Nurturing Catholic Community

Curriculum Connections – Grade 11 English

The Orenda

Author: Joseph Boyden  Penguin Canada Book Inc 2013

The Orenda is a work of historical fiction that tells the story of the encounter between the Iroquois, the Huron, and the European Christian missionaries during the 17th century in what is present day Huronia. The story is told in the form of a triple autobiography. It is spoken alternatively in the voice of a young Iroquois girl (Snow Falls), a Huron leader (Bird), and a French Jesuit priest (Crow). The native name for the Iroquois is Haudenosaunee; the native name for the Huron is the Wendak. Other aboriginal groups that play a supporting role include the Anishnaabe, and the Algonquin.

At the outset of the story, Bird’s Huron group has Snow Falls in captivity. Bird has led a raiding part that killed Snow Falls’ father and mother and family. They are on the move back to their larger tribe and Crow is in their company helping in the transport of Snow Falls. They are being pursued by an Iroquois group that want to free Snow Falls and take revenge for the death and destruction that the Huron wrought upon them. Bird wants to make the girl his daughter because his own family were previously destroyed by a raiding part of Iroquois. Throughout the almost 500 pages of the novel, this cycle of violence keeps being played out.

Each voice that speaks allows us to enter into the preoccupations of that person. Bird for instance sees that having a positive relationship with Crow could benefit his group commercially in the fur trade. Nevertheless, he sees the missionary as an intruder in the life of his people, and he thinks that his demise is inevitable. He sees Crow as one who squawks and practices suspicious rituals that include strange symbols such as a body on a cross, but he knows that for political reasons Crow has to be accommodated within the life of the community. He is very suspicious of an interaction between Crow and Snow Falls, and is vigorously protective of the latter.

Snow Falls, though she wants to return to her own people and wants to destroy the people that killed her parents, gradually comes to know and to accept the Wendak, to accept Bird as a foster father, and to fall in love with a Wendak boy.

Crow is in the complex role of missionary. He finds the winters harsh, the people cruel, the food impossible. But he makes progress with the language, and he feels at times he is making progress in opening the people towards faith in the Great Voice – the Catholic God who has
made heaven and earth. Though at one level he regards the people as heathens and as being in the grip of Satan, at another level he is in awe at their mutual respect and depth of community for the living and especially the dead. He understands that the people that he is ministering to have similar thoughts about himself. “One heathen even began to loudly suggest I was a demon in human form.” (38) It also becomes clear that he is driven by the fire of the charity that flames inside his heart.

Boyden opens up worlds of feeling in the intermingling of the three cultures – the gifts within each culture, the biases, the steps in mutual understanding and the blockages to understanding, the inevitable destruction of the way of the locals faced with the intrusion of more powerful technology and illnesses imported from abroad. Boyden opens us up to the spiritual life of the local culture, its gifts of insight, faithfulness, courage and wisdom. There are also blood curdling descriptions of the mutual cruelty that the native people visited on each other, and eventually on the foreigners. In consuming the hearts of their victims, they believed that they were being strengthened in the gifts of their victims. By facing their own martyrdoms with stoicism and equanimity they believed they were entering into a community beyond death that would see them more fully alive in full communion with their ancestors.

**Classical Missionary Understanding**

“I tell you most solemnly, unless a man is born through water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” (John 3:5) “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you.” (Matthew 28:19) These two sayings of Jesus have headlined Christian missionary efforts down through the centuries, variously interpreted, but always to the fore. The common sense of many Catholic cultures over many centuries was that one could not enter the kingdom of God unless one received a literal baptism of water. A core task of the Church was to go out and to baptise people because without that event of baptism they could not get into heaven….they would remain in the state of original sin. Unbaptised babies who could not know faith because their reason was not sufficiently developed would go to the state of limbo…a place or state of natural happiness in which God is absent. But unbaptised adults were destined to go to hell. Hence there was a fierce sense of urgency in missionary work, driven by the fear of final damnation, and perhaps seen in its most intense form in the work of St Francis of Xavier in India in the 16th century.
The Second Vatican Council Renewal of Missionary Understanding

Within the Catholic culture of the 21st century, under the title of “The New Evangelization” there is a similar energy and intensity of purpose. However the Second Vatican Council (1961-1965) in its documents on Missionary Work puts great emphasis on inculturation….on really respecting and understanding the culture of the local people. All forms of proselytism are condemned. The follower of Jesus is to listen to the local person…to bring the message of Jesus by really listening. The Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) is held up as an example of a model missionary because he really entered into the life of the people of China; he gave no signs of wanting to impose a foreign culture, and he came to be respected by the people because of this.

