



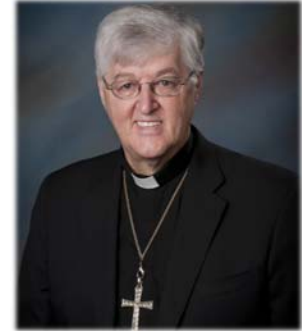
PASTORAL MESSAGE
TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD OF THE DIOCESE OF VALLEYFIELD.
18 MAY 2020

A "DECONFINED" CHARITY, WITH NO LIMITS.

"By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

Dear Diocesan members,

It is with the greeting of Paul, Silas and Timothy to the Church of the Thessalonians that I address you: "Grace and peace to you! We give thanks to God at all times for all of you, remembering you constantly in our prayers. We remember in the presence of our God and Father the activity of your faith, the labour of your charity, the constancy of your hope..." (1 Thessalonians 1:1b-3). In recent months, we have been going through an unprecedented health, economic and social crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic is forcing us to stay at home, in increasingly difficult containment. Many feel tired, sad, anxious and even bewildered by everything that is happening. As Pope Francis said at Easter, "we suffer from a lack of affection and encounters". He expressed his sympathy - which I make my own - to those who could not say goodbye to their loved ones and to the faithful who could not receive the sacraments. Even though we are witnessing gestures of solidarity and mutual aid that restore our confidence in humanity, we remain worried about the future. The pandemic has made us aware of our common humanity and our need for interpersonal bonds. We realize that our economic and social system has enormous shortcomings and leaves many people marginalized, if not forgotten. Think of the seriously ill elderly, the disabled, the homeless, and the chronically ill. This is not the time to blame, overwhelm, criticize or accuse the current management of the crisis or the lack of prevention in past years. Instead, it is time to reflect on the mistakes and the responsibilities that have not been assumed. What is essential at this time is to recognize the very praiseworthy and sometimes heroic efforts of our governments, of the health care staff, of all the workers who provide our essential goods, of all the volunteers, of all those who work to limit the spread of the virus and to help us get out of it with the fewest negative consequences.



TRYING TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IS HAPPENING TO US

This virus has plunged billions of human beings into an extremely restrictive regime of deprivation of our individual freedoms. Our rulers and experts have chosen confinement, which is the action of setting limits or keeping enclosed or tightened up in a narrow space. It is also the set of measures or precautions taken to prevent the dissemination or spread of a virus or harmful product. We have even created the word "deconfinement", which means removing boundaries. How can we explain the fact that billions of human beings have massively and meekly accepted living conditions that are incredibly restrictive of their freedoms? The economist Pierre-Yves Gomez proposes certain hypotheses. We can look for an answer in the priority given to the preservation of health as a non-negotiable good, which motivates the fact that social and economic life has been frozen in such an unprecedented way. As another hypothesis, we have sought security by letting managers and experts transform the pandemic disorder into a managerial order. Or, if we have accepted this confinement, it may be to express that we are fed up with a competitive and frenetic consumer society. It is as if the virus is forcing us to stop and break with an economic and social world that has gone mad. No wonder that many voices are now being raised to take advantage of this pause and lucidity to change our society. Finally, the pandemic is forcing us to innovate and develop new techniques or ways of doing things and living.

Whatever these assumptions, the fact remains that the virus reminds us of who we are: "finite", vulnerable, fragile, mortal beings. The crisis reminds us once again of our condition as interdependent

beings and re-imposes the value of human life that we have to protect, promote and give. Faced with the disorder caused by the pandemic, we are faced with radical choices that must go beyond the selfish search for happiness and security to bring about a world based more on the common good, solidarity, mutual aid, sharing and mutual trust. In this sense, we need more courage, intelligence, inventiveness, charity and hope.

