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Address by His Grace, Thomas Collins, Archbishop of Toronto
30th Annual Cardinal's Dinner – October 29, 2009
Metro Toronto Convention Centre, Toronto

Each year the Cardinal's dinner is an occasion for all of us to come together in a spirit of friendship to enjoy one another's company, and to help those who are in need.

Cardinal Ambrozic is not able to be with us this evening, and we remember him in our prayers, that God may richly bless him and give him good health.

I would like to extend my thanks to this year's dinner chairman, Ronald Osborne, and to the committee involved in organizing this wonderful evening.

From the beginning, Joe Barnicke has been the moving spirit behind the Cardinal's dinner, one of the many ways in which he so generously and zealously serves the good of all. Thank you, Joe.

We are honoured by the presence of leaders from all levels of government. Your vocation is a holy one, and your patron saint is St. Thomas More. We should all support you in prayer, that you may govern wisely and be strengthened in your difficult work.

It is wonderful to gather so many people from within the Catholic community: priests and parishioners from across the archdiocese.

I want to especially recognize our good friends of other faiths who are with us each year. Your participation in the Cardinal's dinner is a much appreciated expression of the way in which people of many religious traditions work together to make our whole community a better place.

The many small charitable organizations supported by the proceeds from the Cardinal's dinner do immense good in assisting those who are in need. You will note in your program the beneficiaries of last year's dinner. These charities reach out to offer hope and practical assistance to those who are vulnerable, alone, and faced with difficult challenges. In these hard economic times, that assistance is especially needed.

For 30 years the Cardinal's Dinner has been an occasion for the Archbishop of Toronto to share his thoughts, concerns, and hopes with the many people who are brought together for this event. And so tonight, in that tradition, I want to share what is of concern to me, and what gives me hope.

First, a concern.

The Catholic Church in Canada has been going through a difficult time lately, with the scandal of a bishop being charged by the police. The people of Antigonish and Atlantic Canada are suffering the full brunt of this scandal, and we join with them in prayer and solidarity, but all of us are affected. Any such scandal will be much in the news, and that is understandable.

The pain of scandal comes first of all because the fact of the evil itself is shocking, especially when it involves the abuse of the young and the vulnerable. To think of the multi-billion dollar industry of sexual exploitation is to be enraged; it is a scourge upon our society.

Although those who pause to reflect will recognize that this massive evil industry is hardly being sustained by the patronage of the clergy of any faith, if a priest or bishop engages in this iniquity, the outrage is all the more intense, and rightly so, for we who are ordained are called by God, and entrusted with the service of His people; any abuse of that trust is a betrayal of our vows to God, and of the people we are consecrated to serve.

Faithful Catholics who love the Church, and who have a deep reverence for the holiness of the office of priest, and especially of bishop, are immensely shocked and saddened when they hear that someone who is ordained is accused of evil actions.

Anyone who has participated in the awesome rites of ordination is conscious of the majesty of the priesthood of Christ, which He has chosen to share with frail humans, "vessels of clay" as St. Paul calls them, so that He might work through them in a sacramental way. I celebrate several ordinations each year, and every time I am filled with awe. When I place my hands upon the head of the candidate at the moment of ordination, I silently pray in my heart: "Lord, may this man be a faithful and holy priest all the days of his life."

To me, as a bishop, the pain of any priestly scandal is a sharp personal reminder that I need to do all that I can to be sure that those who are ordained, for all their inescapable human frailty, are living their vocation with integrity.

In our seminaries, over the long period of preparation for the priesthood, we continually strive to improve our procedures for solid human, intellectual, pastoral, and spiritual formation, so that only those candidates who are suited for the priesthood will proceed to ordination.

As for the choice of bishops, the process is extremely thorough, with detailed letters of reference from dozens of men and women. A thorough process, but not perfect. If no one in that extensive reference net is aware of a problem, it will be missed.

Those entrusted with discerning who should be ordained as priest or bishop need to be diligent, and to pray for wisdom, always aware that they might fail to spot an unsuitable candidate, especially if the problem is deep seated and hidden from everyone behind a splendid exterior.

As for improper behaviour by those already ordained, I and all of us who exercise authority in the Church have a solemn obligation to God and to the people we serve, especially to the most vulnerable, to act clearly and effectively if a problem is discovered, although also with great care that injustice not be done to an innocent person, whose name and life can be destroyed by a false accusation.

The basic reality is that in the sacrament of Holy Orders God works through frail humans, and always has done so, and always will. In the twelve apostles we see the whole range of raw material from the beloved disciple to Judas. As long as the human heart is susceptible to iniquity, we will face scandals among the apostles.

Scandals are like airplane crashes: 1) they are dramatic exceptions to the fundamental reality; 2) they do immense harm; and 3) they challenge us to work more effectively to be sure that they do not happen in the future.

As I look back over two and a half years as Archbishop of Toronto, I am filled with hope. As I constantly travel around the archdiocese, I daily encounter generous and loving people, alive in their faith - devoted priests, deacons, and religious, and zealous and faithful laypeople – all living their vocations with integrity and joy. I often wish that any people who are discouraged or cynical could come along with me to share that experience.

I will mention a few things that have particularly struck me.

Our Archdiocese itself is richly diverse in culture, and each day we work together with friends of many different faith traditions. I well recall a gathering at city hall at which most of the religions in our community were represented. It is good to recall that over 80% of the people of Ontario profess some religious faith.

