

REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT
2012 Plenary Assembly
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB)

My brother Bishops, guests, and members of our staff:

We find ourselves in Plenary Assembly at the Hotel Mont Gabriel. This beautiful locale evokes the mission of the Archangel Gabriel, who “stands in the presence of God”. Long ago he summoned Daniel to “consider the word and understand the vision” (Daniel 8.18, 9.23). Later he assured Zechariah that God was intervening in the lives of his people to save them and bring forth new life. He announced to Mary that this intervention would happen in the wonder of the Incarnation, and invited Our Lady not to be afraid as she responded to her unique call. In these days together, we stand in the presence of God, confident that Christ is faithful to his promise to be present wherever two or three gather in his name. We seek the grace to hear God's word anew, enter into his vision for his people, and announce the Gospel without fear.

A RETROSPECTIVE ON THE PAST YEAR

About 10 days ago, the Holy Father made his apostolic journey to Lebanon, where he officially released his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*. Through that document, as well as in his homilies and speeches, he summoned the Church to deeper unity so as to give witness to hope in a divided world. This touches the essence of our mission as Bishops. We are summoned to serve the Church's unity. In communion with the Holy Father and Bishops everywhere, we share common responsibilities to advance God's peace for the Church and humanity, and to deepen communion with God and with all our world. This past year has afforded a number of opportunities to further and to deepen our “communion and witness”, not only within our Conference but also throughout the Church both in Canada and beyond. Allow me to illustrate this by outlining some of our Conference's key activities over the past year.

Visit of the Presidency to the Holy See

Shortly after our last Plenary, Vice President Archbishop Paul-André Durocher, General Secretary Msgr. Patrick Powers, P.H., and I were involved in the annual visit to the offices of the Holy See. We held approximately 34 meetings during our two-week stay in Rome. The encounters with brother Bishops serving the Holy See were open, frank, fraternal and constructive. We shall have occasion to share with you the fruits of those conversations in the course of our agenda this week.

Of course, the highlight of our visit to the Holy See, as it always is, was our meeting with the Holy Father. His close attentiveness to our concerns is a source of great consolation and encouragement. He very clearly appreciated the quality and beauty of our new Canadian English-language version of the Roman Missal that we presented to him. Indeed, we have

been assured by others in the liturgical world that the CCCB edition is perhaps the best of all the English-language versions of the editio typica tertia of the Roman Missal. More importantly, however, the revised Missal and its liturgical norms are proving to be an important instrument for unity and communion. As *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* reminds us, the Eucharist “is the basis of ecclesial communion” (no. 79). The unity it effects “between the universal and the particular” (no. 38) was given concrete expression in our visit to Rome.

Witness to Life and Celebration of Family

Unity in our witness to the beauty and sanctity of life led us, as a Conference, to adopt elements of a national plan for life and family. Last December, as agreed by our Plenary Assembly, I invited you to encourage your dioceses in our national effort to implement pastoral initiatives for life and family. *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* (no. 63) reminds us that the honouring of human dignity “is the source and foundation of freedom,” yet Western culture and Canadian society continue to see an erosion of respect for human life. Every society needs the assurance its caregivers can be entrusted with the lives of its vulnerable members – those in the womb, children, the elderly, the handicapped, and the infirm. The grave crimes of abortion, euthanasia and assisted suicide seriously undermine that trust. These are real threats not only to individual lives but also to the common good.

The Exhortation also observes: “The Christian family in particular is faced more than ever before with the issue of its deepest identity” (no. 58). This summons us to find positive ways to reinforce the central ideals of Christian family life, and to celebrate the love and nurturing that many families today achieve, despite the difficulties. Our dioceses are looking for ways to help families develop and deepen those characteristics the Pope singled out at the World Meeting of Families in Milan: respect for persons, gratuitousness, trust, responsibility, solidarity, and cooperation (Homily, 3 June 2012). This practical and pastoral approach will be central to the national plan for life and family as it unfolds in the months and years ahead. We will be calling on your offices for life and family for help in this, as well as from the Catholic Organization for Life and Family (COLF), which remains invaluable in its assistance to and collaboration with our Conference.

Solidarity Visit to Haiti

Our love for the gift of life impels us in a particular way to communion and solidarity with the poor. In December 2011, the Vice President and I, together with our Assistant General Secretary Bede Hubbard, were part of a solidarity visit to Haiti. In a blog from there, I wrote: “In the midst of the destitution there are many who are striving with great love and dedication to help people rebuild, not only in material but also in personal terms. It is bearing fruit in a sense of renewed hope ..., a hope which is giving birth to new beginnings.” Archbishop Durocher, Mr. Hubbard and I were impressed not only by the courage and determination of the Haitians we met, but also by the invaluable assistance provided by the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, with its local partners and with the other members of Caritas Internationalis. Our visit reinforced the importance of our

efforts to strengthen the identity and effectiveness of Development and Peace as it pursues its mission to help the poor of our world through integral human development.

My mind goes to the good works I witnessed in Haiti, or I think of the help given to people suffering from food shortages in West Africa, when I read in the Apostolic Exhortation: “it is of the very nature of Christian charity to respond to the immediate needs of all, whatever their religion and regardless of factions or ideologies, for the sole purpose of making present on earth God’s love for humanity” (no. 89). We shall continue our reflections upon the nature and mission of Development and Peace this week.

Support of the Church in the Holy Land

Solidarity and communion with all the citizens of the Middle East was highlighted by Pope Benedict in his journey to Lebanon. For many years now, our Conference has been striving to demonstrate that solidarity through participation in the annual meeting of the Coordination of Episcopal Conferences in Support of the Church in the Holy Land. Since this Coordination was initiated in 1998, our Conference has sent its President as its representative. When I went to Jerusalem in January of this year I was accompanied by Mr. Carl Héту, National Secretary of CNEWA Canada. This participation demonstrates the concern and support of the Church in Canada for our Christian brothers and sisters in the Holy Land and throughout the Middle East. It also witnesses to our determination to promote peace and justice there for Jews, Muslims and Christians.

As with former CCCB Presidents, I, too, have shared our concerns with the Minister for Foreign Affairs. As well, our Human Rights Committee looks for opportune moments to remind Middle East representatives to Canada of the importance of human dignity and religious freedom. The Middle East situation is complex and troubling. There are no immediate or facile answers. Yet this does not absolve us of the responsibility to advocate on behalf of our brothers and sisters, and foster an awareness of the deep suffering and anxiety shared among all residents of the land we call Holy.

The Health Ethics Guide

In March, the Permanent Council agreed to give the *nihil obstat* to the third revision of the *Health Ethics Guide* published by the Catholic Health Alliance of Canada (CHAC). I mention this project in the context of our mission to communion, because the Guide enables the Catholic hospital ministry to give united witness to human dignity at all stages and in every circumstance as we care for the sick in the name of our Lord. By its exposition of the Church’s moral doctrine, the Guide enables us to approach increasingly complex issues with clarity and compassion. The revision of the *Health Ethics Guide* has involved the efforts and insights of many. I wish to acknowledge the important contributions made by the CHAC editorial and writing teams, by our Doctrinal Commission and its advisors, both on staff and on Catholic teaching faculties, and by a number of you individually who gave your time and advice to the project. To cite *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* (no. 13), it is important “that all

“speak with one voice in addressing the great moral questions dealing with the truth about man, the family, sexuality, bioethics, freedom, justice and peace.”

