



1 February 2020

Dear Fathers, Pastoral Assistants and Parishioners,

I am beginning to write this letter while still in Vietnam, with a confrere, Father Remi Hebert, on the first two weeks of my 2020 vacation. Many people that we met here asked why we chose to visit Vietnam for our vacation. While we're not typical tourists, we saw some popular tourist sights. We were not lodged in nice hotels, we stayed with Redemptorist communities in Hanoi, Hue and Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City). As it turned out, the country was celebrating their lunar new year on January 25th (which also is the feast of the conversion of St. Paul, and the anniversary of my episcopal ordination). Têt is a huge celebration in Asian countries, and so we took part in many Masses and processions at the Redemptorist parishes in those three cities.

Catholics make up only 7% of the Vietnamese population. But their presence and influence in society are much greater than that figure might suggest to us. The government is Communist and atheist, so there is obviously some antipathy between the government and all faith communities, especially one as demonstrative as the Catholic Church. Despite this, developments over the past few years have brought about a greater ability for dialogue between Church and State in some regions of the country. The devotion of the people is very strong; expressions of faith are much more evident than in Canada at the present time. There is no doubt some truth to the thought that the Church becomes stronger under persecution.

Ash Wednesday and Lent

The holy season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, which this year falls on February 26th. This is indeed a holy season, in which we are called to renew our hearts and minds in the spirit of our baptism. Meanwhile, those in our catechumenate programs across the archdiocese are preparing for their baptism and initiation into Christ.

Though not a holy day of obligation, Catholics are strongly encouraged to attend Mass or other service on Ash Wednesday. The ashes, made from burnt palm branches of the previous Palm Sunday, are placed on our foreheads as a symbol of our desire to do penance. In biblical times, to sit in "sackcloth and ashes" was an expression of the penitent's desire and commitment to change his/her ways, to be more obedient to the will of God.

Ash Wednesday and Good Friday stand out each year as days of fasting and abstinence. Abstinence is from eating all meat, and applies to those 14 years of age and older. Fasting binds those between the ages of 18 and 59, and addresses the amount of food consumed on that day. Generally, this is understood as one meal a day, and two smaller meals which together do not equal the one meal in quantity. Those with health needs are exempted.

Euthanasia and MAiD

Several years ago, I began receiving literature from the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition. While those who sounded the alarm about “mercy killing” saw the urgency of the matter, it was not at all certain to me in those days that the practice of euthanasia would become a popular and promoted practice in society. How wrong I was! The decisions of our legislatures and our courts highlight that this is indeed a clear and present danger. When what we now call MAiD was legalized, it was proposed for only those who are near death from a physical illness whose pain was unbearable. In the recent general survey of Canadians, and the direction that this survey’s results seem to justify, we will likely see access to MAiD “broadened” to allow other categories of persons to gain access to this “service”. While there were initially assurances that those medical practitioners and institutions who find such practice unconscionable would not be forced to provide these, we are seeing persistent accusations that objectors to MAiD are denying citizens a fundamental human right. In our fully-funded Medicare system, these same voices question if such doctors and hospitals should receive funding if they will deny this “service”.

In the face of such developments, the Catholic Church is consistent in her teaching about human life: human life is a sacred gift, and must be protected from conception to natural death. The following two letters are statements from bishops, of Alberta and Canada, on this matter:

<https://archgm.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Pastoral-Letter-on-Euthanasia-Assisted-Suicide.pdf>
http://www.cccb.ca/site/images/stories/pdf/Letter_to_PM_Justin_Trudeau_on_expansion_of_MAiD_-_31_Jan_2020_-_EN.pdf

Strengthened by Faith, Built on Rock

In last month’s letter, I spoke of a new initiative in our archdiocese to raise needed operating funds for the present and future of our local Church. In an initial conversation with our consultants, I was asked if I had a name or theme for this appeal. It’s too early in the process to say that this name will “stick”, but I told them that the name I had given to the ad hoc committee that worked on this with me was “Strengthened by Faith, Built on Rock.”. I explained that financial need in the Church should not be seen simply from the point of view of money. It is not first and foremost about money; it’s about faith and engagement. If my own faith is well-grounded and solid, my faith community is not going to lack what it needs for its mission and its survival. This is an incontrovertible fact, in my view. Jesus often spoke about money, but one of his best lines is that “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”. (Matt 6:21 and Luke 12:34) If I love my children, I will not see them in need. If I am grateful to my parents, I will not see them suffer want. If I am dedicated to an organization whose goals I fully support, I will make sacrifices (more than monetary ones) to promote its goals and values.

As we continue to build this appeal for needs of the diocese and its many communities, let’s keep this in mind: it’s not first about money; it’s about faith and engagement.

Sincerely in Christ the Redeemer,



Most Rev. Gerard Pettipas, C.S.S.R.
Archbishop of Grouard-McLennan