



March 2019

## Pastoral Letter

### Lent 2019

*«It is in the heart of the darkest night that the greatest prophets and saints arise»*

Last February 21 to 24, Pope Francis called to Rome the presidents of all episcopal Conferences throughout the world for a special meeting on sexual abuse of minors by clergy members. Many things were written and discussed in the media regarding the Church, some being pertinent, others clearly defamatory.

All of that has saddened and even hurt me since it does not correctly reflect the Church as I have experienced it. It is neither the Church I presently find myself in and serve from the depth of my heart as a bishop. I also hope it is not the Church you have known and loved.

When I was very young, even about three, and perhaps before, my grandmother would bring me along with her to daily mass she attended. The parish church was just across the street from our house. That is what made the Church appear to my mind as a second family. The beauty of the place, the singing and liturgy aroused my admiration and so did divine grace penetrate my heart.

Throughout the years of my youth, our family went to Sunday mass together in our parish. It was a time we were together for family activities and spiritual formation. We also had good relationships and sharing with our neighbors. We experienced growing together as a closely knit group, keeping meaningful relationship with Christ, listening to his Word, receiving him through communion, sharing our joys and sorrows, our plans and purposes in life. Such weekly gatherings made us grow stronger and helped us face hardships and even periods of mourning. It guided us in our daily life, and gave meaning to whatever we were experiencing.

One memory from that period of my life which remains quite alive in me today: these were the processions we held to the Notre-Dame chapel. There we met farmers, vacationers, which made us eager to relive that annual event. In the evening, we joyfully walked along to the chapel, carrying torchlights and singing religious songs. Then we attended mass in the woods that was close to the chapel. And it all ended with a joyful gathering. That has been my experience of the Church, with other memories too, which helped me feel in the depth of my soul that the Church is truly a mother, ready to comfort us, to sustain and accompany us, to give us helpful advice when needed, and loves us too.

During those years, I met priests who, without being perfect, were good shepherds for us. In my own family, we had several uncles and aunts who were members of religious communities. To me, they were happy, calm, committed to the care of the sick, the poor, and the youth. Their witnessing was very meaningful to me as I felt that through their commitment the Lord was present at the heart of his Church. And one day, I myself heard the call to commit my whole life to his service and to that of his people. I allowed the Holy Spirit to guide me all along my formation years and at the seminary. I became a priest and now, being a bishop, I give thanks to the Lord for having trusted me and called me to serve him: mine is one of the most beautiful missions to be called to.

This is the Church I have experienced, and the Church I have discovered in your midst during my pastoral visitation with the fifty-six Christian communities that make up our diocese. On that occasion, I was fortunate to meet deep faith people who serve their communities with great dedication. While I was celebrating the sacraments with you, shared your activities and picnics, your special meals and other events, I have felt at home, with my faith family, where I rediscovered the same Church I had known: beautiful, loving, warmly welcoming.

Our Church is quite far from the one reflected by today's media. Everything that was said during the Assembly between Pope Francis and the bishops about sexual abuse perpetrated by clergy members, covers a period that extends over a period of 60 years. Abuser priests are few in number compared with the total number of priests, less than 2%, yet one abuser remains one too many. Because their action was wrong and has left many victims behind. That horrible reality which children were subjected to was kept secret for too long, too many years. Those were the works of the Devil, infamy at its worst.

Some bishops were never made aware of such evil. Others who knew, did not act adequately as they wanted to deal with that wrongdoing «as within the family»; such attitude was current in the past years. Others again did not realize all the psychological harm done to the victims; they only saw in that behaviour a moral evil. Punishment, a time of retreat and a promise to not do that again seemed sufficient to remedy the situation. But it was not. Today, we know that pedophilia is a psychological illness, even a physical one, and has nothing to do with the status or even the will of the abuser. In contradiction with the popular belief, the proportion of abusers is greater among married men having children, not with celibates.

Abuse of a young person is absolutely wrong: we must fight that evil firmly, whatever the time and place. But what is an adequate reaction in that situation, we may ask? I think we must not pass hasty judgments on those who were faced with that evil and acted in good faith in the situation. The norms, knowledge and values in their times were quite different from those we hold today. Times are fast changing. One example of this: some time not too long ago, hospital directors had no objection to letting family and friends smoke in a patient's room. Even the patient was allowed to smoke too. At that time, selling pot was criminal. Now, we see the opposite scale of values. Smoking in a hospital room is considered criminal, as well as smoking within the hospital walls, and even outdoors as far as nine meters from the entrance. And our government has set up marijuana stores! I often wonder how future generations will judge our present behaviour?

