Letter from Canada

Why is Canadian Catholicism So Muted?

By Michael W. Higgins
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Pope Francis talks with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his wife, Sophie Gregoire Trudeau, during a private audience at the Vatican May 29. (CNS photo/Evandro Inetti, pool.)

In 1967 I was a seminarian with the Scarboro Fathers (the Canadian version of the Maryknolls) and spent part of the summer in Montreal during its spectacular Expo 67. It was a heady time. Canada was celebrating its centenary and there was a sense the country had crossed a threshold, had reached a coming-of-age as a nation. For a brief time we allowed ourselves to be, well, rather immodest.

Canada's current and ever-so-modest celebration of the 150th year of its founding is a return to form, typical of its penchant for low-key observances. There were more articles on the significance of the event in *The New York Times* than in most Canadian dailies. Journalist and author Stephen Marche

put it nicely when he observed that most Canadians love their country, but "they just love it quietly. They don't want to make a big fuss."

Today Canada looks good on the global stage, with a prime minister who is photogenic, bilingual, progressive, and disarming, and who has won praise for his positions on gender equity, immigration and refugee acceptance, human rights, and climate change. The country has its faults—the monstrous maltreatment of its native peoples being the principal one—but on the whole, its image as a pacific, welcoming, and inclusive society has never been stronger. The fifty years since the centennial have seen demographic expansion, economic diversification, and exponential growth in institutions of higher education. In 2017, there's even a vibrant national unity, as the separatism that periodically marked some of the intervening years (see: Quebec) has disappeared into its romantic cocoon.

For Catholicism, however, the last fifty years have mostly been ones of severe institutional decline. In 1967, for instance, the highly regarded cardinal archbishop of Montreal, Paul-Émile Léger, head of the pre-eminent archdiocese in the country, resigned to assume a new ministry as a missionary to the lepers of Cameroon. In 2017, the cardinal archbishop of Toronto, Thomas Christopher Collins, head of the today's pre-eminent archdiocese in the country, is committed to the restoration of the *ancien regime* in Catholic ecclesial life.

These fifty years have seen the disappearance of Catholic institutions from hitherto deeply Catholic Quebec (New France has opted to follow Old France in its slavish adherence to the 1905 doctrine of *laïcité*—with its rigorous exclusion of religion from the political world), the rise and fall of national leadership in Catholic social teaching by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB), the marginalization of the Catholic voice in the political arena, and the collapse of interest in Catholic affairs in the secular media. Further, there's the precipitous drop in religious practice among Catholics, the aging of religious personnel, the clustering of parishes, the selling of churches, the enduring stain of clerical sex abuse, and the aftershocks of the Residential Schools crisis (a cultural genocide stemming from the late nineteenth-century policy of "assimilating" indigenous children by removing them from their homes and housing them in institutions run by the United, the Presbyterian, the Anglican, and the Roman Catholic churches).

Statistical data underscores the reality that a church that once commanded 46 percent of the country's population and was an unassailable presence in education and healthcare is now a muted force. Although it retains the largest percentage of religious adherents in the country, this is the result mostly of immigration from more traditionally Catholic countries or thriving missionary territories.

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How did it come to this?

Catholicism's golden era was coincident with the Second Vatican Council and its immediate aftermath. Many Canadian thinkers were either advisors at the Council, teachers in Rome, foundational shapers of a resurgent Catholicism, or episcopal actors on the conciliar landscape: Gregory Baum, J. M. R. Tillard, R.A.F. Mackenzie, David Stanley, Bernard Lonergan, the aforementioned Léger, and Maxim Hermaniuk were among the more prominent.

In addition, Catholic lay intellectuals like Claude Ryan, Douglas Roche, and Marshall McLuhan were helping to define faith in a changing political climate and in light of a new global interconnectedness. Canada's premier Catholic novelist was the redoubtable Morley Callaghan, whose controversial *A Time for Judas (*1983) prompted nothing short of awe from the well-read and progressive senior prelate, Cardinal Gerald Emmett Carter. New post-conciliar publications flourished, faculties of theology were bursting, Catholic clergy and laity were suffused with energy and hope. And the secular media paid attention.

But the publication, soon after the centennial, of the papal encyclical that condemned all forms of artificial birth control changed the national mood. *Humanae vitae* ushered in turbulence, ecclesiastical discord, and acute polarization—less pronounced, in typical Canadian fashion, than elsewhere perhaps, but there nevertheless. The Canadian bishops published their Winnipeg Statement on conscience, refused to censure dissenting theologians, and struck a *via media* approach. Pope Paul VI's response to the statement was simply: "*L'accettiamo con soddisfazione* [we accept it with satisfaction]."

The attitude of the bishops was an irenic one. With rare exception they eschewed denunciation and reprimands, opting to exercise a pastoral solicitude that recognized the complexity of people's lives, the primacy of conscience, and the maturity of adult decision-making. This stance, and their subsequent leadership on social justice matters, secured the reputation of the Canadian hierarchy as a progressive body, less radical than the Dutch, more open than the Irish and the Polish, more liberal than their southern neighbor. This would change.

The pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI overturned the makeup of the CCCB—as they did elsewhere in the universal church—and by the 1990s the Vatican had redirected the pastoral emphases of the episcopal conference, diminished its bureaucracy, undermined its authority, and seen to the methodical replacement of independent-minded bishops by clerics placing a premium on deference. The hard edges of the Canadian bishops disappeared and so did their temerity, vision, and outspokenness. They retreated into the citadel, a metaphor Northrop Frye would apply to Canadian historical reality itself.

