

# **Senate Tributes Sub-Committee Final Report to Senate Tributes Committee on the request to revoke the Honorary Degree awarded the late Bishop John Fergus O’Grady**

## **1. Referral to the Sub-Committee Regarding the Late Bishop O’Grady**

The tragedies of the Canadian Indian residential school system –including the death and disappearance of Indigenous children –have been known for many years; in the summer of 2021 the confirmations of specific places with the remains of children have drawn this system to the forethoughts of many in British Columbia, Canada and around the world.

The University of British Columbia, in particular, was reminded by many people that in 1986 the university granted an honorary Doctor of Laws to John Fergus O’Grady, who at that time was the Catholic Bishop of Prince George. Prior to his being appointed a bishop, the then Father O’Grady was a member of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate and, in that capacity, he was Principal at various Indian Residential Schools, including Kamloops Indian Residential School in the 1940s. There have been many calls from both within the University and from the broader community for the honorary degree to be revoked.

To address these calls, the Senate Tributes Committee formed a Sub-Committee to consider the matter and make recommendations, through the Committee, to Senate. A special process was viewed as necessary as University policy is presently silent on if, how and when an honorary degree may be revoked. While this report focusses solely on O’Grady as a timely matter, the Sub-Committee is acutely aware of the gap in University policy and the need for this to be addressed as soon as possible should other honorary degrees need to be reviewed.

## **2. Sub-Committee Process and Considerations**

The Sub-Committee held early discussions with Chancellor Steven Lewis Point and Professor Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, Director of the Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre, with respect to the conduct of work of the Sub-Committee. Following these discussions, the Sub-Committee articulated seven overarching questions concerning the revocation of Honorary Degrees (Appendix 1). From these, the Sub-Committee considered the following as relevant to the review of the honorary degree granted to Bishop O’Grady:

- What information would be needed to consider revoking a degree and who, either within or beyond the University, should be involved in making such a decision
- What burden of proof, either for outside processes, or for processes within the University, should be required for UBC to revoke an honorary degree?
- What procedural fairness considerations should be applied when considering revoking an honorary degree?
- Would the procedural fairness considerations above necessitate someone being able to respond to allegations made against them?

Unfortunately, there was not sufficient extant material to directly answer all of these questions. The Sub-Committee conducted a survey of the Okanagan Senate Learning and Research Committee and the Vancouver Senate Tributes Committee, both of which make honorary degree recommendations to the respective Senates, to gauge the reaction of members of both committees to the seven questions.

The Sub-Committee held a series of meetings to consider the seven overarching questions – a synthesis of those discussions is presented in this report. The Sub-Committee noted the University received a number of emails reflecting opposite sides of the argument to revoke O’Grady’s honorary degree and took those into consideration.

In arriving at its recommendation, the Sub-Committee:

- considered various reports in the media,
- reviewed documents relevant to its work, and
- considered a confidential report which summarized a review of files obtained from the appropriate Oblate authorities in Ottawa and by their archivist in Richelieu. That information was only made available to the Sub-Committee on the understanding that it would not be made retained or public as part of this process. The Sub-Committee understands that processes to make that documentation available to the public more broadly are underway and that some of these records may already be with the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation.

### **Part 3. Findings**

The decisions of the Sub-Committee are based on the following findings derived from the work of others. The Sub-Committee recognizes that there will not be 100% certainty with respect to its findings. In making its determinations, the Sub-Committee used the “balance of probabilities” standard of proof which means the Committee found certain things to be “more likely than not” to have occurred.

UBC awarded Bishop O’Grady an honorary degree in 1986. The basis for the award is noted in the citation as recognition for these long years of service among the communities in the Interior of British Columbia and because of his appreciation for the role of education within those communities.

Given the confirmation in the summer of 2021 of the remains of 215 children on the grounds of the Kamloops Indian Residential School, on the historical and unceded territory of the Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc peoples, the Sub-Committee considered in what ways may John Fergus O’Grady be seen as a party to neglect, harm to, or death of children during his tenure as Principal.

O’Grady was Principal at the Kamloops Indian Residential School for thirteen years from 1939-1952, during the time it held Canada’s highest residential school population. With regards to his time there, the Sub-Committee found an article by the Curator of the Prince George Exploration Place Museum & Science centre, Alyssa Leier, particularly helpful. She notes

*“It is known that there were at least six recorded “pupil deaths” between the years 1945-1950 when he was principal. Records of other years could not be found. Five of the six of these recorded deaths were blamed on disease, and one from a lack of due care and supervision signed off on by O’Grady himself. As for the other five, it is documented by staff working at Kamloops Indian Residential School that due to overcrowding, it was impossible to isolate the sick children from the healthy ones, leaving many healthy children to get sick during their time there.”*

In her review of O’Grady’s legacy, Leier concludes:

*“During his contentious career, O’Grady headed three different residential schools (all of which have documented physical and verbal abuse), and as the Bishop of the Prince George Diocese, O’Grady continued to supervise over residential schools where children continued to receive verbal and physical abuse. After his retirement in 1986, O’Grady remarked that he had relatively few disappointments or regrets during his career. After listing those few disappointments, none of them included the untimely deaths of pupils during his time in Kamloops or the alleged cases of physical and sexual abuse of students he presided over”*

Following his review of the confidential archival information provided in confidence by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate related to O’Grady’s tenure as Principal of the Kamloops Indian Residential School, Professor Higgins concluded:

*“In conclusion: It is not unreasonable to surmise that matters referring to problems arising in the schools –Kamloops specifically—regarding instances of violence, disciplining, any form of abuse, student illness and death, may have been kept as a separate file, i.e. Personnel, and maintained consequently under the canonical rubric of sub secreto. These files may have already been submitted by the Oblates, as per their signed agreement, to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, or they may be still pending prior to settling any outstanding legal matter. If such files exist, they were not included in the materials sent to me.”*

Finally, Sub-Committee considered whether it is possible to believe that O’Grady did not know about these deaths or that he did not acquiesce in their burial in what by that time was most probably recognized/designated as a cemetery. Notably, there appears to be no evidence in the materials provided by the Oblates to indicate that O’Grady contacted the parents of children who had died during his tenure as Principal to inform them of the death of their child.

#### **Part 4. Recommendation to Senate**

Although direct evidence of O’Grady’s role in neglect, harm or death of children is not available, the Sub-Committee adopted a balance of probabilities as its burden of proof, which led the Sub-Committee to conclude that it is more likely than not that O’Grady was aware of the deaths of some of those children and failed in his duty to protect them or to treat their deaths with dignity as the chief administrator of the residential school. Based on its deliberations and consultations, the Sub-Committee recommends:

1. *That the Senate rescind its approval of the Honorary Degree awarded to the late John Fergus O'Grady*
2. *That the Senate urges The University of British Columbia conduct a historic reflection on:*
  - *its role in the subjugation of Indigenous people and communities;*
  - *the role that its scholars played in producing some of the evidence that policy makers used to justify their practices with respect to Indigenous persons in this province and country; and*
  - *the collective disregard that most of the academic community demonstrated as to the atrocities that were being enacted in the name of the public of British Columbia; and*
3. *That the Senate calls on the University to further create conditions under which:*
  - *records of the existence and activities of residential schools can be preserved and studied;*
  - *students can be exposed to evidence of what has occurred; and*
  - *the University as a whole can embrace a commitment to learning, and to becoming part of solutions in a collective journey toward truth and reconciliation.*

While the Sub-Committee is aware that the first recommendations largely symbolic in that Bishop O'Grady is no longer alive, the Sub-Committee make this recommendation both in reflection of O'Grady's administration of this residential school, but also as a statement of UBC's complicity in overlooking the systemic injustices that were occurring over that period of time with respect to Indigenous children.

Respectfully submitted,

Vancouver Senate Tributes Committee Sub-Committee to Consider the Honorary Degree of John Fergus O'Grady

Dr John H.V. Gilbert, Chair

Dr Lawrence Burr

Dr Michael Higgins

Dr Sally Thorne

Dr Sally Stewart

Laia Shpeller

Dr Richard Vedan

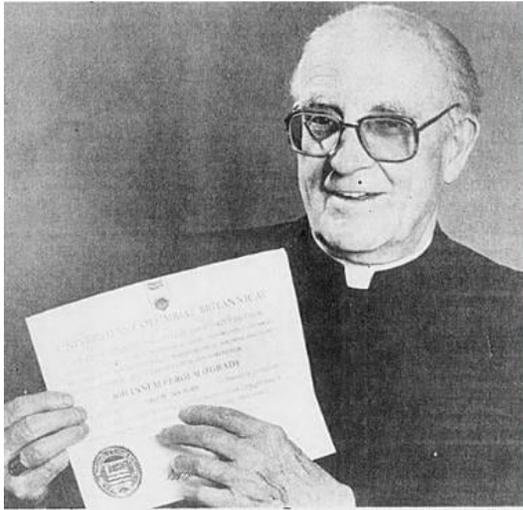
## **Appendix 1. The Seven Questions Posed to the Sub-Committee**

