



**Diocèse de Gaspé**

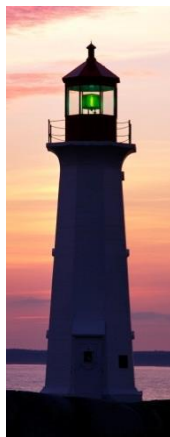
## **Pastoral Letter**

**To all the Baptized Catholics in The Gaspésie and Magdalen Islands**

***Urgency of Acting now  
for the Future of our Parish Communities***

**† Jean Gagnon  
Bishop of Gaspé**

**March 19 2013**



***Prayer  
for the Christian Communities and for Vocations***

God our Father, we pray to you: look with kindness upon your Church living in Gaspésie and the Magdalen Islands.

Sustain the communities of disciples who make up this Church: may they celebrate the presence of the Risen Christ, proclaim his Word and give witness to his Charity.

Grant us the generosity of using our talents for the benefit of our brothers and sisters and of taking an active part in the life of our community.

Come and choose among us young people and adults who will accept to put themselves at the service of the Church, so the Gospel of Jesus may always be for us a beacon shining upon our lives and guiding them.

Lord Jesus Christ, you said that the harvest is great. Give us, through the power of your Spirit, the courage to call for workers widely and to respond generously. Amen

† Jean Gagnon  
Bishop of Gaspé  
Easter 2004

## Introduction

**Following in the  
footsteps of  
Bishop Ross**

1. We celebrate this year the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of our diocese which we proudly call the Church in the Gaspésie and Magdalen Islands. Our founding Bishop, Reverend François-Xavier Ross, who was born a gaspésien in Grosses-Roches, was a remarkable pastor. He had hardly arrived here in 1923 that he gave an important impetus to the development of this region in many regards. It is under his missionary inspiration that I formulate this pressing appeal to you today so we can assure the future of our Church.

*We shall grow in every way to Christ (Ep 4:15)*

Motto of the Diocese chosen by Bishop Ross

**Faithful to  
Vatican  
Council II**

2. I would first like to recall that Vatican Council II which marks its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, has given to the universal Church a basic orientation that aims to meet present challenges in how to live out Jesus' mission: we are the People of God in today's world, and every one of the baptized must participate in this mission through each one's personal talents.

*Those who believe in Christ make up "a holy people [...] as they are the People of God". Vatican II, Lumen Gentium,*

**Responsible as  
baptized  
people**

3. Shortly after I had arrived in Gaspé in 2003, I issued pastoral orientations which I entitled *Building Communities of Disciples in our Midst*. That document came as a follow-up to the orientations given by my predecessor bishops. My wish was that we should become more and more a missionary Church, by the way we live up the Gospel and thereby bring some light into our world: the icon (image) of the lighthouse is for us a beautiful symbol of this mission. I also invited all the baptized to become better aware of their responsibility in living out Jesus' mission in *the community*. *Blessed John Paul II has often affirmed this necessary commitment of all, especially in his message for the opening of the new Millennium :*

*The entire Church is missionary : the work of evangelization is an imperative must for God's people.*

*Vatican II, Missionary Activity of the Church, 1965, # 35*

*On many occasions in the past years, I have repeatedly called to proclaim a new evangelization [...] We must relive within ourselves the feeling of Paul who cried out: "Woe to me if I do not announce the Gospel" ( 1 Co 9:16). Such passion can arouse in the Church a new missionary spirit which cannot be reserved for a group of 'specialists' but must engage the responsibility of all the members of God's People.*

*John Paul II, Novo Millennio Ineunte, 2001, # 40*

## ***Important Steps Already Accomplished***

### **Successful experiences**

4. Over this past decade, a number of successful experiences have been realized. This gives me joy and adds to my hope that we can face the new challenges awaiting us. I see an increasing mentality whereby communities assume more and more responsibilities locally. Let me single out with joy the following areas : a large number of catechists are engaged with our youth, several Parish Pastoral Teams bring their contribution to serve the community, some teams have been trained for Sunday Liturgies of the Word and funerals as well. And I believe that such commitments are no longer seen as substitute ministries, but rather an implementation of the talents of the baptized in the service of Jesus' mission in our midst.

