



Homily given by
Cardinal Jean-Marc Aveline
Archbishop of Marseille
Special envoy of the Holy Father for the
350th anniversary of the founding of the Diocese of Québec

Cathedral Basilica Notre-Dame de Québec

Québec, Sunday, September 22, 2024

Dear friends,

When Pope Francis asked me to be his representative for the celebration of the 350th anniversary of the founding of your diocese, I understood that this event was particularly close to his heart. For many years, and especially since his unforgettable apostolic visit to you two years ago, he has shown great esteem for your Church, wanting to accompany it with solicitude, to help it courageously weather storms, to move forward with it on a penitential path with regard to the indigenous peoples, while recommending that it look to the future, becoming even more attached to Christ and to the hope that His call gives us.

For my part, I had already learned to love your people, thanks to the fact that, for several years, I was able to benefit from a research project at Laval University for my doctoral studies and that, on Sundays, I went to help out in the Sainte-Ursule parish, in Sainte-Foy. It was during these repeated visits that I was able to discover the charms of your country, at once splendid and austere, warm in its welcome, proud of its vastness, yet lucid about its many precarious situations. Over the years, I have forged beautiful, lasting friendships with people from your country, who not only helped me discover and love this beautiful province, but who also helped me, and still help me, to

move forward on the path of life. Because of these people who have become my friends, I am indebted to you, Church of Quebec, and I would like to add the humble testimony of my gratitude to your thanksgiving today. In this spirit of respect and gratitude, allow me to offer you, as a gift on your birthday, a few thoughts and words of advice, based on my own experience in Marseille.

First of all, it seems to me that we must remember that, fundamentally, the Church's mission is to be at the service of the love with which God loves the world. *"God so loved the world, writes St John, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"* (Jn 3:16). Such a way of living out the mission places the Church off centre, obliging her not to allow herself to be obsessed by concern for her own survival, but rather to let Jesus who is *"the way, the truth and the life"* (Jn 14:6) live within her, who is capable of constantly renewing her, and whom she is responsible for proclaiming, not so much by dazzling actions as by a presence, a closeness, an attention to everyone, especially the least of these. We are not at the centre, but at the service of a relationship of love that transcends us and yet requires us. *"The mission, for us, is first and foremost neighbourly relations"*, the two brothers who "survived" Tibhirine told me when I went to meet them at the Trappist monastery of Midelt in Morocco. And they knew just how far this simple fidelity had taken them, for the sake of Christ Jesus.

Church of Quebec, don't forget that your mission is not to become a museum, to preserve a heritage! Even if it is up to you to commemorate the deeds of the apostles who preceded you on this earth - and they are many and often admirable, as I realized when I discovered your history - your mission today is to allow yourself, like them, to be sent on the road, open to all encounters. Stay focused on the fault lines that run through Quebec society today, whether they be economic, cultural or religious. Don't let the gaps widen, leaving so many poor people by the wayside, victims of the fanaticism of indifference. Take your part in the fight against injustice. Be close to those who suffer from being abandoned, misunderstood, rejected and despised. Remember, as Saint James said in his letter, that wars and conflicts arise, most of the time, from covetousness and jealousy.

Church of Quebec, reflect on the example given to you by your first bishop, Saint François de Laval, who multiplied his pastoral visits in his immense diocese in order to get close, at the cost of long, exhausting and perilous journeys, to all those diverse peoples, especially the First Nations, whom the Lord entrusted to him. *"We must approach these peoples with gentleness and patience, showing them the example of the Christian life even before teaching them its precepts"*, he used to say. It is up to you, brothers and sisters, to love the men and women who make up the Quebec of today,

not a Quebec of dreams, but the real Quebec. It is up to you to show Christ through your lives, before proclaiming him through your words. It's up to you to live in such a way that when we see you live, we come to wonder about the One who makes you live.

Many of today's Quebecois do not know Christ, or what is worse, only know caricatures of him. It's up to you to listen patiently to their joys and sorrows, their hopes and anxieties; it's up to you to pray for them and offer them the strength that comes from Christ and that you receive at every Eucharist. Even if they don't know how to name their deepest yearnings, have no doubt that these men and women, these young people and children, in the secret of their hearts that are often parched or anaesthetized, are nonetheless, like the woman of Samaria, searching for living water, waiting for an answer to their existential questions, eager to find meaning in their lives and salvation in their future.

Church of Quebec, it's all very well to develop missionary projects, but don't get bogged down in your internal organizational problems. Get off centre! Put Christ and the poor at the centre: that way you can be sure that you're not mistaken! Don't forget the essential message that has been entrusted to you: the love with which God loves the world, to the point of giving his life, in his Son, for our salvation. Offer God the hospitality of your heart, so that you can give your brothers and sisters a face to this message. Be true to yourself, so that *"those who devise evil"*, as the book of Wisdom referred to them earlier, will not be able to get hold of you when they test your patience and try to see what your gentleness is worth! And don't forget that the encounters that God brings about, if they are lived in truth, transform both the person who receives the Gospel and the person who proclaims it.

And, Church of Quebec, don't forget that every culture is capable of expressing the Gospel message in its own way. Don't confuse missionary expansion with cultural imperialism, as the dangerous links too often established between mission and colonization have led us to believe. The narrowness of an education that claimed to give us the 'only' true civilization has closed our eyes to the beauties that man has developed under other skies. Pope Francis' penitential pilgrimage has encouraged you to examine the traces of God's desire in the cultural and religious history of humanity, especially among indigenous peoples. Continue this work, without getting caught up in a morbid sense of guilt, but with courage, after acknowledging your faults, to joyfully go and discover the work of the Spirit in these cultures which, although they are not marked by any Christian sign, can nevertheless help you, and the whole Church, to discover how the mystery of God is even

greater than what we believed to know about it. That's what learning to be Catholic is all about!

For the catholicity of the Church, which is both a gift and a mission that concerns all Christians, whatever their denomination, is not measured by the size of a social area that is constantly being enlarged, but by the flavour of the salt, the radiance of the lamp, the fruitfulness of the leaven. The Church was already Catholic on the morning of Pentecost, when all its members were housed in a single small room in the Upper Room! Indeed, it was only by accepting to be founded on the Paschal Mystery, the mystery of death and resurrection, that the Church received its mission.

This is what Jesus, for the second time, was trying to teach his disciples in the Gospel passage that the Church's liturgy has given us as a gift this morning. But the disciples still don't understand. They remembered what Jesus had said after the first announcement of his Passion: *"Whoever wishes to follow me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me"*. And this time he adds: *"Whoever wishes to be first, let him be last of all and servant of all"*.

Church of Quebec, do not be afraid to strip yourself of all that encumbers you and to attach yourself unreservedly to Christ in the mystery of his death and resurrection, for the salvation of the world. Don't forget that this mystery of salvation goes beyond you, because *"the Holy Spirit offers to all, in a way known to God, the possibility of being associated with the paschal mystery"*, as our fathers expressed it at the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22, 5). But don't forget either that this mystery of salvation requires you because, with your precariousness and your weaknesses, with your wanderings and even your deviances, God has nevertheless called you to be, in this country, the *"sacrament of salvation"*, that is, in Christ, *"the sign and means of man's intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race"* (*Lumen gentium*, 1).

Dear Church of Quebec, thank you for the beautiful witness you have already given to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So much holiness has already blossomed on the banks of the river! Continue your pilgrimage by learning to walk together, with all those who are given to you as fellow travelers, as Pope Francis invites you to do in the beautiful letter he sent you.

Happy birthday, Church of Quebec!

May God, who loves you, bless you and keep you! Amen!