

***A letter to the Minister of Education  
on the Ethics and Religious Culture Program***

*The following is a translation of a letter sent by Bishop Martin Veillette, president of the Assembly of Québec Catholic Bishops, to Madame Michelle Courchesne, Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports, on the Ethics and Religious Culture program.*

*The letter was sent to the Minister on September 15, 2009. This English version was prepared subsequently for release at the September 23 press conference.*

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Madame la Ministre,

Eighteen months have passed since we wrote to you concerning the new *Ethics and Religious Culture* program (ERC). We had thoroughly studied the program, acknowledged the importance of its two main objectives - *the recognition of others and the pursuit of the common good* – and concluded that, while the new program had certain positive features, it also had serious limitations.

We had then publicly committed ourselves to maintain “*an attitude of openness and prudence..., both critical and vigilant.*”

For that purpose, we have taken the following measures:

- We compiled opinions forwarded by our network of diocesan leaders who are responsible for Christian life formation.
- We consulted parents, teachers and catechists.
- We commissioned a group of experts to analyze in a systematic way the textbooks approved by your Ministry.
- Our Christian Education Committee received opinions and testimonies from various individuals and groups.
- A special committee submitted a summary report to the Executive Committee of the Assembly of Québec Catholic Bishops.

We now possess a substantial amount of data based on observations by those involved in the program’s implementation and on objective analysis of the pedagogical material. We are therefore prepared to submit an initial assessment.

We must say that we are concerned. A growing number of indicators point to the need for significant corrections, without which the program can neither meet its objectives nor fulfill its potential.

Our main concerns are:

- that the comprehension and implementation of the program have been undermined by the lack of information made available to parents, who are the ones who are primarily responsible for the education of their children;
- that the place and the presentation of the Christian tradition in the textbooks approved for elementary schools do not respect the requirements of the program;
- that teacher training and support is inadequate to say the least.

## 1. Questions and Concerns from Parents

Until now, as your own research would undoubtedly confirm, the implementation of the program has gone relatively smoothly in the majority of communities, with the exception of the movement that opposes the obligatory character of the program. This relative calm, however, does not necessarily mean that there is widespread satisfaction.

The parents who have been consulted often deplore the lack of information regarding the instruction that takes place in the classroom. Many have expressed the desire to have access to the textbooks that are actually being used. To form an opinion about the new program, they can only rely upon their children's reactions.

Certain parents have acknowledged the positive features of the new program, which provides opportunities to discuss issues with their children and encourages openness to the cultural and religious diversity of their milieu. Other parents are reticent or completely opposed to the program, most often because they foresee that the program might generate problems and confusion for their children.

A certain number have asked for their children to be exempt from the *ECR* program. This opposition movement cannot be ignored. In our public statement of March 2008, we addressed this sensitive matter in the following way:

*“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 favoured a system offering an option between confessional instruction and non-religious moral instruction. This freedom of choice will disappear once the new program is implemented. In our eyes, this represents a loss. Special care will be required to assure complete respect of freedom of conscience within the newly created context.”*

*(Statement from the Assembly of Québec Catholic Bishops on the Ethics and Religious Cultural Program, March 17, 2008)*

Similarly, in a letter dated March 11, 2008, sent to your attention, we reiterated our conviction that *“in all matters involving freedom of conscience, every possible effort must be made to assure that such freedom will be entirely respected.”*

## 2. Significant shortcomings in the textbooks approved for elementary schools

### a. The place given to Christian tradition

Your Ministry had formulated very stringent requirements concerning the importance to be given to the Christian tradition in the *Ethics and Religious Culture* program:

*“In contexts involving learning and evaluation, the teacher must ensure that the Christian tradition (both Catholic and Protestant) is taught throughout each year of a cycle.”* (2008 Update of *Programme de formation de l'école québécoise. Éducation préscolaire. Enseignement primaire*. Page 325.) (Free translation)

Such a requirement is not specified for any other religious tradition. The description of the program includes an explicit reminder that *“the historical and cultural importance of Catholicism and Protestantism”* must be *“particularly stressed.”* (Id. Page 325) (Free translation)

The predominance to be given to the Christian tradition had been stipulated by your predecessor, M. Jean-Marc Fournier, during his parliamentary speech to the National Assembly before the vote on Bill 95. His assurances had certainly encouraged a favourable reception of the new program. He stated:

*“The learning process must be rooted within the students' reality in order to facilitate the expansion of their horizons. This reality is the culture of Québec, one that has been largely shaped by the influence of the Catholic and Protestant religions. The new program will therefore have to grant an appropriate place to the religious heritage of Québec, which will then be situated within a larger perspective characterized by religious plurality.”*

*(Journal des débats, Cahier 169, June 15, 2005.)* (Free translation)

However, on this crucial point, our analysis reveals that the textbooks do not meet the requirements of the program. Our experts have found that the importance given to the Christian tradition is comparable to that given to other religions, failing thereby to meet the requirement that the Christian tradition be taught throughout the year of a particular cycle. These textbooks will expose the students to religious diversity much more than introduce them in a significant way to Québec's Christian tradition.

*b. The presentation of the Christian tradition*

In the document on the *Ethics and Religious Culture* program published by your Ministry, we read that the program will enable students to:

*“... progressively grasp, in accordance with their age level, the religious phenomenon, in its experiential, historical, doctrinal, moral, ritual, literary, artistic, social and political dimensions.”* (2008 Update of *Programme de formation de l'école québécoise. Éducation préscolaire. Enseignement primaire.* Page 280.) (Free translation)

The first dimension that is mentioned is the *experiential* one. Religious faith is first and foremost a *lived experience* and it is difficult to grasp its essence without trying to understand the experience of believers. On this point, the program is well focused.

Here again, unfortunately, the textbooks that have been analyzed do not meet the program's requirements. Certainly the approach in the textbooks is in general quite respectful – this was noted by our experts - but it is usually based on anecdotes, particularly in respect of certain of the fundamental narratives of the Christian tradition. Essentially the textbooks recount these narratives, often relying upon a paraphrase or a summary, but without helping students to discover the significance of these narratives. The *experiential* dimension is absent.

If there is no effort to provide explanations that are adapted to the students' age, it is quite possible that prejudices will develop concerning a particular religious belief or practice. This would result in the failure to achieve one of the major objectives of the program - *the profound recognition of the other.*

*c. Christianity's contribution to the social and cultural life of Québec*

Christianity's contribution to the social and cultural life of Québec, frequently reiterated during consultations which led to the approval of the program, is barely evident and, in some cases, totally absent in the textbooks that were studied.

There are references to the *guignolée*, the St. Vincent-de-Paul Society and the YMCA. Certain textbooks introduce individuals such as Martin Luther King and Mother Teresa. However, except on very rare occasions, the textbooks do not acknowledge the influence of Christianity upon such characteristic aspects of Québec culture as the cooperative movement and the social networks. Nor is there any mention of the involvement of committed Christians today in the many different areas of Québec society and culture.

### 3. **Insufficient Teacher Training**

The teachers who participated in our consultation reported that they were in general satisfied: they had observed that their students had shown interest in the program, particularly for its ethical aspects. Some teachers mentioned difficulties in maintaining a neutral stance in teaching the program. However, all expressed their desire for better teacher training and support. Despite the measures that have been put in place, teacher training remains largely inadequate.

Furthermore, no teaching manual has been formally approved for the *Ethics and Religious Culture* program, even though exercise books are already being used in the classrooms without having been approved by the Ministry in respect of their quality or compliance with program objectives. Given the unique and very sensitive nature of the ERC program, we are calling upon you to exercise increased vigilance regarding the use of unapproved exercise books.

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The *Ethics and Religious Culture* program raises very important challenges, particularly where it concerns the fundamental rights and values of our society. Parents must be better informed and be assured that their opinions will be heard. Greater effort and more resources will have to be devoted to teacher training and support. The serious deficiencies in the textbooks, which we have indicated above, must be corrected by means of an approval process that seeks to rigorously meet the requirements set out in the program itself and in the commitments explicitly made by the Government.

On our part, we will continue, as we said we would, to carefully monitor the *ERC* program and its implementation.

This letter will be made public on Tuesday, September 22nd and we will refer to it at a press conference, which will be held on Wednesday, the 23rd, at 11 a.m., during our plenary session in Trois-Rivières.

We thank you for your time and attention.

Yours truly,

+ Martin Veillette  
Bishop of Trois-Rivières  
President of the Assembly of Québec Catholic Bishops