*“We remember before our God and Father how you put your faith into practice, how your love made you work so hard, and how your hope in our Lord Jesus is firm. (1 Th. 1:3)*

### **Fraternal support**

5. We must also acknowledge the contribution of priests from Churches of other countries who have come to offer their support, as well as the efforts of religious orders who have explicitly chosen to support our Church in different ways, even the coming of religious sisters from abroad. Some individuals – we wish we had more - are preparing for the diaconate or to serve as pastoral agents.

*Such sharing among Churches, being a fruit of an active fraternal communion, must serve to sustain a powerful missionary momentum – Congregation for the Evangelization of Nations, 2001*

### **Encouraging pastoral life**

6. We can't ignore the on-going success of our annual diocesan collection done in partnership with the parishes, an effort which implies a large number of volunteers. Moreover, we also acknowledge the fact that many fabriques consider the pastoral life of their parish as a priority.

*«Command them to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share with others. In this way they will store up for themselves a treasure which will be a solid foundation for the future. And they will be able to win true life». (1 Tm 6:18-19)*

## ***Yet, an urgent move forward is needed***

### **New challenges in view**

7. Despite the good achievements noted above, some signs gathered in the past few years show us that we must plan out new pathways, because major challenges are just about to impose themselves upon us. In the spring of 2012 we issued two questionnaires to the communities, one bearing on needs connected with pastoral life, and the other one about financial and administrative matters in the parish. The information reaped has raised a number of major questions for us all to think about.

**A situation causing worry**

8. The decrease in the number of people who regularly participate in the life of their christian community and who bring their financial support, the increasing difficulty to recruit volunteers, the small number of priests, the lack of mandated personnel and the financial fragility of a good number of parishes: all those contribute to raise serious preoccupations. That is why I feel that several communities must undergo a discernment that will lead to face important inner transformations in a relatively short time.

*We are personally called and sent forth to carry on the mission of Christ; namely, to reveal a loving God to the people in today's world.  
Our Mission Statement*

**The reason why we exist**

9. For us to make good decisions and appropriate choices, we must go back to the fundamental reason for our being: «why we are there», «what is a christian community». Under what conditions can we continue to fulfill our mission? What deep convictions can enlighten our decisions? What new attitudes can we develop?

### ***The foundations of our christian and communal life***

**Basic criteria**

10. The Word of God is our main treasure and lies at the heart of our christian faith and our encounter with Jesus. In each community, all must learn more about the Word, meditate on it and hand it down to the younger generations as well as to all generations. From our very origins, Sunday has been a sacred day for us christians, and our Sunday gatherings remain the main event that gives visibility to our existence as community. The baptized should be able to celebrate the sacraments and the events of their christian life following an adequate preparation. We should also find in each community a concrete fraternal support and mutual sharing that reaches out to those who are less provided for.

*They were faithfully listening to the teaching of the Apostles, taking part in the fellowship, sharing in the fellowship meals and the prayers*

*(Acts 2:42)*

**Responsible communities**

11. When a parish can no longer count on such basic group to assume a minimum of services, although it still has a good financial status, such parish has become an empty shell. Is its existence still justifiable? A parish will no longer be able to live if we cannot find among its members people who are ready to take up responsibilities in pastoral and administrative realities, or if the financial resources have become insufficient for its normal functioning.

*Those christian communities that will best meet the challenges coming ahead are those that will be able to count on a group of people working together to serve the common good.*

*Bishop Bertrand Blanchet, 1991*

## ***A few attitudes to keep developing***

### **Delegation and team work**

12. Coresponsibility and shared leadership are two important attitudes to develop in our Church as we engage in the New Evangelization mission. We know that Jesus sent out his disciples to mission two by two (Lk 10:1). We must learn to work more as teams and to delegate certain tasks: witnessing as community is always better than individual witnessing. In his homily on Ash Wednesday of 2012, Pope Benedict XVI said this: “The communal dimension is an essential trait of our faith and christian living”. Team work may sometimes seem slower, but the results always have a good chance to last longer.

