

REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT
2008 Plenary Assembly
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB)

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

1. Year of Saint Paul

Pope Benedict XVI has invited the Church to celebrate the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of Saint Paul with a year of special celebrations, from 28 June 2008 to 29 June 2009. This Pauline Year provides a wonderful context for our Plenary Assembly. Like Paul, we too, in our respective ministries, are called to proclaim the Good News in season and out (2 Timothy 4.2), to discern and adapt the vocabulary and images of our culture which seem best suited to conveying the message of Christ (see Acts 17.15-34), and to accept that if we are to share in the glory of the resurrected Christ, then we also share in the sufferings of his Cross (Galatians 5.14-17).

The Bishops of Canada have already been invited to indicate what their dioceses are planning for the Pauline Year; the information is being made accessible on the CCCB website. In addition, this Plenary will include presentations on Saint Paul by two resource persons, as well as reflections with our brother Bishops who will be participating next month in the Ordinary General Synod on *The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*. Also by way of paying homage to Paul and his continuing pertinence, I will be referring in this report to a few themes from his writings which seem to have particular relevance for the current priorities and concerns of our Conference.

2. Aboriginal Peoples

One of the major aspects about the history of the evangelization of our country is our partnership with the Aboriginal Peoples. As part of the story of the Paschal Mystery, it too is a history marked by both glory and tears, deeds of generosity and betrayal, the dawning of new light and continuing shadows of darkness. Most of all, it is part of the constant reminder, in the words of Paul, that we are to be ambassadors for Christ and witnesses of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5.18,20).

During this Plenary, there will be several significant moments focusing on the First Nations. This is a fitting follow-up to the 2007 meeting of the Plenary, at which the members passed three major resolutions on the relationship of the Church with the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada.

The first touched on the Council for Reconciliation, Solidarity and Communion, which began operating in 1998, following approval in principle by our Plenary in 1997. This past year, it received a new mandate from the Permanent Council and a new name: the Catholic Aboriginal Council. We will have an opportunity later today to honour three of its founding members. Today, we will have the honour of hearing from the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), Mr. Phil Fontaine. You may recall that on the eve of the Third Millennium, 30 November 1999, our Conference signed an Agreement of Understanding with the Assembly of First Nations, with Mr. Fontaine representing the AFN.

The second resolution by the 2007 Plenary called for a statement by our Conference to welcome the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This text was issued on 1 May, following which I wrote to each of the Commission members, conveying our hope that it would “shed light on the whole story of the former residential schools through the testimonies of those who lived it,” as well as “focus not only on the past, but also on the current situation involving Aboriginal Peoples and non-Aboriginal Peoples.”

A third resolution by the 2007 Plenary was for the CCCB to “take greater initiative to raise the profile of the Catholic presence to, involvement with and ministry among the Aboriginal Peoples of all Canadian dioceses, in both the North and the South”. This of course has long-range implications – first, for us as Bishops, in providing information on our diocesan and regional Aboriginal programs; secondly, for the Aboriginal Council, which has already begun a series of statistical studies on the presence of the First Nations in our communities; and thirdly, for a renewed communications capacity by the CCCB, which will be discussed later during this Plenary in view of more effective and strategic planning.

Our Conference was not historically involved with the former Indian Residential Schools. At the same time, well over a dozen Canadian Catholic dioceses had some degree of involvement, together with many of the Catholic religious institutes and societies of apostolic life that were present in our country at the time. It is true that we must insist on accuracy and clarity regarding the corporate responsibilities of any Catholic organization involved with the Residential Schools. At the same time, we also need to make it clear that Catholic leaders, in their respective capacities, have already made a series of statements of regret on the Residential Schools. These include the March 1991 apology from Catholic Bishops and religious superiors whose respective organizations had been involved in the schools; the July 1991 apology from the Oblate Conference of Canada; the May 1993 apology by the Jesuit General Superior; the 1993 CCCB brief to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples; and the March 2004 joint pastoral letter by the CCCB Commission for Theology and the Commission for Social Affairs on eliminating racial and religious discrimination.