Also, in the 20th century Catholic theology began to shift away from a literal interpretation of John 3:5. No matter how good the preaching, not everyone might want to be baptised. Not everyone might hear the message given the multiplicity and complexity of cultures and the size of the world. How could one intelligently apply the teaching to all the people who never heard of Jesus because they lived before his era? Or they lived in places that were never in contact with the Mediterranean world? Was the Catholic God a God of damnation who would condemn one to hell for ever because one grew up in a different culture with different religious convictions?

The Second Vatican Council (1961-64) opened the Catholic Church to the possibility and goodness of dialogue. There was to be dialogue between Christian Churches. Catholics and Protestants slaughtered each other in Europe in the 17th century. There was a stepping back from that extreme but no popular or mutually accepted method of rapprochement. The notion of “dialogue” provided such a method. Furthermore in the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church found a way of opening a new era in its relationship with non-Christian religions….Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, native peoples, Jews. It advocated for the way of dialogue. It recognized that God’s grace was at work in the goodness of the other forms of religion. It became less judgmental. It used more of the language of family….that we are all brothers and sisters in this global family…that whilst in our faith tradition Jesus is paramount, our tradition is not to be forced or imposed on any other community other than through the persuasive power of the gospel and the truth in their words. As George F. McLean remarks in an article on Faith and Culture by John M Staak in Christian Philosophical Studies: “We often fail in our task, which is not to bring the Spirit but to uncover its presence in each culture and to cooperate therewith. This I would say is the main task of the Church as witness to the Gospel, namely, engaging the human spirit of the people of God in the work of the Holy Spirit.”
The New Evangelization and The Joy of the Gospel

The most recent articulation of the developing understanding of evangelization in the Catholic Church is to be found in the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis called *The Joy of the Gospel* (Evangeli Gaudium 2013). This 191 page document captures the wisdom of present day Catholic approaches to the spreading of the Gospel. When answering a question about passing on the faith to the next generation in the fall of 2012 at Regis College in the Toronto School of Theology on the topic of The New Evangelization, visiting Professor Michael Paul Gallagher SJ captured the essence of this document. He remarked, “Surprise them with your happiness.”

The message of Pope Francis to Catholics is to live the faith with energy, with hope, and with great charity from the well of the experience of the joy of the Gospel. In God’s Providence, people will be drawn to a faith that is genuine and energetic, a faith that does justice, a faith that is always reaching out to do good in the world, a faith that reaches into the hearts of the most marginalized in our world, a faith that does not in any way disrespect the other, a faith that is non-defensive and that is grounded in the best that the light of reason provides us, a faith that cherishes the other, that takes seriously the words of Jesus to love others to the point of the Cross, and to live in simplicity and joy and without the trappings of grandeur. This faith is nourished in the experience of reaching in and reaching out...reaching in again and again to the treasury of the endless good news in the story of the life, death and resurrection Jesus, and reaching out to evoke it in complete freedom and generosity in the lives of everyone and especially the most marginalized.

The Canadian Jesuits Response to the Residential Schools Issue

In light of the discussions that Joseph Boyden’s text inevitably triggers, it is perhaps helpful to make available the contemporary Jesuit response to the Residential Schools issue given in the spring of 2013 before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission by Fr. Winston Rye, S.J. on behalf of the Jesuits in English Canada.
Statement of Reconciliation

The Jesuits in English Canada
Father Winston Rye, S.J.
Truth & Reconciliation Commission
Québec National Event
Montreal, April 25, 2013

Let me begin today by first acknowledging all Survivors of the Residential Schools and their families, the Elders present, the Commissioners, Church and community leaders and members of the wider communities. We thank you sincerely for the invitation to share in this important event.

The Jesuits in English Canada want to take this special occasion to honour the Survivors. It has taken great courage, strength and generosity for you to come forward and to share your story with all of us here, a story of loss, grief, hardship, but also of resistance and healing.

We also greet the children and grandchildren of the Survivors, who suffered in turn from their parent’s trauma in the Residential Schools and learned from their character and bravery.

We come today to pay tribute to the individuals who attended the Spanish Residential School; both boys and girls. We recognize and embrace the students who attended the St. Peter Claver Residential School for Boys, St. Charles Garnier Collegiate and St. Joseph’s School for Girls, some of whom are with us today in the audience.

This gathering is a symbol of hope and a reminder to all of us that such abuse must never happen again.

I stand here on behalf of the Jesuits to say that we are truly, deep within our hearts, sorry for what we did to injure individuals, families and communities by participating in the Canadian Residential School system.

