REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT
2016 Plenary Assembly
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

Dear brother Bishops, distinguished guests and members of staff,

My predecessor as President, Archbishop Paul-André Durocher, is a spontaneous man who relies on the Gospel principle dabitur vobis: “When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time” (Matthew 10:19). However, as I come before this council and you its rulers, I have chosen to fall back on our Conference’s time-honoured custom of a prepared text.

Euthanasia and assisted suicide

With your input and approval, we ended last year’s Plenary with the release of a statement on assisted suicide. It urged politicians to make “the need for palliative care ... one of the most pressing preoccupations of our country and its institutions.” The words we used included “outrage”, “dismay”, “disappointment” and “disagreement” with the decision of the Supreme Court of Canada to recognize a so-called “right” to suicide. We called on the federal and provincial / territorial governments to uphold and protect the conscience rights of the men and women who work as caregivers, as well as the right of health-care institutions not to assist in suicide. These same concerns have been articulated and expressed by our Conference over the past months as well as in cooperation with Catholic, ecumenical and interfaith partners.

On June 17, 2016, following the approval of the Parliament of Canada, royal assent was given to the “Act to amend the Criminal Code and to make related amendments to other Acts (medical assistance in dying)”. In preparation for this eventuality, the Permanent Council in March held a special session to explore the question of what pastoral advice to give clergy, pastoral workers and the faithful. Following an earlier suggestion from the Pontifical Academy for Life on possible resource persons, the Permanent Council invited Cardinal Willem Eijk, Archbishop of Utrecht and also a physician, to speak at this year’s Plenary. He will give two major presentations: today, on the cultural and social impact of euthanasia and assisted suicide; tomorrow, on the pastoral response. In addition, the General Secretary has already shared with you the reflections and directives issued by the Archbishop of Vancouver and by the Latin Rite Bishops of Alberta and the Northwest Territories.

The liberalization, legalization and championing of euthanasia and assisted suicide are further evidence of how ours is a “throw-away culture”, to use the phrase so often invoked by Pope Francis. Assisted suicide and its ramifications is a major pastoral challenge.

Relations with and among the Indigenous People

As an episcopal assembly we were never involved with the operations or policies of the former Indian Residential Schools. However, the Indigenous People have been a major focus for dioceses and institutes of consecrated life since the days of Saint François de Laval. It is instructive to note the following from the minutes of the Quinquennial Plenary Meeting of the Canadian Hierarchy, October 12-13, 1943, which was the founding meeting of our Conference:
The Government proposes to erect hospitals to which Catholic Indians will be compelled to go when in need of treatment – on the ground that they are the wards of the Government, which alone determines their lot. The Committee condemned this and declared that Indian Catholics should have free choice of hospital as well as free choice of school.

Over the past year, our Conference and our dioceses have continued to focus on relations with Indigenous People, including questions by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Following the animation session by the Commission for Justice and Peace at the 2015 Plenary, I wrote to the Right Honourable Justin Trudeau the day he was sworn in as Prime Minister. I highlighted the need for improved Aboriginal access to education, the epidemic of murdered and missing Indigenous women, the need for environments supportive of Indigenous families and communities, and the importance of strengthening the ability of Canadian justice and correctional systems to respond to Aboriginal realities.

Last November, the Permanent Council agreed that the Executive Committee establish a special taskforce. In January this taskforce outlined possible options for CCCB follow-up on the TRC Calls to Action. Already last year, in June 2015, the Permanent Council had agreed in principle with the basis of a proposed statement on the legal notions known as the “Doctrine of Discovery” and “terra nullius”, as well as various approaches for responding to those Calls to Action addressed to the Churches in Canada.

In the light of these discussions and reflections, I presented an overview on relations with Indigenous People at the Meeting of the Bishops of the Church in America which met in Florida this February. I noted four major challenges before us:

1) The diversity of Indigenous Peoples in our country and their respective situations;
2) The complex economic and social challenges facing them;
3) The nature of an Episcopal Conference which by definition is not the Catholic Church of our country nor its national headquarters;
4) The question of religious and social collaboration when so many in our country question, or disown, the good that the Churches have done with and among Indigenous People.