In considering the revocation of honorary degrees, the committees addressed the following questions:

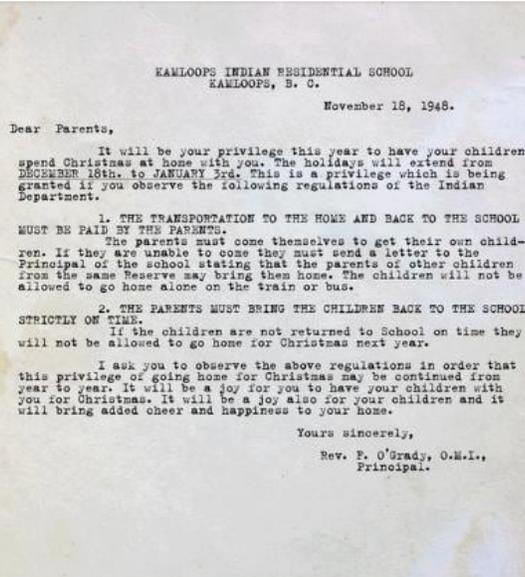
- 1) In principle, can UBC honorary degrees be revoked?
- 2) Under what criteria would the UBC revoke an honorary degree?
- 3) What information would be needed to consider revoking a degree and who, either within or beyond the University, should be involved in making such a decision?
- 4) What burden of proof, either for outside processes, or for processes within the University, should be required for UBC to revoke an honorary degree?
- 5) What procedural fairness considerations should be applied when considering revoking an honorary degree?
- 6) Would the procedural fairness considerations above necessitate someone being able to respond to allegations made against them?
- 7) What other actions, either in addition to, or instead of revoking an honorary degree should UBC consider when concerns are raised or substantiated regarding a past honoree?

## Appendix 2.

### 1.0 Father O'Grady with HD and his 1948 letter to parents



Bishop O'Grady proudly displays his doctor of laws degree conferred on him by the University of British Columbia for his religious work in this area, particularly with Native Indians.



## **2.0 Professor Michael Higgins Report to Tributes Sub-Committee**

### **RE: Bishop O’Grady review**

In an exercise of due diligence, I have undertaken to review the O’Grady files submitted to me for reading and scrutiny by the appropriate Oblate authorities in Ottawa and by their archivist in Richelieu. I was provided with files that cover the period when O’Grady was a principal at the residential schools (more than one), with specific emphasis on his term at the Kamloops Indian Residential School, as well as for the period when he was Provincial of the St. Peter’s Province, just prior to his being named a bishop in 1956. In summary:

Mission City, 1936-1939  
Kamloops, 1939-1952  
Williams Lake, 1952-1953  
Provincial, 1953-1956

In addition, this collection consists of:

7 folders  
50 files per folder  
350 files in all

The content of these files is preponderantly managerial dealing mostly with the following:

- Raising money for new buildings for Oblate lay and scholastic brothers
- Assigning Oblate personnel to various parishes in the West and in Nova Scotia
- The purchasing of farm equipment for the residential school communities
- The requisitioning of additional funds to purchase heifers for the adjacent farms in order to provide sustenance for the residential children
- Coping with priest personnel disputes
- Complaints over the annual Cathedraticum (annual payment to the local Ordinary or bishop)

In addition, there are no letters, memos, notes, etc. that refer specifically, or even generally, to problems arising between the residential staff and the residential children. In addition, there are no reports or even mention regarding student illness, death or burial, nor of disciplining the behaviour of staff.