I was most grateful to be invited to Beth Tzedec synagogue to celebrate the feast of Succoth with that community. On another occasion I was glad to join in a fruitful Jewish-Muslim-Christian evening of dialogue. A while ago I joined with the Anglicans at St. James cathedral for Evensong and Lectio Divina.

People of faith need to work together in our society that is sometimes considered to be secular. But secular simply means “of this age”, as distinct from the sacred reality of the heavenly kingdom. It does not mean, or should not mean, that our society is better if it is devoid of religion.

I have found that the deeper people’s faith is, even though they disagree on matters of belief, the more they can and do co-operate to serve the common good, and especially in matters of social justice and caring for the needy.

From the earliest days of our history, many of our great health care institutions, and social service organizations, have operated from a foundation of faith, a particular faith which determines the spiritual values that inform all of their activities. They are religiously based: that is their starting point, but they have always served people of all faiths, or of no faith, without distinction. It is important that this religious freedom be respected. Our whole society is enriched by the religious motivation that energizes so many of those who care for the sick, the troubled, and the needy.

A nation or province can be healthy and will flourish when it includes within it a rich assortment of smaller voluntary communities, in which people can be at home and can practice their faith, and move out from that base to serve the wider community.

Here are a few notes about what is happening in the particular community of faith that is the Archdiocese of Toronto. I hope that these observations will be helpful for the Catholics who are here this evening, but also informative for our friends of other faiths, who may be interested in some background about the present situation of the large local community that is the Archdiocese of Toronto, to which so many of their friends and neighbours belong.

We make up about a third of the population of this area, from Oshawa in the East to Mississauga in the West, and from Lake Ontario to Georgian Bay. We are a large family – almost two million people – and diverse. As we always point out, Mass is celebrated in 37 different languages each Sunday.

There are many roles within our community. The highest responsibility belongs to the lay people of the Church, whose mission is to let their life of faith transform first themselves, and then society. They are assisted by members of religious orders, and by deacons, priests, and bishops. In this “Year of the Priest” I particularly express my gratitude to the hundreds of priests, true shepherds after the heart of Christ, who care for the spiritual wellbeing of the people of the archdiocese.

We were sad a few months ago to lose Bishop Grecco, who cared so faithfully for the central region of the archdiocese, as well as for the various ethnic communities, and the many lay movements within the Church. Now as Bishop of Charlottetown he is the bishop of a whole province. May God abundantly bless him in his new pastoral ministry.

Each of our auxiliary bishops cares for a region of the diocese: Bishop Boissonneau in the west, Bishop Hundt in the north and east, while Bishop Grecco was responsible for the central region. They co-ordinate the work of the priests and parishes in the region, and deal with pastoral issues that arise. Each is also responsible for certain matters that affect the whole diocese, such as Catholic Education, or the life of Religious orders. Every week they meet with me and with Father Vincent Nguyen, the Chancellor for Spiritual Affairs, and Mr. John McGrath, the Chancellor for Temporal Affairs, to discuss the pastoral care of the whole diocese.

Many people share in pastoral ministry in the archdiocese, but since coming to Toronto, I have been reflecting on the specific matters that I should concentrate on personally as Archbishop.

As I look to the years ahead I foresee the need for me to concentrate personally on the following seven areas:

- 1) To take time to think and pray about how to confront creatively the challenges we face in a secular and individualistic society, and to direct the long range pastoral planning of the archdiocese.
- 2) To devote special personal attention and time to the priests, to the seminarians, and to potential priestly vocations.

- 3) To proclaim the Word of God through preaching, and through *Lectio Divina*, the prayerful reading of the Bible, which is celebrated in St. Michael's Cathedral each month, and communicated through Catholic media resources so that the wider community can participate.
- 4) To become engaged in the public life of our secular society through the media, through writing, and through contact with leaders of the community. This also involves personal relationship with people of other faiths, something which all of us need to do.
- 5) To help support publicly funded Catholic education.
- 6) To support St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto.
- 7) To oversee the formation of candidates for the priesthood. There are presently 14 Toronto seminarians studying Theology at St. Augustine's seminary in Scarborough, and 11 Toronto Seminarians living at Serra House, who are in the pre-Theology philosophy program of St. Philip's seminary, which is operated by the Oratorian fathers. There are also 21 Toronto seminarians who come to us from other countries, and who are being prepared for the priesthood at the Redemptoris Mater seminary, which is connected to the spiritual movement in the Catholic Church known as the Neocatechumenal Way. So there are presently 46 candidates preparing to be priests of the Archdiocese of Toronto. In order to strengthen the Seminary, and to provide spiritual resources for the whole archdiocese in the future, I have sent nine priests away for further studies, and I will send more in the years to come. This is a significant sacrifice, not only financially, but also in the loss of so many priests from the central mission of parish ministry, but such a sacrifice is necessary if we are to be faithful stewards who look to the future, as God wants us to do.

That is my personal list of priorities, as I seek to fulfil my vocation as Archbishop of Toronto. All of us here present have different vocations, and distinct missions in life. But for all our differences, each of us is called to live with integrity, and to serve God by showing practical love to those whom we encounter every day.

May God bless us, protect us from all evil, and bring all of us to everlasting life.