

**CATHY WURZER:** It's *Minnesota Now* here on MPR News. I'm Cathy Wurzer. Pope Francis continues his visit to Canada today. His mission is to apologize in-person for what he's called the church's catastrophic policy of Indian boarding schools, which led to the destruction of families and damage to Native culture.

A Minneapolis-based organization called the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition has a representative at the meetings to ask for some specific actions from the Pope. Here with more is Sam Torres, Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. Sam, welcome to the program.

**SAM TORRES:** Thank you, Cathy. Tlazohkamati.

**CATHY WURZER:** Would you like to introduce yourself?

**CATHY WURZER:**

**SAM TORRES:** Absolutely. [Nahuatl language]

Good morning, relatives. My name is Sam Torres. I am Mexica [meh SHEEK uh] and Nahua [NAH wah], with relatives in Los Angeles, El Paso, and Zacatecas, Mexico. And on my mother's side, I'm also Irish and Scottish.

I'm the Deputy Chief Executive Officer for the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition and just happy to be here today.

**CATHY WURZER:** Thank you for being with us. I appreciate that. Let's talk about what we're seeing in Canada. There are several meetings that have been taking place. I'm curious-- why did your group decide to be involved?

**SAM TORRES:** Well, we have been asking for action from the Catholic Church, Christian institutions, and governments that are responsible for Indian boarding school and residential school policies that have deeply impacted and have left open scars, open wounds in Indigenous communities all over Turtle Island. So we found it extremely important to be able to be on the ground there, to be with our relatives north of the medicine line as these words are being received.

**CATHY WURZER:** And who is representing your organization?

**CATHY WURZER:**

**SAM TORRES:** Our CEO Deborah Parker who is from the Tulalip tribes-- she is in Canada right now. And she was there yesterday to receive the apology in-person.

**CATHY WURZER:** How did that go? What were the feelings like there?

**CATHY WURZER:**

**SAM TORRES:** It's a whole mix of emotions ranging from many folks appearing to receive healing from this, who have waited their entire lives to hear something like this from the leader of the Catholic Church. But on the other hand, we've also seen, and experienced, and heard from folks that have mentioned that an apology is not enough-- that an apology needs to be accompanied by action.

And so one thing that we know that the Catholic Church has records and repositories with boarding school documents that rightfully belonged to native peoples. And what we'd ultimately like to see is those documents to be made more accessible, for those documents to be able to be in the hands of Native peoples so that they can learn more substantively about what happened to their relatives.

**CATHY** Is this part of the Doctrine of Discovery that I've heard about? I've just recently heard about this. Can you explain that for folks?

**SAM TORRES:** So the Doctrine of Discovery is a set of 15th century papal bulls that essentially sanctioned European claims to Indigenous lands. If European colonizers attempted to claim lands, they could do so legally through these series of 15th century papal bulls.

And the Doctrine of Discovery is not just a series of historical documents. The Doctrine of Discovery has a firm legal precedent in the Western legal system. So this has real world implications even to this day.

**CATHY** How did the Catholic Church, Sam, use the Doctrine of Discovery to promote the boarding schools-- the attempt to assimilate Indigenous peoples into the Christian culture?

**SAM TORRES:** Well, the Doctrine of Discovery essentially characterized Indigenous peoples as subhuman. It meant that they could be subjugated. It meant that they could be controlled, and that they could be objectified, and that their lands were essentially still considered, quote unquote, "wilderness," and it could be essentially claimed-- and this was a precedent that swept the entire world, particularly in North America, where boarding schools were, essentially, an expression of that-- and this sweeping philosophy was a machine, essentially, that allowed for the justification of the subjugation of Indigenous peoples, even the enslavement of Africans in the United States.

**CATHY** How might some of these documents be used for further healing in the Indigenous communities?

**SAM TORRES:** I think that there is an enormous opportunity for bringing Indigenous folks together from all over Turtle Island to be able to find more information about their relatives. But in fact, we've already seen many instances where the accessibility of boarding school records and documents has allowed for substantive healing of relatives that are looking for information about their parents, their grandparents.

There are some projects that already exist. The Carlisle Digital Reconciliation Project that is hosted by Dickinson College, they've had a digital archive that has made these records accessible. What NABS is seeking to do is trying to aggregate or bringing many of those projects together and to create a central digital archive, a central repository.

When those information are aggregated in that way, what we've seen is a new kind of accessibility. We're, of course, working with other projects such as Carlisle, Genoa at the University of Nebraska, and others to be able to accomplish these goals.

**CATHY** So a final question here for you-- now, we've been talking about one of the concrete steps would be to turn over church records about the fate of Indigenous children who died at the schools. But I also know that Indigenous peoples in Canada want funding for therapeutic healing programs for survivors, and also investigations, maybe facilitation of investigations, of those responsible for the abuses. It's been so long. What of that?

**SAM TORRES:** One thing that has been a concerted challenge in Indigenous communities all over North America has been the impacts of residential and boarding schools with regard to intergenerational trauma. These are wounds that our communities have not had the amount of resources necessary to substantively approach these. As a means of attempting to restore what has been taken, what has been wounded by Christian institutions, by the Catholic Church, by federal governments, both in the United States and Canada-- accountability needs to look like listening to Native people, listening to Native leaders.

When Native leaders and Native people are asking for culturally appropriate, culturally relevant healing modalities and resources to be able to support that, it's important to not just listen, but to take action on that. So the records are important. Repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery-- these are essential. But when Native leaders, Native communities are repeatedly telling the world that this would be important to help restore our lifeways, that culturally relevant healing modalities, that resources to bring our communities together, and the autonomy to be able to make those decisions for themselves, that is just as important as all of the other objectives that Native leaders have been asking.

So I really do hope that there is substantive action that's taken by the Catholic Church in the wake of this apology from Pope Francis. I hope that the federal governments of Canada, of the United States can lean into these conversations more seriously. As we know with the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, there were 94 calls to action that were created-- recommendations, essentially, with respect to how to walk in this way with Canadian First Nations peoples.

Some of them have been accomplished. In fact, one of them was accomplished yesterday with the papal apology. But many of them are still left unchecked. So with respect to the Canadian experience, those calls to action need to be reconsidered once more. And within the United States, there is currently a legislative bill in the House and a legislative bill in the Senate that NABS has supported.

We wrote much of this bill-- the Truth and Healing Commission bill Indian boarding schools. And these are important measures to be able to pay attention to and to support.

**CATHY WURZER:** We'll be watching closely, obviously. Sam, I appreciate your time. Thank you so very much for the conversation today.

**SAM TORRES:** Thank you, Cathy. I appreciate it.

**CATHY WURZER:** Sam Torres is the Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition.