175th Anniversary of the Arrival in Canada
of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate
Mont St. Hilaire, Quebec, August 28, 2016

What a joy; what an honour for me – “un Oblat Protestant” – to be given the distinct honour of presiding at this Mass which marks the 175th anniversary of the arrival of the first Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate to Canada – right here in Mont St. Hilaire, Quebec! Thank you to Father Luc Tardif, Provincial of Province Notre Dame du Cap for this privilege!

Earlier this year, as President of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, I addressed a letter to the Very Reverend Father Louis Lougen, Superior General, and to each of the three Oblate Provincials in Canada, to congratulate the community for the 200th anniversary of its foundation – and to acknowledge and express the gratitude of the Canadian Bishops for the great work of evangelization in Canada – giving as examples only a very few of the remarkable initiatives taken by the daring men who built the Church throughout the country – starting right here in Mont St. Hilaire!

Today’s readings exhort us to be humble – but after 175 years there is so much that makes us proud. So many regions of the country have been blessed by the presence and ministry of Oblates, and their missionary determination! So many creative initiatives of individual Oblates have changed the lives of countless numbers of people. Communities exist because Oblates encouraged and supported their foundation. Newspapers, magazines, historical documents, dictionaries and grammars, provide information about the growth of communities, villages, counties, Provinces, indeed the nation – all contributing to a better world.

We are made humble when we are aware that the work of the Oblates was nothing less than the very work of God – following the example of Jesus Christ – caring for the neediest, spending our lives to assure that the Good News was proclaimed to the poor. With profound gratitude I can say that, along with many, many priests, Religious Sisters, and lay women and men from across the country and around the world, I have been a beneficiary of the mission of the Oblates. With them, I was taught by world renowned professors – holy and committed Oblates – at St. Paul University and Ottawa University, institutions founded by the Oblates. To this day, many young people make their way to both those venerable institutions, which have such great reputations world-wide, to seek the best preparation for a multitude of careers – which promote the common good.

When I was Bishop of the Diocese of Labrador City-Schefferville, I visited all of the isolated communities in the Diocese. During the winter months, I was transported by skidoo – an invention of an Oblate, Father Ouimet, who served in the Diocese of Moosonee. Unhappy with the amount of work needed to care for dog teams, he spent a
winter preparing the first drawings of a snow machine that might replace them. He brought the drawings to his sister’s home where he went for a summer vacation – and presented them to her husband, the great engineer Mr. Bombardier! I think one of the early prototypes can still be found in the parish shed in Kangiksujuaq! Transportation in the north and winter sport in the south have been transformed – by the work of an Oblate!

Oblate Priests have been dedicated teachers, preachers, and pastors from their earliest days in Canada. And Oblate Brothers have served with them, full members of the community, supporting the mission in many ways! Their strength was their commitment as a community of priests and brothers to serve Jesus Christ tirelessly in and through the Church. To serve him, they had to know him. To know him, they had to love him. And to love him, they had to communicate with him. So, dedication to prayer was vitally important. Whether working with others as they do at the retreat centre in Cap de la Madeleine for example, or working alone in faraway missions like Arviat, Oblates spent time in prayer – praying their Breviary together or alone, spending time in quiet prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, celebrating the Eucharist alone or in parishes, retreat centres, or community houses. Prayer sustained them – and assured that Jesus Christ was always the centre of what they did and said.

Does that mean Oblates are perfect? Of course not! We are only too well aware of our weakness, our sinfulness, and our need for the mercy and healing of God in our lives – both as individuals and as a community. The sad history of Indian Residential Schools caused Oblate Provincials to be first in line to offer apology for our participation in what has become such a painful memory for the Indigenous people in our country. While we wanted to support the best education possible for them – a noble desire – the legacy is not what we would have wanted it to be. Saddened, shaken, and sorry, we move forward, with an even stronger desire to renew and deepen our relationship without Indigenous brothers and sisters who are ready to work closely with the Oblates who strove to assure that their languages and cultures survived the overwhelming onslaught of European cultures. We can be fiercely proud that Oblates and co-workers learned the languages, spoke the languages, wrote books about the languages, and even taught the languages – so many languages! To date, I believe that this story has yet to be acknowledged in an honest and forthright way.

I speak of the past. But I am equally impressed with the work of the present. Undaunted by the challenges of secular cultures that often reject the tenets of our faith, Oblates continue to serve communities of faithful people, and reach out to the peripheries of our society, encouraged by a Pope who seems to have the same daring missionary charism of the Oblate founder, the venerable Saint Eugene de Mazenod. I am impressed by the life-changing decisions made by Province Notre Dame de Cap over the past number of years have also been so daring and exciting. They are made with both a vision of the future and in light of the realities of the present.

In Hamilton, I am proud of the work of the Oblates at St. Patrick’s Parish in the heart of downtown Hamilton, where hundreds of the poor are welcomed to its front door every
day. They are fed, and cared for by priests, pastoral ministers, and volunteers. The door they come to is called “de Mazenod’s Door” – reminding people of the great man who dared to send missionaries to this country 175 years ago – starting right here in Mont St. Hilaire.

The mission to St. Hilaire did not last long. The Oblates of the time moved to other communities to reach out to other needs. That’s what Oblates do. We do not stay still. We do not settle down. We do what needs to be done, and we move on – just as we did back then. Is that not like the patron of our community, the Blessed and Immaculate Virgin Mary, who placed her confidence in the love and the will of God?

We know what we have accomplished, and we understand that we did what we were called to do. We need no more thanks than that. The Oblates come here today not to BE THANKED, rather TO REMEMBER, and TO GIVE THANKS to the One who has called, the One who blesses, the One who sends. And so my dear brother Oblates, in the concluding words of today’s Gospel, may you be “repaid at the resurrection of the righteous”!

The Most Rev. Douglas Crosby, OMI
Bishop of Hamilton and
President of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops