INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented event of the visit to Canada of the relics of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux in 2001 brought about a spontaneous outpouring of popular devotion. As well, the pilgrimage of the World Youth Day cross that journeyed across Canada by air, boat, train, truck and dogsled, which culminated in Pope John Paul II’s visit to Toronto in the summer of 2002, occasioned an impressive degree of fervour and enthusiasm among Canada’s youth. More recently, the pilgrimage of the Ark of the New Covenant served in a similar manner to raise enthusiasm among the faithful around the 2008 International Eucharistic Congress in Quebec, as did the canonization of Brother André.

In keeping with the spirit of these remarkable manifestations which served as authentic experiences of Christian faith for the one and a half million participants in the various events, the Commission for Doctrine of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB) wishes to re-examine the importance and the role of popular piety in Canada. We will rely on the results of a survey that was undertaken several years ago regarding the principal expressions and practices of popular devotion within the Catholic dioceses of Canada. We will also present theological references from the Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy promulgated in 2001 by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. Finally, this document will offer a broad picture of popular piety in Canada, identifying the most significant aspects from the theological point of view, and will propose certain guidelines.

POPULAR EXPRESSIONS OF FAITH IN CANADA

Several years ago the Theology Commission, now the Commission for Doctrine, conducted a survey of the major expressions of popular devotion throughout Canada, to which the response was both impressive and revealing. The current Commission for Doctrine would like to sketch a composite profile of the popular piety that emerged from this survey.

When looking at the overall picture of popular piety in Canada, the following salient features emerge:
Popular piety is highly valued and promoted in a multitude of ways among both Latin and Eastern Catholics here in Canada. Not only is there evidence that the faithful spontaneously assign considerable spiritual value to practices of popular devotion, these devotions are actively encouraged throughout the year (e.g., on feast days). The many shrines, sanctuaries, processions, organized pilgrimages, as well as the numerous relics and icons venerated in Canada bear witness to the popular devotion of the faithful. If the number of major shrines in Canada is impressive, so too is the number of small active local shrines, outdoor grottos and sanctuaries in virtually every diocese. The Novalis Guide to Canadian Shrines lists no fewer than 177 such popular sites of devotion across Canada. The Stations of the Cross and cross-carrying pilgrimages are also popular in many parishes, especially during the Paschal Triduum.

For Eastern Christians especially, the veneration of holy icons is very significant. Icons are called holy because they are channels of divine light, grace and beauty, “images of the invisible,” instruments that portray and testify that the Most Holy Trinity, the angels, and the entire communion of saints in heaven are indeed present and united to the faithful in the family of God, the Church. When believers venerate icons, they enter a sacred time and space and are led to communion with the mystery signified. The faithful remain attached – and deeply so – to the sacred images, icons, statues and crosses with which they adorn their homes or wear on their persons. The personal use of these is of major assistance in helping them encounter the mystery of the Christian faith in their daily lives.

Central among the popular devotions in Canada is Eucharistic adoration. Eucharistic devotion refers to the worship of the Blessed Sacrament outside of the celebration of Mass. These include visits to the Blessed Sacrament, processions on the Feast of Corpus Christi, exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and the Forty Hours devotion.

To a remarkable extent, popular piety in Canada coincides with the Church’s liturgical calendar and feast days. With few exceptions, the majority of popular devotions in Canada take place in conjunction with the concomitant feast day or season of the liturgical year. Divine Mercy Sunday and the solemnities of Corpus Christi and the Sacred Heart of Jesus are especially surrounded with popular devotions, processions and expressions of adoration. In a great many dioceses, novenas are offered at various shrines of Our Lady to coincide with the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (August 15th) and the feast of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary (October 7th), while special devotions are held on the feast of St. Anne (July 26th). Churches of the Byzantine tradition, including the members of the Ukrainian Catholic community, conduct a Great Blessing of Water service on the feast of the Theophany (January 6th/19th), commemorating Christ’s baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. In some areas, this service is conducted alongside a river, after which the blessed water is distributed among the faithful, who take it to their homes.

Special devotions also take place in most parishes across the country on the feast of the patron saint of the parish church: holy hours, novenas, triduums, evening prayer, the recitation of the rosary, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and the “moleben” prayer service in the Eastern Catholic Churches. These popular expressions of faith coincide with the liturgical calendar,
reflecting the teaching of Vatican II’s Constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium: “Such devotions should be so drawn up that they harmonize with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred Liturgy, are in some way derived from it, and lead the people to it, since in fact the Liturgy by its very nature far surpasses any of them.” We can be grateful for this, since history has shown that whenever the faithful lose sight of the values essential to the Liturgy itself, the correct relationship between Liturgy and popular piety begins to be distorted.

4 The most fervent and popular expressions of faith in Canada are reserved for the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Anne. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the popular piety of the faithful in Canada has a distinctive feminine quality. The maternity and maternal qualities of both Our Lady and St. Anne strike a chord in the hearts of Canadians, particularly among Indigenous peoples. This should come as no surprise, given the pioneering role of so many heroic women in the founding years of Canada as a young nation. The remarkable contribution made over the years by so many religious women in establishing Catholic schools, hospitals, and charitable agencies is deeply embedded in the collective memory and culture of our people.