In terms of more current developments, we can and should signal our appreciation to the Corporation of Catholic Entities parties to the Indian Residential School Settlement. The generous efforts of its members are helping all the Church in Canada, as well as Aboriginal Peoples, to move forward beyond the pains and disappointments of the Residential Schools. I also wish to take this opportunity to thank my brother Bishops who have already begun to assist at local meetings involving the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In the words of the CCCB statement welcoming the Commission, may the truth that frees be a source of healing and reconciliation for all.

3. Afghanistan

As Paul so often reminds us at the beginning of his letters, peace is conjoined with grace, and it is peace that is to be the protection of minds and hearts (Philippians 4.7). In the Catholic tradition, recourse to force may be considered a legitimate but extreme means for protecting an individual or a community, but only under certain conditions (see *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 401). Even then, it is a dangerous option that always

comes with double-edged consequences. Canadian hearts and minds remain anguished over the conflict in Afghanistan. All Canadians are deeply grateful for the bravery and dedication of our men and women who are assisting the people of Afghanistan at the cost and risk of their own lives, both in terms of military protection as well as in reconstruction efforts and development work. However, it is an ongoing concern that the Government of Canada has yet to make clear the goals of our mission in Afghanistan. If these goals are not articulated, it is difficult to determine bench marks, and almost impossible to evaluate successes and failures.

In early February of this year, as President I wrote the Prime Minister, to “ask the Government of Canada to show greater transparency on the issues surrounding the Afghanistan conflict.” Our Conference called for “More complete and reliable information from the government” to “help Canadian citizens better understand the objective, the questions and the conditions involved in the Afghanistan conflict, and also how to evaluate the engagement there of Canadian armed forces and humanitarian agencies.” Such information, we said, “is essential if all Canadians are to be involved in making decisions that can lead to real and lasting peace in that country.”

To date, Canadians are no clearer about the Canadian role in Afghanistan. While respecting the need of the government for ensuring that the release of information does not endanger the presence of Canadians or the safety of the people of Afghanistan, there remains a moral obligation on the part of the government to provide clarity and be transparent. This federal election campaign is a good opportunity to remind the Prime Minister and all those running for federal office of the words of Pope Benedict XVI: “war is the worst solution for all sides.” If military action is considered to be necessary in Afghanistan, then at least the people of Canada should be given adequate and accurate information to be able to debate the issues facing the Afghanistan people and to evaluate Canadian contributions.

4. Life issues

The question of war involves concern about life. For Canadian society, the past year has been marked by other worrisome developments concerning human life as well:

- Toward the end of 2007, it became evident that the Government of Canada was adopting a new policy on the execution of Canadians in other countries. In December, at the request of the Permanent Council, I conveyed to the Prime Minister our concerns that the “life and dignity of each human person ... be respected and protected without exception.”
- Over the past year, and especially around the time that Mr. Robert Latimer was given day parole in February, one often saw in the media a certain degree of sympathy for euthanasia and so-called “mercy killing”. In case this might be reflective of a possible change in public and social attitudes, the CCCB Executive Committee has asked the Catholic Organization for Life and Family (COLF) to monitor this issue closely, which it is doing in close collaboration with the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition.
- This summer, there was the regrettable decision to award Dr Henry Morgentaler the Order of Canada, with the problematic involvement, one way or another, by the

Governor General and also the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada. The CCCB issued a statement of dismay in July; earlier this month, Cardinal Jean-Claude Turcotte, supported by the Quebec Assembly of Catholic Bishops, announced he was returning his Order of Canada medal. Evidently, this whole question continues to have important repercussions for the Church and Canadian society, since the Order of Canada in this case appears to be an award for abortion, giving it social approval, social endorsement and social standing.

