

**Excerpts from the Report of Most Reverend Archbishop V. James Weisgerber,
President
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB)
2009 Plenary Assembly**

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

If the phrase *annus horribilis* is not reserved for the use of the British royal family, perhaps it might seem tempting to appropriate it for describing the recent weeks.

But *annus horribilis* is not a phrase from Catholic tradition. Our vocabulary instead uses terms such as holy year and jubilee year. For example, the Year of Saint Paul, which our Plenary celebrated last year. There are also years with a special pastoral theme, as the Year for Priests, which we are currently celebrating. For Christians, it is always *annus Domini*, the year of the Lord. Our overall perspective is that of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and of our being called to labour in his vineyard.

The arrest of Bishop Lahey has been especially painful, because of the seriousness of the charges, and also because it involves a former member of our Assembly, an episcopal colleague and a close associate.

With respect to the nature of the issues and questions that have been raised, as Bishops we are united in concern and prayer for each and all of those whose lives are impacted by the crime and sin of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. These include the victims and their families; the local community and society in general; the Christian community in a special way; and also the perpetrators, as well as anyone who has been accused, whether justly or unjustly. The past few weeks are a significant reminder of the importance of the pastoral priority we have agreed on for almost 20 years. Our dioceses are determined to protect and safeguard the human family and the community of faith from serious violations of human dignity. *From Pain to Hope* continues to be an important pastoral resource for the Church in Canada and around the world, and is also used as a reference by other faith groups and social agencies.

2009 Plenary agenda

The current context is one more important reason why it is opportune for us to take seriously the Year for Priests. Priests as well as deacons are our immediate ministerial collaborators. Their help is essential for us as Bishops in sharing our mission of serving the Christian community and providing for its life and wellbeing. The Second Vatican Council reminded us that the renewal of Christ's Church involves priests in "tasks of the greatest importance and of ever increasing difficulty". Our Assembly thus follows the example of Vatican II, for the Council itself called for a renewed understanding of the priesthood, in order that the ministry of the presbyterate "be carried out more effectively

and the lives [of priests] be better provided for, in pastoral and human circumstances” (Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 1, promulgated by Pope Paul VI on 7 December 1965).

The Spirit that inspired and guided the Second Vatican Council will also surely assist us in our reflections during this Plenary on the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace. Founded shortly after the Council, and inspired by its emphasis on the dignity of the human person (for example, the Vatican II Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*), Development and Peace was formed to help carry out the Council’s vision of universal concern for all people. As the Council declared: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts” (opening words of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*).

Pope Benedict XVI in his recent Encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, reaffirms this universal vision of the Council, and gives it renewed importance, even urgency, in view of the profound challenges today facing humanity. This teaching of the Holy Father provides an excellent basis for our Assembly to discuss the mission and approaches of Development and Peace, and to assist in its efforts to “pursue development goals that possess a more humane and humanizing value” (no. 9). In the words of Benedict, integral human development “requires a transcendent vision of the person”, and thus also the involvement of the whole Church (nn. 11, 16).

Development and Peace has clearly indicated that it wishes to respond to new questions and concerns, and is already reviewing the effectiveness of its contractual arrangements with other groups, its surveillance of the projects that it financially assists, as well as its mechanisms for ensuring cooperation and communication with local Bishops and other Episcopal Conferences. Assisted by the recent Encyclical, we have this week a unique opportunity, together with all the Church in Canada, for renewing, re-mandating and “re-visioning” Development and Peace. This is a new moment in development work, as the Holy Father indicates, for in our day we see how nations and individuals have grown increasingly interdependent, and the concerns of faith, society, life and environment have become more and more interconnected.

This vision of the integrity and dignity of human life provides the source of our reflections for this Plenary on Development and Peace and the leadership role of Bishops in life issues. In his recent 2009 Message for World Food Day, Pope Benedict clearly links famine relief with the Church’s teaching on the right to life. To quote the Encyclical again, “The Church forcefully maintains [the] link between life ethics and social ethics” (no. 15.2), for “Openness to life is at the centre of true development” (no. 28.4). Benedict XVI makes the pertinent observation that such questions also involve the principles of

subsidiarity, mutuality, reciprocity, and freedom of religion, as well as the need to avoid what the Pope refers to as the dangers of fundamentalism and fanaticism (no. 29).

Another major discussion by our Plenary will concern the more recent technological developments in the media. These include blogs and websites, as well as with other media, which allow interaction. By their very nature, communications media offer wonderful possibilities to the human community, but they can also be used to ill effect. All of us have lamented how social discourse, including political debate, has too often become dehumanizing and polarizing. To use the words of Pope Benedict's Encyclical, websites, blogs, and social media, "need to focus on promoting the dignity of persons and peoples, they need to be clearly inspired by charity, and placed at the service of truth, of the good, and of natural and supernatural fraternity" (no. 73).

Overview of the past year

During our Assembly last year, we had the privilege of being addressed by Mr Phil Fontaine, then National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations. Our 2008 Plenary began a series of developments that have been most constructive in the relationship of the Church with the indigenous peoples of Canada. The historic highlight certainly was the 29 April audience that Pope Benedict graciously gave to representatives of the Aboriginal communities and of the Church in Canada. His words and welcome have been key in opening up a new chapter for Aboriginal Peoples and also for the Church, particularly in those many areas of our country in which we, as Bishops, are working in close partnership with indigenous communities.