In March, our Conference set in motion two meetings with other Catholic parties on strengthening Indigenous relations. One immediate result was that representatives of the CCCB, the Canadian Catholic Aboriginal Council, the Canadian Religious Conference, and the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace co-signed two major statements on follow-up to the TRC Calls to Action: A Catholic Response to the “Doctrine of Discovery” and terra nullius, and A Catholic Response to Call to Action 48, On Adopting and Implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Later this week you will receive a progress report on the proposal for the CCCB to be part of what is envisaged as an ongoing “circle” of Catholic parties to continue focusing on Indigenous relations.

Concern for balance and nuance is part of our philosophical and theological tradition: virtus stat in medio (virtue stands in the middle). In this regard, it is encouraging to reread the acclaimed Encyclical Populorum Progressio – and what Blessed Paul VI wrote in it almost 50 years ago about colonization and the Church’s work among Indigenous People around the world:
We read in no. 7:

*Though insufficient for the immensity and urgency of the task, the means inherited from the past are not totally useless. It is true that colonizing nations were sometimes concerned with nothing save their own interests, their own power and their own prestige…. Certain types of colonialism surely caused harm and paved the way for further troubles. On the other hand, we must also reserve a word of praise for those colonizers whose skills and technical know-how brought benefits…. The structural machinery they introduced was not fully developed or perfected, but it did help to reduce ignorance and disease, to promote communication, and to improve living conditions.*

And in no. 12:

*True to the teaching and example of her divine Founder, who cited the preaching of the Gospel to the poor as a sign of His mission, the Church has never failed to foster the human progress of the nations to which she brings faith in Christ. Besides erecting sacred edifices, her missionaries have also promoted construction of hospitals, sanitariums, schools and universities. By teaching the native population how to take full advantage of natural resources, the missionaries often protected them from the greed of foreigners. We would certainly admit that this work was sometimes far from perfect, since it was the work of men. The missionaries sometimes intermingled the thought patterns and behavior patterns of their native land with the authentic message of Christ. Yet, for all this, they did protect and promote indigenous institutions.*

**Other major plans for the future**

Physician-assisted suicide and relations with Indigenous People are major concerns that will affect all the Church in our country far into the future. Yet these are not the only questions requiring immediate attention as well as thoughtful reflection and well planned response for years if not decades to come. In brief, the following are several other points discussed over the past year and which will be considered this Plenary. These are in the order listed in the agenda:

1. We begin and end our week with the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace. Although it has its own autonomy, it has a structure that we Bishops established 50 years ago to provide assistance and education around the two major interrelated themes of *Populorum Progressio*: peace and development. In consultation with our Standing Committee, our Conference will mark this important anniversary later this year with a pastoral letter. In addition, we will make CCODP’s jubilee a key event at next year’s Plenary. Moreover, since Development and Peace is already into a “soft launch” of its celebrations, we will hear about its plans at the start of our Plenary.

At the end of this week, we will receive the annual report from our Standing Committee on Development and Peace together with that prepared by CCODP. Development and Peace is mandated by the Bishops. Charity and justice are key elements in proclaiming the Gospel and in furthering the pastoral life of the Church. The major source of funding for CCODP international
emergency and development work, as well as for education, comes from the Catholic faithful. The mission, mandate, vision, inspiration and strength of CCODP are thus ecclesial. There is a necessary and continuing need for us as Bishops, the rest of the Church, and Development and Peace to work closely together. At our last Plenary we encouraged and supported Development and Peace, CNEWA Canada, and Aid to the Church in Need – Canada in organizing a joint campaign for Syrian refugees. This remains a practical and pertinent example of the ecclesial collaboration we want in the future. However, of more immediate and urgent concern for us this week is the news from earlier this summer that the new Executive Director hired for Development and Peace a year ago is no longer with the organization.