- Most recently, the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario developed a draft policy on “Physicians and the Ontario Human Rights Code”, which suggested “there will be times when it may be necessary for physicians to set aside their personal beliefs in order to ensure that patients or potential patients are provided with the medical treatment and services they require.” There were strong responses by Archbishop Thomas Collins and other Bishops from Ontario, as well as the Catholic Health Association of Ontario, to this questioning of freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. Although the College of Physicians has made important modifications to its proposed text, this remains a serious issue which will continue to be followed carefully by COLF, the Catholic Health Association of Canada and the Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute.

Each of the above questions, including the war in Afghanistan, involves the dignity and sacredness of human life. For Catholics, such issues are not some sort of secondary option, for the simple reason that we consider human life to be the most basic of human rights (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 155). Obviously, we Bishops, as teachers and witnesses of faith, have a tremendous challenge before us. Not only do we need to ensure that a principled response is given to such questions, we also must encourage all the faithful to be better informed, more active and more articulate in protecting and defending the sacredness of human life and the inviolability of conscience.

At the same time, we need to remind Catholics that they cannot serve the Gospel of Christ, which is the Good News of life, simply by any means at hand or by whatever rhetoric that might come to mind. As the Second Vatican Council recalled in its Declaration on Religious Freedom, “In the exercise of all freedoms, the moral principle of personal and social responsibility is to be observed.” This always means respecting the “rights of others and ... the common welfare of all”, and dealing with others in “justice and civility” (*Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 7). In the words of Saint Paul, by turning to the living and true God and denouncing false idols, Christians are called to a work of faith, a labour of love and steadfastness of hope, which are to be characterized by joy, expectation, conviction and hospitality in our imitation of Christ (1 Thessalonians 1.3-9).

5. Restructuring

Our Conference has been in a process of restructuring since the 2004 Plenary. Although this most recent chapter was sparked by a financial crisis, restructuring remains an ongoing process. The current reflections in many ways are a continuation of the work of the 1986-1990 Taskforce on CCCB Future Directions, which looked at the overall nature and role of our Episcopal Conference. With the first phase of our current restructuring having already given us an opportunity to confirm the structures and roles of the Permanent Council and

Executive Committee, our second phase on CCCB activities and Commissions is now entering completion. During this Plenary, you will be invited to receive and discuss a report by the Permanent Council concerning Episcopal Commissions and the new, more flexible structures to be known as Standing Committees. Current restructuring continues the same thrust as the earlier Taskforce: to ensure that Bishops as the members take ownership of their Conference and its activities. This no doubt will also continue to be the challenge for every new generation of Bishops.

To echo Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians (chapter 12), the common good of the Church is served by a variety of charisms, offices and ministries; so also our Conference will be the stronger by having a greater variety of structures. As you will be reminded again over the coming days, the aims of the second phase of restructuring are: 1) to make better use of the National Commissions, which should be key in helping to animate and challenge our Assembly; 2) to establish Standing Committees that will be ongoing, focused and task oriented, while also more flexible in terms of allowing for membership involving experts who need not be Bishops; 3) to rely more on *Ad Hoc* Committees when there are specific issues to be studied in the short term; and 4) to make better use of external expertise by means of our ongoing relationships and partnerships, especially with Catholic organizations and agencies.

After this Plenary, there will continue to be aspects of restructuring that need implementation, as well as a few questions requiring further reflection. In addition to a discussion this week on the principles and practicalities of CCCB involvement in publishing, there is now also a proposal by the Executive that the Permanent Council review how the Sectoral Commissions can best be coordinated as an integral part of the Conference, and thus assisted in their invaluable services as task-oriented advisory episcopal bodies.

Another aspect of restructuring which will involve further reflection over the coming months is how the Eparchial Bishops of the Eastern Churches wish to participate in our Assembly. Our revised Statutes received *recognitio* from the Congregation for Bishops in late 2007. Eparchial Bishops continue to be most welcome to participate as members of our Conference, and so assist in our common sharing on the pastoral needs of all the People of God within our nation. However, the Bishops of the Eastern Churches have their own respective Synods for decision making, and it is now clearer that the CCCB by definition is a structure of the Latin Church and not of the Eastern Churches. How then can we ensure the flexibility needed for communication and collaboration among our various ecclesial traditions? During this Plenary, the Eparchial Bishops will be meeting to help the CCCB look at this question and how it might have possible future implications for the structures of our Conference.