There are periodic references to the Indian Act, the need to get more money from the Government for the charges under their supervision, and occasional disturbances “on the neighbouring Reservation”

Although the language of exchange among O’Grady’s correspondents is cordial, polite, and strangely formal, the periodic references to the Indigenous communities that are pejorative, condescending, culturally biased, infantilizing, or simply dismissive are very few. O’Grady’s voice is consistently steady, professional, and pastoral. And he can be quite compassionate when dealing with problem cases around priest appointments in their parishes, intractable intra-clergy dynamics, etc. But when it comes to the residential students and their school guardians, he is silent

In conclusion: It is not unreasonable to surmise that matters referring to problems arising in the schools –Kamloops specifically—regarding instances of violence, disciplining, any

form of abuse, student illness and death, may have been kept as a separate file, i.e. Personnel, and maintained consequently under the canonical rubric of *sub secreto*.

These files may have already been submitted by the Oblates, as per their signed agreement, to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, or they may be still pending prior to settling any outstanding legal matter. If such files exist, they were not included in the materials sent to me.

Respectfully submitted,

Michael W. Higgins

### 3.0 Letter of Nomination for Honorary Degree

224-3311

*Send to Joan King*

**ST. MARK'S COLLEGE**

5935 IONA DRIVE  
VANCOUVER, B.C. V6T 1J7

RECEIVED SEP 23 1983

22 September 1983.

Professor Peter Larkin,  
Chairman, Tributes Committee,  
Senate of the University of British Columbia.

Dear Peter,

Thank you for the invitation which you extended at the September meeting of Senate inviting suggestions for candidates for honorary degrees from the University of British Columbia. I would like to nominate Bishop Fergus O'Grady again and ask you to bring forth the material from the file which I submitted to you last year. This year Fergus O'Grady reaches 75 years of age and in the normal course of events he is required to offer his resignation. It may or may not be accepted immediately, but this is a significant year for him and an appropriate time for the University to acknowledge his contribution to education, Native life and religious service in this Province.

Sincerely,

*Paul Burns*

Paul C. Burns, C.S.B., B. Litt., Ph.D.

*ackd  
13/10/83.*

ACERMONIES 22-12

To the Tributes Committee of the Senate of the University of British Columbia  
Re Nomination of a candidate for an Honorary Degree

J. Fergus O'Grady

J. Fergus O'Grady has made a significant contribution to the quality of life for citizens of British Columbia. His years of service among the Indian peoples and other races in the Province have been distinguished by dedication and innovation as a builder and an educator.

He was born in 1908 in Fergus Ontario. After completing his secondary education, he joined the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, a Roman Catholic religious community. Since 1845 this community has been working throughout the West particularly among the Indian peoples, preaching the Gospel and supporting the culture and languages of these people as well as finding the practical means to provide health care and education. Fergus O'Grady was ordained a priest in 1934 and began his work in the West shortly after that. He was the Administrator of the Indian Residential School in Mission. In 1952 he became the Administrator of the Indian Student Residence in Kamloops. In this position he developed the first High School for Indians. He also developed a practical training program in housing construction for Indians to alleviate poor housing conditions on the reserves.

In 1956 J. Fergus O'Grady was appointed to be the first Bishop of Prince George, a position he still holds. He has developed a system of education to integrate Indian children effectively within established patterns of education. Since 1956 he has built 14 elementary and secondary schools in Prince Rupert, Kitimat, Terrace, New Hazelton, Smithers, Burns Lake, Prince George, Dawson Creek, Fort St. James and Fort St. John. To build these schools he established a construction company which includes a glass factory, a sash and door factory, a cement block factory, a trucking and bulldozing firm. To staff all of these schools he developed a very original system of volunteers. For twenty-five years he has been able to attract men and women of all ages from Canada and countries around the world. He has successfully challenged their skills and generosity to provide a remarkable educational service to the Indians and other people in the Interior of the Province.

J. Fergus O'Grady has also stimulated interest in the history of the Province by promoting the restoration of the Oblate Shrine at Mission and the Pandosy Mission at Kelowna, the site of the first fruit grown in the Okanagan.

The real tribute to the work of J. Fergus O'Grady is to be heard in the words of respect and friendship uttered by several generations of Indians and the 2,500 volunteers who have accepted the challenge to come and serve with him. Many students and graduates of this University have been served by and have served with Fergus O'Grady.

Nominated by Paul C. Burns, C.S.B., M.A., B. Litt., Ph.D.,  
member of Senate, Lecturer in the Faculty of  
Arts, Vice-Principal of St. Mark's College.



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