As pope Francis said last December to the members of the Curia, pedophilia is not a «catholic problem»; it is one that involves the Church and the entire society as well: *«If that serious calamity has come to involve a certain number of ordained ministers, one may ask how deep it is in our societies and families»*. At the end of his address at the closure of that special Assembly of presidents of Episcopal Conferences he said:

*«We are presently faced with a universal problem, which is widespread throughout the world, sad to say. We must be clear: even though the universality of that crisis confirms its sweeping presence in our societies, it does not diminish its monstrous manifestation within the Church. The inhumanity of that world problem makes its presence still more serious and scandalous in the Church, because it is in total contradiction with its moral authority and ethical credibility.*

It is true that there are pedophiles among priests, but also among educators, people who work in health care services, sport coaches, animators of various groups, impresarios, etc. One must know that, depending on the region 80 to 90 % cases of sexual abuse of minors occur in the home place of those youths and 72% of them are perpetrated by family members (grandfather, father, mother, step-father, uncles, cousins, brothers, sisters, friends. etc.), even by minors themselves. Such frightening statistics seem to be too conservative still because that epidemic is yet kept secret within many families.

As you all know, cases of sexual abuse have been made publicly known in the Diocese of Bathurst. We've heard with amazement that two priests particularly were reported for having caused a large number of victims. Profoundly affected by such suffering, my predecessor, Mgr Valéry Vienneau, did react immediately and did all he could to help victims so they may be helped to heal from such abuse. Also, for almost 20 years now a strict protocol was put in place in all parishes in order to prevent a repetition of such infamous gestures. In addition, over the past year, another protocol prepared by the Conference of Canadian Bishop is being applied in all dioceses of our country, including ours.

I am sincerely and deeply saddened by the suffering of so many youths. One cannot imagine how deep their wounds can be. Their life has literally been broken by those whose responsibility was to protect and guide them. They have been cheated. What I find still more serious is the fact that those young people were turned away from the Church as Christ has wanted it to be for them and for us too.

I can certainly affirm without any hesitation that today the rule applied throughout our diocese is «zero tolerance». I have asked to report to the diocese without delay any suspicious behaviour so we may address the issue appropriately. Let us not forget that we have good priests who exercise their pastoral ministry as good shepherds as Christ did. I fully share the address Pope Francis gave at the closure of the Assembly last February:



*«Allow me to express my deep gratitude to all priests and consecrated persons who faithfully and totally serve the Lord and who feel dishonoured, discredited by the shameful behaviour of some of their fellow priests. All of us – Church, consecrated persons, people of God, even God himself – carry the consequences of such infidelity. On behalf of the entire Church, I want to thank the great majority of priests who have remained faithful to their commitment in celibacy, but also bear the burden of a ministry made more difficult by the numerous scandals perpetrated by a small number of them (but again one case is one too many). And I also want to thank the faithful who know their pastors quite well and continue to pray for them and sustain them through the present crisis.*

Our Church is beautiful, and as members of this Church we should all feel at home within its walls. The Church is Holy because the Holy Spirit dwells in it, as does Christ himself. This same Church is made up of all of us who are its members. We all know that nobody is perfect, as we remain sinners.

As members of the clergy, religious men and women, lay people, we should keep on going to the sacraments to receive the grace of the Lord we so need to improve our hearts, to grow in holiness. There are indeed other aspects of our ecclesial life that would need to be addressed so we could better reflect the beauty of Christ's Church. Certain dangers are awaiting us. Let me mention, among others, abuse of power and other wrongful attitudes, mistrust and fear of people coming from abroad, gossiping that spread lies, calumny or defamation. Those are some elements that poison our communities, and disfigure the face of our Church.

Evil itself is not totally wiped out yet. But with the help of the Lord, we can overcome and eliminate its effects. Lent is an appropriate time to be purified and grow in the faith, through fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. May our words, gestures and behaviour show the beauty of the Church of Christ who is a mother sustaining life, love and hope in all her children.

Pope Francis reminded us that Blessed Thérèse Benedict of the Cross (Edith Stein) wrote one day: *« It is in the darkest night that the greatest prophets and saints arise »*. Trusting in the promise of Christ to never abandon us, and strengthened by Mary's tender love, our Mother, let us live up fully this Lenten season as one of purification and renewal... hoping we shall find ourselves among those prophets and saints in our Acadian region.

Your brother in Jesus Christ,



+ Daniel Jodoin

Bishop of Bathurst

DJ/pv