

**Statement
from the Assembly of Québec Catholic Bishops
on
the Ethics and Religious Cultural Program**

1. We live in an era of profound cultural and religious transformation. Religious education in Québec is an area that has witnessed many changes over the past several years. After the dismantling of the confessional school structure in school boards and public schools, Bill 95 was passed in July 2005 with the result that religious confessional instruction will disappear from this milieu. In its place, the Government has chosen to implement an *Ethics and Religious Culture program* in September 2008 which will be compulsory for students attending public or private, elementary or secondary schools.

2. It has been evident for at least fifteen years that the goal of religious education in public schools is not an initiation to Christian life. This has become even more apparent with the introduction of a single program of ethics and religious culture. The school is no longer a place for confessional religious instruction. Instead this responsibility has primarily been assigned to parishes and families.

Formation for a Christian Life

3. Québec dioceses have undertaken to establish catechetical processes in parishes in order to ensure that children have a coherent formation for a Christian life, in conjunction with their families and parish communities. These positive and vital initiatives resonate with a significant percentage of the population with allowances for regional variations. In this way, parents may ensure that their children have the possibility of moral and spiritual instruction that conforms to their convictions.

4. These catechetical processes call for active participation from parents and all those who are involved in transmitting and spreading the faith. We understand that this entails considerable effort in today's social and family contexts, and our objective has been to

offer parents and catechists various support mechanisms to facilitate these tasks. In other respects, experience has proved that the result of such participation is often a deepening of faith for those involved and an occasion for renewal for the Christian community.

The Ethics and Religious Culture Program

5. The government's adoption of the *Ethics and Religious Culture* program (ERC) has caused apprehension and disapproval among some, while others have viewed it as a necessary evolution. The Assembly of Québec Catholic Bishops has always expressed its preference for respecting parents' choices in matters concerning moral and religious education. For this reason, it has favored a system of options between confessional instruction and a non-religious moral instruction. This freedom of choice will disappear once the new program is implemented. In our eyes this represents a loss and we conclude that we must remain very vigilant regarding the fundamental respect of freedom of conscience within the newly created context.

6. We have taken formal note of the Government's decisions concerning the place of religion in schools. In a spirit of vigilant collaboration, we have taken part in consultations that preceded the adoption of the new program. Having concluded that the approved version would have both appreciable advantages and serious limitations, we believe it is necessary to maintain a position of openness and prudence.

Strengths and Weaknesses

7. The expected educational contribution in this program is based mainly on a plan for citizenship: *the recognition of others and the pursuit of the common good*. This involves learning to live together in a pluralistic society. We subscribe to this objective and invite the Catholic population to acknowledge its relevance. The transformations that have profoundly marked our society motivate us to act immediately. The dialogue on ethical and religious questions may help youth from various beliefs and convictions to surmount

ideological differences and better respect one another. In addition, students as a whole will be given a positive understanding of religious phenomena, particularly concerning the Catholic and Protestant traditions. This may also prevent the loss of the Christian heritage for future generations.

8. Yet this program also raises crucial questions. For example, with respect to ethics, it proposes few significant references other than those that pertain to living together in harmony. It considers exterior religious phenomena from a strictly socio-cultural view, which could lead to a restricted vision in a believer's experience. Since young people's identity and their capacity to judge are just beginning to develop, what effect will the exposure to diverse ethical and religious viewpoints have on them, particularly at the elementary level? We may also ask what place will in fact be given to Christianity within a program with a heavy content that includes ethical and religious perspectives.

Conditions for Implementing the Program

9. We have further questions relating to the implementation of the new program. The most serious challenge is the formation offered to new teachers. It is far from being evident that the required human resources will be available in time to deal with the program's specific needs, particularly at the elementary level. Even if we count on the teachers' professionalism to perfect their training using the available options, will the resources set aside be sufficient for these purposes? We may also inquire if the required teaching materials will be ready for general distribution as of September 2008. The success of this program which presents such demanding challenges, with respect to the place where the values and fundamental rights of our society intersect, will depend to a large extent on the response to these questions.

10. It is only through experience that we may judge if the advantages of the ERC program outweigh its limitations or *vice versa*, and if its application will be consistent with the declarations of its good intentions. The Government has made its decision about this program and the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Québec can only offer its opinion

on this subject. For the moment, we have chosen to maintain a critical and vigilant stance. We explain this in greater detail in a letter to the Minister which is on our Internet site: www.eveques.qc.ca

11. We acknowledge that a significant number of parents have expressed their concern over these changes. If it happens that the program content or the way it is taught may cause serious concerns for the students, the Law concerning Public Instruction (Art. 222) foresees the possibility of recourse to an exemption, which a school commission may grant or refuse. This would be a final resort that must be used cautiously. There is a need for the Ministry of Education to pay scrupulous attention throughout the implementation process and to evaluations involving parents, in order that any necessary corrections are put into effect as the needs arise. Extensive evaluations must be carried out after a period of three to five years. In the case of very pronounced dissatisfaction, we must be prepared to reconsider the possibility of offering an option. The Assembly will remain attentive to the impact of the new program on our youth by entrusting a committee of experts with the responsibility of monitoring the implementation process and receiving observations from the dioceses as the program follows its course.

12. Changes of this magnitude present considerable challenges. May we collectively rise to these challenges in a spirit of prudence and responsibility and continue the dialogue with all partners involved.

Assembly of Québec Catholic Bishops

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