

Celebrating our diversity now

Hello, everyone!

Glory be to God!

My name is Ovidiu Moldovan and I am a Romanian Orthodox priest under the jurisdiction of the Romanian Orthodox Diocese of Canada, with its headquarters in Montreal.

In the context of the Canadian ethnic and cultural diversity, I'd like to give you a short history of the Romanian presence here in Alberta.

The first Romanian Pioneers came over from Romania in 1898, exactly 120 years ago. They settled in Boian, which is located 110 kilometers north-east of Edmonton, where, just a few years after their arrival (1905), they built their church, which stands tall to this day and was declared a historical site by the provincial government.

Just like the other ethnic groups who came from Europe and other continents, the Romanians had to contend with many difficulties, given the poor standard of living at the time in Alberta. Their first home was an underground shack, where they raised their large families, consisting of 8, 12 or even 16 children in many cases. There was no government assistance of any kind then. So, they got up every morning and worked the land with great effort, turning the prairies, slowly, slowly, into the breadbasket of this great country we all proudly call Canada today. They were economically poor but spiritually, very rich. Materially they came over with close to nothing, but spiritually they brought the Orthodox Faith and their unwavering trust and hope in God, which sustained them in trying and difficult times.

When the call came to defend the freedom, democracy and the human rights on other continents and to stand up to the tyrants of those lands, the Pioneers, or their descendants, responded with a genuine sense of pride, gratitude and patriotic duty. Sadly, some of them never came back to their families.

This is what integration, personal responsibility, self-sacrifice and contribution to the common good is all about.

Speaking to the aspect of religious diversity in Canada, in which we share, I would like to tell you, first of all, that the Romanian people have something totally unique, which no other nation in the world has: the Romanian people came into existence as a Christian Orthodox nation. In other words, our people were born Christian Orthodox.

This unique and special feature means that Christian Orthodoxy is an intrinsic part of the very fabric of our identity as a nation. This explains why, during the course of our two-thousand-year history as a people, neither migratory hordes that swept over our Land, nor centuries of relentless attacks and pillage committed by the Ottoman Empire, not even the evil Communist regime, with all of its atrocities, were able to extinguish the flame of faith, trust and hope in our people.

As many of you probably know, Orthodoxy has an ethnic component, which is why it is often spoken of with an ethnic/national identification: **Romanian** Orthodox, **Greek** Orthodox, **Antiochian** Orthodox, **Russian** Orthodox, **Armenian** Orthodox, etc.

Although these national identifications reflect also certain ethnic/local practices or traditions, the Orthodox dogmas and theological teachings are the unifying elements, which connect all of us to the primitive Church established by Christ our Savior. That's why we call this **unity in diversity**.

So, as you can see, Orthodox Christians are very familiar with cultural diversity.

Before I go further, let me say something to my fellow Christians here in attendance. The theme of this event calls for celebration of our diversity. Usually, a celebration takes place after a certain goal has been achieved. For us Christians, to celebrate our division and disunity and accept the status quo would mean to give up on pursuing the will of our Lord and Savior expressed in the Priestly Prayer to God the Father, shortly before His voluntary and redeeming Passion, ***“that they all may be one, as You, Father are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us”*** (John 17:21). As you know, the ecumenical movement, which was formed in the early 1900s (nineteen hundreds) was based on the principle **“to know each other better and to love one another more.”** This was supposed to be just the beginning of our journey. How far have we come? Or, better yet, how further apart are we now?

In the Orthodox Church, the priest is an integral part of the community. He is the leader of the community not only in terms of spiritual guidance but as a regular community member. Being married (in most cases), he is a husband, a father, even a grandfather, contending in his daily life with the same challenges, everyone of his parishioners is facing. He is a leader of his own family and, at the same time, of the community entrusted to him. This gives him a great advantage in understanding his people and in helping them to make it across the stormy sea of life to the shore of salvation.

