



Pastoral Letter

Towards a Renewed Church

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Let us be Witnesses of Joy and Hope

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women 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.

GAUDIAUM ET SPES, Para. 1

If I start this letter by quoting the beginning of the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* of the Second Vatican Council, there are two reasons for this. First, it is because my Episcopal Motto has been inspired by it: Joy and Hope. Secondly, it is because this text, published in 1965, is still scathingly relevant as we embark on our Diocesan synodal process.

In our world and in our Church, we see reasons for joy and hope, but also for sorrow and anguish. I would like to draw your attention to some of these.

Like you, I have been observing that the pandemic, the climate crisis and the raging wars are having a major impact on our world. The months of social distancing and lockdown in response to the pandemic have taken their toll; witnessing the horrors of war and the ominous signs of climate change on a daily basis does not bode well for us and the generations that are succeeding us. All these situations have been revealing vulnerabilities; in people, in social ties, in relationships between peoples, and in relations within our common home.

Here, in Quebec, this vulnerability has borne several countenances:

- We find economic vulnerability, which has been leading to a rise in the cost of living, a housing crisis and a growing gap between the rich and the poor.

- We also observe a personal vulnerability, which is seen in the fragility of our seniors, the increase in mental health problems, including an eco-anxiety in the majority of our youth, irritability and violence, even femicide.
- And my hope is that the new government elected yesterday will pay attention to these important issues.

As citizens and as followers of Christ, we encounter sadness and anguish in our families, our friends, our neighbourhoods and our faith communities. We are close to this suffering on a daily basis. I sometimes hear people telling me that we can't do anything about economic and social problems, that it is beyond our means or that it is ultimately not our responsibility.

It is at times like these that I like to remember the words of the Council that I quoted above: "Nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in [the] hearts [of the followers of Christ]." It is because we are part of one great human family and because we have at heart the complete human flourishing of the women and men of this time, that we cannot remain indifferent to these situations.

Also for this reason, I wanted, in solidarity with the Leadership Team, the *Conseil presbytéral* and the *Conseil diocésain de pastorale*, to commit ourselves to a synodal process a year ago. Of course, the call of Pope Francis to prepare the Synod of Bishops in 2023 was what triggered this. However, just as I reminded you last year, we will work through this process for ourselves, to listen to "new ways of being close, finding solace and compassion to continue to proclaim the Good News in our Diocese."

I repeat: the synodal process is not just one activity among many others. It is not enough to have a few of our "synod meetings" to ease our conscience and then move on. Allowing ourselves to be renewed as Church requires that we develop a synodal way of being and doing Church in order to proclaim the Gospel today. This also begins with a basic pastoral attitude: to listen to what the Spirit is telling us today about what is at the heart of the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the women and men of this time. This is the very essence of our missionary project that dwells in us: to welcome and reveal to the world the Word that frees and gives life.

Listening to the Spirit also means paying attention to those sprouts of hope that are working their way in our Diocese. Thus, regarding our synodal process, if I count the people surveyed by Léger Marketing in September 2021, more than 2,300 people have shared their joys and hopes, as well as their sorrows and anxieties about the present and future of our Diocesan Church. We are just at the beginning of this process, but I am pleased to see that it has begun to generate a strong voicing of opinions, which are necessary for the establishment of a synodal culture.

I would also like to remind you that, despite the departure of several members of our pastoral staff, eight new people have joined us this year. How can we not see this as a sign of renewal and hope?

Another sign of hope is the penitential pilgrimage that Pope Francis made among us last July. I am aware of the limits of such an exercise. I realize, as you do, that there is still much to be done to repair the damage inflicted and to envisage a future in solidarity with indigenous peoples. However, this visit is a sign of hope because it opens up a possible future among the various nations that inhabit this territory. When men and women of good will seek peace and reconciliation together, in truth, the Gospel is made real in our midst. We can only rejoice in this, even if enormous strides remain to be taken together. Our indigenous sisters and brothers, including the members of the St. Francis Xavier community of Kahnawà: ke, hope that we will listen to them to enable us to walk together on this path of reconciliation.

Pope Francis also took advantage of this visit to address a message to all pastoral actors during the vespers he presided over at the Notre-Dame de Québec cathedral. I would like to dwell a little on this message, which I invite you to read and reflect on. He calls on Church leaders to take up three challenges, related to the joy and hope of Christ's disciples.

The first challenge: to make Jesus known today and now to the people of this time. I quote:

*We cannot presume to communicate the joy of faith by [...] replicating older forms of pastoral work. We must find new ways to proclaim the heart of the Gospel to those who have not yet encountered Christ. This calls for a pastoral creativity capable of reaching people where they are living—not waiting for them to come—**finding opportunities for listening, dialogue and encounter.***

The second challenge launched by Pope Francis: be a witness to the joy of the Gospel by transforming this joy from within.

Pope Francis continued:

***You are key figures and builders of a different Church:** humble, meek, merciful, which accompanies processes, labours decisively and serenely in the service of inculturation, and shows respect for each individual and for every cultural and religious difference. Let us offer this witness!*

Finally, this, too, is the basic criterion of the credibility that we have to rebuild in our Quebec society, to be a Church of fraternity.