2. On Tuesday afternoon, we will hear a reflection by Cardinal Gérald Cyprien Lacroix and Cardinal Thomas Collins on the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Laetitia, On Love in the Family. The Exhortation is a summary of those points which Pope Francis wishes to underline as follow-up to the 2014 Extraordinary Synod on pastoral challenges to the family, and the 2015 Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the vocation and mission of the family. This theme in turn introduces two other related items on our agenda. First, some 20 years ago the Bishops of our country, in collaboration with the Knights of Columbus, established the Catholic Organization for Life and Family (COLF). The Permanent Council and the COLF Board believe this is an opportune moment to evaluate COLF’s mandate and efficacy. Thursday, we will discuss and vote on a practical and effective structure for hearing appeals on those marriage cases where there is serious doubt about validity. As our Conference has noted previously, marriage tribunals are an essential part of the Church’s mission of reconciliation and healing.

3. Already in the 1970s and 1980s, the Bishops of the northern dioceses in our country were encouraging the Church in southern Canada to be more involved in the pastoral challenges of the North. After a series of earlier as well as more recent conversations with the Holy See, and also among ourselves, the remaining six “mission dioceses” in Northern Canada are now under the common jurisdiction of the Church: Churchill-Hudson Bay, Grouard-McLennan, Keewatin-Le Pas, Mackenzie-Fort Smith, Moosonee, and Whitehorse. Our challenge now is to find ways to assure these dioceses, and others facing similar northern challenges, of ongoing collaboration and support. Possible ways forward will be outlined for us Thursday morning by the Ad hoc Committee on the Transition of the Northern Dioceses.

4. Since the early 1990s, our Conference has looked for ways to assist dioceses and eparchies in their responsibilities of protecting minors, safeguarding pastoral environments, and responding to sexual abuse. The most recent initiative is coming close to fruition – the publication of a new resource. You will be invited to approve it in principle, in view of its being released sometime in the first part of 2017.

There is another major topic I wish to note, although not on the Plenary agenda: ongoing formation – both preparation for the ordained ministry, as well as theological education in general. Following your approval, the General Secretary and the Secretariat are in the final stages of sending to the Holy See for recognitio the proposed National Directory for the Ministry, Formation and Life of Permanent Deacons in Canada, as well as the updated French Sector Ratio or program of formation for the priestly ministry. Our hope is to have the manuscript in hand shortly for the English Sector Ratio. In addition, for some years our Conference has expressed concern about the declining numbers
of Canadian institutions, professors and students specializing in higher theological studies. The Commission for Doctrine recently met with representatives of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities of Canada to discuss challenges facing theological faculties. The Permanent Council and Executive Committee will be receiving an update from the Commission and plan to follow this question closely.

To echo the Gospel of John, 21.25, many other things were done but cannot be written down here. These include the Vice President’s participation last January at the annual meeting in the Holy Land with other Episcopal Conferences; the forum this summer of Catholic delegates on ecumenical and interfaith dialogues; and the various letters and comments we have issued on major events in our country and around the world. However, there are constraints to this report and time is limited. The life of an Episcopal Conference is a continuing dynamic of consultations, discussions, reflections and research involving Bishops, the General Secretary, personnel and external experts as well as other organizations and offices – Catholic as well as other Churches and ecclesial communities or other faiths, and also from different areas of society and academia. I thank the members of the Permanent Council, the Executive Committee and the Commissions and other committees of our Conference for their dedication and engagement. I acknowledge the generosity and commitment of our General Secretary Msgr. Frank Leo and the other members of our staff. Ours is a Conference of Bishops. Its strength depends on the participation of its Bishop members. However, its ongoing work would not be possible without the vital contributions of dedicated and proficient staff and consultants.

Since last December 8, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, Mother of Our Lord, the Church has been journeying through a year-long celebration of mercy. This has proven to be a significant moment to reflect on what mercy means in the life of the world, in the life of the community, and in the life of each person. In his Bull of Indiction which formally opened the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, Pope Francis reminded us of the “need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy” as “a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace”. Thus his prayer and hope that the Church “never tire of extending mercy,” in order that the Word of God “resounds strong and clear as a message and a sign of pardon, strength, aid, and love.” My dear brothers, distinguished guests and members of staff, may this week of deliberation, reflection, prayer and fraternity be an experience of that mutual support, encouragement, renewed determination and agape which the mercy of Christ promises.

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

25 September 2016