

CCCB Ecumenical Greetings
September 27, 2016
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President, Canadian Council of Churches

Grace and peace to you, my brothers and sisters in Christ – bishops, guests, and staff. It is truly an honour to be asked to bring you greetings on behalf of all your ecumenical guests, partners in the mission of God to a broken world.

First of all, let me thank the Conference of Catholic Bishops for your strong support for more than 30 years of the Canadian Council of Churches. One of the first episcopal conferences in the world to join a council of churches, you have been unwavering in your commitment in terms of finances, personnel, communication, agenda-setting, and indeed in constructive criticism. You have lived your own ecclesial reality with integrity while sharing in the forum method of decision-making that characterizes our ecumenical initiatives in Canada.

I want in particular to thank you for your brother Archbishop Daniel Bohan of Regina, who was serving as a member of the Governing Board of the CCC at the time of his death. May his soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed, rest in peace and rise in glory.

I thank you also for the strong leadership exercised by Bishop Ron Fabbro as a Vice-President of the Council, and for the other members of the Governing Board, the Commissions, committees and working groups of the CCC. It is through personal engagement that the relationships are formed which strengthen our ecumenical work, and the integrity of the participants which ensures that the churches are faithful to their ecclesiological principles and to their ecumenical calling.

In the fall of last year, your President wrote to me expressing the unwavering support of the CCCB for the Canadian Council of Churches, but also raising a number of significant issues. Since that time, I with the Executive have been trying to pay attention to your concerns. In meeting with the leadership of the Conference, as I have met with leaders of, now, 11 member churches, I have heard that several churches want the Council to be more selective about the issues it addresses, taking the time truly to seek consensus amongst the members, and to ensure that the churches speak together not only in a timely fashion on significant matters in the public square, but that we do so as churches – that is, providing the theological basis for our statements. The Council, I want to assure you, is not an interest group, but an ecclesial entity, a common table for us to meet as Christians to pray and to listen to one another and to the Holy Spirit, before we speak to the nation and to the world. That is the very reason we exist: to seek the truth of the Gospel and to proclaim it together.

In part so that bodies such as the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops could join the Council, the CCC pioneered the use of a ‘forum’ method of decision-making. This means that the churches try to find consensus rather than determine a position by majority vote. The forum method of listening to one another and to the Spirit does not lend itself to quick responses. It also means that the Council may not be able to be as bold and clear as individual member churches can be. A prime example is the way that the churches responded to the issue of physician assisted death. The CCCB and several other member churches were clear that there could be no justification for such an intervention in human life. But other member churches had more nuanced positions, considering the pastoral situations of individuals. As a result, the Council as a whole was not able to speak with one voice – except on one particular critical aspect. The Council was able to say unequivocally that all Canadians must have access to excellent and

affordable palliative care. In the process of arriving at its decision, the Governing Board took care to listen to an excellent presentation from the CCCB on the issues involved.

One of the ways the churches learn from one another is to try to understand their respective operating ecclesiologies. At the last Governing Board meeting we heard from the Society of Friends and from the Salvation Army, and it would be hard to imagine two more different ways of being church and of discernment. At the upcoming meeting we hope to hear from Archbishop Donald Bolen about your ecclesiology. Such sharing helps us to understand how and why churches may come to different conclusions on particular issues, while drawing on the same common sources and serving the same Triune God. At the same time, we remain committed to the one goal of the ecumenical movement, the full visible unity of the Church, however long that may seem to be in coming. It is our calling and our motivation.

The Canadian Council of Churches is looking forward to marking, next year, two anniversaries. One is the 150th anniversary of the Confederation of Canada, and this provides an opportunity to speak once again in the public square about what values we hold as Christian citizens. Equality and justice for all are not just civic values; they stem from the prophetic tradition of our Scriptures and the value of each person created in the image and likeness of God. An anniversary is not just an occasion to celebrate – though we should certainly have fun – but a time to be grateful and to assess whether our nation is actually living up to what it says it stands for. A true celebration would see, at a minimum, progress in relationships between indigenous and settler peoples, the raising of thousands of people, especially children, from poverty, and an increased respect for the land which has been lent to our care by the Creator.

The other anniversary is the 500th anniversary of what many consider the start of the Reformation. I am aware that the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation have put much care into the report and the process called ‘From Conflict to Communion’, and many other churches want to walk with you in this journey of the healing of memories. We heard of some of those plans yesterday. We look forward to the visit next month of the Holy Father to Sweden, and we and to take seriously the Reformation slogan of ‘semper reformanda’, knowing that the churches, divided as they are, have much need of renewal together in the Holy Spirit. May this anniversary year be a greater spur to our ecumenical commitment to one another. One way in which we can do that is to give even more attention to the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which in 2017 will be on the theme of ‘Reconciliation – the Love of Christ Compels Us’, prepared by Christians in Germany.

For news and resources in French and in English on the many projects of the Canadian Council of Churches, please take the time to visit councilofchurches.ca, conseildeseglises.ca There you will find links to Week of Prayer materials; letters to the government on such issues as Murdered and Mission Aboriginal Women, nuclear disarmament, the protection of exploited persons; and podcasts by the Faith and Witness Commission on how different churches teach about salvation.

Again, thank you for including ecumenical partners in your Plenary Assembly, and for the care which you give to the ecumenical movement, both as a Conference and as leaders in your own dioceses.