In the Gospel according to St. John, Christ speaks of Himself in terms of a shepherd: ***“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep...I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and My sheep know Me”*** (10:11 &15). The role of the priest is to emulate the “good shepherd,” leading his reason and speech-endowed flock to the spring of living waters, to the knowledge of truth, to the source of truth, Christ, the incarnate Son of God, as He said: ***“I am the way, the truth and the life”*** (John 14:6).

The priest also leads his parishioners on the Eucharistic journey, the Divine Liturgy, the highest form of prayer human beings can offer to God, whose climax is the transformation of the Eucharistic elements, bread and wine, into the Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior. This is the moment when heaven and earth, the invisible and the visible worlds are able to transcend the veil of eternity and come together in awe, in praise, in glory and in thanksgiving, singing with one voice to God Almighty; ***“Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord of Sabaoth, heaven and earth are full of Thy Glory.”*** This is what gives the Orthodox Liturgy a universal, cosmic dimension. The liturgical petitions and prayers encompass much more than the needs of the celebrating gathering; they are offered ***“for the peace of the whole world, for the unity of the holy Churches of God, for the civil authorities and all those who are in service of our country, for every city and town and for those who dwell in them, for favorable weather, for abundance of***

the fruits of the earth and for peaceful times, for those who travel by land, by sea and by air, for the sick and suffering, for captives and for their salvation.” And this, in just the first 5 minutes of our Eucharistic journey into the Kingdom of God. We believe that man was created as a liturgical being.

Another priority of the Orthodox priest and his community is to defend **the sacred institution of marriage**, which, as you all very well know, is under relentless attacks from different quarters of the “modern” society. When man tries to undo what God Himself has done, the consequences cannot but be **catastrophic**. In a society where man’s freedom is misunderstood and misused, it is very easy to abandon the moral and spiritual values that constituted the very foundation of human civilization. Chipping away at this millennia-old foundation can have one grave result only: a tragic collapse. In the words of the British philosopher and historian Arnold J. Toynbee: *“Civilizations die from suicide, not by murder.”* If history is any guide, let us remember that the greatest Empires in the history of human civilization have collapsed for two reasons: **immorality and corruption**. Free will is both one of the greatest God-given gifts and a liability. When used for selfish reasons and interests and, therefore, apart from the will of God, man becomes lost and begins to justify his actions by playing the mankind-old blame game: **“the woman You gave me, gave me of the tree and I ate”** (Genesis 3:12) said Adam when he was held responsible for disobeying his Creator’s commandment. The aforementioned Arnold Toynbee puts it this way: *“As human beings, we are endowed with freedom of choice, and we cannot shuffle off our responsibility upon the shoulders of God or nature. We must shoulder it ourselves. It is our responsibility.”*

Last but not least, the mission of the Orthodox priest in a pluralistic society, as I see it, is to make sure that the members of his community integrate themselves into the society, are law-abiding citizens and respect all of their fellow Canadians.

All of us need to identify our God-given talents and blessings, multiply them to the best of our ability and contribute to the common good. Having benefited from the hard labor and great sacrifices of our predecessors, we must show them gratitude and have compassion for the less fortunate members of our society, volunteer for different causes and join the efforts of all those who love this great country and want it to remain the envy of the world.

Please, allow me to close with a short prayer for “the true North strong and free,” echoed by millions upon millions of people throughout this Land, who, with utmost respect and pride sing: **“God, keep our Land glorious and free”** Amen.

Thank you for the opportunity and for your attention!

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A message to our Youth

“Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (I Timothy, 4:12).

Hello!

My name is Denisa Moldovan and I am a Romanian Orthodox Christian. My parents and I are immigrants from Romania. A few years ago, we decided to make Canada our new home.