Increasingly isolated, they withdrew from public debate, save for teaching on sexuality. Yet they consistently failed in efforts to persuade the government to alter its liberalizing direction on *every* matter related to sexual morality—abortion (Canada has had not any kind of abortion legislation on the books since the late 1980s, when the failure to achieve national political or social consensus on the existing legislation prompted the Roman Catholic Prime Minister, Jean Chrétien, to dispense with any kind of law at all), same-sex marriage (one of the first nations to approve it), gender equity, and physician-assisted suicide—resulting in the complete peripheralization of their moral voice.

The bishops rightly critiqued Parliament's penchant for enhanced autonomy for the individual and the consequent chipping away at shared communitarian values, and they persistently struggled to make arguments grounded on an inclusive anthropology. But their track record for prophetic witness and credible authority has withered away in the eyes of *both* disillusioned progressive Catholics and dispirited traditionalist Catholics.

As the influence of the CCCB has plummeted, Catholic faculties of theology at universities have struggled with threats to their *raison d'être*. Currently there

are only three remaining Catholic institutions in all of Canada where the graduate study of Catholic theology is possible: Laval University in Quebec City, St. Paul University in Ottawa, and the Toronto School of Theology federation, which includes the University of St. Michael's College and Regis College. The seriousness and commitment, both ecclesial and scholarly, remain—though enrollments are but a fraction of those in previous years. With seminarians now trained in their safe enclosures and making only periodic appearances on secular campuses, the role of theology as a critical discipline essential to the life of the church has become an almost exclusively lay imperative.

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But for many post-conciliar Catholics the deepest disappointment with hierarchical leadership has been its stance on women and ministry. At one time the undisputed international leader on the empowerment of women in the church—thanks to avowed feminists like Remi De Roo of the Diocese of Victoria and to interventions at several Roman synods on the charisms and evolving roles of women—the Canadian episcopate listened carefully to women of faith, appointed female theologians as consultants, and advocated publicly for enhanced positions and greater inclusivity within the clerical structure.

But this enlightened and gradualist approach was beaten down by papal intransigence, if not hostility, and by the reluctance of the newer bishops to adopt policies or positions at variance with pontifical perspectives. The result has been a silent departure of multitudes from the institution, a departure defined not by anger, animosity, or resentment but by a sadness grounded in a sense of their own irrelevancy. Deborah Pecoskie, a Catholic educator and former chair of the board of governors of St. Jerome's University, has observed: "I believe that society as a whole in Canada has contributed more positively to the lives of Canadian women than the Church has done. I believe that the Church holds an ambivalence between our civil society and our spiritual lives.... The Catholic Church is effectively squandering the

opportunity to be a visible faith leader for *today and for the future*" (my italics).

How to end the squandering and bring new energy to the task at hand is a challenge of promethean proportions, especially given the bracing facts. Average Sunday Mass attendance in *la belle province* is 7 percent. Catholic schools have virtually disappeared in Quebec (only private ones remain). Magnificent church architecture is either being recast to accommodate the insatiable need for condominiums or preserved at considerable expense by means of heritage grants and for historical purposes.

Meanwhile, Catholic publications of record in English-speaking Canada have gone under, including *Catholic New Times* of Toronto, *Western Catholic Reporter* of Edmonton, *Grail* of Waterloo, *Compass* of Toronto, and *Canadian Catholic Review* of Saskatoon. The much-revered Benedictine weekly, *The Prairie Messenger,* of Muenster, is slated to disappear at the end of this year.

The vanishing of such publications represents a significant impoverishment and continues to imperil the very possibility of a thriving public platform for the Catholic voice. There remain some outlets representing exclusively Catholic concerns, like the *Salt + Light Television* network, the focus of which remains predominantly devotional and catechetical, and the politically and theologically conservative online project, *Convivium,* with its distinctly Neuhausen flavor.

But there is no Canadian parallel for *Commonweal* or *America* in the United States, *The Tablet* in the United Kingdom, or *La Croix* in France. And the failure of the twenty Catholic universities in the country to develop a national pool of Catholic public intellectuals, of leaders prepared to engage ideas outside the ramparts of an insular or desiccated Catholicism, further hobbles the possibility of a Catholic presence in the media and in the chambers of influence. It was not always thus. Publications like *Le Devoir* influenced policy, Catholic scholars held national presence, Catholic thinkers and artists were shapers of the Canadian sensibility. It is a dry time these last few decades. The country cannot rely on Charles Taylor alone.

But not all is desolation.

As Canada looks to the next fifty years it should not be shackled by either despair over institutional statistics or nostalgia for a time and order beyond recovery. Today there are active retreat houses and parishes that are genuinely flourishing and offering effective ministerial collaboration. There are bishops of vision and hope, like the ecumenist archbishop of Regina, Don Bolen, or the pastorally charismatic Paul-André Durocher, Archbishop of Gatineau.

There are international symbols of humanitarian integrity like Jean Vanier; spiritual writers like Ronald Rolheiser, who commands a readership second to none; icons of holiness like Susan Moran, founder of Out of the Cold food and shelter services, and Martin Royackers, the martyred Jesuit in Jamaica; social visionaries like Mary-Jo Leddy, a nationally revered leader on refugee initiatives that have helped make Canada a haven to the displaced worldwide; and creative artists like David Adams Richards, tracking the sometimes calamitous and sometime luminous, but always deeply human, Christian narrative of redemption.

Catholicism in Canada's sesquicentennial year is not a sepulchral entity, not merely a shell of its former glory. It remains the largest religious body in the nation. Catholics occupy key positions in the corporate world, and on the political front, both Trudeau and the leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Canadian Opposition, Andrew Scheer, are self-identifying Catholics.

Still, Canadian Catholicism needs to be re-shaped for the future. It needs to galvanize the indifferent, it needs to reclaim the lost, and it needs to create the conditions for a vital leadership. The signs are not auspicious. But they are there—modest, as befits the country's character.

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