



APOSTOLIC LETTER
Primum quidem gratias ago Deo



of the Holy Father Francis

for the 350th anniversary
of the Church of Québec



“First, I give thanks to my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is heralded throughout the world. God is my witness, (...) that I remember you constantly” (Rom 1:8-9).*

I would like to begin this letter with the words that the Apostle Paul addressed to the Christians of Rome, reminding them that their faith had spread throughout the world. This is true for you, since your faith has, in fact, spread across the whole continent and, through the work of your missionaries, beyond the seas.

And so, as your diocese, the first in North America, inaugurates the celebrations of the 350th anniversary of its foundation, I give thanks to God for all of you, for your faith, and I remember you.

On April 3rd 2014 - and it was a moment of grace for me - I had the opportunity to canonize François de Laval, your holy bishop, as well as the woman known as the Theresa of the New World, Marie de l’Incarnation. I received a delegation of pilgrims led by your Archbishop, my beloved brother, Cardinal Gérald Cyprien Lacroix. I heard the story of your faith. Your Church has been made fruitful by the blood of martyrs who sowed the Gospel; it was built with wisdom and boldness by a holy shepherd with a missionary heart, François de Laval; it was formed by the charity and spiritual life of the Ursuline and Augustinian Sisters who left such a profound mark on this country. I have learned about the holiness that is at the source of your country: the canonized and beatified saints, like Marie-Catherine de Saint-Augustin, Dina Bélanger, Élisabeth Turgeon, and even the Canadian Jesuit martyrs, but also the saints “in our next-door neighbours, those who, living in our midst, reflect God’s presence” (*Gaudete et exultate*, no. 6).

Just over a year ago, I had the opportunity to visit the Church of God in Québec City. I went there as a brother, to meet my brothers and sisters, to continue the dialogue and exchanges that began several centuries ago and that are destined to continue. Because even today, we still have to learn each other’s language. It is to continue this encounter that I am sending you this fraternal letter.

The first missionaries found here people who were deeply religious, living in the presence of God, the Creator of heaven and earth; people who were aware that they were heirs, that their land was a gift from the Creator “to be shared with others and to be cherished in harmony with all that exists, in profound fellowship with all living beings. In this way, you learned to foster a sense of family and community, and to build solid bonds between generations, honouring your elders and caring for your little ones. A treasure of sound customs and teachings, centred on concern for others, truthfulness, courage and respect, humility, honesty and practical wisdom!” (*Address, Maskwacis, 25 July 2022*).

In the depths of their conscience, they had discovered the presence of a law which they had not given themselves, but which they were obliged to obey. This voice never ceased to urge them to love and do good and to avoid evil (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 16). They were always on the move and, as a result, seekers of the truth, fascinated by the mystery, seeking to know the One who was at the root of their existence and towards whom they were heading in their seasonal wanderings; He who is beyond the horizon towards whom they are journeying.

The Gospel was proclaimed to them through the lives of the missionaries who shared their lives as much as through their words. Beyond the unknown tongues, there was a common language: charity, made up of welcome, care for others and contemplation of the God whose face we are all seeking. This Gospel, whose name is Jesus, who died and rose from the dead, was truly welcomed by them, and was often received with joy, shedding new light on their lives. In their midst and through them, it bore much fruit. Several among them spread it, proclaiming it in their own language, singing a new song to God on this earth.

A House Built on Rock

As for today, we see the men and women who live in this country exposed to major upheavals: cultural changes leading to a break with tradition, disorientation and a loss of reference points for thinking about life and the future; migratory movements that are renewing the population and restructuring society, which is becoming multi-ethnic and increasingly mixed; technological advances that are leading us to rethink communication and our relationship with others, and are provoking unprecedented anthropological changes.

The rain fell, the torrents rushed down, the winds blew and battered this house. This is perhaps the feeling you have when you consider the current situation of the Church in Québec.

It's no exaggeration to say that the Church is weathering a storm. It is shaken, and what has been built up even seems to be in jeopardy.

Faced with these changes and upheavals, and contemplating the city built on Cap Diamant, forming an exceptional promontory, my amazed gaze brought back to my mind the words of Jesus about the house built on the rock:

“Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. But it did not collapse; it had been set solidly on rock” (Mt 7:24-25).

The rock we are talking about is Christ, of course, who addresses people as friends to invite and admit them to share his own life (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 2). The Church in Québec must live the Word, listen to it and put it into practice. In this way, whatever storms it may face it will not crumble, because its foundations will not be shaken. It is going through a phase of purification, certainly trying, but salutary. Our security is in God, not in the institutions we have built up over the centuries.

Strengthened by these words from the Gospel, allow me to reflect a bit on the meaning of the jubilee you are celebrating.

A Time to Give Thanks

It's good to recognize together the many wonderful gifts that God has given you over the centuries. In this way, we look not primarily at our own works, our successes, our prowess or our achievements, but at what we have received from God and from others.

Let us give thanks to God for the gift of faith that has enabled you to face - and still face - the difficulties you have encountered over the years, and which has enabled you to get up again without ever letting yourselves be defeated by the trial. Faith has sustained you and enabled you to hope against all hope. Like your ancestors, thanks to faith, thanks to the Word of God that dwell(s) in you, you have built an open society, marked by cooperation, and attentive to creation.

We should also give thanks for all that has been received from the various components of Québec society: from the “generous Indian”, to use the beautiful expression of one of your historians¹; as well as

1 Louise Côté, Louis Tardivel and Denis Vaugeois, *L'Indien généreux. Ce que le monde doit aux Amériques*, Québec, Septentrion, 1992.

from the immigrants who, in successive waves, have arrived in this land, hoping to find not just a home or a job, but friends, brothers and sisters. To give thanks for the gift of the other, the other who, in his or her difference, can only enrich us and make us better.