CONTINUE TO CONTAIN EVIL

Even as our rulers relax containment and gradually lift restrictions, it is imperative that we continue to contain the physical evil of the virus and the disease and the suffering associated with it. We must continue to adhere to health regulations and physical distancing to stop the spread of the virus. Our effort to confine evil must also target moral evil, that of indifference, selfishness and withdrawal. In his *Urbi et Orbi* Blessing for Easter 2020, Pope Francis invited us to do so in these terms: "This is not a time of indifference, for the whole world is suffering and must be united in the face of the pandemic. Indifference, egocentrism, division and oblivion are not the words we wish to hear at this time. We want to banish them forever". Finally, if there is one evil that we need to remedy, it is "evil to the soul". How many people live in anguish and fear! They are worried about the future. They wonder where God is. They wonder about the meaning of life, of their life. Some people even think about ending it. Isolation has created in them a feeling of emptiness, of abandonment on the part of God. This is an evil that is perhaps forgotten in the fight against the pandemic and is a major challenge for us Catholics. More than ever, we are invited to bear witness to our hope for a better world, our hope for the coming of the Kingdom of justice, peace and love that Jesus has established and that he asks us to build with him. This Kingdom is built by the exceptional dedication of all the doctors, nurses, orderlies and support staff who, in our hospitals, homes or treatment centres, accompany and relieve those struggling with COVID-19. This Kingdom is built by the work of all those who provide our essential goods. It is also built by all the gestures of sharing, listening, accompaniment and mutual aid that many volunteers accomplish in our parishes and communities. To all our pastors and presidents of assemblies, to our deacons, our pastoral agents, our church wardens, our managers and secretaries, to all those who have invented ways to reach the lonely and deprived, I say a huge thank you. It's going to be all right because you continue to be committed and to serve out of love.

DECONFINING THE GOOD

If we are to confine evil in all its forms, we must further "deconfine" the good. What does this mean? It means pushing the boundaries of the ignorance and uncertainty that the virus creates; it means supporting all efforts to find an effective treatment and a vaccine. Important and urgent as it is, scientific and medical knowledge alone is not enough to get us out of the crisis. What is required of us is undoubtedly a new humanism and the human qualities of solidarity, proximity, compassion and concern. As Catholics, we know that the Risen Jesus embodied all these qualities by giving his life on the cross and by rising again, opening the way to life in fullness.

Deconfining good also means supporting the efforts of so many of our fellow citizens to transform our social structures that have too often created a gap between rich and poor or left out the more vulnerable members of our society. It means working to build our common home by developing a living together based on interdependence, trust and fourfold harmony with oneself, with others, with nature and with God. And as the theme of our pastoral year says, it means going out with charity and putting no limits on that charity. It means going beyond a parochial spirit, that of our Church, of our diocese and working for the good of society as a whole.

DECONFINING OUR CHURCH

We look forward to the deconfinement of our churches and their reopening to allow for personal and collective prayer, sharing of the Word and the bread of life, reception of the sacraments and of course the

celebration of funerals. We look forward to their return as a place of fraternal sharing, formation in Christian life and renewal for greater social commitment. Of course, it will no longer be as it was before. We must expect adjustments and adaptations.

Many have suffered and are still suffering from not being able to receive communion and not being able to meet their brothers and sisters in faith. I understand this suffering and like you, I look forward to meeting you again and to seeing our churches vibrate to the rhythm of music and songs, to the rhythm of hearts united in love and joy. If the virus has forced us to develop new ways of living our faith and of witnessing, the reopening of our churches should not be just a return to normal. It is time to take advantage of the pause that the pandemic has imposed on us to do Church differently and to "deconfine" our Church which is still too self-centred, too confined to maintaining material structures and its internal problems. Deconfining the Church means going out to the outskirts where the poor and the wounded of life are, so that with them we may seek to respond to their needs. It is to become, in the words of Pope Francis, an open field hospital filled with the care and tenderness of God.

In this Easter time, may the joy, light and life of the Risen Christ guide us and give us the strength to walk in trust and hope! If the future may seem bleak, we believe that with Jesus there is a future because He is drawing us towards a new earth and new heavens. As Pentecost approaches, may his Spirit blow in us and on our diocesan Church, a wind of strength and daring to continue to be joyful witnesses of the Good News!

I ask the Lord to bless you and Mary our mother to watch over us, our world and our Church.

I carry you in the heart of my prayers and I ask you to pray for me.

+ Noël Simard,
Bishop of Valleyfield