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PASTORAL LETTER OF BISHOP NOEL SIMARD,

BISHOP OF VALLEYFIELD,

ON THE ORGANISATION AND THE PASTORAL CHALLENGES

OF OUR DIOCESAN CHURCH

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Dear Fellow Members of the Diocese of Valleyfield,

To all of you I offer a fervent greeting in Jesus who is our way, our truth and our life.

I – SITUATION

All across Quebec, the Roman Catholic Dioceses are facing a crisis marked especially by a massive loss of practicing faithful, a reduction of pastoral personnel, and a lessening of financial resources. Our local church of the Diocese of Valleyfield is no exception. We also are impoverished in these ways. Is this an overstatement, a disaster to accept, or does all this offer a new possibility for transformation? Can we remain attached to the old ways of doing things and simply wait for things to turn around? Are we called to be a church of silence, off on an irrelevant sideline? What are we as a Church being called to proclaim so as to inspire the human heart, especially those of the vulnerable, the wounded, and those excluded from society?

II – CONTEXTE AND CAUSES

To understand what is happening in our Church, it is necessary to take a clear look at the social context in which we live and go about our business, as well as the possible causes of this crisis both outside and inside the Church.

In the realm of social context and external reasons, we can, without misleading ourselves, take note of the impact of postmodernity where happiness consists of being free from rules and dogmas, where the search for the immediate satisfaction of needs along with the instability of culture, the pluralism of beliefs, ideas and moral behaviour all have consequences of individualism and relativism. We live in a consumer society where the logic of the market is supreme and the human person is reduced to the dimension of the user of material as presented by the power of advertising. We also face the phenomenon of secularization which tends to diminish the role of faith and Church in the public domain, as well as an information society which, sadly and so often, is full of news without reference to good works being done and without any sense of values. As has been so pertinently written by Our Holy Father Pope Francis, “Our media culture and some intellectual circles convey a marked scepticism with regard to the Church’s message, along with a certain cynicism.” (The Joy of the Gospel, n. 79)

In this context of postmodern individualism and worldliness, our basic institutions are being given a difficult test. I think especially of the family, the principle identification for the person and the basic unit of society. The shattering of the traditional family model and the fragility of family ties, exacerbated by a style of life centred on self-affirmation and the freedom of the individual, render problematic the transmission of the faith of parents to their children.

It is true that enormous and rapid changes which began in the last century have brought immense benefits to individuals and society. Think for a moment of health care, education and communication. But these changes have also brought evils and elements of dehumanisation. Without purporting to make a complete and detailed analysis of contemporary reality, Pope Francis exhorts us “to an ‘ever watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times’... We need to distinguish clearly what might be a fruit of the kingdom from what runs counter to God’s plan.” (The Joy of the Gospel, n.51)

The crisis which we are going through is also explained by reasons within the Church. Without being exhaustive, I think that among others our model of the Church tends to be too hierarchic to move us along, I think of the way we express our preaching and our teaching, of the small number of priestly and religious vocations, of the lack of recognition of certain “lay” ministries, of the lack of formation of the laity, etc.

There are also reasons tied to the organisation of our pastoral services. Pope Francis has written strongly on this point, “We must recognize that if part of our baptized people lack a sense of belonging to the Church, this is also due to certain structures and the occasionally unwelcoming atmosphere of some of our parishes and communities, or to a bureaucratic way of dealing with problems, be they simple or complex, in the lives of our people. In many places an administrative approach prevails over a pastoral approach, as does a concentration on administering the sacraments apart from other forms of evangelisation.” (The Joy of the Gospel, n. 63)

While it is true that “the awareness of the identity and the mission of the laity in the Church has grown”, “even if many are now involved in the lay ministries, this involvement is not reflected in a greater penetration of Christian values in the social, political and economic sectors. It often remains tied to tasks within the Church, without a real commitment to applying the Gospel to the transformation of society. The formation of the laity and the evangelisation of professional and intellectual life represent a significant pastoral challenge.” (The Joy of the Gospel, n. 102)

Finally, we cannot ignore the legitimate demands for the rights of women. As Pope Francis says, “We need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church” (The Joy of the Gospel n. 103) As far as youth are concerned, we are required to find “responses to their concerns, needs, problems and hurts”. (The Joy of the Gospel n. 105)

III – TO BE A CHURCH DIFFERENTLY

The social and ecclesial contest written about here compels us to a pastoral conversion which calls for the solidarity in our communion and the fruitfulness of our mission. We live during a period of intense uncertainty and change. It is precisely at the heart of this changing reality that our hope must be reaffirmed. We much not give in to defeatism, inflexibility, or to discouragement. We are invited to show our creativity and to read the signs of the times as an opportunity to be a Church in a different way, as a means to find another way to build our Church, a Church which is not hiding in a religious ghetto but which knows how to read the presence of the Spirit at work in the world, a world to love, a world which awaits the message of the love of Jesus.

