



**Assemblée des
évêques catholiques
du Québec**

Catholics in a Pluralist Québec

January 2013

Original Title: *Catholiques dans un Québec pluraliste*.
English Translation by Richard Bernier.

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Legal Deposit – January 2013
Bibliothèque nationale du Québec
ISBN 978-2-89279-142-6 (Printed version)
ISBN 978-2-89279-143-3 (PDF)



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*Les amours, les travaux,
même le chant d'un oiseau,
ton cœur, mes mots,
font tourner le monde.*

(Loves and labours,
Even the song of one bird,
Your heart, my words,
Make the world turn.)

- Gilles Vigneault

When Vigneault sings of the loves that make the world go around, Christians may hear an echo in their hearts of the Love that is the source of all love, the overflowing and infinite Love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who has made himself known to us in Jesus Christ.

God does indeed love this world, our world, with its loves and its labours, its joys and sorrows, its beauty and its wretchedness. He loves it passionately, even madly, to the point of giving his very self that the world might have life and have it abundantly.

God does indeed love this Québec, our Québec, with all its talents and dreams, its music and its dance – in its exuberant moments, but in its silences too.

God loves Québec, which has now reached a new point in living out its history. It is a stage of maturity, a stage in which Québec must face the challenges of an increasingly diverse world, where differences of opinion and belief are expressed and displayed in new ways.

This Bishops' pastoral message, titled "Catholics in a Pluralist Québec", is addressed first of all, naturally, to the Catholics of Québec – but not to them only. We also offer these pages to those of our fellow-citizens who may not share our faith, by way of contributing to the deliberations of society and to the quest for new paths, tasks in which we are all committed together.

This message is an initiative shaped by the Year of Faith promulgated by Pope Benedict XVI on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, in the follow-up to the Synod on the New Evangelization which took place in Rome from October 7 to 28, 2012. May it shed light and bring hope into the midst of current debates!

+ *Pierre-André Fournier*

+ Pierre-André Fournier
Archbishop of Rimouski
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November 16, 2012

Catholics in a Pluralist Québec

Past generations of Quebecers generally had the sense of living in a society that was religiously and culturally united. Although minorities have always been at home here as well, Québec's collective identity grew out of the language and faith of the Catholic majority who descended from the early settlers from France.

As a matter of fact, when Québec adopted a flag for itself more than sixty years ago, it was only natural for it to feature, white on blue, the cross and the fleur-de-lis – two symbols that evoked the Christian faith and the French language.

Clearly, the situation has changed dramatically.

I. Québec's new pluralism

If it was once said that Quebecers were dyed-in-the-wool, tightly knit of *pure laine*, nowadays we would have to acknowledge that the wool has become as multicoloured as our traditional sashes, the *ceintures fléchées*. To use a biblical phrase, Quebecers today come “from every tribe and language and people and nation”.¹

This new reality is especially apparent in our churches. On any given Sunday, Mass is celebrated in more than twenty languages throughout Québec, and the crowds frequenting our great shrines have never been so cosmopolitan.

This new pluralism in Québec, however, is not only - or even primarily - a consequence of immigration. Many other changes have taken place, and are taking place, in our society, and it is often those changes that set the tone for current debates concerning secularity.

Movement toward deconfessionalization

Traditionally, most of Québec's institutions and associations, both public and private, were confessional in nature. From trade unions to social services to the cooperative movement, from hospitals to recreational organizations to youth groups, from schools to colleges to universities – nearly everywhere a Catholic identity and a link to the Church were in evidence.

¹ *Revelation 5:9.*

These works and institutions are the foundations on which modern Québec was built: a rich legacy shaped by personal commitment, the gift of self and voluntary Christian service.

We have good reason to be proud of that legacy as a component of our history, and not to let it be forgotten. It is part of our collective identity, just as the landscape of Québec is made up of church steeples, monuments, wayside crosses, and the many place-names that are so typical of our tradition.

One after another, though, Québec's institutions, associations and organizations have been deconfessionalized. The State has taken over from the Church and taken on the responsibility for services that were created, organized, and maintained for generations by clergy and religious communities. This is particularly true in the areas of education, health care, and social services.

The start of this movement of deconfessionalization is often traced to the Quiet Revolution in the Sixties, but it is rooted in the development of a mindset that had begun even earlier. It must be emphasized that it began before the waves of immigration of recent decades.

The trend towards secularization

As far as religion is concerned, we must note an even more meaningful tendency than changes to the confessionality of institutions and structures: namely, the transformation of mentalities.

In a more traditional society like the Québec of our grandparents' generation, people spontaneously took their bearings from God and religion. God was part of the shared worldview of the vast majority of Quebecers. This was true not only for personal choices and life decisions, but for those of society as well.

Québec has nevertheless been influenced in this area, as has much of today's world, by a trend that is virtually without precedent in human history: many people no longer turn to religion as a guide to the conduct of their lives. For them, it simply is not relevant. This is an outcome of what is called "secularization."

Ultimately, the process of secularization can lead to a culture and lifestyle that make no reference to God, to the sacred or to a religious perspective.

A new face of the Church

Our Church has also changed a great deal, and this transformation too has contributed to the shaping of Québec's new pluralism.

Following the deconfessionalization of common institutions, the Church's activity became more subdued. The approximately 3300 priests, 400 deacons and 11 000 consecrated religious present in Québec today², along with the thousands of lay Catholics who are involved in their own communities because of their faith, seek above all to live and act as the proverbial yeast in the dough. Thus, for example, parish-based food and clothing banks, and networks devoted to volunteering and to mutual assistance, are less visible than the charitable institutions of the past; but they nonetheless remain vital for many solitary persons, sick and shut-ins, underprivileged families, and immigrants left to their own devices. These services are one of the most important forms of Catholic involvement at the service of the most needy. In the same vein, one should also note the on-the-ground involvement of social action ministers.

For some, it may be confusing to see debates now emerging about the visibility of religious symbols proper to other religious beliefs and traditions, given that for the past generation or two, many Catholics have opted for more discreet expressions of presence and witness. This is one more factor that gives Québec's new pluralism its distinct tone.

Communications and the flow of ideas

The lightning-fast development of digital technologies in recent years has created unprecedented networks where every idea and ideology, every current of conviction and opinion, every philosophy and spirituality, can circulate freely. The Internet and social networking have woven a web of "virtual proximity" around the world, a web of information and discussion, seemingly limitless in its possibilities.

From a generational point of view, this phenomenon is truly a revolution. Those of us over fifty can remember "Expo year" with emotion, when the World's Fair was held in Montreal from April to October 1967. That year, Québec opened itself to the world as never before, discovering culture, dress, arts, language and even food from around the globe.

It must be difficult for younger people to imagine how new and groundbreaking this was at the time. The communications revolution has quickly made us grow accustomed to considering as normal what was, in 1967, a totally new discovery.

² According to data compiled by the AECQ secretariat, in 2011 there were 2029 diocesan priests, 1332 religious priests, 912 non-ordained men religious, 9993 women religious and 417 permanent deacons in Québec.

Though it is possible for some to use social networking and the means of communication to isolate themselves in a digital bubble, where they interact and share only with those who are like them and share their views, the outcome of the digital revolution for most of society has been the appearance and enrichment of a new and pioneering pluralism, one without borders.

Opposition to religion

In the 2001 Canadian census, 83.2% of Québec's population identified itself as Catholic, while 5.6% declared as their affiliation "no religion."³

Among those who describe themselves as "without religion" there are surely some who share the secularist view that religion simply has no relevance, and who do not concern themselves with it.

Among them we will also find people who explicitly describe themselves as atheists ("there is no God") and others who are agnostics ("it is impossible to prove either the existence or the non-existence of God"). These are currents of thought that have and have always had serious proponents, with whom believers can and must enter into respectful discussion.

However, it is not those currents of thought (which we might call "classic") that tend to make headlines nowadays in Québec or elsewhere around the world, but rather a militant anti-religious position that strongly opposes religion and its place in the public square.

Among the arguments cited in support of that militant ideology, one often finds the following:

- *Religion is a purely private matter. The public sphere ought therefore to be free of every trace of religion.*
- *Religion is a backward and outmoded phenomenon. The progress of science and civilization ought to result in its disappearance since religion consists of nothing but superstitions, beliefs and taboos that hinder people from reaching their full potential and real autonomy.*
- *Religion is a tool to create, impose, maintain and justify patriarchal and discriminatory power structures. Its influence must therefore be limited as much as possible in order to protect rights and freedoms.*
- *Religions are by definition sources of divisions and hatred. Despite their words of peace and brotherhood, they always lead to violence and war.*

³ These are the most recent data available on the *Statistics Canada* Web site. No data on religion based on the 2011 census has yet been published.

