News



Sr. Kateri Mitchell, a member of the Sisters of St. Anne and the Mohawk Tribe, takes part in the Grand Entry at the Tekakwitha Conference July 20 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)



by Dan Stockman

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dstockman@ncronline.org

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Healing cannot begin without transformative and restorative justice, hundreds of Catholics involved in Native American ministry were told.

Nearly 400 people gathered for four days starting July 19 for the Tekakwitha Conference, which aims to be the "voice, presence and identity" of indigenous Catholics of North America and is named for St. Kateri Tekakwitha.

The theme of this year's conference was "gathering for healing through living waters," but keynote speaker Samuel Torres, deputy chief executive officer of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, said healing cannot take place until there is justice. Torres is Nahua, who are indigenous to Mexico.

"Truth and justice have to be where we begin for that healing to be realized," Torres said. "It is going to require generations of care and attention to attain restoration and perhaps reconciliation. But it is worthy of our efforts, worthy of our diligence."

More than 400 government-funded boarding schools operated across the country from 1819 to the 1970s; many of those were run by religious groups, including 87 run by Catholic dioceses and religious orders. Seventy-four of those schools were run or staffed by Catholic women religious from 53 different orders.

The conference was held over the first anniversary of Pope Francis' visit to Canada, where he apologized for the cultural destruction the schools caused.



Samuel Torres, deputy chief executive officer of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, speaks to the Tekakwitha Conference July 20 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

Pope Francis came to Canada in 2022 to apologize to Indigenous people for abusive residential schools. In the wake of his visit, Global Sisters Report looked into ongoing reconciliation efforts within religious communities. Also, take a deeper look at the steps being taken toward reconciliation as recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. And read about Returning to Spirit, an Indigenous-led, not-for-profit group that was co-founded by the Sisters of St. Ann.

In May 2022, the U.S. Department of the Interior released an initial report on the schools, showing they were rife with corporal punishment, including solitary confinement, withholding of food, and whipping and other physical abuse. There are also reports of sexual abuse and the trauma of children being forcibly taken from their homes, having their hair cut, and being prohibited from speaking their native languages.

More than 500 children died at 19 of the schools, according to the government report, and burial sites have been found at 53 schools — numbers that are expected to rise. The schools were part of an effort to eradicate Native American culture — in the words of the system's architect, to "kill the Indian" and "save the man." The government forced the children to attend the schools, where they were punished for speaking any language other than English or practicing Native traditions or religions. A second report is expected later this year.

Torres said just as the boarding school system lasted for generations, it will take generations to find healing, but the process must start with restoration, not jump ahead to reconciliation.

Restoration, he said, cannot happen without American society "giving up land, power or privilege."

The issue can be personal and complicated: Sr. Kateri Mitchell is a member of the Sisters of St. Anne and the Mohawk Tribe in New York and has relatives who attended boarding schools in Canada, including a great aunt who died at one in a boating accident. The government would not pay for a casket to send home her remains so her body was never returned to the family.

"It's still a heartache and it's still causing a lot of anger, to the point that some (relatives) won't practice their Catholic faith anymore," Mitchell said. "But it was not the church that did these things, it was some members of the church."

Mitchell was executive director of the Tekakwitha Conference for decades until she retired a few years ago.

"We are called to forgive, to forget," she said. "We may not forget, but we can't focus on that hurt and prevent our own spiritual growth."



Sr. Deana Case, of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Norfolk, Nebraska, takes part in the Grand Entry at the Tekakwitha Conference July 20 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

Sr. Theresa Chato, a member of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and the Navajo Nation, taught at St. Katherine Indian School in Santa Fe, New Mexico, until it closed in 1998. Most recently, she was in parish ministry in Chinle, Arizona, until she was elected to her congregation's leadership team and had to return to Philadelphia. Their foundress, St. Katherine Drexel, funded dozens of boarding schools across the nation.

Chato said she appreciates the conference because it is about sharing the gift of our Catholic faith while honoring Native traditions, and because it brings together people from across North America, a whole tapestry of customs is on display.

"We all have different ways of worshiping," she said. "It's a chance to re-connect across all these different tribal traditions."

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Sr. Letisia Komba has had to learn many of those traditions from scratch: The Missionary Benedictine sister is originally from Tanzania, but for the last three years has been living, studying and ministering in Winnebago, Nebraska, where the congregation's mission serves the Winnebago and Omaha tribes.

"But the people are so kind and so friendly," Komba said. Traditions such as smudging — a type of incensing ritual for purification "is so amazing to me."



Allison Spies, archivist for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, speaks to the Tekakwitha Conference July 20 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, about the efforts to locate records from Catholic-run Native American boarding schools. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

The conference also featured a workshop by Allison Spies, the archivist for the St. Paul-Minneapolis Archdiocese and a member of the U.S. Catholic Indigenous Boarding School Accountability and Healing Project and its archives committee, which created the list of Catholic-run boarding schools.

Spies discussed the difficulties in finding boarding school records, as well as the commitment of those working to locate them and make them available to survivors and their descendants.

"People believe there is one, central depository of records at the Vatican," she said. "I wish that were true."

Spies noted that one school that operated in what is now the archdiocese has 13 different institutions that could have records related to its 12 years of operation.

"So far, only one of them has any," she said. "It's hard to make amends for something when you don't even know what the extent of the problem is."

Read this next: A year after Pope Francis' Canada trip, sisters walk long road to reconciliation amid boarding schools' bitter legacy
This story appears in the **Indigenous boarding schools** feature series. View the full series.