Closely associated with this pre-eminent devotion in every diocese accorded to the Blessed Virgin Mary, we find evidence in several regions of a deep and fervent attachment to Saint Joseph and the Holy Family. In Canada, these devotions are also historically marked by a strong cultural sense of family life.

5 The popular piety of the faithful in Canada is also noted for its distinctive Canadian character and roots. “Popular piety is naturally marked by historical and cultural factors.” Our survey indicated that the faithful have a special devotion to Canadian saints and blesseds. If holiness, like charity, begins “at home”, the popular devotion of the faithful therefore reserves a special place of honour and veneration for Canada’s own holy men and women. The following enjoy a special place in the devotion and hearts of the faithful: the Canadian Martyrs, Marguerite Bourgeoys, Marguerite d’Youville, Brother André, Bishop Nykyta Budka, Bishop Vasyl Velychkovsky, Kateri Tekakwitha, Bishop Laval, Mary of the Incarnation, and Rose Prince of the Carrier Nation. These and many more are celebrated at various historical sites and shrines in Canada with great devotion. It is as though these venerated Canadian individuals are perceived as having a special

1 Sacrosanctum Concilium 13. Cf also the Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy 46, 48, 50, 58.

2 Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy 91. The Directory also reminds us that “popular piety is the first and most fundamental form of the faith’s inculturation.” (91)
“familial” affinity; they are invoked as our very own. As the Pontifical Council for Culture states, “Popular piety remains one of the best examples of genuine inculturation of faith, because it is a harmonious blend of faith and Liturgy, feelings and art, and the recognition of our identity in local traditions.”

**POINTS FOR FURTHER REFLECTION**

The Second Vatican Council declared in its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*: “Popular devotions of the Christian people are to be highly commended, provided they accord with the laws and norms of the Church, above all when they are ordered by the Apostolic See…. But these devotions should be so drawn up that they harmonize with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred Liturgy, are in some fashion derived from it, and lead the people to it, since, in fact, the Liturgy by its very nature far surpasses any of them” (no. 13).

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “Besides sacramental Liturgy and sacramentals, catechesis must take into account the forms of piety and popular devotions among the faithful. The religious sense of the Christian people has always found expression in various forms of piety surrounding the Church’s sacramental life, such as the veneration of relics, visits to sanctuaries, pilgrimages, processions, the Stations of the cross, religious dances, the rosary, medals, etc.” (no. 1674). The *Catechism* adds that “these expressions of piety extend the liturgical life of the Church, but do not replace it” (no. 1675).

The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments published the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* in December 2001, in order to affirm the primacy of the Liturgy and to cultivate a positive and encouraging stance toward popular piety. It seeks to offer guidelines to ensure “a balanced relationship between various forms of popular piety and the Church’s Liturgy.” Following the release of this document, the Bishops of Canada were consulted at the level of their national Conference regarding ways in which it could be implemented. This Roman document constitutes a reference tool for the Bishops, specifically within the context of the visit of the relics of Saint John Bosco, but also to revive recognition for all pilgrimages in various regions across the country that remain unknown to the faithful.

The Directory highlights the connections between the Liturgy and popular piety and establishes some excellent guidelines to ensure that the organic link between the Liturgy and popular expressions of the faith is never ignored or severed. Chapter III (nos. 76-92) of the Directory outlines the theological principles for an evaluation and renewal of popular piety. These can be very useful as guidelines for any diocesan or parish formation program that seeks to foster an even greater harmony and correct relationship between popular devotions and the Church’s divine worship. What follows is a summary of these guidelines. The bold numbers in brackets refer to the specific section as found in the Directory.

- Reference to the **Most Blessed Trinity**, while seminally present in popular piety, is an element requiring further emphasis. Christian prayer is always directed to the Father, through the mediation of the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Christian prayer without any reference to the Blessed Trinity is unthinkable. [79, 80]

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Popular piety should give greater emphasis to the person and action of the Holy Spirit. Authentic forms of popular piety are the fruits of the Holy Spirit and must always be regarded as expressions of the Church’s piety. Every true form of piety comes from the Spirit and is exercised in the Spirit.

It is also necessary for popular piety to emphasize the fundamental importance of the Resurrection of Christ. Devotions directed to the suffering of Christ and the Via Crucis should also include reference to his glorification so as to give integral expression to the Paschal mystery. The heart of this mystery is Christ’s victory over death, as the one who was dead but now lives forever (cf. Rev 1:18).

Devotion to the Passion of Christ should also lead the faithful to a full and conscious participation in the Eucharist. In this connection, we do well to remember that Eucharistic adoration may ordinarily take place only where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, and that the Blessed Sacrament can only be reserved in a church or chapel where the celebration of the Holy Eucharist takes place.

