

Q&A

“Documentation Related to Indian Residential Schools”

Thirty years ago, in July 1991, the [Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Canada apologized to the Indigenous peoples](#) of this land at the Lac Ste. Anne Pilgrimage in Alberta, for the significant part they played in the residential school system of Canada. At that time, the Oblates recognized that “...the biggest abuse was that the schools themselves happened...”. Among other commitments to truth and reconciliation made in the apology, the Oblates pledged, “...to collaborate in any way we can so that the full story of the Indian Residential Schools may be written...”

As part of their efforts to fulfill the commitments made in the 1991 Apology, and in response to [commitments they made in July 2021](#), the Oblates, along with other religious communities and dioceses, have been working to ensure that all historical documentation in their possession pertaining to their work in residential schools is available to the National Centre of Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR).

While the Oblates recognize that the historical documents in their possession related to their work at residential schools cannot answer all the questions held by survivors, their families, and communities, they hope they will contribute to a greater understanding of our shared history and contribute to the process of reconciliation. They hope that these records will lead to the identification of as many children as possible who died while in the care of the schools and that this will bring some measure of peace and healing to those who are still seeking answers for the questions that remain.

Recently, on September 24, 2021, The Catholic bishops of Canada released a [Statement of Apology](#) to Indigenous peoples and on October 27, 2021, they [announced that Pope Francis](#) accepted their invitation to visit Canada on a Pilgrimage of Healing and Reconciliation. These steps are part of the ongoing work called for by the TRC in the Calls to Action towards truth, reconciliation, and healing in our land.

In an effort to be fully transparent, this document will provide answers to several “frequently-asked questions” about documentation.’

1) What responsibilities do faith communities have to release documents about their administration of Indian Residential Schools?

The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA, September 2007, Schedule N) described the obligations of the parties to the Agreement as follows: "...Canada and the churches will provide all relevant documents in their possession or control" to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) "subject to the privacy interests of an individual as provided by applicable privacy legislation, and subject to and in compliance with applicable privacy and access to information legislation, and except for those documents for which solicitor-client privilege applies and is asserted." (See #9 for a description of recent steps we have taken regarding accession of our files).

2) Isn't that a monumental task if over a hundred years of records are in question in various church and government archives?

Yes, it is. The federal government and the churches were also required to "compile all relevant documents in an organized manner" for review by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC.)

Since 2011 the Oblates have made staff available to assist TRC researchers at the Deschâtelets Archives in Ottawa where more than 40,000 Oblate documents were accessed.

3) In easy-to-understand terms, what kind of documents are we talking about?

"All relevant documents," in this case, refers to records kept by administrators in the schools, as well as photos (which were made available to residential school survivors in albums at many of the National Gatherings as the TRC process went forward.)

From there, the term expands to any document that can shed light on the policies, practices, routines, and environment of the schools. This may include but not be limited to correspondence, newsletters, yearbooks, schedules and so forth, including written records and photos, which were shared with the TRC and made available at every TRC event across the country.

Due to privacy law restrictions, what were not shared at that time were the personnel files of Oblates who had worked at the schools and a category of documents called the "*Codex Historicus*" or codices (see #9 below for more recent developments.)

4) What more have the Oblates done?

During and after the TRC process, the Oblates made documents available in their archives and in good faith and in accordance with their capacity, endeavoured to provide their archival material to the TRC and, subsequently, to other authorities.

At the time of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), September 2007, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate kept many documents in the Deschâtelets Archives, in a building of that same name, located beside the St. Paul University campus in Ottawa. The TRC hired a private company of researchers who spent several weeks in the Deschâtelets Archives, gathering

and digitizing material onsite. Similar transfers of documents took place at other archives which house Oblate archives. Over forty thousand documents were accessed during the TRC process and are now housed in the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) in Winnipeg, MB.

However, the entire document collection process proved too costly for the TRC in light of the large size of the holdings. Since then, a variety of ways to complete the task have been used, including removing legal barriers that inhibited the government from transferring large amounts of documents it had obtained during litigation to the TRC.

A Partnership with the NCTR

On July 5, 2021, the NCTR, along with the leadership of OMI Lacombe Canada and Notre Dame du Cap Oblate provinces, issued [a joint statement](#), describing what the NCTR referred to as the “arduous road ahead” in the effort to release even more records. The NCTR and the Oblates are committed to working together to determine where there might be any gaps in records provided or held. This will include the mission records of the schools and the “*Codex Historicus*” documents.

The NCTR is appreciative of potentially sensitive information related to deceased students, survivors, their families, and former school staff, which may be contained in any personnel files. They are in the process of establishing a Memorandum of Understanding around the confidential nature of information and the process through which the NCTR would share this information with the public.

Additional staff to accelerate the process

The Oblates have hired or have funded the hiring of archivists in three locations (Deschâtelets Archives in Richelieu, Centre du Patrimoine in Saint Boniface, and the Provincial Archives of Alberta in Edmonton) to facilitate this important collaborative work. The Oblates are ready to support the work of the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria, which owns and curates the archival record of the Oblate missions in British Columbia.

5) Do the churches have to hand over original, historical documents?

No. The IRSSA specifically noted that the churches and the federal government were not required to give up possession of their original documents to the TRC. However, they were required to provide access to their archives so that officials acting for the TRC were allowed to carry out their research mandate. It became clear early in the mandate of the TRC that gathering all these documents was beyond the capacity of the Commission. The Oblates have made these documents available in their archives and have endeavoured, in good faith and in accordance with their capacity, to provide these to the TRC.

