are growing stronger. What's your perspective on that?

WURZER:

BRENDA

For us in the United States, that 50-year period of the history of government boarding schools is the assimilation years. And so children and young people were expected to leave their families behind to take up new occupations, to take up a new lifestyle, to give up their traditional religious affiliations and become Christians, and to of course, speak English. And all of those things were tremendously disruptive to Native people.

CHURCH:

Of course, I like to include in there a tremendous genocide, I would call it that, of the boarding school era. Because this is the great period, if you look at Ojibwe people for example, from the Great Lakes, this was our big era of dispossession, right? So it's not just boarding school. It's like a whole series of things were kind of conspiring against Native people at the time. So it was a real period of suffering.

And when you think of what was going on in Minnesota and the post-allotment era, this is the time when, for example, the White Earth Ojibwe lost over 90% of their reservation. And so it was the great era of dispossession. So that in combination with the boarding school assimilation, was in altogether very damaging to Native people.

CATHY

We're focusing on the Pope. But given what you just said, how can healing come to Native people, many of whom are now elderly who went through the assimilation process? How does it fix the damage done?

WURZER:

BRENDA

In some ways, you can't ever fix the damage done, right? One of the stories has been about the children who died at government boarding schools. And we know that places like Haskell and some of the government boarding schools had cemeteries attached to them. Of course, this was a big era of deaths from tuberculosis in the government boarding schools. So that's hard to fix.

CHURCH:

I have a wonderful vantage point seeing what young people are doing at the University of Minnesota. And I see this incredible interest on the part of young people in Ojibwe and Dakota language revitalization. There are some young people who've never heard their language spoken until they come to a classroom at the University of Minnesota.

But it's not just language because that's a cultural revitalization as well. It's a revitalizing revitalization of spirit and spiritual traditions. So it really makes me very happy to see the interest that the younger generation, I often call them the language generation because of their great interest in that.

But in other more practical terms, and maybe this is kind of what's going on now with the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Deb Haaland and the Secretary of the Interior being interested in boarding school history is like I say, this is our big era of dispossession for Native people. There are things we still can do about that, right? It's not just it's in the past and we can't change what happened, but we can make changes today in terms of the dispossession that Native people experienced.

I'm from Red Lake, and in fact, I'm up in northern Minnesota today. And we have an eastern portion of upper Red Lake that was taken away from us during the assimilation years, during the allotment years, even though Red Lake was not allotted per se. And so we'd like that back. And so if you talk to Indian people all across the country, I'm sure they would be able to tell you how to make amends for the boarding school dispossession era.

CATHY Would, at least in this country, financial reparations be a part of that equation?

WURZER:

BRENDA CHURCH: Financial reparations, the US government has the idea that we should always compensate native people when it turns out that there was something happened and Native people were dispossessed illegally of their lands, like in the big case of the Lakotas and the Black Hills.

But my understanding is that the Lakota people want portions of the Black Hills returned to them. So reparations in terms of finances and money and compensation is one thing, but I think Native people are increasingly interested in having land back as well.

CATHY It's always a pleasure talking to you, professor. I always learn a lot. Thank you so very much.

WURZER:

BRENDA CHURCH: Thank you for inviting me.

CATHY Brenda Child is Northrop professor of American studies and American Indian studies at the University of
WURZER: Minnesota. Pope Francis arrived in Canada yesterday. He's expected to leave on the 29th.