



## « Arise, go forth, draw near and listen! »

*Brothers and sisters,*

*At the beginning of a new year, it is customary to review the highlights of the previous one. For us, the bishops of Québec, last Spring's *ad limina* visit was one of the most striking events of 2017. We would like to offer you these few words in order to share our experience with you as well as the common inspiration that we drew from it as we carry on the mission of evangelizing here at home, "so that you also may have fellowship with us, so that our joy may be complete"<sup>1</sup>.*

**A message  
from the Catholic Bishops  
of Québec  
following their visit  
*ad limina apostolorum*  
(Rome, April/May 2017).**

### **A Many-Faceted Event**

**T**he bishops' pilgrimage to Rome, "to the threshold of the Apostles Peter and Paul,"<sup>2</sup> is supposed to be held every five years. However, for a variety of reasons, the bishops of Québec completed their last visit in 2006. The ecclesial landscape has changed dramatically over the past decade, so we embarked on the experience with new questions on our minds as we undertake the missionary shift called for by Pope Francis in his message *The Joy of the Gospel*<sup>3</sup>.

Such a visit requires quite a bit of planning! In each of our dioceses, teams worked on drafting the "status report" that every diocesan bishop must present to the Holy Father and his close collaborators in the Roman Curia. We heartily thank the members of our teams for the work they accomplished. As a regional bishops' conference (one of four in Canada),<sup>4</sup> we also spent time in the months preceding the visit to identify common issues, findings, and questions to discuss with those whom we would be meeting. A report from the Québec Assembly of Catholic Bishops was drafted.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. 1 John 1: 1-4 (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> This is the literal meaning of the Latin phrase "*ad limina apostolorum*."

<sup>3</sup> *The Joy of the Gospel* is an apostolic exhortation by Pope Francis published in 2013, following the Synod of Bishops on the new evangelization.

<sup>4</sup> The other three are the Atlantic Episcopal Assembly (AEA), the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario (ACBO), and the Assembly of Western Catholic Bishops (AWCB).

Every *ad limina* visit includes certain standard elements: (1) pilgrimages to the four major basilicas of Rome: St. Peter's, St. Mary Major, St. John Lateran, and St. Paul's-Outside-the-Walls; (2) meetings with many of the dicasteries (departments) of the Curia to discuss issues that fall within their jurisdiction; and (3) a meeting with the Pope to share our perspectives, to renew our communion in his ministry of unity, and above all to receive from him a message to encourage our local Churches in their mission.

Our visit comprised ten well-filled days. The daily liturgies of the Easter season, particularly the readings from the *Acts of the Apostles*, nourished our reflections. Every aspect of the visit contributed to make it an intense experience of communion with the universal Church. Despite the distances involved, this kept us that much closer to our people in Québec who, at that very moment, were dealing with catastrophic flooding and the attending tribulations.

Our various meetings with the leadership of the dicasteries of the Curia were enriching. The spirit of Pope Francis, his listening ear and his desire to dialogue, characterized our exchanges with his close collaborators who all share his vision. We also enjoyed encountering a Curia "on the move," "living out of boxes," uprooted by the Pope's reorganization of various offices. We experienced a renewed interest in the social and ecclesial situation in Québec—as though perhaps our lengthy experience of secularity and the profound changes undergone by our Church since the last Council might aid in understanding what is happening elsewhere in the West.

## **Thought-provoking Discussions**

**T**he missionary shift of our Church framed the context of our discussions. We spoke freely of the many challenges we face that will require of us both perseverance and determination in the years to come: the challenge of implementing new ways of being present to our people, now that the confessional institutions on which we historically relied no longer exist; the challenge of maintaining our enthusiasm despite the signs of our Church's impoverishment; the challenge of offering a common witness to faith and solidarity so as to generate and nurture Christian life in our society.

Throughout our meetings, we heard the call to engage contemporary culture more deeply, to resist the temptation to escapism or to close in on ourselves. Here is one example that comes to mind spontaneously: investing specifically in media through proactive efforts, renewing our language and presenting a more positive message. We must also become more socially involved, especially with the poor and the marginalized. In the context of a society that sometimes changes very quickly, we are called to slow down, to meet others more authentically – the best way of evangelizing – and to accompany them more closely. We must allow ourselves to be touched by their questions and help enlighten their consciences without seeking to replace them.

