



PLENARY ASSEMBLY
23-27 September 2019
Item 3-A

23 September 2019

His Holiness Pope Francis
Apostolic Palace
Vatican City State

Most Holy Father,

Blessings and peace together with our fraternal greetings in the Lord.

At the beginning of the annual Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Bishops of Canada, we wish to apprise you of a significant number of our pastoral reflections throughout this week-long meeting which are in a special way being assisted by your magisterium, inspired by your witness, and strengthened by your charisma as Successor of Peter and therefore as the “permanent and visible source and foundation of unity of faith and communion” (*Lumen Gentium*, 18).

In collaboration with the “PALL-LIFE” project of the Pontifical Academy for Life, our Conference is “*fostering relationships ... to building the common good*”, in part by alleviating “*suffering through palliative care*” and hospices, and at the same time discerning those manifold attempts so common in today’s society to reduce human life to “*a thing*”, “*a burden*” or “*a waste*” and, as you say, “*only seemingly*” promise “*to promote personal freedom*”, since they are “*based on a utilitarian view*” of the person and human life (address to the Italian Association of Medical Oncology, 2 September 2019). At the opening session of our Plenary, we will receive a report on a project involving our Conference with Catholic institutions as well as social agencies to develop a parish resource on the grace-filled and life-giving alternative of palliative and hospice care. Once the parish resource is completed, similar initiatives will be undertaken to develop other educational resources on palliative care but intended for the use of schools and also in the formation of healthcare personnel.

The keynote address of our Plenary Assembly will be given by Archbishop Giampietro Dal Toso, Adjunct Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, in his capacity as President of the Pontifical Mission Societies. He will be speaking on evangelization in preparation for next month’s Extraordinary Missionary Month, which you initiated some two years ago when you called for “*renewed fervour*” in “*the missionary transformation of the Church’s life and pastoral activity*” (letter to Cardinal Fernando Filoni, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, 22 October 2017). This same assessment you have frequently noted throughout your pontificate, in your Apostolic Exhortations *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, and again most recently in *Christus Vivit*. The same appraisal was also made over the past century by your illustrious predecessors, each in his own words and with his own insights, just as our Assembly too is again considering in depth the missionary and pastoral importance of ecclesial as well as personal transformation.

Tomorrow, a number of our brother Bishops will share their experiences of, and insights into, the Synod of Bishops on *Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment* which you convoked last year. Also part of the panel discussions will be two young delegates to the International Youth Forum which was organized by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life to reflect on the local application of your Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*; the discussion will also include our Conference's coordinator for World Youth Day. This way, we hope to continue what you rightly described as "*one of the fruits*" of the Synod: "*The enrichment of intergenerational dialogue, the enrichment of exchange and the value of realizing that we need one another, that we have to work to create channels and spaces that encourage dreaming of and working for tomorrow, starting today*" (homily at the Closing Mass for World Youth Day, 27 January 2019, Campo San Juan Pablo II, Panama).

Later, our Plenary Assembly will listen to an ecumenical and interfaith panel presentation on challenges to freedom of religion and freedom of conscience in the current cultural and political contexts of Canadian society. This too is a recurring theme throughout your Petrine ministry. In your words, "*freedom of conscience and religious freedom*" are not "*limited to freedom of worship alone*" but allow "*all to live in accordance with their religious convictions*" and so "*are inseparably linked to human dignity*" as well as to the "*importance of religion for building bridges between people*" (address at the Esplanade of the Hassan Tower, Rabat, Morocco, 30 March 2019). The practical implications of this in Western countries, which you pointed out the following day, is that "*we Christians face the danger that some governments will take away our freedom of conscience,*" and you went on to refer to the situation of "*Christian doctors and health care institutions that do not have the right of conscientious objection regarding, for example, euthanasia.*"

At other points later during the week, our Plenary Assembly will once again return to the vital question of responsible ministry and the protection of minors and vulnerable adults. In addition to receiving an update on the new Standing Committee our Conference has established to assist in this matter, the Bishops of Canada will share and reflect on best practices as they continue to implement our revised and expanded guidelines, *Protecting Minors from Sexual Abuse: A Call to the Catholic Faithful in Canada for Healing, Reconciliation, and Transformation*, as well as the norms you gave the whole Church this past May 2019 in your Apostolic Letter issued *motu proprio*, *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*. We thank you for encouraging and guiding us and all the Church toward what your *motu proprio* refers to as "*a continuous and profound conversion of hearts,*" "*concrete and effective actions*", and the "*personal sanctity and moral commitment*" which "*can contribute to promoting the full credibility of the Gospel message and the effectiveness of the Church's mission*" in addressing "*the crimes of sexual abuse*".

As well, this Plenary Assembly will reflect on the challenges and opportunities of providing pastoral ministry and chaplaincy services in correctional institutions, especially those under federal jurisdiction. Here again your own personal witness is an important incentive: your celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation with young detainees in Panama and your encouraging them to "*seek and find the paths of integration and transformation*" (homily, Centro de Cumplimiento de Menores Las Garzas de Pacora, 25 January 2019); your message the following month to the staff of the Regina Coeli correctional institution on keeping "*'the window open' to hope, on the part of both the prison and of each person*" (address, 7 February 2019); and your visit on Holy Thursday this past 18 April to the Velletri high-security correctional facility, celebrating the Eucharist with the prisoners and washing their feet.

Among other topics this week, the Bishops of our Conference will continue to dialogue on accompanying the Indigenous Peoples in our country. Your examples this year and throughout your pontificate are an inspiration and encouragement to us:

- Your video this past 18 January to participants in the World Indigenous Youth Gathering by way of preparation for World Youth Day with your message on the need to search for answers to the “*many truly scandalous situations of alienation and exclusion, rejection and impoverishment*”;
- Your address of 14 February to the participants in the Fourth Global Meeting of the Indigenous Peoples’ Forum, on how Indigenous Peoples have “*become for all of us a wake-up call that emphasizes that man is not the owner of nature, but only its steward*”;
- Your address of 3 May regarding the meeting promoted by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development on the mining industry, in which you recalled the “*precarious condition of our common home*”, and how large-scale economic projects can have particular impact on Indigenous communities and their cultural traditions, when instead Indigenous Peoples “*should be the principal dialogue partners*” when their land is affected.

Our Conference on another occasion has said to the Episcopal Council for Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM) that the upcoming Synod on the Amazonian Region which you have convoked has particular resonance for Canada. First of all, because of past errors in relating to Indigenous Peoples, including their colonial denigration, economic and social marginalization, and the devastating erosion of their spiritual and linguistic heritage, often at the cost of their community and social identity. Secondly, because of the growing understanding of the environmental importance of the North which only today, not unlike the Amazon, is being recognized as invaluable and important for the health of the whole planet.

Holy Father, you will be present in our hearts and minds not only during the above discussions and reflections but throughout this meeting of our Plenary Assembly. In unison with you in all aspects and areas of our pastoral ministry, and united with you in the communion of faith, we pray for you and your ministry, and in turn we ask you to bless us and all the faithful of our dioceses and eparchies including the guests and observers present at the Plenary Assembly and those who follow via social media.

Fraternally yours in Christ the Good Shepherd,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Lionel Gendron, P.S.S." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

+ Lionel Gendron, P.S.S.
Bishop of Saint-Jean-Longueuil and
President of the Canadian Conference of Catholic
Bishops