In a totally different vein, one must mention the revulsion and anger created by the discovery in recent years of scandalous sexual abuses of minors by religious and priests. These repugnant crimes have understandably helped to foster a strong antipathy towards the Church and towards religion in general.

Catholicism in many shades

Another important characteristic of Québec's new pluralism is the pluralism proper to Catholicism itself. Indeed, even if 80% of census respondents describe themselves as Catholics, it is clear that this affirmation can cover many different realities, many ways of belonging to the Church.

Hundreds of thousands of Catholics participate at Mass every week in churches throughout Québec. They thereby answer Christ's invitation to "do this in memory of Him" and thus bear witness that the Eucharist is the "vital source,"⁴ the "source and summit of the whole Christian life."⁵

At the same time, such practicing Catholics are not the majority of Catholics in Québec. Indeed, many Catholic Quebecers rarely participate in Sunday celebrations in churches, but they remain attached to Gospel values and to their Catholic identity and they turn to the Church at crucial points in their lives: births, particular celebrations, marriages, funerals, etc.

Many are attached to the Church, to the Faith and to the Catholic heritage even as they hold divergent convictions on fundamental issues such as family, sexuality or the ministries of the Church. They are keeping a certain distance, but they have not broken off ties.

What is more, one sometimes meets Catholics who have made room in their spiritual lives for ideas, doctrines, and practices borrowed from other religious traditions, for example from the East.

Nevertheless, shrines like Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, Notre-Dame-du-Cap and St. Joseph's Oratory continue to draw millions of pilgrims every year, including many whom we might otherwise describe as "estranged" or "non-practicing". New movements and new communities can be seen emerging at the heart of the Church, startling by their youthfulness, their intense spirituality, and their infectious enthusiasm; and from time to time, religious gatherings will attract quite unexpected crowds.

⁴ This expression is John Paul II's (from the letter *Mane nobiscum, Domine*), taken up again by Pope Benedict XVI in his message for the World Day of Prayer for Vocations 2012.

⁵ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *On the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, December 21, 1964, paragraph 11.

The fascination of religion

Despite all these cultural changes, despite deconfessionalization and secularization, despite estrangement from the Church and organized religion, the religious question ceaselessly arises – in the news, in arts and culture, in scholarly publications and in bestsellers, in blogs and in the media – in a word, everywhere.

Movies are a good example.

Films regularly appear that are inspired by religion and that enjoy a remarkable (sometimes unexpected) success, both locally and internationally. One thinks of Xavier Beauvais' *Of Gods and Men* (2010) and Philippe Gröning's *Into Great Silence* (2006). One thinks as well, of course, of Québec director Bernard Émond's revisiting of the theological virtues in his trilogy: *La Neuvaïne* (2005), *Contre toute espérance* (2007) and *La Donation* (2009).

Religious themes emerge in many different forms, traditional and non-traditional, serious and less serious, ranging from Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001, 2002, and 2003) to James Cameron's more recent film *Avatar* (2009), by way of the *Star Wars* saga, and the wild chases of *Indiana Jones* - courtesy George Lucas and Steven Spielberg - who sets out on quests for such famous religious artifacts as the Hebrews' Ark of the Covenant, or the Holy Grail sought by medieval knights.

Such productions as these provide images, themes and beliefs, at times cartoonish and misshapen, that meld with the cultural and religious imaginary of our time.

As far as the person of Jesus himself is concerned, he continues to fascinate and continually to inspire new works of literature, music, theatre and film – at times respectful, at times provocative.

• • •

We could doubtless identify other factors that shape Québec's new pluralism.

One may state without risk of contradiction, for all that, that our society is far from being unanimous or uniform when it comes to religious questions. It is marked by any number of trends and tendencies and seems likely to become more diverse still. It would be reckless to claim to be able to describe a single shared attitude or position of Quebecers on the issue of religion today.

It is in this very concrete context, of a diverse, pluralist Québec society, that the ongoing debate concerning the notion of secularity is unfolding.

II. Pluralism and religious freedom

*“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”*⁶

With these words Jesus replied to those who had attempted to trap him by asking whether a faithful Jew could pay the tax levied by the Romans: his questioners suggested that doing so would be, in a way, a recognition of the authority and thus of the gods of the Romans. Jesus’ answer could not be clearer and effectively provides, as Pope Benedict XVI sums it up, “a healthy distinction between the political and religious spheres”.⁷

It is on this “healthy distinction” that the notion of laicity rests.