The magnitude of the challenges raised convince us that we must work together even more effectively, through better networking, better sharing of resources, and a deeper instinct for synodality. This implies involving as many people as possible, acknowledging the charisms proper to each and respecting the equality of men and women.

Moreover, this new missionary context will certainly bring about a reorganization of responsibilities in the Churches of Québec. The real-life ministry of pastors is changing, calling us to pay attention to newly emerging key issues: the training of more laypeople for pastoral care and stewardship; a closer attention to the concrete circumstances of pastors who, often overworked and aging, are at risk of burnout; and the accompaniment of priests from abroad and of the communities who welcome them.

## Meetings With Pope Francis

We had the privilege of meeting Pope Francis on three occasions. First, a word about the setting and context of these meetings. They took on the traits we often associate with the Holy Father: simplicity, spontaneity and dialogue. The Pope even took time during a break to have coffee with us!

We found his remarkable capacity for listening quite touching. His words strengthened us in faith and hope<sup>5</sup>, and confirmed our commitment to engage our Church in a profound missionary transformation. Francis called our Church in Québec to “arise, go forth, draw near and listen” to our world, just as the Holy Spirit commanded the deacon Philip to do when he encountered the Ethiopian eunuch<sup>6</sup>. We too are called to attend to the Word of God and to the Spirit who precedes us<sup>7</sup>.

During our third planned encounter with Pope Francis, late in the morning of May 11, he shared with us his particular concern for Québec “which has given so many missionaries to the world”. He assured us that he carries us especially in his prayers.

In response to our questions and comments, Pope Francis returned several times to the necessity of implementing true discernment and accompaniment of individuals. We should help people get “on the path” and leave behind an “all or nothing” approach. He was also concerned with the fact that the synodal<sup>8</sup> life of the Church is suffering in many places: many dioceses around the world have neither pastoral councils nor finance committees; nor do 60% of parishes! According to our Pope, to be truly

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Luke* 22:32.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Acts* 8:27-39, Mass reading for May 4th; that same day, we had the experience of a working session with Pope Francis.

<sup>7</sup> From the homily of May 9, delivered at the Mass concelebrated with the Pope, which was a moment of deep communion; cf. *Acts* 11:19-26.

<sup>8</sup> The expression “*synoda*” comes from the Greek and means “to travel on the road together.”

synodal means “letting everyone have a say”.

\*\*\*\*\*

In short, this *ad limina* visit gave us the opportunity to reflect on our own roles as bishops in the context of our Churches' unique mission. One thing is for sure, Pope Francis is blazing the trail for us. He embodies what we are called to be as bishops: prayerful men, listening men, familiar with God's living Word and attentive to the signs of the Spirit speaking through the voices of our poorest brothers and sisters.

Our pilgrimage to Rome to be with the Successor of Peter gave us a foretaste of this new way of being Church, a way we must travel from now on here in Québec. Our Church will doubtless be poorer and sometimes weary but never discouraged since the Lord is at work in it: it is He who will bring forth new growth. In the years to come we will need much confidence, boldness, humility ... and patience.

We returned from this visit renewed in our desire to engage a real missionary shift in the Church, to take up again the initiative of proposing the Gospel, to remain faithful to Christ speaking to us today. Nostalgia serves no purpose, nor does the fantasy of a utopian future. Confronted with the new demands of the mission here and now, we received a clear and encouraging commission in Rome: "Be creative, act collegially, try new things and we will support you!"

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we urge you as individuals and communities to embody, in all aspects of your lives, that Church of outreach of which Pope Francis speaks: a Church attentive to the concerns of all our brothers and sisters in humanity.

"Arise, go forth, draw near and listen!" The Spirit of the Lord is upon us; the Spirit of the Lord goes before us.

Fraternally yours in Jesus our Saviour,



+Noel Simard  
Bishop of Valleyfield  
President of the Québec Assembly of Catholic Bishops  
January 19, 2018



Assemblée des  
évêques catholiques  
du Québec

3331, rue Sherbrooke Est, Montréal (Québec) H1W 1C5  
Téléphone. : 514 274-4323 Télécopieur : 514 274-4383  
[aecc@eveques.qc.ca](mailto:aecc@eveques.qc.ca) [www.eveques.qc.ca](http://www.eveques.qc.ca)