



## United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

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WEBSITE: [WWW.USCCB.ORG](http://WWW.USCCB.ORG)

July 25, 2024

The Honorable Tom Cole  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Sharice Davids  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Cole and Congresswoman Davids:

We write to you about the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act ([H.R.7227](#)).

We wish to state unequivocally that the tragic history of the Indian boarding school period should be brought to light in order to pave the way for healing of impacted Indigenous communities. Our guiding principle, as the Church, is truth: “you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:32).

In the USCCB’s Pastoral Framework, [\*Keeping Christ’s Sacred Promise: A Pastoral Framework for Indigenous Ministry\*](#), the bishops recognized that Native boarding schools are a significant source of trauma in the history of Indigenous peoples, especially because of their profound effect on the family. Further, the bishops acknowledged that the Church played a part in trauma experienced by Native children, and wrote, “Healing and reconciliation can only take place when the Church acknowledges the wounds perpetrated on her Indigenous children and humbly listens as they voice their experiences.” Whenever a child suffers abuse or neglect, that is a grave evil, and we must name the evil for what it is and stand against it.

We are committed to concrete actions to restore trust and cultivate healing and the reconciliation that the Church desires. In 2021, following U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland’s announcement of the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative, the chairmen of two USCCB Committees [wrote to all their brother bishops](#) in the United States to encourage transparency in bringing forward this history and to engage in meaningful dialogue with affected communities.

Those efforts are an ongoing priority for the Church, and will continue as we seek to walk with impacted communities in a path towards healing.

As we continue to encourage greater access to and understanding of this painful history, we note the efforts to bring to light these events through legislation to establish a Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies.

We also wish to offer two points that we hope will prompt further thinking and discussion around the structure of the legislation. First, it is well settled that the policies and funding of the boarding schools in large part issued from the government, with approximately half of the schools being run entirely by the government, and the other half run in partnership with Catholic and Protestant entities. In the legislation’s current drafting, there is ample representation from various Indigenous associations, as there should be. There is also a spot reserved for a representative of the U.S. Department of the Interior, the federal government agency that is historically responsible for the government’s role in the schools, and a second spot for a representative of the U.S. Department of Education. However, there are no seats for representatives of any of the religious communities that have historic ties to the schools. Participation by present-day representatives of religious communities could help better facilitate requests for records or dialogue with current leaders of those

communities. They could serve as an important liaison for voluntary cooperation with the efforts of the Commission when needed. It seems like an omission if the government, which was the genesis of the boarding schools, has a “seat at the table,” but religious communities do not. Healing and reconciliation are only possible if all parties are involved. A listening process presupposes that different partners are engaged in the dialogue.

Second, as stated above, the bishops were all encouraged to be transparent and cooperative with further investigation of this history. We are not aware of any requests for relevant records that have been denied. There are, by contrast, several examples of voluntary disclosures of historical records.<sup>1</sup> It is possible that some school records could contain information that could be subject to restrictions of federal law.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the disclosure of the Church’s sacramental records is governed by canon law.

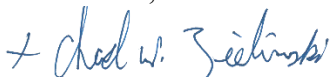
The broad subpoena power currently in the legislation is somewhat curious since we are not aware of prior requests being denied. If there are such denials, please bring them to our attention. We will endeavor to connect with the appropriate record-holders and facilitate a possible solution. In any scenario in which a government entity makes a record request of a private entity, whether a business, non-profit, or religious organization, certainly the preferred way of proceeding is to request voluntary cooperation first, and only resort to a subpoena if voluntary efforts fail. We believe strongly that the Commission can and should avoid an adversarial posture since we have expressed desire for transparency and cooperation in making this history more available to the public, and have thus far not been given an opportunity to cooperate voluntarily with government efforts to bring this history to light.

We are committed to transparency, to listening, and to humility in prayerfully walking together on this difficult path, and we stand ready to work with you on efforts to bring the truth forward towards that end of healing and reconciliation.

Sincerely,



Most Rev. Borys Gudziak  
Archbishop of Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia  
Chairman, Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development



Most Rev. Chad W. Zielinski  
Bishop of New Ulm  
Chairman, Subcommittee of Native American Affairs



Bishop Arturo Cepeda  
Auxiliary Bishop of Archdiocese of Detroit  
Chairman, Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, initiatives out of Oklahoma: “[The Oklahoma Catholic Native Schools Project | Archdiocese of Oklahoma City | Oklahoma City, OK \(archokc.org\)](#)”; and Minnesota: “[Minnesota’s Bishops Respond to Department of the Interior Native American Boarding Schools Report \(crookston.org\)](#)”. See also Marquette University’s Archival Collection: “[Guide to Catholic Records About Native Americans in the United States](#)”: [GENERAL INDEX: GUIDE TO CATHOLIC RECORDS ABOUT NATIVE AMERICANS IN THE UNITED STATES // Raynor Library // Marquette University](#).

<sup>2</sup> For example, education records governed by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) or health information governed by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).