

Plenary of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB)

The Plenary of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB) gathers this Monday to Friday in Cornwall.

Since my ordination as a bishop in 1995, I have enjoyed meeting with my confreres from across Canada. These include the bishops of the Oriental Churches—Chaldean, Maronite, Melkite, Syriac, Syro-Malabar, and Ukrainian—whom we call eparchs and who give us a broader view of the worldwide church.

Although we must discuss many issues, receive many reports, and make financial decisions, there is also space and time for a human touch. We will have personal encounters, exchanges on a variety of topics, and fellowship. On the first day, we will hear from the Apostolic Nuncio, the Pope's representative in Canada, followed by a reception and dinner in his honour.

Two highlights are the introduction of new bishops named since the last meeting and colleagues telling of their publications in the past year.

This is the seventy-fifth anniversary of the formation of the CCCB in 1943, called originally the Canadian Catholic Conference. It sought to address the needs facing the Church in Canada. The bishops had been meeting regularly for several years, but they wished to formalize the relationship.

As responsible shepherds, they felt the need to serve the members of their flocks by calling on contemporary resources to more fittingly address the changed conditions of their time. Some of these changes affected pastoral matters. How could the Church prepare couples for marriage? What could alleviate the strain on family life with separations caused by the Second World War or when breadwinners had to leave home for work in distant places? How, in such circumstances, could we hand on the faith?

Other matters were liturgical—making the Sunday liturgy more vital through greater lay participation in what was called at the time the “dialogue Mass,” and the place of devotions in Catholic life. We hoped to become closer to the people and take them a message of gospel hope.

The times have changed in the last three quarters of a century. There are always new issues. For example, we will examine ecumenical cooperation opportunities with other Christians and openings to dialogue with members of other faiths or none. Ethical issues are always present. Notably, the Church has a role in promoting care for the elderly and the dying. Governmental leaders must understand the importance of making palliative care available and recognizing the freedom of conscience of Catholic hospitals and physicians to resist pressures toward euthanasia or assisted suicide. Another pressing issue will be formulating a response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indigenous issues to move closer to reconciliation and healing. Our

ideal is to work together as bishops to be able to give the best kind of pastoral leadership that we can.

This milestone was to have been celebratory. The recent scandals of sexual abuse in the United States and elsewhere have tempered the mood. Now, we will focus more on our own Canadian Catholic document to help safeguard youth and vulnerable persons. Entitled, *Protecting Minors from Sexual Abuse: A Call to the Faithful of Canada for Healing, Reconciliation and Transformation*, it will update the CCCB's 1992 document *From Pain to Hope*. We will also commit to cooperating with current enquiries to hold bishops accountable for their misconduct and for failing to deal properly with allegations of abuse.

What this means is that we bishops and our role are a matter of concern. The role of the laity in challenging as well as affirming the Church's hierarchy is a humbling but hopeful task for the future of Church leadership in Canada.