Pluralist society and non-confessional institutions

The debates that have been taking place for several years now have demonstrated that there are several interpretations of the words “non-confessional” and “laicity” (*laïcité*).^{*} Not everyone is speaking of the same thing when they use these words; and by all appearances, not everyone has the same notion of how the notion of laicity should be implemented.

An institution is described as non-confessional, and is characterized by laicity, if it is independent of any religious belief. It neither favours nor discriminates against any church or religious group in particular. For their part, churches and religious groups have no power within such an institution.

The use of the word laicity to designate something that is “not concerned with or devoted to the service of religion” may seem novel for many Catholics who are more familiar with a traditional meaning of the word “lay”, namely “belonging to the ‘people’ as contradistinguished from the clergy”. This traditional meaning refers to the

⁶ *Matthew 22:21*

⁷ Benedict XVI, General Audience of September 17, 2008.

^{*} *Translator’s note:* There is a subtlety in the French expressions *laïque* and *laïcité* that can be challenging to capture in English; *laïcité* is widely used, as in this document, in a descriptive, non-pejorative way to designate the non-confessionality of institutions that operate without reference (either positive or negative) to religious identity and belief. *Laïcité* is sometimes translated as “secularism,” with an unfortunate negative connotation, or simply by the word “laicity” – a word which exists in English, originally meaning “the principles of the laity; the rule or influence of the laity; the fact of being lay” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition), but which is no longer in widespread use. “Laicity” has the shortcoming that its adjectival form would presumably be “lay”, which could be confusing: a “lay institution” is not exactly what is meant by an *institution laïque*. In this translation I have opted to translate *laïcité* as “laicity” and *laïque* as “non-confessional.” The latter has been widely used in Québec, for instance to describe the new regime of school boards that followed the deconfessionalization of the public school system.

“laity,” that is, the baptized in general who are not members of the clergy, and not to the laicity which is now being debated in Québec.

Laicity is a notion that is applied to institutions, and not to society as a whole. Indeed, society is made up of people with every kind of conviction, belief, spirituality and religious adherence, and religious organizations too are part of society. Thus it is characterized by “pluralism” rather than “laicity”.

Moreover, one must not confuse laicity with opposition to religion, a mistake that is sometimes made in the heat of debate. In a truly non-confessional context, there can no more be an official atheism than there can be an official religion.

Religious freedom and social involvement

In any democratic State, the government has a basic role to play to ensure what the preamble to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* calls the “universal respect for and observance” of rights and freedoms. This respect for rights includes the right to religious freedom.

Religious freedom certainly means being able to gather together freely with other believers for prayer and worship – but it means much more. According to the *Universal Declaration*, freedom of thought, conscience and religion includes “freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest [one’s] religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance” (Article 18). We are dealing here, it must be emphasized, with a fundamental right – not a concession or privilege granted by States to their citizens.

For Christians, this right concretely means being able to put the Gospel into practice in everyday life, in word and deed, in public and in private.

*“So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith.”*⁸

Who has not read or heard at some point the touching phrase of Christ where he identifies himself with all persons in need?

*“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. (...) Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”*⁹

⁸ *James 2:17-18*

⁹ *Matthew 25:35-36 and 40*

Thus, for Catholics, practicing one's religion means concretely serving the needy and abandoned. This can be done through individual initiatives, or by creating organizations for mutual assistance, sharing and charity that may – even in a pluralist society – be explicitly Catholic and acknowledged as such.

Putting the Catholic faith into practice can also mean speaking out or getting involved in movements, to transform institutions, laws, and living or working conditions that are unworthy, unfair, or otherwise contrary to the values of the Gospel.

Governments and the reality of religion

When a society opts for non-confessional institutions, this does not mean that there is no place for religion in its public life. For example, several laws passed by the National Assembly deal specifically with Catholic institutions: the best known among them is, no doubt, the *Act Respecting Fabriques* which covers the legal existence of parishes, and in particular which defines the role and powers of the wardens elected by parishioners to manage the community's goods. One thinks also of the law governing Catholic cemeteries, or the one dealing with religious congregations.

In fact, there are persons among the ranks of Québec's unionized public employees who are specifically mandated to address spiritual and religious needs – namely, the Spiritual Life and Community Involvement Animators in public schools, and spiritual care workers in establishments operating under the Ministry of Health and Social Services. By providing these services according to an ecumenical and inter-faith perspective, in keeping with the needs and traits proper to each environment, the State is promoting the common good, ensures the welfare of citizens, and upholds their rights.