Yes, the Church of Québec has received a great deal over the course of its history. The Lord has been very generous in calling many people with different vocations to give their lives and commit themselves to all areas of the Church's mission: committed lay people, pastoral agents, evangelizers and catechists, consecrated men and women, deacons, priests and bishops who have not only built the Christian community, but who also contributed to building society.

A Time to Examine Our Conscience and Ask for Forgiveness

As the Old Testament teaches us, a jubilee is a time for forgiveness and reconciliation. The purification of memory can only come at the end of a process initiated by the repentant Church, always called to purify itself, a Church that not only offers God's mercy and dispenses grace, but also asks for mercy for itself from its Lord and from others.

“The Christian faith has played an essential role in shaping the highest ideals of Canada, characterized by the desire to build a better country for all its people. At the same time, it is necessary, in admitting our faults, (...) to promote the legitimate rights of the native populations and to favour processes of healing and reconciliation between them and the non-indigenous people of the country” (Address, Citadelle de Québec, 27 July 2022).

These processes of forgiveness take time and patience, because they have to win over hearts. Following my trip to your country, last year, which had a strong penitential character, it is appropriate to continue to make progress “in the search for truth, so that the processes of healing and reconciliation may continue, and so that seeds of hope can keep being sown for future generations – indigenous and non-indigenous alike – who desire to live together, in harmony, as brothers and sisters” (*Greetings*, Archbishop's Residence, 29 July 2022). I hope that all Quebecers will always be able “to walk together, to pray together and to work together, so that the sufferings of the past can lead to a future of justice, healing and reconciliation” (*Address*, Maskwacis, 25 July 2022).

A Time to Look to the Future and Commit to it Boldly

In the face of the challenges that lie ahead, we must not mourn the present or harbour nostalgia for the past, but rather look to the future and commit to it boldly. To this end, “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 3). Pope Benedict XVI reminded us that “being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (*Deus caritas est*, 1). Dear friends, missionary-disciples of the Church of Québec, be men and women of the Encounter with Christ.

Allow me to make two invitations. It will be up to you to develop them further and make them your project. They are taken quite simply from the heart of the Gospel and its one commandment of love, to which everything else is subordinate: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind; and you shall love your neighbour as yourself* (cf. Mt 22:37,39).

To love God with all our heart begins with the growth of our interior life. We have lost the habit of silent prayer, a practice that built the lives of generations of Christians who have gone before us. We all know elders who were radiant and serene, sometimes despite the illness, suffering and infirmity that come with age. They are rich in their interior life, cultivated over the years.

Creating spaces and times for solitude, silence and contemplation is all the more necessary given that our lives are cluttered, not only by so many worries and obligations, but also by so many noises, words and futile images that distract us, disperse us and prevent us from cultivating our relationship with God. Places to reflect, times to listen to the Word, times of adoration, of silent prayer - easier for those who live in daily contact with nature - allow us to take a step back from our daily commitments and to consider things in the light of faith, to discern what is important, what gives life and makes us more human.

Silence, if it's about listening, listening to the Other, to his Word, introduces us to a Presence and makes us taste that Presence. The person can then rediscover the mystery that dwells within him or her, his or her deepest nature, that of being in dialogue with the All-Other, a being made for encounter and communion. It opens up a dialogue of praise and intercession.

Of course, this does not mean turning our backs on our obligations, nor does it mean giving up the essential fight for greater justice and solidarity. Involvement in the community remains vital; but it is no less important to distance ourselves from frenetic commitments if we are to consider with serenity and to put into perspective the serious issues we must face.

To love one's neighbour as oneself is to be merciful, to forgive, not to repay evil for evil, to consider one's neighbour as a brother or sister whom it is my duty to care for. In particular, you are called not to forget the cry of the poor, the isolated, the abandoned, the marginalized. They have much to teach us, and we are always invited to recognize the salvific power of their existence, to put them at the centre of the Church's journey. We are given the opportunity to encounter Christ in them and to welcome the mysterious wisdom that God wants to communicate to us through them (Cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, 198).

Loving our neighbour as oneself also means welcoming the stranger. Remember that one day many of your ancestors were strangers and were welcomed. A society can only be built in respect, solidarity and fraternity. It is threatened when people turn in on themselves in comfort and indifference, when we give in to anger, invective and insult in the way we address others. Nothing solid can be built other than in respectful encounter and dialogue.

Loving our neighbour as oneself also means caring for our Common Home, the Earth (Cf. *Laudate Deum*). There is a link between caring for creation and caring for the poorest, and we cannot build a future together if we consume the earth's resources irresponsibly.

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Dear brothers and sisters of the Church of Québec, you were born of a great missionary impulse that has shaped what you have become. I invite you to continue your journey together, filled with the apostolic and missionary zeal so that the proclamation of the Gospel and the spread of Christian life may give growth to the Kingdom of God in people's hearts amongst you. Continue courageously on your way, founded on the rock that is Christ; trust in the goodness and mercy of the Father and let the Holy Spirit surprise and move you. Above all, learn to walk together. I impart to you my heartfelt apostolic blessing.

Given at Saint John Lateran, on December 8th 2023, Feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, Patronal Feast of the Diocese of Québec, and the anniversary of the episcopal ordination of its first bishop, Saint François de Laval.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "François". The signature is written in a cursive style with a capital 'F' and a capital 'F' at the end.



350 ANS
DE SENS ET
D'ACTION

 Église catholique
de Québec

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