



From A Bishop's Journal (663)

Meeting of the Atlantic Bishops

The bishops of the Atlantic region met together at Grand Falls (NL), September 7 and 8, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the founding of this diocese dedicated to the Immaculate Conception. Established in 1856, the diocese has a Catholic population today of 35,850, in 72 parishes and missions. Allow me to describe a bit our bishops' assembly, within the Canadian Catholic Church.

Nearly One Million Catholics

There are twelve dioceses in the Atlantic region, at this time, with four in New Brunswick, one in Prince Edward Island, three in Nova Scotia, and four in Newfoundland-Labrador. These dioceses comprise approximately 970,000 Catholics in 769 parishes. In the last seven years, ten of the twelve dioceses have changed or shall be changing titular bishops, and two of the dioceses are vacant. There are nine titular bishops, one auxiliary bishop, and nine bishops emeriti. The Catholic population of the dioceses of Bathurst, Edmundston, and Moncton is largely French-speaking, and the others are anglophone. Archbishop Terrence Prendergast, S.J. of Halifax is also apostolic administrator of Yarmouth, Bishop Douglas Crosby, O.M.I. of Labrador City-Schefferville is also bishop of St. George's, and Bishop Martin Currie of Grand Falls (NL), was just appointed September 9 of this year, apostolic administrator of Saint John (NB), replacing Bishop J. Faber MacDonald who resigned for health reasons.

A Rich History

The history of the Church in the Maritimes is rich and varied. We used to say that the arrival of the first Christians in America dated back to the seventeenth century, in 1604, with the first French establishment in Acadia, but since Newfoundland's incorporation into Canada we must say that the first Christians came to our shores around the year 1000 when the Vikings came to the island: these men were Christians from Scandinavia and Greenland. And we could not have a true picture of the Atlantic region of our country without the presence of the Native people, especially the Micmacs and the Maliseet.

Mission of Evangelisation

The mission of evangelisation urges us to find qualified workers to proclaim the message of Jesus: hundreds of committed lay persons cooperate in a wonderful way with some 550 priests, in the Atlantic

region. We must remember that the struggle for justice is essential to the spreading of the Gospel. In a bold document entitled *For Building A Kingdom of Justice*, the Atlantic bishops wrote, in 1979, that the history of Atlantic Canada's dependence is as old as the history of Confederation: "The excessive concentration of economic and cultural power in the metropolitan regions of Canada has robbed the Maritimes region not only of their original economic institutions but also of their human resources: population, softwood lumber, fish, food, and minerals."

Faced with the catastrophic disappearance of our fisheries, the increasing incidence of precarious employment, and the problems in trying to coming to international agreements especially on lumber and the potato market, faced also with the concentration of means of communication, such a description of regional disparities is even more apropos.

Meeting in Rome, in May

The bishops of the Atlantic region were in Rome from May 15 to June 1 for their *ad limina* visit. It was Bishop Raymond J. Lahey of Antigonish who introduced us to the Holy Father, mentioning the 400th anniversary of baptism of Chief Membertou, the Cologne World Youth Day, the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, economic and cultural globalization, the high unemployment, the exodus of young people from our region, secularisation today, and evangelisation. The Holy Father responded by citing the rich heritage of faith passed on by our ancestors, but also the disastrous effects of secularisation. He congratulated the bishops on their continuing work in catechetics. "The reorganisation of parishes is essentially an exercise in spiritual renewal. A rediscovery of Jesus Christ, the Word made Man, our Saviour, shall lead to a rediscovery of the faithful's personal, social, and cultural identity." The Holy Father insisted on our call to holiness.

Main Concerns

The main points studied by the AEA bishops are: the sacrament of marriage, the situation of our Marriage Tribunal for better mutual cooperation while ensuring accessibility to the population in their own culture, and the legal reorganisation of our diocesan corporations. These subjects will continue to be studied during the 2006-2007 pastoral year. We studied together the catechetical pastoral situation, the formation and training of our catechists, and adult catechesis. "How is the faith of our adults nourished? The homily given to Christians who attend Mass is usually no longer than ten minutes or so, and written and spoken media very rarely broach issues of faith." In our diocese, the School of Faith is now in its twenty-second year for the French, and twenty-first year for the English, and the School of Pastoral Formation [French] is already in its tenth year. Several parish associations and communities are applying pressure on our prime minister and members of parliament to reopen the debate on marriage. Following our meeting, Pope Benedict XVI saw the bishops of Ontario. After praising our country for its efforts on behalf of justice and peace, he had these words: "In the name of 'tolerance' your country has had to submit to the folly of the redefinition of marriage, and in the name of freedom of choice, it has had to come to grips with the daily destruction of unborn children. When we ignore the divine plan of the Creator, we lose the truth of human nature. Democracy succeeds only to the extent that it is based on truth and on a corrected understanding of the human person."

New EAE Executive

At its May meeting the AEA elected me as its president. The first vice-president is Archbishop Terrence Prendergast, S.J., of Halifax, and the second vice-president is Bishop Martin Currie of Grand Falls (NL), taking into consideration the cultural diversity of our ecclesiastical provinces. I thank Bishop Raymond J. Lahey who presided the AEA for a six-year term.

+ François Thibodeau

+ François Thibodeau, C.J.M.
Bishop of Edmundston

09-20-06