6) What documents have been released since the Oblates made their commitment in July 2021?

- Codices, and other documents such as agendas etc., for the following schools have been transmitted to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR):

- Camperville, MB
- Fort Alexander, MB
- Sandy Bay, MB
- Marieval, SK
- Assiniboia, SK
- St. Mary's Kenora, ON
- Lebret, SK
- Lestock, SK
- St. Philippe, SK
- Fort Francis, ON
- McIntosh, ON

- The Royal British Columbia Museum (RBCM), which owns the Oblate archives for British Columbia, met with or have ongoing communications with Indigenous communities with links to the following former residential schools: Kamloops, St. Paul's Squamish, St. Mary's Mission, and Kuper Island.
- OMI Lacombe Canada is funding additional staff for three of the centers holding our archives: Richelieu, Winnipeg, and Edmonton.
- All four archives holding Oblate files are dealing with an enormous surge in requests from individuals and Indigenous communities for information.

Ongoing items

- The NCTR is leading the work towards a Memorandum of Understanding or a Memorandum of Agreement regarding the sharing of Oblate personnel files that respects privacy legislation.
- OMI Lacombe Canada offering funding to the RBCM in Victoria for the funding of an additional staff member, to accelerate the process of digitizing and sharing files,

7) When documents were made available to researchers and the NCTR, does that mean that this information is therefore available to residential school survivors and Indigenous communities?

Not necessarily. Access to documents held by the NCTR and the various archives that house Oblate records is determined by the policies of the respective institutions. While access to archival material has not always been easily facilitated for relatives or survivors, these institutions are working hard to ensure efficient responses to the requests they receive. The TRC (Final Report, page 264) reports that "The Settlement Agreement church archives, to varying degrees, have endeavoured to make their residential school records more accessible to Survivors, their families and communities, researchers, and the general public."

8) What has the federal government done to comply?

The TRC Calls to Action #69 - #78 all refer to documentation issues. For example, the TRC's Call to Action #70 requested federal government funding to the Canadian Association of Archivists to develop archival policies and best practices for making records available.

The federal government received quarterly reports from residential schools, among other documents, but many of these have been lost or destroyed. According to the Final Report of the TRC (pg. 255), “The Commission’s attempts to obtain records were frustrated by a series of bureaucratic and legal roadblocks.” For example, in April 2012, the TRC went to court to compel the release of relevant federal records held in Library and Archives Canada.

9) Have the Oblates refused to release their records to help identify the remains found at the Kamloops Indian Residential School?

Their [1991 Apology](#) committed the Oblates to “an effective process of disclosure vis-à-vis Residential Schools.” Although complicated, because there are several categories of archival material, the Oblates have worked diligently to live up to their obligations to make their archived material available. On June 24, 2021 the two Oblate provinces (OMI Lacombe Canada and Notre Dame du Cap Province) with historical ties to residential schools committed to the release of the remaining two categories of documentation that until then had been unavailable or difficult to access. The documents in question are the Codex Historicus (see #10 below) and the personnel files of Oblates who worked in the schools. The process of digitizing and transferring the Codices is well underway. The work, led by the NCTR, towards an agreement between the NCTR and the Oblates will allow for the eventual transfer of personnel files of those Oblates who worked in the schools.

10) What are the Codex Historicus, and why are they important documents?

In June of 2021, concern was expressed about one category of documents called the “Codex Historicus.” These contain semi-regular entries (usually in the form of hand-written diaries) penned by missionaries over the years. Since 2015, these documents have been available and are in the care of the different public curators of various Oblate Archives. What had not happened is the additional technical work of drawing these together in a consolidated format as had been requested by the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. As a concrete expression of their understanding of the urgent need to access the full truth, the Oblates have begun, at their expense, to complete this digitization and transfer work. Meanwhile, the Codex Historicus will continue to be available through the public curators. In British Columbia, the Oblate archives (including files related to the Kamloops Residential school) were gifted almost two years ago to the Royal British Columbia Museum. As well, work has started on the records from other schools administered by the Oblates.

11) Recent media reports say there are documents hidden in the Vatican...what about them?

The Oblates have found no record of their residential school files being sent to the Vatican.

12) Other recent media reports say documents relevant to residential schools “are in Rome.” What about them?

As stated, Oblates are committed to transparency in terms of releasing materials that may lead to the identification of missing children or other historically significant information. It would not be unusual that certain historical documents (such as letters written by early Oblate missionaries to Oblate leaders), could be housed at the Oblate’s General House Archive in Rome. At this point, no one has identified what specific materials might be relevant – but OMI Lacombe Canada and Notre Dame du Cap leadership are working with the Oblate Administration in Rome to find an independent third-party process to clarify if any such documentation resides there, and the information it might contain.

13) Will there be more discoveries of burial sites of children near other Indian Residential Schools administered by the Oblates?

The TRC noted that the sparse written documentation must be combined with locally held knowledge of survivors, their families, staff, or local residents to verify, correct and amplify archival information. ([Final Report](#), page 263.) The TRC Final Report (page 258) noted that “Throughout the history of Canada’s residential school system, there was no effort to record across the entire system, the number of students who died while attending schools each year.” To date (December 2021), the [National Student Memorial Register](#) has identified 4,131 children. Sadly, this number is expected to increase.