

Remembering So That We Will Do Better



Assemblée des
évêques catholiques
du Québec

December 2019

A declaration on violence against women and vulnerable persons

Thirty years ago, on December 6, 1989, 14 young women were murdered at the École Polytechnique in Montréal. This event has tragically marked the history of Québec and is highlighted each year on December 6, the *National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence against Women*. This yearly commemoration is an opportunity to assess the violence still endured by women, as well as the magnitude of the work that is yet to be done by all of us, collectively, in the areas of education, prevention, and restitution. For this reason, it is of vital importance that we publicly acknowledge that the Polytechnique massacre specifically targeted women.

We see that violence against women persists, and so we must all, individually and collectively, take responsibility. For us, Catholics who have signed this declaration, it is our duty to remember - so that we will do better.

Since the 1980s, the subject of violence against women has been on the minds of working groups made up of women and men, priests, and bishops from Québec. A long process of research and consultation led, thirty years ago, to the publication of the document *A Heritage of Violence?*¹. We can see that the realities it described are still with us today, and that many other forms of violence affect women and vulnerable persons outside the conjugal realm. Cyberbullying, for example, comes to mind, as do the sexual exploitation of minors, the spread of pornography, psychological and physical abuses, and human trafficking, both domestic and international². We acknowledge the phenomenon of assaults - often sexual in nature - that were kept secret for a long time but have started to be made public by movements such as "Been Raped Never Reported" and "Me Too" (#BeenRapedNeverReported and #MeToo). We are also more aware of the discrimination and violence experienced by individuals on the basis of their sexual orientation, their religious affiliation manifested by an outward sign, or their racial or cultural identity.

We are especially concerned by the violence experienced by Indigenous women. The *Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* identifies the vast scope of the systemic violence that has been inflicted on them. This violence, rooted in colonial and patriarchal policies, is the cause of traumas that continue to affect our Indigenous brothers and sisters today. The *Final Report's* 231 "Calls for Justice" concern each one of us, and we must together seek and envision pathways towards healing.

The imperative to remember is at the heart of our faith. Indeed, we remember a person, Jesus of Nazareth, victim of the ultimate violence - that of death by crucifixion. This capital punishment was inflicted on him unjustly, two thousand years ago, by the political and religious authorities. And yet Jesus' actions were

1. ASSEMBLY OF QUÉBEC CATHOLIC BISHOPS, *A Heritage of Violence? A Pastoral Reflexion on Conjugal Violence*, trans. Antoinette Kinlough (1989, 2nd French edition 2009) This document takes stock in detail of the types of violence, of the cycle of violence, and its consequences, both on the level of society in general as well as in the history of the Christian tradition and its sacred texts. In it, action points are proposed in order to reflect, educate, and transform, particularly with a view to the formation of those working within the Church.

2. In 2004, in order to take action against sexual exploitation and forced labour, a number of religious communities and community advocacy and research organizations created the *Comité d'action contre la traite humaine interne et internationale* (CATHII) ["Action Committee Against Domestic and International Human Trafficking"]. To learn more: www.cathii.org.

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non-violent: he served dignity and justice, becoming close to excluded and marginalized people, including women. The Gospels remind us clearly the fundamental role women played at the very beginning of Christianity.

This reminder invites us to take a look at the religious institution that brings us together. We are aware that our Church has contributed to the violence experienced by many people, here and elsewhere. The assaults, sexual abuses, abuses of power and spiritual abuses perpetrated by members of the clergy and by religious scandalize us deeply. These horrors were experienced by children, by consecrated women, by vulnerable adults, and by Indigenous persons. Our Church must continue to analyze the causes of these abuses, carry on its commitment to preventing them, and develop forms of restitution and healing. Clericalism, which Pope Francis identified as a factor that causes and perpetuates abuse, must be rejected vigorously³.

Together we have the duty to listen to women and to victims of violence. We must act in the areas of prevention, education, and advocacy. Men must be allies of women in this struggle. Making a point of remembering is a duty so that we avoid repeating the harms done in our individual and collective pasts. Remembering violence committed against women and vulnerable persons must lead us to act, so as to lift up in dignity all those who suffer, to foster hope, and to revive relationships based on peace and unity.

Network of diocesan officers for the status of women, and other members of the provincial social-justice roundtable:

Ms. Audrey Boucher	Ms. Thérèse Duval	Ms. Eileen Perry
Ms. Mélanie Charron	Ms. Sylvie Gagné	Ms. Mylène Renaud
Ms. Hélène Dargis	Ms. Christiane Lafaille	Ms. Sasha Valdes
Ms. Caroline Dostie	Ms. Ingrid LeFort	

Council on Church and Society:

Ms. Sabrina Di Matteo	Bishop René Guay
Ms. Émilie Frémont-Cloutier	Bishop Claude Hamelin
Ms. Silvia Garcia Agnelli	Bishop Marc Pelchat (chair)
Mr. Frédéric Barriault	Mr. Simon Labrecque (secretary)

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3. [*Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the People of God*](#), August 20, 2018.

A number of events for commemoration and reflection are planned around December 6, the *National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence against Women*. A partial list is available on the website of the Assembly of Québec Catholic Bishops.

Many pastoral tools are also available online, including a proposal for a Christian commemorative celebration to be organized in your community.