*Do we sufficiently appreciate our capacity and are we willing to stay the course and work ... even if at a slower pace?*

Bishop Bertrand Blanchet, *Is there a future for the Gaspésie?*, March 1991

### **Charity and solidarity**

13. To love one's community is part of the sentiments any disciple of Jesus must have as a response to the Master's invitation: “If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples” (Jn 13:35) It is also essential to develop a bond of solidarity with other parishes and with one's diocesan Church, especially if one is entrusted with responsibilities. I have observed that people who prefer to work by themselves tend to panic more easily when confronted with difficult situations. Finally, taking the example of saint Paul who watched over the communities, it is easier to see that the bishop and the other diocesan staff carry a “concern for all the churches” ( 2 Co 11:28) and, as such, exercise some leadership and provide support to the communities, acting in a bond of communion with them.

*One cannot care for the community if one does not love it in the first place and consider it a work of God's creation for the good of all. If we have a positive appreciation of the community we shall certainly want to keep it in good health. Bishop Raymond Dumais, My Christian Community is a work of God's Creation, 1999.*

### **Communion bonds**

14. We must consequently develop a broad sense of communion throughout our entire diocesan Church. No parish exists on its own; on the contrary, it is a “member” of a larger community in which the local pastor and the bishop are the most visible representatives. But, as we have often said it before, in a Church known as the People of God, the pastor must not be the only person carrying all the responsibilities: as is the case for any leader, he does not have to do everything himself, but to see that everything is being done. All in the parish must contribute to serve with the feeling that they are acting in solidarity within the same mission which is : to make the Gospel of Jesus known “so all may have life in its fullness” (Jn 10:10).

*The pastor carries the responsibility for the overall action, as it were, but does not act on all that is being done. In other words, he does not accomplish everything that must be done, nor does he have the necessary gifts for every task to be fulfilled. But he sees to it that everything is being done.*

Alphonse Borras, in *Parishes and ministries*, 2001, p. 141

## ***Things to do***

**Priority to working in pastoral sector**

15. Looking at the frail situation we now observe here as elsewhere – decrease in regular attendance of the faithful, difficult recruitment of volunteers, lack of mandated personnel, financial fragility – and still wishing to build a future for our Church, I would really insist that we make it a priority to deepen our reflection and our work at the sector’s level. And this on the pastoral level as well as in the financial area. And that we do this with a mind moved by solidarity and co-responsibility. We must absolutely develop a new mentality where collaboration and sharing help us move beyond a “narrow parochial spirit” which can still be occasionally observed in some places.

*It would be good to move gradually towards making the SPC of each sector the main body where reflection is carried about pastoral needs. It is also at that level that solidarity among communities will make it possible to share common orientations, plan out action and share initiatives and resources as well. Building Communities of*

**Sector’s Councils**

16. All of these needs lead us to revitalize of the Sector’s Pastoral Council wherever it exists, and to quickly set up one in places where there is none. The task of such council, while acting in a spirit of co-responsibility with the pastor, is to formulate orientations regarding pastoral services to the parishes, to plan out activities for the good of the sector, to help in the formation of volunteers and to exercise any other form of collaboration and mutual help. On the administrative level as well, fabrique chairs and parish administrators of the same sector should meet with their pastor at least a few times during the year to analyze the situation of the parishes involved, seek common solutions to difficulties and seek any other form of collaboration and mutual assistance.

*Disciples in our Midst, 2003, p. 14.*

**Giving out information regularly**

17. It will be very important to keep the entire community regularly informed on the overall situation of the parish, on both the pastoral and administrative levels. Information includes successful events and happenings in the life of the parish, as well as needs spotted by the fabrique, whether financial or otherwise. Yet, there is more to information. To meet that need, it would be most appropriate to call an annual meeting of all parishioners to go over the year that just elapsed, submit projects for the current year, and allow everyone to ask questions in both pastoral and administrative areas. Such way of spreading information fosters a sense of participating in a common responsibility, and in this way it may avoid creating unpleasant surprises, should difficult decisions be made.

