

Remember the Ukrainians found in Spirit Lake cemetery

Lubomyr Luciuk

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Statue at Spirit Lake, Quebec of the "Interned Madonna," by John Boxtel (Ukrainian Canadian Civil Liberties Association)

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau reminded Canadians last month that: “As a Catholic, I am deeply disappointed by the position ... the Catholic Church has taken now and over the past many years,” not “showing the leadership that quite frankly is supposed to be at the core of our faith, of forgiveness, of responsibility, of acknowledging truth.” Evocative words, especially delivered in the well-practised, rather unctuous tone he deploys whenever apologizing for some historical injustice.

Anyway, as Trudeau was frank about his faith, I shall follow his good example. I, too, was schooled in a Roman Catholic world, although I’m different for having been baptized into the Ukrainian Catholic faith of my parents. This circumstance would occasionally provoke the displeasure of the nuns and priests into whose (sometimes not entirely gentle) hands I was

placed, from kindergarten to Grade 13 in Ontario's separate school system. I recall being punished for blessing myself "backwards" (from right to left instead of left to right as Roman Catholics do). And there was no understanding of who I was — most people then, whether adults or schoolyard friends, had never heard of Ukraine, questioned its existence, my very identity. Of course, I concede my name didn't help — for most then, and now, it's unpronounceable, unspellable, "not Canadian." It took years before I learned how to stand up to the bullies and bigots — like the otherwise respectable-looking woman on a Kingston bus who told my mother and me to "stop speaking our f—ing foreign language." I've gotten over such slights. Having a Christian appreciation of this world, I accept that the cretins will always be with us. I see evidence of it almost daily.

Thinking back, I remember another incident in Grade 9 at Regiopolis College, then an all-boys high school. A Jesuit, Father P.J. Ambrosie, was charged with our religious education. It was probably in mid-March 1968 that he solemnly exposed an oil painting, hung out of reach on our classroom's wall, Joseph Légaré's *The Martyrdom of Fathers Brébeuf and Lalemant*. By today's standards, the imagery was tame. But then Father Ambrosie began telling us about Christophe Regnaut's account of what happened. Knowing how fragile readers are these days, I'll not cite the account found in the *Jesuit Recollections*. Suffice to record that these *Blackrobes* were tortured savagely — beaten, burned, scalded, dismembered, even parts of their flesh and blood consumed ritually.

Hearing all this, I blurted out the first thought that came into my head, asking by what right these priests came to another people's land, attempting to convert them to a foreign faith? Unintentionally, these words deeply offended my teacher. I was ordered into the hallway. I knew I'd be sent to the principal and punished. So I attempted a defence, only to be subjected to such a loud scolding that a novitiate, Berkeley Brean, came to investigate. He calmed Father Ambrosie, reminding him that Jesuits are supposed to encourage students to ask questions, even hard ones.

Decades have passed. While I consider myself a man of faith, I can't call myself a Catholic, of Latin or Eastern Rite, for I do not accept all of the church's teachings. In this, I apparently also differ from our prime minister, who seems able to pick and choose what to believe yet remain a Catholic. That's not actually how it works. But, since Trudeau has proclaimed his faith, has even assigned himself the role of preaching to Pope Francis about how His Holiness must apologize to victims of the residential schools, I've a few questions for him.

Prime Minister: why hasn't your government helped us to hallow the remains of the Ukrainian men and children found in the Spirit Lake internee cemetery? Branded "enemy aliens," scooped up from Montreal's St. Michael's Ukrainian Catholic parish, these innocents were transported into the remote Abitibi, Que. Confined behind Canadian barbed wire, they were forced to heavy labour for the profit of their jailers. At least 16 perished from disease, accidents or were killed attempting to escape. Their remains were left in a boneyard now all but lost to the boreal forest. We've been telling you their story for years. Are they, your fellow Quebec Catholics, less worthy of memory than the unfortunates of the federally organized residential schools? Apparently the louts who targeted Calgary's Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Ukrainian Catholic Church felt so, for they vandalized a plaque recalling Canada's first national internment operations. I am

reminded of what Christ said from the Cross: “Lord forgive them for they know not what they do.”

One other thing. I assume you know, but, if not, ask your parish priest who Canada’s patron saint is. Just in case you don’t really have a confessor, and for the edification of our many non-Catholic fellow citizens, I’ll tell you — that would be Father Brébeuf. He was a Catholic, too, although not quite of the same faith as you.

Lubomyr Luciuk is director of research for the Ukrainian Canadian Civil Liberties Association (www.uccla.ca).