

## **Diocesan Gathering**

**September 14, 2020, from 7:30 p.m. to 9 p.m.**

**The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Church in Montreal:**

**Overview and Perspectives**

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***A formidable challenge: eight minutes to summarize six months!***

***Without further delay, let's begin!***

We often say that the COVID-19 pandemic is a global and personal crisis, experienced worldwide and nationwide, but leaving its traces in the lives of each and every one of us. As we're often reminded, a crisis is at once a real danger and an opportunity for growth. This evening, I would like to offer a brief overview of the pandemic in relation to these two aspects: a real danger and as an invitation to personal and ecclesial conversion.

Here in Montreal — both in society and in the church — we were profoundly marked by this crisis. It seems significant that this meeting takes place on September 14, on the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. For, it was exactly six months ago, Saturday, March 14, 2020, that we officially closed all of our churches in the diocese to public liturgical celebrations. No Sunday or daily Masses, no funerals or weddings, no celebrations of the sacraments of initiation. We were in full lockdown.

I remember it well, for I was arriving on the morning of the 14<sup>th</sup> from Prince Edward Island, where I had just led two parish retreats, attended by 200 to 300 people each evening. Increasingly in the news, we would speak of COVID as a problem in China, South Korea, and news of the outbreak in northern Italy swept the nation: it was serious, but it seemed

to us to be still very far from our borders. When I landed in Montreal, I quickly realized that life had changed.

When the churches were closed on the Third Sunday of Lent — I must underline that this decision was taken in view of public health and the common good, and before being compelled by the civil authorities — we asked ourselves the question, “Surely, it’s just for one or two weeks?” And, at each high point in the liturgical year, we continued to ask ourselves the question about reopening our places of worship: for Holy Week, for Easter, for first Communions in May, and for Pentecost.

For the diocese and for parishes, there were decisions that had to be made quickly regarding pastoral personnel, support staff, the services that we could offer parishioners despite social distancing, and which new technologies to learn to stay in touch with members of our communities. I am convinced that without the government assistance we received in April through the CERB and the salary assistance through the wage subsidy program, as well as the \$40,000 loan offered through banking institutions (reduced to \$30,000, if we pay it back before the end of 2021), easily about half of our parishes could have closed permanently or, at least, all of them would have had to put all of their staff — including priests and pastors — on employment insurance. It would have been the same for the chancery, the cathedral and for a sizeable proportion of our church institutions. We, too, had some painful decisions to make regarding personnel and reduced services. We lost dear friends and colleagues, who decided to retire or to seek other professional and personal opportunities elsewhere. It wasn’t easy.

But the problems were not only on the financial level. We know well that the coronavirus attacked our seniors in a particularly severe way, especially the most fragile among them in nursing homes and in CHSLDs. We were bereft: our parishioners were sick and even dying, and the ability to accompany them in their last days, to offer a pastoral presence and the sacraments of reconciliation and the anointing of the sick, and even the consolation of our funeral rites, was drastically curtailed. I lived this reality personally when Father Adelchi Bertoli, a

93-year-old priest, with whom I had lived for 15 years, contracted COVID-19 at the end of April and was hospitalised for more than a month. I contracted the virus myself, though I didn't need to be hospitalised and I recovered well. But it was very difficult to see the isolation of my friend, who went from the rectory to the hospital to a private residence, and then again to the hospital, and with each move he was put in quarantine, without being allowed any visits from his close friends. We lost him in August, and the pandemic made his last few months much more arduous and isolated than they should have been.

I believe the pandemic also exposed and magnified the weaknesses already at work in our communities. We realized that many of our parishes have become — effectively by the lack of pastoral renewal, volunteer personnel, Sunday Mass attendance, families and young people — Mass or service centres rather than viable and vital Christian communities. Everything was centred around Sunday Mass and the ritual celebrations tied to life transitions: baptisms, weddings, funerals. When we could no longer offer these rites, nothing was left!

However, I was impressed by the parishes and missions that chose to see the pandemic, not only as a crisis and a tragedy, but as an invitation to see and do differently. Rather than dismissing or reducing the hours of their pastoral staff, they learned about new technologies, they developed the capacity to telecommute, they employed old methods — mail, telephone and email — and new methods — Facebook, Zoom, Teams and YouTube — not only to communicate information, but to foster communion: in meetings with pastoral teams, with liturgies and devotions broadcast online (we had to relearn the meaning of spiritual communion!), in faith-sharing groups gathered around the Word of God or our great spiritual traditions, in the many online formation sessions offered through webinars or on Zoom to help us to understand and address the challenges that the current pandemic presents to us.

Since the gradual reopening of our parishes for divine worship began in July, we have seen a certain “return to normalcy.” But I am convinced there's a catch. There will be no turning back to “business as usual.” By

and large, we must recognize that often we would invest great efforts that, quite often, brought few fruits. The pandemic invites us to think differently, to work in teams differently, to live community and communion differently. It forced us to choose that which we could have chosen years ago: the learning of new technologies, the ability to reach the young and not-so-young with language and approaches suitable to each group, the encouragement of a model of stewardship, where the survival of a parish does not depend solely on the Sunday Mass collection.

From now on, we must get used to another pedagogy, that is, hybrid pastoral programming, where in-person meetings will complement digital approaches, as well as to partnerships, in which we will choose to really work in our communities, with our neighbours, including: other Catholic parishes, regardless of their language or culture; movements and institutes of consecrated life; our Christian, Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters; with community groups and those who work for justice and to assist the poor and the homeless, with municipal and governmental authorities, and with all people of good will.

As I recalled at the beginning, a crisis is at once a danger and a precious opportunity. I believe that in the months ahead these words of Jesus, which always seemed to me to be a little obscure, will take on their full meaning: “For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (Mt 13:12).