*Communication cannot be limited to notices or brief notes. It demands verbal communication, and fraternal sharings... It presupposes dialogue, sharing of ideas, and partnership.*

*The Diocese of Cambrai, France, 2007*

**Calling widely**

18. We must keep on calling widely on new collaborators, including young people, to assume various responsibilities. In my pastoral letter for Easter 2004, I insisted on the fact that we must call pastorally on people in virtue of their dignity as baptized disciples, and relying on the fact that God expects everyone of us to announce the Gospel and to take care of each community. And I added this : “The call to commitment in our day will be coming more from the community itself who sees the need to fulfill a specific task for the vitality and advancement of the mission in that place. That is why every member of the community must make it a duty to call on specific persons to ‘take care of the community’ in this or that area, some of whom would commit themselves permanently, others for a period of time”. Such need to find persons and talents to serve the community still remains an urgency today.

*Each one, as a good manager of God's different gifts, must use for the good of others the special gift he has received from God (1 P 4:10)*

**Activities to prioritize**

19. We shall continue to develop as a priority catechesis for youths and adults, as this is the first missionary task of the Church. We must also keep supporting Gospel sharing groups and spiritual movements. Each local community must also hold a Sunday prayer gathering with a reasonable number of people. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews clearly invites us to do that: “Let us not give up the habit of coming together” (10:25); such gathering being in fact an expression of the visibility and vitality of a community.

*You will always find in your midst people who could fulfill certain required responsibilities, if you patiently take the time to prepare them.*

Mgr F.-X. Ross,  
Circular Letter to the Clergy, # 7, July 1923.

There is still need to organize pastoral teams to work with those who come for baptism, confirmation and marriage. Some other people will be called upon to visit the sick on behalf of the community. In each pastoral sector, there is need to prepare teams to lead community prayers, such as Sunday Liturgies of the Word and christian funerals. And I insist on this: this is an important task to be concretely addressed by the Parish Pastoral Teams and Sector Councils as well. For their part, diocesan services are ready to find the resources needed to prepare people for those involvements.

*The talent of the one who organizes is not to work alone, but to prepare people to be involved. Our most appreciable and effective work is to prepare those who will come after us and enable them to take the task over when we shall go.*

Mgr. Ross, 1923



**Important discernment**

20. Unless sufficient resources are found that will sustain christian living in our communities, the question that will arise will cause us to seriously face the eventuality of not being able to maintain all the existing services that were set up for parishes in the past. Ultimately, if the situation became such that they would lack the required means to maintain some basic vitality, such communities should even reflect on the possibility of joining neighboring parishes or a grouping of parishes.

*It is true that the decrease in church attendance has and will continue to challenge the christian living of our communities in the years ahead.*

Bishop Bertrand Blanchet, 1991.

## ***Conclusion***

**Deep transformations**

21. Last February at a meeting with the seminarians of the Diocese of Rome, Pope Benedict XVI reinstated that : “the Church is constantly being born”. This speaks eloquently of the deep changes our society has undergone over the past fifty years. And the Church has experienced its own deep transformations as well. To the extent that even today she must redefine her own way of being, as this has been the case so many times over the past two thousand years of her history. We therefore must adapt constantly as new difficulties arise, such that we should not place ourselves in a dead-end position which would block the future before us.

*The first way to announce the Gospel is through witnessing by one's life [...] Yet, that in itself remains insufficient, because the best witnessing will in the long run be ineffective if it is not supported by what saint Peter identified as “being ready to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you” (I P 3:15). This is done through an explicit, unbiased and clear proclamation of the Lord Jesus.*

**Keeping an unfailing hope**

22. Being disciples of Jesus, and being confronted with this urgency to engage ourselves, I invite you all to enter into this new stage of the life of our diocesan Church with an unfailing hope. When faced with the heavy task that lay ahead for him, Bishop Ross wrote: “ Considering the tasks to be accomplished, we place our confidence in God who promised he would be with his apostles until the end” (Opening Mandate, 1923).

Paul VI, Evangelization in the modern world, 1975, # 21.

