

## **A policy on church buildings no longer necessary in the context of the reorganization of parishes**

### **Criteria for making judgements**

During recent years, in the context of the re-organization of parishes and following the adoption of evangelization and pastoral animation projects, we have had to either sell or assign to a different use a certain number of church buildings and rectories. Such decisions are never easy when one considers the attachment parishioners feel to their church, the bonds that people have formed, and the challenges posed by every change that bears upon our ties of affection or our customs.

There must, therefore, be serious reasons to go ahead with such changes. In the cases that have arisen, the direction was often foreseen when the evangelization and pastoral animation projects were being prepared. A certain number of criteria have been taken into account. It seems important now to recall them and express them concretely, when we consider that we shall undoubtedly have to proceed with new sales or new assignments to different uses.

The present document therefore sets forth the principal criteria for use as clarification and guidance when a decision has to be taken. These criteria are not to be considered in isolation. It is by looking at them all together that you will determine whether to keep a given location or divest yourselves of it.

#### **1. The viability of a community connected with a place of worship**

Just as the creation of parishes and the construction of places of worship have been attributable to the increasing numbers, and the willingness and generosity of worshippers, so have the decreases in the number of active parishioners and their failure to take an active part in the evangelization project and contribute financially to the parish, called its existence into question and that of one or more of its places of worship and assembly.

It is not just the number of parishioners, but first and foremost their effective participation in an evangelization and pastoral animation project that justifies and makes possible the maintenance of a meeting place and of premises necessary for the mission of the parish. The duties of a parish are many, as it must ensure everything that is needed for the life of Christians, from birth to death, which presupposes that the real needs of the parish are taken into account as well as adequate staff to instruct, guide and serve the faithful. However, this spiritual duty calls for effective participation in the mission of the Church and also, obviously, a corresponding financial participation (Sunday collections, annual dues, voluntary contributions, special collections, etc.). When this participation is lacking the question then arises, without passing judgement on individual persons, as to whether the parish and/or its places of worship can survive.

## **2. The community of the faithful and the pastoral staff**

The parish is defined as a community of the faithful established in a stable manner in a diocese, whose pastoral care is entrusted to a parish priest (Code of Canon Law, can. 515). The community of the faithful is without doubt foremost. To be established in a stable manner and to remain so, assumes a whole set of conditions related to the numbers of the faithful and to all that is needed for the Christian life of a community, but also to the pastoral personnel that would respond to these needs.

It is, therefore, clear that maintaining parishes and their places of worship and other meeting places also depends upon the number of priests available, upon lay pastoral personnel available, churchwardens, various employees and a whole set of volunteers.

We must now also realize that the diocese has fewer priests than it did at the time of its foundation for a population ten times as large, while the average age of these priests is much higher than it was seventy years ago. Even taking into account priests coming from other dioceses and the religious priests working here, we have only about 50 priests available for the 51 existing parishes, of which some have more than 25,000 parishioners and several places of worship. This situation cannot be improved quickly, even by calling upon priests from outside. The ratio of people to priests now is more than 11,000 to one.

Moreover, the number of pastoral agents has also diminished and their task has broadened in scope, notably because they have taken on the duties of catechesis, of social ministry, the catechumenate and ministry to the elderly, the sick and the grieving.

Even after reorganizing our teams, creating larger parish entities, and appealing to volunteers, we find that it is impossible to guarantee celebrations everywhere (especially where there are several places of worship in the same parish), above all when only a small number of worshippers gather together. Therefore, we must no longer think only of re-grouping parishes, but of re-grouping the communities which constitute the parish.

This is, therefore, another factor that has to be taken into consideration when deciding to maintain a place of worship or not, after undertaking a very close study of the needs of each constituent community and of the entire parish.

### **3. The financial situation and the state of the immovables**

It is often because of the costs connected with the upkeep and repairs to a church, when worshippers could be assembling in a neighbouring church, that consideration is given to giving up a particular place of worship. Whether it is a matter of regular maintenance costs, or personnel costs and other factors already mentioned, if we do not manage to achieve financial stability in the medium term, we certainly have to ask what is to be done with the place of worship.

After taking into account the actual needs of the community in question, we can certainly consider renting the premises, or making new use of the church, especially if it is under-used. But it is not normal to waste a lot of energy on material questions at the expense of a vaster and more urgent evangelization and pastoral animation project. Besides, the Act respecting Fabriques does not permit the indefinite retention of buildings not serving religious purposes.

### **4. The patrimonial value**

Much has been said in recent years about the patrimonial value of religious buildings and the duty to keep them. The government of Quebec has allocated several millions of dollars to undertake the work necessary to conserve the religious heritage. Many of our churches possessing patrimonial value have benefited from these subsidies.

The proposition has been asserted lately that the people were the proprietors of these religious buildings. Some have even suggested that the State should take possession of them. They forget that it is the members of the different confessions who have paid the costs of construction. For our part, it is practising Catholics who have guaranteed the costs of maintenance and repairs (even when there were subsidies) and, under the terms of the existing law, it is the Fabriques who are the proprietors.

Recently we have begun to establish parish and diocesan patrimonial funds to protect our religious heritage. As far as possible we must, therefore, give priority to buildings possessing patrimonial value. Where this is not really possible, we must plan and assign to another use but a used that would preserve their patrimonial value.

## 5. Consultations and information

When we have had to divest ourselves of buildings, we have undertaken to consult the assemblies of the Fabriques on the basis of objective information collected by an *ad hoc* committee and we have provided the information to the people concerned at meetings of parishioners, who have been able to express their opinions on the future prospects of the buildings in question. The final decision has been taken after the College of Consultants and the Diocesan Council for Economic Affairs gave their consent.

We shall continue to proceed in the same manner. We shall provide all the information requested by the people concerned about the church buildings referred to in this paper. The final decision, in conformity with civil and ecclesiastical law, will be taken by the Bishop with the consent of those councils that have the responsibility to speak.

In these challenging times for our Church, we are led to take decisions that result in separation and suffering. But these decisions also result in calls to resume our journey along new paths with other travelling companions. This is how the road to Emmaus is built : the route of the Word, the route of the Eucharist, the route of mission. Following Christ leads us through the suffering of the cross to experiencing the Resurrection. The Spirit of the Lord guides us. It is in Him that we are in communion with the Father and the Son. In Him that we are the Church !

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "+ Jacques Berthelet C.S.V.", with a vertical line to its right.

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