*The Church, as Pope Francis reminds us, will be a credible witness to the Gospel the more its members embody communion, **creating opportunities and situations** that enable all those who approach the faith to encounter a welcoming community, one capable of listening, entering into dialogue and promoting quality relationships.*

Hope resides in these words of Pope Francis. They echo what hundreds of people have told us in the various meetings held over the past year as part of our Diocesan synodal process, "Be a Church that welcomes everyone!" "Be true witnesses to Christ and his message." "Be consistent with the Gospel message." "Live up to the Gospel."

Speaking of consistency, Pope Francis also recalled the pain and shame that all Christians feel when faced with the sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable persons by ministers of the Church. In our context in Quebec, television series, newspaper articles and legal proceedings constantly remind us of these dramas. I am asking you to continue to do everything possible to protect minors and vulnerable persons and to show compassion for the victims, the survivors and their families. Let us make our Diocese and each of our parishes safe, secure and exemplary in the education, prevention and treatment of abuse.

In closing, I would like to return to the results of the first stage of our synodal process. I would first like to thank the members of the supporting and discernment committees for the work they have accomplished. The Diocesan summary report indicates some avenues that I would like to see explored in the coming year.

I remind you that we are just entering this first stage of listening and meeting. In order for it to bear fruit, it requires that we devote more time to it. Time to meet and listen even more to the members of our communities, on various subjects, but also and above all to people marked by anguish and sadness, by isolation and by poverty. Let us beware of hasty conclusions that would make us immediately consider what is good for others, but that would dispense us from really listening to them. Above all, let us put aside all forms of religious paternalism that would place us in the position of those who know, facing those who do not. No true dialogue can be established under such conditions.

If, understandably, we have first devoted our energies to meeting and listening to the people who are closest to us (parishioners, our volunteers, the members of our movements, our religious communities), I sincerely hope that, in this second stage of our process, we will go beyond this first circle of proximity to reach out to those who have so much to teach us and evangelize us, so that our Church will be truly open and welcoming to all.

In the coming year, I would like to see opportunities, times, places and spaces (perhaps outside our walls) arise in each of our communities to give voice to the greatest number of people and to discern how the Word of God works in sincere hearts. Let us do this not as a chore, but as a missionary process, as a permanent process that allows us to adjust to God's plan for our world, following the example of the Lord's challenge to St. Francis of Assisi: "Go, Francis, repair my Church!"

Let us listen to what the people in our Diocese say they are anxiously enduring about the economic situation, the environment, and the treatment of seniors. Let us go and listen to what enables the joy of the women and men here. Let us go out to meet young people, families, the poor, those who do not share our faith or who no longer recognize themselves in the Church. Let us go and meet our sisters and brothers of other Christian confessions and other religious convictions. We already encounter such people in catechetical activities, in meetings with the bereaved, with future brides and grooms and with parents presenting their children for baptism.

There are also, however, community groups, movements, round tables, companies, businesses and self-help organizations in our areas that deserve to be met and listened to. Let's go and meet them! Leave behind our comfort zone, our common places and our habits! Let us bring about fraternal, joyful, open and welcoming opportunities in which each and every one of those participating can express their desires for our Church to enable a better response to the human and spiritual needs of today. Let us respond with creativity and daring: I know that we can do it.

Also, no shortage of topics is lacking to initiate and deepen the dialogue. I will name a few: the place and role of women in our Church; leadership in our communities; current social, ecological and economic issues; unconditional welcoming; new places for listening and sharing the Word; intergenerational solidarity; ways of communicating the faith today; the renewal of our liturgies; contemporary spiritual research; the formation of our pastoral staff, volunteers and all the baptized. All these topics, and many others, can be explored in order to identify what should be the object of our pastoral caring for the years to come.

At the heart of these encounters, let us listen with the ears of our heart. Let us discern with these people what the Spirit is saying to our Church, what he is inspiring in the People of God. It is from this attentive and loving listening that will emerge the initiatives and actions to which, in the future, we will dedicate ourselves. This is the way our Church will be renewed, profoundly, sustainably and prophetically.

This synodal process is one of conversion. As in any conversion, there are twists and turns, and difficult choices and trials. We have not embarked on an easy path, but a difficult one. We are, however, journeying on it together, with each other, for each other. If discouragement assails us, let us count on one another to regain our momentum; if we encounter resistance, let us act as one to overcome it; if fear paralyses us, let us trust one another. Let us share our good deeds, let us tell one another what we are learning in this synodal process, let us be fraternal with one another: our testimony will speak louder than all our documents and speeches.

For deep within us I know, as the prophet Jeremiah said, that 'within me, there is something like a burning fire,' (Jer 20:9) a fire that is generated by the love of the Lord, in which we put our joy and hope.

So, at the beginning of this new pastoral year, let us remain ready to serve! Let us rejoice to see our Church renewed by the power of the Spirit! Let us be creators of the future for the world and with the world! Let us be witnesses of joy and hope!

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