Pastoral Letter on Freedom of Conscience and Religion

This past May, again thanks to the Commission for Doctrine, the Permanent Council issued its Pastoral Letter on Freedom of Conscience and Religion. This is an issue of growing concern both internationally and in Canada. It impacts directly on our communion not only as a Church but also as a nation. As I stated in my address to the Supreme Convention of the Knights of Columbus in August,

freedom of religion and conscience is necessary for the common good of countries such as Canada where religious diversity is the norm. These freedoms are not granted by the state, society or any human authority, but belong to all people by virtue of their humanity. For this reason, when these freedoms are disregarded or repressed, the human person – and therefore human society – suffers. Freedom of conscience is necessary for seeking the truth and adhering to the truth. Freedom of religion is not merely the right to freedom of worship; it includes the right to live out one’s faith in the public square.

Later this week, we will have an opportunity to reflect on specific Canadian aspects of this issue.

International Eucharistic Congress

In June, I saw a number of you at the International Eucharistic Congress in Dublin. I was particularly struck by the number of Canadians present, the largest delegation of any country outside of Ireland. This was thanks especially to the efforts of your diocesan delegates and our two national delegates, Archbishop Albert LeGatt and Sister Doris Lamontagne, P.F.M. The implications of such an event for the Church's communion are obvious. Its theme, “The Eucharist: Communion with Christ and with one another,” is also central to *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*. Witness is “the fruit of a life of communion with God and neighbour,” the Exhortation says, and is based on the service of charity, the breaking of the bread, and prayer, both personal and communal (nos. 1,5).

PERSPECTIVES ON OUR MEETING THIS WEEK

A great number of issues will occupy our attention this week. As usual we shall receive reports from the various commissions and standing committees, and address a number of issues of an administrative nature that affect the functioning of our Conference. For the purposes of this report, I will speak in some detail only about the topics of significant pastoral concern that will engage us. After that, I will draw your attention more succinctly to some upcoming matters.

Immigration

On our agenda is an off-the-record discussion with the Honourable Jason Kenney, Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multiculturalism. Over the last few years particularly, a number of you have posed questions about Canadian immigration and refugee policies. At our last Plenary, then President Bishop Pierre Morissette suggested it would be opportune for a conversation with government representatives. More recently, our Commission for Justice and Peace recommended a discussion with department officials. When I informed Minister Kenney about this in June, he indicated his readiness at any time to answer questions the Bishops may wish to ask. In light of this, the Permanent Council invited Minister Kenney to an exchange with us during this Plenary. This is a welcome opportunity since, as *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* (no. 34) reminds us, the pastors of the Church are to give particular care for refugees and others displaced because of violence and poverty.

Care for Persons and Communities Harmed by Abuse

In 1992, ours was the first Conference of Bishops to publish a series of recommendations pertaining to the tragic reality of sexual abuse. Over the two decades since, our Assembly has striven to remain active and vigilant in this important area of pastoral life. As part of our continuing reflections on responsible ministry, we will receive the updated guidelines prepared for submission to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Of course, our ongoing response must extend far beyond the articulation of protocols and procedures to an embrace in love and compassion of any person, family or community affected by this scourge. How do we foster healing? How do we ensure safe environments? What are the situations that could facilitate boundary violations? “The ‘good conduct’ of Christians ... should become a leaven in society,” *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* reminds us (no. 81). Those in the Church’s ministry must give “an example of unblemished conduct” (no. 46).

The Impact of the Economic Downturn

Each of us is aware of the suffering caused to many of our parishioners by the economic downturn of recent years. We often hear it said that Canada has not been impacted as seriously as other countries. Although that may be true, nevertheless it is of cold comfort to the unemployed or those struggling to find affordable housing. In his address two years ago at Westminster Hall in London (September 17, 2010), Pope Benedict made this incisive observation:

Where human lives are concerned, time is always short: yet the world has witnessed the vast resources that governments can draw upon to rescue financial institutions deemed “too big to fail”. Surely the integral human development of the world’s peoples is no less important: here is an enterprise, worthy of the world’s attention, that is truly “too big to fail.”

The economic system needs the light of the Gospel. Through expert input this week, we shall seek to understand the dynamics of our current situation and consider possible pastoral responses.