Representing the Conference abroad

Toward the beginning of this year, I participated in the yearly meeting of the Co-ordination of Episcopal Conferences in Support of the Church of the Holy Land and the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land. This year we met mainly in Bethlehem, with visits also to the Palestinian territories as well as to Jerusalem.

In August, I accepted an invitation to attend the ninth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences which met in Manila, on the theme "Living the Eucharist in Asia". The meeting focused on how the unity of the Eucharist enables and encourages Christians in Asia to "cross boundaries of religion and race, culture and language, caste and class, as well as to forge bonds of fellowship within and also with the people of other religions and cultures."

Toward the beginning of the year, all members of the Executive Committee, together with the General Secretary, participated in the Meeting of the Bishops of the Church in America, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on the theme of The Personal Encounter with Jesus Christ in the Experience of Catechesis and Evangelization. The presentation by our

Conference focused on the essential importance in the Catholic tradition of seeing this personal encounter within the context of the Christian community – in its liturgical and sacramental celebrations, as well as in its outreach and witness.

This past month, the CCCB Executive and the General Secretary met in Huntington, NY, with our counterparts from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

With respect to other international representation, our Executive Committee at the beginning of this year invited Bishop François Lapierre, P.M.É., to be part of a session on episcopal leadership organized by the Episcopal Council of Latin America (CELAM).

I also wish to point out that early in this coming year, our Conference will be hosting the next meeting of the Bishops of the Church in America, to be held in Montreal in February 2010, focusing on the Year for Priests. Later in the year, our Conference will participate in an international meeting of faith leaders in Winnipeg on the occasion of the G-8 / G-20 meeting of political leaders in Canada. The Winnipeg meeting is being organized by the Canadian Council of Churches, to which our Conference belongs.

CCCB interventions

In reviewing the past year, I wish to note that our Conference:

- Strongly protested the awarding of the Order of Canada to Dr. Henry Morgentaler;
- Joined the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada in intervening before the Supreme Court of Canada, in order to affirm that, on the basis of the common good and public interest, the Government of Canada should have a major role in maintaining and implementing the *Assisted Human Reproduction Act*;
- Participated in an ecumenical observer mission of the Alberta oil sands, which had been organized by the ecumenical social justice agency Kairos, of which our Conference is also a member;
- And issued a letter to all Senators and members of Parliament, as well as providing resources to dioceses, on the unacceptability of any legislation that would endeavour to legalize euthanasia and assisted suicide.

In addition to the activities of our Councils, Commissions and committees on which you will later receive reports during this Plenary, over the past year, our Conference has:

- Issued a statement deploring the abhorrent notion of Bishop Hugh Williamson of the Society of St Pius X that the terrible evil of the Holocaust (or Shoah) did not exist or was exaggerated;
- Expressed our solidarity with the Holy Father in a personal letter to him following his public letter to the Bishops of the world;

- Welcomed the new Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Mr Justice Murray Sinclair;
- Joined the other Episcopal Conferences of the G-8 nations in urging our political leaders to “to take concerted actions to protect poor persons and assist developing countries”;
- Expressed our ongoing concerns about the practices of Canadian mining companies operating in Central America and the Philippines;
- And urged the Government of Canada to do more to assist those in refugee camps in Sri Lanka, conveying concerns similar to those expressed in the recent past with respect to Christian and other refugees from Iraq.

Conclusion

The Lectionary readings this past year have focused on the Gospel of Mark, in which a major theme is the slowness and limitations of the discipleship. The Gospel toward the end, as we all know, shows Jesus betrayed by one of his disciples, abandoned by the remaining disciples and, finally, denied three times by Peter, the leader of the disciples.

Yet for Mark this is not the end of a tragic story. For early in the morning on the first day of the week, the women who had come to the tomb were told by a young man robed in white to announce to the disciples and Peter that Jesus of Nazareth had been raised, and was proceeding them back to Galilee, where they would see him.

To go to Galilee, in other words to accept Jesus’ universal vision of salvation, his outreach and his mission. “Galilee of the Nations” was the phrase used by Isaiah and repeated by Matthew in his Gospel – Galilee of the pagans. Bordering on hostile Samaria, surrounded and permeated by gentiles, Galilee was where Jesus had commenced his ministry: casting out evil spirits, healing the sick, calling and forming disciples, outlining his own teaching and showing how it differed from that of the Pharisees and scribes.

Galilee is a one-word summary of our own pastoral ministry as Bishops. Labouring in a society which so often has little faith, yet where we see the presence of Jesus, we join him in his mission of liberating from evil, healing, calling forth new disciples, and teaching. Ours is a mission of life and hope in our own “Galilee of the Nations”.

“Be not alarmed; do not be afraid; Jesus is risen.” This is the message from the empty tomb. This is the reason why the First Letter of Peter (3.14-16) reminds us that no matter the challenge or the question, we are to respond respectfully but not be intimidated. May our Plenary Assembly this week encourage each and all of us in living and proclaiming the Good News of Jesus of Nazareth, and help us acknowledge the presence of the Risen Christ in the Galilee where he has called each of us to serve.