A similar reality may be found in the realm of correctional services, where the presence of a pastoral worker can often be essential; nor can we neglect to mention the role of military chaplains. In fact, the bishop of all the men and women serving in the Canadian Forces is a member of the Assembly of Québec Catholic Bishops, and he carries out his ministry in close collaboration with ministers of other churches. Often enough, in difficult and even tragic circumstances, theirs is an absolutely indispensable ministry.

Yet another, different sort of example is the government's solicitude for the preservation of Québec's religious heritage and legacy. This is done in the name and for the benefit of all Quebecers, present and future.

Religion in the public square

An integral part of the practice of every religion is its communitarian dimension and its outward manifestations in the public sphere. This is a basic characteristic of religious affiliation.

Of course, faith emerges from individual conscience and personal freedom, but it is always lived with others; it is indeed personal, but not restricted to the private sphere only.

Thus, from its very beginnings, Christianity has been a movement that made itself visible in the public square. As is well known, Jesus drew crowds; he went about the villages and towns of Galilee, Judea and the surrounding regions, and people came to him from all over. At the time of his last visit to Jerusalem, he was welcomed by a joyful throng, and crucified in a public place the following Friday. A few weeks later, filled with the Holy Spirit, the apostle Peter proclaimed the resurrection of Christ to a crowd of pilgrims that had come to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost, and to that same crowd the proclamation of the Good News rang out in every language.

In subsequent centuries, public spaces have hosted Christian symbols and monuments, as well as expressions of faith like processions and traditional stations of the cross. The Church sees herself as a community open to the world, not a shadowy and secret cult, even though there have been – and, alas, continue to be – persecutions and tyrannies that condemn the faithful, for a time, to a clandestine existence or to exile.

New gestures, symbols and practices unfamiliar to Québec society are now joining the existing manifestations and symbols of the Christian faith. This presents a welcome challenge: to create an open and hospitable public sphere, where the values and beliefs of everyone can be expressed in mutual respect.

Though this is a challenge, it is also an opportunity – an opportunity to grow as a community, and to blaze a trail that other societies, led by the example of Quebecers, can follow.

III. Catholics in a pluralist Québec

Earlier generations of Catholic Quebecers could not have imagined living in an unmistakably pluralist society. This means that we have to learn new ways of being Catholic Christians in a society that no longer necessarily sees itself in us.

The centre and foundation: Jesus Christ

What makes all the difference for us is our adherence to Christ; and this same Jesus of Nazareth who is the centre of our lives, and who has so affected the history of humankind, continues to interest, intrigue and raise questions for people of today, even non-believers.

If we were to include a question about Jesus in an opinion poll today, we would no doubt obtain all kinds of answers, many of them very different from the faith of the Church. But did not the first disciples of Jesus live a very similar reality? A well-known passage of Scripture certainly leads us to such a conclusion. On that occasion, Christ presented something like an opinion poll:

*“Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, ‘Who do the crowds say that I am?’ They answered, ‘John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered, ‘The Messiah of God.’”*¹⁰

Jesus’ “opinion poll” confirms that people were asking themselves questions about him, and that they were trying to form an opinion about him. The decisive answer, however, came only from those close to him, through the mouth of Simon Peter. One had to have accompanied Jesus and spent time with him as a disciple to be able to accept the revelation of his identity and mission.

*“Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven’.”*¹¹

This is true today as well, all the more so because we live in a pluralist context and a world where all kinds of opinions about Jesus circulate, for instance in the media and social networks. A true understanding of Christ, an understanding that counts, one that provides a solid foundation for life and translates into concrete involvement in the world – such an understanding comes only (just as in the time of the Apostles) from a real experience of being together with the Lord, and of fraternity at the heart of the community of disciples, the Church. One cannot truly come to know Jesus in any other way.

¹⁰ Luke 9:18-20

¹¹ Matthew 16:17

The crucial choice: to live as a disciple of Jesus

The Gospels relate a turning-point in Jesus' public life, at the moment when a number of disciples who had followed him from the beginning decided to leave him. Bit by bit, for them Jesus' teaching had become too demanding and his words too difficult to accept. The turning-point came right after Jesus said, in his address given in the synagogue at Capernaum: *"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life."*

*"When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' (...) Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the Twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'"*¹²

Doesn't this scenario remind us somewhat of what we are living in our own day in Québec? Not so long ago, there were many of us following Christ and participating in the life of the Church, the community of disciples. Then, within a few years, *"many of his disciples turned back"*.