In varying degrees and ways, popular piety should give expression to the “ecclesial” principle, in virtue of which the faithful are constituted the holy People of God. For example, the veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary, of the Angels and Saints, and prayer for the dead, should be set in the larger context of the Communion of the Saints, that vital relationship existing between the heavenly Church and the pilgrim Church on earth. A proper understanding of the relationship between ministry and charism is also important, since the former is necessary for divine worship, while the latter is frequently found in manifestations of popular piety.

It is highly recommended that the various forms of popular piety have constant recourse to Sacred Scripture, since the Word of God is the privileged instrument of the Holy Spirit. Popular piety must have a “biblical imprint” and be imbued with the great themes of the Christian message. Frequent reference to and use of Sacred Scripture can also help curb overly exuberant and excessive forms of popular piety.

While recognizing that “Liturgical worship does not exhaust all the expressive possibilities of the People of God for devotion to the Holy Mother of God,” the Directory nevertheless states: “In relation to Marian devotion, the Liturgy must be the exemplary form, source of inspiration, constant reference point and ultimate goal of Marian devotion.”
• **Prayer for the dead** should also be encouraged in the popular devotions of the faithful. The Church’s prayer for the dead implores eternal life not only for the disciples of Christ who have died in his peace, but also for the dead whose faith is known to God alone. [248-260]

**EVALUATIONS AND GUIDELINES**

The visit of the relics of Saint Thérèse, the journey across Canada of the World Youth Day cross, as well as the Ark of the New Covenant all touched and moved not only the young and the not-so-young but also served to remind us that, even outside of the sacraments and the official liturgical rites of the Church, people need tangible signs to nourish their faith and help them express it. Thus the “sensible”, “physical”, and “visible” elements, which characterize popular expressions of faith, must be seen as indications of an interior desire of the faithful to express their loyalty to Christ our Saviour, their love of the Virgin Mary, and their invocation of the Saints.

Many events related to popular piety have recently taken place in Canada. The most outstanding was anchored in the centre and source of all the Church’s life, namely the Sacrament of the Eucharist: the International Eucharistic Congress in Québec City (15-22 June 2008). Besides this exceptional event, there were other instances of devotional practice, such as the highly attended national shrines and pilgrimages in various parts of the country. All of them bear witness to the wondrous variety of popular expressions of the Christian imagination as it seeks to translate into simple and popular devotions the profound faith of the Church’s members, an authentic expression of the “sensus fidelium.”

As we have indicated, with few exceptions, the manifestation of popular devotion in Canada takes place in conjunction with the concomitant feast day or season of the liturgical year. This fact is in accordance with the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, since the Directory emphasizes the importance of the convergence between expressions of popular piety and the Liturgy.

From the earliest French settlers with their devotion to St. Anne, to the Ukrainian Catholic community with its distinctive traditions, to the more recently arrived Vietnamese Catholics, immigrant communities have continually enriched the life of the Church in Canada. It is important that their traditional expressions of piety be known and welcomed in our parishes.
Eucharistic devotion, which is very popular in Canada, was clearly demonstrated during the 2008 International Eucharistic Congress. It is reassuring to note that the popular devotion to the Eucharist has not replaced the Mass, as presented in the decrees of Vatican II.

The best criterion for evaluating the worth and the spiritual fruitfulness of a particular devotion will be its capacity to draw people deeper into the liturgical life and ministry of the Church. Understanding the popular expressions of faith and devotion in Canada not only enables us to better understand the spiritual needs and gifts of the faithful, but also tells us much about how faith is brought into the everyday lives of our people. “Popular piety is a sign that the faith is spreading its roots into the heart of a people in such a way that it reaches into daily life.”

On several occasions throughout his great pontificate, Pope John Paul II reminded the Catholic faithful and clergy of the need to evangelize popular devotions, inasmuch as they must always be lived out in harmony with the Church’s Liturgy. The Bishops of Canada wish to encourage devotional practices, while calling Catholics to ensure that they remain grounded in the Church’s liturgical life.

The Liturgy of the Church remains the living model by which popular devotions can best be appreciated and evaluated. To this end, according to the Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy [12; 186], popular devotions and practices should be imbued with:

(a) a biblical spirit, since it is impossible to imagine a Christian prayer without direct or indirect reference to Sacred Scripture;

(b) a liturgical spirit, if it is to properly dispose for or echo the mysteries celebrated in the liturgical actions;

(c) an ecumenical spirit, out of consideration for the religious sensibilities and traditions of other Christian communities;

(d) an anthropological spirit which uses symbols and expressions that are important and meaningful to a given culture or people and which serve as a valid response to that people’s needs;

(e) a missionary spirit since it is incumbent on all the faithful to bear witness to the Lord.

CONCLUSION

Popular piety is without doubt an expression of the deep inner rootedness of faith. The importance that Pope John Paul II attributed to expressions of popular piety in the life of the Church is well known: “Authentic popular devotion, expressed in a variety of ways,” he said, “takes faith as its source and for this reason must be appreciated and respected. In its most authentic forms, popular piety is not opposed to the centrality of the Sacred Liturgy, but rather, it fosters the faith of the people who consider it to be a connatural religious experience and disposes for the celebration of the Sacred Mysteries.”

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