Celebrating with our Ukrainian Brothers in the Episcopate

Tomorrow morning, we shall have the honour of welcoming His Beatitude Sviatoslav Shevchuk, Major Archbishop of the *sui juris* Ukrainian Catholic Church. He is currently in Canada to help celebrate the 100th anniversary of the arrival of the first Ukrainian Catholic Bishop appointed to our country, Blessed Nykyta Budka, who eventually suffered a martyr's death in Kazakhstan in 1949. I had the pleasure of joining with Archbishop Sviatoslav and our episcopal colleagues last week in Manitoba, as they and other Ukrainian Catholic Bishops from around the world ended their Synod. This Thursday morning, we will celebrate the Divine Liturgy according to the Ukrainian usage of the Byzantine Rite. *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* compares the Catholic Church to a "mosaic" composed of "a great number of venerable Churches and Ecclesial Communities" (no. 11), "in which shines forth the tradition coming down from the Apostles through the Fathers, and which, in its variety, affirms the divine unity of the Catholic faith" (no. 6). Our Conference is blessed to count among its members Bishops and Eparchs from a number of Eastern Churches.

Ecumenical Collaboration

During our meeting this week we will discuss the challenges and opportunities of collaborating with other Christians as part of ecumenical social justice coalitions. Our Conference, like most Churches and faith communities in our country, faces problems about finances, personnel, and the practicalities of partnering. But there are also other questions. How effectively does each of our partnerships advance the Christian understanding of social justice? How do they help our Conference realize its own mission and attain its own priorities? How do the various coalitions advance and respect the principles of ecumenism, which by definition include mutual respect for the other's ecclesiology? How do they contribute to a better understanding of the faith? *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* (no. 11) teaches that "faith is the centre and the fruit of true ecumenism." We value opportunities to work together with our Christian brothers and sisters in bearing witness to the Gospel. Our deliberations will seek to assess and strengthen the effectiveness of the partnerships that currently exist.

COMING EVENTS

In addition to these discussions, our Plenary Assembly will be taking note of the following events planned for the coming weeks:

- The meeting of the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome, 7-28 October, on *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*;
- The 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, 11 October;

- The canonization of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha on 21 October, at which some 1500 Canadian pilgrims are expected to be participating, the majority from the First Nations and other Indigenous communities;
- A day of awareness, reconciliation and gratitude concerning Indigenous Peoples, which dioceses are being invited to mark, each in their own way, on 28 October, the “octave” of the canonization of Blessed Kateri;
- The Second National Catholic Conference on Resettlement, on the theme “With One Voice – We are the Hope”, being organized 3-6 December by the Office for Refugees of the Archdiocese of Toronto;
- The Day of Prayer in Solidarity with Indigenous People, on 12 December, which will also focus on Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha as a model of the First Evangelization in our country, and also a model of the New Evangelization.

We gather on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. I think it appropriate, therefore, to conclude with a citation of words used by Blessed John XXIII to open the Council:

In the daily exercise of our pastoral office, we sometimes have to listen, much to our regret, to voices of persons who, though burning with zeal, are not endowed with too much sense of discretion or measure. In these modern times they can see nothing but prevarication and ruin. They say that our era, in comparison with past eras, is getting worse, and they behave as though they had learned nothing from history, which is, none the less, the teacher of life. They behave as though at the time of former Councils everything was a full triumph for the Christian idea and life and for proper religious liberty.

We feel we must disagree with those prophets of gloom, who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand.

In the present order of things, Divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by men's own efforts and even beyond their very expectations, are directed toward the fulfilment of God's superior and inscrutable designs. And everything, even human differences, leads to the greater good of the Church.

I invite you to join with me in praying that our Plenary Assembly be enlivened by the same faith and hope that led Pope John XXIII to convoke the Council, that permeated its decrees and that continues to animate the life of the Church.

+ Richard W. Smith
 Archbishop of Edmonton and
 President of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

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