For our local Church, this pastoral conversion will mean moving beyond a Church still too clerical to a Church truly of the people of God and of communion with one another. Some of our parishes have been merged. But have the Christian communities which compose them become responsible communities which represent the four dimensions or axes of Christian life: to know how to proclaim the Word of God, to show the witness of fraternal living, to manifest our baptismal commitment in the midst of the world (justice, peace, ecology), to gather together before God to celebrate in prayer and in the sacraments?

Is our local Church a missionary Church, a Church which goes out, concerned with encountering persons who are on the margins of society, or who are excluded from social dialogue? Have we taken or do we really take the side of the voiceless and those left aside from our society? Are we ready to make the journey from a Church of numbers to a Church which is a sign, a sign of the presence of the Kingdom of God in the world, a kneaded and leavened Church, participating in the changes and challenges of the world? In the presence of an increase of immigrants in our diocese, we are also invited to move from a Church of uniformity to a Church fraternal and open to other cultures, welcoming diversity.

Yes, we are challenged to be a Church differently. This does not mean that we remake the Church nor make another Church, nor embellish a worldly institution. It is above all to dare to renew our vision of Church, to believe in the possibility of renewal, of change and of action adapted to the new signs of the times. Therefore it is necessary to ask ourselves what to maintain or keep, and what to improve or to change.

IV - SPECIFICALLY IN OUR DIOCESE

In the search for new ways for our local Church, we have:

 1) Certain Givens:

* The diocesan goal: to foster and form new disciples who walk in the path of the Church and are involved in her mission;
* Pastoral priorities of the new evangelisation and of the family;
* Taking into consideration the lived experiences of other dioceses.

 2) Some Criteria:

* The vitality of our parishes (services offered along the four axes and dynamism);
* Their viability (number of faithful and of persons who support the community, human resources and available finances...);
* The presence of young people and those who can take over;
* Dialogue with the world and participation in cultural and social activities.

 3) A Concern for Creativity:

* To expand or adapt perspective;
* To accept a change of vision;
* To be willing to make mistakes and above all to break the mould or to add new elements;
* To take seriously the gospel and to accept the demands of the Word of God who never ceases to renew us in our lives, our communities and our world;
* To dare to go out and sow the seed of the gospel in the fields of the world.

 this, in our way of speaking and acting.

 4) A Consultation:

A consultation has been conducted among pastors, permanent deacons, pastoral agents, various ministerial contributors, and of course, members of our involved laity. These special meetings were conducted with these persons and their regional animators.

 5) An Orientation:

This process of discernment and judgement which took place between February 2014 and May 2014 led to a decision to put in place pastoral units. The PASTORAL UNIT is a grouping of parishes and a communion of communities. In a pastoral unit, the parishes maintain their administrative identity, and thus the *fabriques* continue to exist; nevertheless, one single pastoral team will take care of the entire unit for which it has pastoral responsibility. The make-up of each team will differ from one unit to another but will include, without fail, the presence of a priest and lay persons known within the community or mandated by the Bishop. This is in conformity with the establishing of pastoral animation teams from within (EPAM) and the parish and pastoral advisories (C.P.P.).

The permanent presence of a priest in each Christian community is no longer possible; it is therefore necessary to think, where it is feasible, to name a delegated person from the community who will act as the bridge between the pastoral unit and the faithful, connected with the lived experience of the region and of the diocese.

The organization of these pastoral units and the implications that flow from them have yet to be determined. Presently our diocese is divided into six regions and the anglophone sector. In certain cases, the pastoral unit will be identical to the pastoral region; in other, the region might contain two units, three at most. To each region, two persons will assume the animation and the coordination: one priest and one lay person mandated by the Bishop.

This organization will be done in steps and will call upon the collaboration of all. The priest in charge of the pastoral unit will be required to be very mobile and possess a generous availability to assure the people of God of the spiritual nourishment of the Word and the sacraments, and to maintain a presence and a proximity to people, especially to families, to the aged, and to the young. He will be helped in this ministry by the priests who will be relieved of many administrative tasks. Nevertheless, the engagement and the participation of the baptized are indispensible for breathing into the Christian communities a life force and a spiritual and missionary dynamism. For this, it is essential that every person be committed and takes part in the mission. It is only by counting on one and all and by the development of the fundamental pillars of the Church, which are solidarity, mutual support and fellowship that we can bring these pastoral units to a happy success.

We believe, more than ever, that small cells of evangelisation and small groups, in response to the call of Vatican II, are necessary to manifest the presence of the Risen Christ where Christians live.

V - MY PROMISE AND MY HOPE

Together, turned toward the future, let us take up the challenges attached to the new way that we are seeking. With joy and confidence, rooted in the Word of God, let us witness to Jesus in our world and give it the savor of the knowledge of Christ and loving Him. Let us be a missionary Church which reveals to our brothers and sisters the tender face of God and the beauty of the gospel which generates for each epoch the way of goodness and fulfilment.

Let us be Christian communities filled with hope, with faith and with love, open to the surprises of the Spirit, joyous to make resplendent the treasure of the gospel to all those to whom the Lord sends us.

Given at the Diocesan Seat this eleventh day of June, 2014, on the feast of Saint Barnabas the Apostle.

  † Noël Simard

 Bishop of Valleyfield