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Ruins of a Native American boarding school on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation are pictured in Mission, South Dakota, Oct. 15, 2022. U.S. Catholic Bishops are slated to approve a new outreach plan for Native American Catholics during a convention on June 14, 2024, in Louisville, Kentucky. The plan is part of an effort to make amends for the widespread abuses inflicted on Native youths at Catholic-run boarding schools in the 19th and 20th centuries. (AP/Matthew Brown, File)

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U.S. bishops on June 14 approved new guidelines for ministering to Indigenous Catholics, a long in-the-works effort to reinvigorate the ministry and assure those communities that they don't need to feel torn between their Native identity and their Catholic one.

"You are both. Your cultural embodiment of the faith is a gift to the Church," states the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' document. It was completed as new details emerged during the past two years of widespread abuses inflicted on Native children over many decades at Catholic-run boarding schools.

"The Church recognizes that it has played a part in traumas experienced by Native children," according to the new "[Keeping Christ's Sacred Promise: A Pastoral Framework for Indigenous Ministry](#)." The document received overwhelming support at this week's U.S. bishops' meeting in Louisville, Kentucky.

It is meant to help bishops "refocus and invigorate ministry among Indigenous populations in the United States," said Bishop Chad Zielinski, chair of the bishops' conference subcommittee on Native American Affairs, who presented the draft framework on Thursday afternoon.

It "gives shape to ideas that Catholic Native leadership has been voicing for the past several years in listening sessions sponsored by the subcommittee," he said.

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The document, created with input from Native Catholics, is not meant to be an exhaustive, one-size-fits-all directive on ministering to the diverse array of Indigenous Catholics. Rather, it is guidance that can be adapted by dioceses, clergy and lay people to fit within the various cultural contexts of the people they are serving. It covers everything from evangelism and sacred music to boarding schools and marriage and family.

Native Americans make up about 3.5% of U.S. Catholics and more than 350 parishes serve predominantly Indigenous people, according to bishops' conference statistics.

Through praying, listening and seeking healing and reconciliation, the bishops are committing to revitalizing their Native Catholic ministry.

It is a relationship that has been strained by the Catholic Church's involvement in past traumas that affected Native people, including operating at least 80 of the more than 500 government-funded Indigenous boarding schools in 19th and 20th centuries. The schools were part of a federal forced-assimilation program that ripped children from their families and suppressed their culture.

The document acknowledges the church's role, and offers an apology for failing to care well for Indigenous Catholics who have felt abandoned because church leaders ignored their unique cultural needs.

"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," the document states, and adds that those efforts should be led by Indigenous communities.



A makeshift memorial for the dozens of Indigenous children who died more than a century ago while attending a boarding school that was once located nearby is displayed under a tree July 1, 2021, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. (AP photo/Susan Montoya Bryan, File)

The majority of the boarding schools were run by the government, but Protestant and Catholic churches operated many of them.

Conditions varied at the schools, which some former students described as unsafe, unsanitary and scenes of physical or sexual abuse. Other former students recall their school years as positive times of learning, friendship and extracurricular activities. Indigenous groups note that even the better schools were part of a project to assimilate children — what many Indigenous groups call a cultural genocide.

"Fostering dialogue and engaging in other efforts to reconcile involvement remains an important priority of the USCCB on the issue of boarding school accountability as we walk with the impacted communities in their path towards healing," said bishops' conference spokesperson Chieko Noguchi.

[A recent Washington Post report](#) found sexual abuse of Native children by clergy was pervasive at 22 Catholic-run boarding schools in the U.S. At least 122 priests, sisters and brothers were accused of sexually abusing the children in their care. The bishops' conference worked with the outlet's reporters, Noguchi said, "because we agree that this painful story needs to be told. This story is part of the ongoing process to learn what happened and better understand how we can work toward healing."

"The Church recognizes that it has played a part in traumas experienced by Native children."

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Basil Brave Heart, an Oglala Lakota boarding school survivor from the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota, said any pastoral plan needs to draw on the wisdom found in Indigenous spirituality and languages.

"If they're going to do that, I think they need a lot of communication with Native Americans," he said.

He has spoken out about his experiences as a boarding school student at Holy Rosary Mission in Pine Ridge, where he said he was forbidden from speaking his native language and had his long hair, considered sacred, cut short. He currently partakes in Lakota spiritual practices while also attending Catholic Mass.

He said Catholic churches on the reservation are often empty and that if the church wants "to keep the Native people in the congregation, I don't have the answer, but one of the things they need to do is change the liturgy."

[Read this next:](#) [Investigation finds at least 973 Native American children died in US government boarding schools](#)

This story appears in the **USCCB Spring Assembly 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)