**Regional  
gatherings**

23. Wishing this pastoral letter will arouse serious reflection and move people to make concrete decisions, I plan to organize a series of regional gatherings in our diocesan Church in the months ahead. I call for the participation of those who are already engaged in our Church – ordained ministers, pastoral agents, other people in pastoral commitments, members of Councils at the sector and parish levels, as well as fabrique members – and also the largest possible number of parishioners who care for the life of our Church. I also want to assure every community that our diocesan services will bring their support each time it will be requested.

We can justly hope that the future rests in the hands of those who will have handed down to future generations reasons for living and hoping. Vatican II, Gaudium et Spes, # 31

**To the glory  
of Christ the  
King**

24. May the Holy Spirit accompany us with his light and comforting presence! May Saint Joseph, model of faith, whose feast we celebrate today, also be for us a model of hope! And may all our reflections and future actions serve the glory of Christ the King, patron of our Church that is in Gaspésie and the Magdalen Islands! From the depth of my heart I pray that the Lord who walks along with us on the way of our commitments, will renew our energies and fill us all with his blessings!

*Come Holy Spirit,  
come from the  
heights of heaven  
and shine with  
radiance bright.*

Pentecost  
Sequence

Given at Gaspé, on this nineteenth day of March in the year two thousand thirteen, on the fourteenth anniversary of my episcopal ordination.



† Jean Gagnon  
Évêque de Gaspé



Julien Leblanc, diacre



Chancelier

## ***Your Pastor's urgent demands***

Considering the urgency for the future of our communities to move on to action now, I press you to give follow-up to the following demands:

1. That all parishes and missions be organized into **Pastoral Sectors** this year, and that those engaged be involved at the sector's level, both for pastoral and administrative issues, so as to develop concretely patterns of solidarity, sharing and mutual support among neighboring parishes.
2. That **Sector's Pastoral Councils** be set up or strengthened to sustain this common collaboration; such council will, along with the pastor, set up pastoral priorities for the communities concerned, organize parish pastoral teams, coordinate liturgical celebrations, foresee how to ....(*quelque chose de pas clair ici*), and suggest common activities to strengthen unity and communion.
3. That pastors call **meetings of fabrique chairpeople** to plan out a constant sharing of information and concerns regarding pastoral priorities, such as common costs for replacement of personnel, sick leaves, vacation, fringe benefits, etc.
4. That we all acquire **the habit to reflect and pray together with the Word of God** before each pastoral and administrative meeting; that **Gospel sharing groups** be fostered and developed who will meet regularly, especially during special liturgical seasons.
5. That all parishes firmly engage themselves in **the christian formation of youths and adults** by using, whenever possible, catechetical programs already in place in our diocese which allow parents to be involved as the main educators of the faith of their children.
6. That, within each pastoral Sector, members of the Sector Pastoral Council, with the help of parish pastoral teams, identify lay persons who would accept to be prepared to lead **Sunday Liturgies of the Word** and **christian funerals**, such that the community would not be deprived of communal prayers should there be a sudden need for replacement.
7. That in each community people be trained to **operate in teams** in a **spirit of co-responsibility** so as to assume "as community" the main tasks called for by its life, with the view that the community itself assumes its own life and prepares younger volunteers and leaders to carry on. That all our meetings and involvements be lived out with **great respect and charity towards all**.
8. That those in charge in each community be mindful of **high quality of pastoral services**; that fabriques set apart a **budget for pastoral works** and find **regular occasions to inform** the community on its needs.
9. That in each Sector and each community there be a reflection on the capacity of this local **community to maintain its vitality** and if not, see what alternative would be possible.
10. That this period of reflection and action be lived in **the hope** raised by Pope Benedict's words : "The Church is constantly being born".

## Words of Life

*Continue in the faith, stable and steadfast,  
without shifting from the hope  
of the gospel that you heard,  
which has been proclaimed to every creature  
under heaven.*

Colossians 1.23



*Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God,  
serve one another  
with whatever gift each of you has received.  
Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God;  
whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies,  
so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ.*

1 Peter 4.10-11



*Speaking the truth in love,  
**we must grow up in every way  
into him who is the head,**  
into Christ, from whom the whole body,  
joined and knitted together by every joint  
with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly,  
makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

Ephesians 4,15-16