When the Jesuits first met with First Nations peoples 400 years ago, we recognized the greatness of your traditional spiritual beliefs. That openness was lost in the 20th Century.

The legacy of the Residential Schools is a terrible cloud on our legacy of friendship. Today, we are relearning how to trust each other in a deeper understanding of our own faith through the lessons that your Elders have taught us.

It has been a struggle for the Jesuits to recognize that we became an active part of a system aimed at the assimilation of your traditional culture. It was not until it was much too late that we realized the harm that we had done.

The Jesuits are proud to still count many of our former students as friends and colleagues. We are grateful for the forgiveness and understanding that you have extended to us over the years. We humbly thank you for sticking with us and continuing to welcome us in your homes and communities.

We come to celebrate the achievements of our students. We recognize that what they achieved as professionals, athletes and community leaders was not because of our efforts at the school – but through their own strength of character and love of knowledge.
We also come to acknowledge the students who were brave enough to confront us about our role in the Residential School system some thirty years ago. We treated you as dissenters and malcontents rather than listening to what you had to tell us.

Through litigation and lawsuits, we learned about harsh conditions, poor food, brutal punishment and horrible incidents of sexual molestation. You turned to the courts because the Jesuits turned away from you.

As educators, we have been shocked by stories of bullying, inadequate clothing, strapping and beatings for minor offences. Our School harbored individuals who molested or abused students. Bed wetters were tormented by older students and staff alike. The food was not fit for the needs of growing boys and girls.

Children who were much too young were taken from the love of their families and placed under the guidance of men and women who had little training and less compassion.

Most of all, we have heard stories of the inherent unfairness of the system. Students were given the strap for things that they did not do. Bullies were rewarded and victims punished. Abuse was not disclosed because there was no one who would hear a student’s cry for help.

We are still struggling with how it could possibly have happened. We realize that the abuse might have been uncovered and punished many years ago, if there had been someone that the students could turn to. We failed in putting the needs and interests of the Jesuit priests and brothers ahead of the welfare of our students.

We vow that this will never be “the way things are” ever again.

Amongst the heartache, we have delighted in stories about how students outwitted their teachers and kept their spirit alive through practical jokes and ingenuity. Our students understood their instructors and their human frailties so much better than their teachers understood them. They fought against the unfairness of the system with humor and good nature.

We have heard of brave students who were resourceful enough to set out for their home communities. We are ashamed of the harsh punishments that they received when they were brought back by the authorities.

We offer a sincere prayer of thankfulness that no young lives were lost at our school because students ran away.

We have learned from these harsh lessons and have become stronger from your example. To the students who have defended us and taken our part, we are truly grateful. We will strive to prove ourselves worthy of the respect and love that you have shown your teachers.

We are deeply grateful to the communities that have continued to welcome us as pastors and as friends in the years since the Spanish Residential Schools closed. We are humbled by your love and forgiveness. We have never had to beg for reconciliation; you have offered it to us freely for so many years by your example.
We ask for your forgiveness for any role that our school may have played in sowing distrust and division between Catholic and Protestant families. It is not enough to decry the narrow mindedness of the times. By teaching intolerance in our schools, we sowed division where it had never existed.

Many of you have asked when the reconciliation between the churches will occur. We desire and pray that it is happening today as we move together in healing with our friends in the Ecumenical Working Group.

Finally, we have learned of the terrible inequality that continues to exist between the educational opportunities for white students and students from First Nations in Canada. Young people are still being transported to white communities, to obtain an education in an environment that is foreign to them. This is exactly what happened in the past and we seem to be reliving it again.

We share Shannen Koostachin’s dream that in our lifetime we will see equal opportunities for education in the home community of every Canadian. We will do everything in our power and influence to ensure that this comes to pass and the injustices of the past are not perpetuated.

You had the courage to stand up and speak out about the past. You can help us all to open our minds and our hearts to understand and to stop the destruction now and not have to go through this all over again.

Today we stand before you to pledge our support in the rebuilding of your language and culture. We cannot undo the things that are done, but we can take positive and meaningful steps to rebuild.

We have opened our Archives so that the whole picture of the Residential Schools can be seen. We will unlock the doors to the ancient books that preserved the languages of the First Nations and make copies available to people in their own communities. These precious resources will never again be the exclusive property of white scholars and academics.

We thank the Commissioners for challenging us to undertake this journey of self-examination and reflection with them. We will work hand in hand with our students past and present to bring all these things to pass.

May the Creator God who sees all and knows what is truly in our hearts, bring us together. May the Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha guide us that we can learn from each other, for she is a model for us all.

May we come once again to call each other “friend.”