The Lord asks the same question today that he asked long ago to the twelve apostles – but now he addresses the question to us: *"Do you also wish to go away?"* Together we answer in our own turn, as did the small community of disciples around St. Peter who remained faithful: *"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life"*.

This underlines the importance of a community, even a small one, for Christian life. One is not, one cannot be, a Christian all by oneself. In a pluralist context, such a community is all the more necessary since the surrounding culture provides no support or guidance for living as a Christian.

Together to live our faith in Christ: the local church

On the eve of his death, Jesus said *"by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*¹³ Throughout the history of the Church and still today, many forms of community life have developed according to the needs and characteristics of each age, society and culture, such as rural and urban communities, new movements, religious congregations and others.

For most of us, however, the Christian community, the local church, is the parish.

¹² John 6:54,60,66-69

¹³ John 13:35

To be sure, the parish has changed and is no longer what it once was. In a more traditional Québec, the parish was in part a sociological reality. It was more or less identified with the village or neighbourhood: one could speak of “living in” this or that parish. In the new, pluralist Québec, however, the parish is increasingly a community to which one chooses to belong, an anchor-point and a place of belonging where one may live and grow in faith along with other believers.

There, in the parish, at the heart of the Christian community, we are baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and it is there that faith is nourished, lived, shared and handed on.

There, in the parish, we gather to hear the Word of God, receive the sacraments and celebrate the Lord’s Day every week.

There, in the parish, couples and families especially find companionship and support to deepen and fulfill their Christian vocation.

There, children are introduced to liturgical prayer, to the sacraments and to Christian life. There they enter into a journey of discovery and of deepening their faith, with the help of volunteer catechists who continue to become involved in great numbers from one end of Québec to the other – an unprecedented initiative in our Church’s history – to take charge of the Christian formation of children, which the schools no longer provide.

There, in the parish, catechumens and adults renewing their faith can learn or re-learn what it means to live as a Christian.

There, young people (and the not-so-young) can give meaning to their lives based on the Gospel, and can find the motivation and support to become concretely involved, in word and deed, on behalf of peace, justice, and the protection of the environment, as well as on behalf of respect for life and for the dignity of persons. As the Second Vatican Council, which opened fifty years ago this year¹⁴, affirmed so emphatically:

*“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men 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.”*¹⁵

¹⁴ This Year of Faith promulgated by Pope Benedict XVI underscores at once the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of Vatican II and the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

¹⁵ These are the opening words of the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution *On the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes)*, promulgated at the end of the Council, on December 7, 1965.

A treasure to be shared, a contagious joy

To be Catholic, in a pluralist society and in a world of communication and networking, is to be called to come face-to-face with difference: differences in faith, differences in religious practice (or no such practices at all), differences of conviction and opinion. Our attitude must be one of welcome, openness, respect and kind listening.

This attitude must manifest itself particularly by a determined involvement in ecumenical collaboration and interreligious dialogue, which are essential elements in the life and mission of the Church.

To be sure, in a society that has become accustomed to unceasing day-to-day conflicts, fed by all kinds of vested interests and ideologies, we will not always encounter sympathy. We may have to confront mistrust and even outright hostility. St. Peter's words in his first letter thus retain all of their significance:

*"Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence."*¹⁶

Anchored in faith, carried along by hope, and driven by charity, we shall seek in all circumstances, following the Lord's invitation, to be "salt of the earth" and "light of the world."¹⁷

No matter how young or old we may be, we can embrace for ourselves the message that the Holy Father Benedict XVI addressed to young Catholics on the occasion of World Youth Day 2012:

"Dear friends, to conclude I would encourage you to be missionaries of joy. We cannot be happy if others are not. Joy has to be shared. Go and tell other young people about your joy at finding the precious treasure which is Jesus himself. We cannot keep the joy of faith to ourselves. If we are to keep it, we must give it away. Saint John said: 'What we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; we are writing this so that our joy may be complete' (1 John 1:3-4). (...)

*Be enthusiastic witnesses of the new evangelization! Go to those who are suffering and those who are searching, and give them the joy that Jesus wants to bestow. Bring it to your families, your schools and universities, and your workplaces and your friends, wherever you live. You will see how it is contagious."*¹⁸

¹⁶ *1 Peter* 3:15-16

¹⁷ See *Matthew* 5:13-16.

¹⁸ Benedict XVI, *Message for the Twenty-Seventh World Youth Day*, March 15, 2012. The Scripture passage in this quotation is taken from the *New American Bible with Revised New Testament and Revised Psalms* © 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C.