6. 2008 International Eucharistic Congress

Before coming to my conclusion, I wish to signal the deep appreciation by all the Bishops and faithful of Canada to Cardinal Marc Ouellet, his team of organizers and the participants for the 2008 International Eucharistic Congress this past June in Quebec City. It was a wonderful testimony and inspiration for all of us who were present, and great encouragement for the faithful in our dioceses.

It will now be important for our Plenary Assembly and each of us individually to reflect how the Congress can continue to inspire and assist all our communities in our ever growing appreciation and understanding of the Eucharist as “God’s gift for the life of the world”. To summarize our challenge using the words of Saint Paul, how can our celebrations of the Eucharist help us in our calling not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed, discerning the will of God in what is good, acceptable and perfect, and presenting our very being to God in a holy and acceptable sacrifice (Romans 12.1-2)?

7. Words of appreciation

Every letter of Paul ends with commendations and personal greetings, which is a good reminder how faith is inextricably linked with personal and communal relationships. The Body of Christ daily involves flesh-and-blood implications.

As I conclude my report on the activities of the past year, I wish to make a few special acknowledgements.

Over the past year, there have been repeated and concerted efforts by the Canadian Religious Conference (CRC) and the CCCB to re-establish good communications. I thank the CRC leadership for their commitment to this, and I also express my gratitude to Bishop Jacques Berthelet, C.S.V., Archbishop Daniel Bohan, and General Secretary Msgr. Mario Paquette, P.H., for being part of a joint CCCB - CRC *Ad Hoc* Committee which will present its report to the Permanent Council later this fall.

This past February, the other members of the Executive as well as the General Secretary and I were present at the 35th Meeting of the Bishops of the Church in America, held at Huntington, NY. The focus was the document published by the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, which had met in Aparecida, Brazil, during May 2007. The Meeting of the Bishops of the Church in America provided both the CCCB and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops an opportunity to offer their own reflections on the CELAM text.

Earlier this summer, at the invitation of the Canadian Council of Churches, I addressed an international meeting of faith leaders in Hokkaido, Japan, held in parallel to the G8 Summit of political leaders. In preparation for the Summit meeting, I also joined the other Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences of the G-8 countries in writing our political leaders, asking them to give particular attention to world poverty and global climate change. Our letter, by the way, was used by the Holy Father in his Angelus message of 6 July, when he took the same thoughts and concerns as in our joint letter and made them his own.

For both these events, Huntington and Hokkaido, I wish to acknowledge the fine collaboration of the CCCB General Secretariat and all the staff, for the excellent work that was done on each of the CCCB texts.

Next month, at the end of October, I will be participating in a seminar in Chicago being hosted by DePaul University and the Catholic Theological Union, entitled “Transformed by Hope: Building a Catholic Social Theology for the Americas”. This exchange will reflect on the 1968 to 2008 contributions by CELAM in its texts ranging from Medellin to Aparecida. But before then, shortly after this Plenary, Vice President Bishop Pierre Morissette and Co-Treasurers Bishops James M. Wingle and Paul-André Durocher will join the General Secretary and me for the annual meeting of the Executives of the Episcopal Conferences of the United States and Canada, which will be held this year in Montreal

Sharing this advance information with you gives me the happy opportunity as well to thank my colleagues on the Executive for their welcome insights, constructive suggestions and patient collaboration over the past year.

On a final note of appreciation and commendation, I wish to thank all the members of the CCCB for your contributions and participation in the life and activities of our Conference, as well as for your support given to me as President. To end with another brief citation from Saint Paul, his letter to Philemon (verse 7): “I have received much joy and encouragement from your love.”

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President
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

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