When it comes to today’s youth, it is very difficult, maybe even impossible to identify just one important issue they contend with in our society. And the challenges are many and very serious. I’m not implying that the youths of the 21st century are facing the wrath accumulated throughout hundreds of years and that this generation has to atone for all the sins and ills of the past ones. Every generation, from the beginning of mankind, had problems and challenges, both young and old. Instead of stumbling blocks, problems can become stepping stones. They all stem from the corrupt and sinful human nature, which is the result of mankind’s first couple’s (Adam and Eve) misuse, or better said, abuse of their God-given gift of free will, when they decided to rebel against their Creator, abandon communion with Him and enter communion with the world. In theological terms, this is called **the original sin**. Ever since that tragic mistake, the Bible is telling us that God embarked on a search for man, the masterpiece of His creation: **“Adam, (man, in translation) *where are you?*”** (Genesis 3: 9). Since God created man out of His infinite love, He could not abandon His creation. Therefore, based on His Divine Providence, He had planned (before the fall of man) man’s salvation. This was achieved through the Incarnation of the Only-begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ, the second person of the Holy Trinity, who assumed our human nature and deified it by uniting it to His divine nature and, through His voluntary Passion, death and resurrection, brought about the objective salvation for every person who embraces His message and desires communion with Him.

So, the only way to restore our integrity is to re-enter communion with our Creator, as the Psalmist says: **“How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word”** (Psalm 118:9).

I’d like to think that I speak for all of you here in attendance when I say that family upbringing is one of the most important things that shapes the future of any child. This is why we emphasize the importance of a solid, stable and loving family, founded on traditional moral and spiritual values in the lives of children. This is what gives children assurance, confidence, stability and peace of mind, which allows them to enjoy their childhood, their teen-age years and concentrate on their education.

The reverse is true in case of **divorce**, which, unfortunately, is very common in our “modern and advanced” society. When this happens, the children become the first casualties and

suffer the most, having to carry on their young and frail shoulders the guilt, the anger and the frustration of both parents. Now they are forced to deal with adult issues and be involved in the parents' tag of war, which is sadly what's happening in most cases of divorce. When this happens, the sense of security, the peace and tranquility they used to have and enjoy, all of a sudden, become a nightmare, a sense of guilt sets in their innocent minds and hearts, they lose their concentration and focus, become depressed and rebellious. The parents' divorce is a traumatic experience for the children and the psychological damage will mar them for many years, even for the rest of their lives.

The situation is even more traumatic and desperate for children who live in **single parent homes**. Statistics tell us that since the 1950s, the cases of single parent homes increased to an alarming level. In North America there are tens of millions of single parents, caring for many more millions of children. Deprived of the love and guidance of the other parent, children in this situation become a high risk of school dropout, dangerous sexual behavior and teenage pregnancies, as well as alcohol and drug abuse. To make matters worse, the mass media (TV, movies, the internet) and everywhere kids and youngsters turn, is bombarding them with sexual suggestions.

Drug abuse among young people in North America has become a daily headline for quite a while now. So much so, that even the worst statistics don't seem to generate the expected shock and determination to reverse the situation by those who can do so.

The **opioid crisis** is something we hear about almost every day on mass media. This is something that should shock our entire society and demand that action be taken. Let me give you some concrete statistics to understand the seriousness of this problem.

In the United States, 115 people die every day after overdosing with opioids (prescription pain relievers, heroin and fentanyl). Let's see how this became such a big problem. In the late 1990s, pharmaceutical companies reassured the medical community that patients would not become addicted to prescription opioid pain relievers, and healthcare providers began to prescribe them at greater rates. This subsequently led to widespread diversion and misuse of these medications before it became clear that these medications are indeed highly addictive. In 2015, more than 33,000 Americans died as a result of an opioid overdose.

Canada, too, is experiencing a serious and growing opioid crisis. Across the country, it is having devastating effects on families and communities. Here are some statistics for Canada:

- in 2016, there were 2,861 opioid-related deaths in Canada.
- from January to June 2017, there were at least 1,460 opioid-related deaths and it is expected that this count will rise as additional data become available.

Smoking and drug use is typically picked up in Junior and High School years. Much of this is attributed to peer pressure. There is tremendous pressure to do what those around you are doing. Young people are subjected to the pressure to conform in order to be accepted and liked by others.

Young people have to learn to be themselves, to think for themselves, to be their own person and not to follow others. If you follow someone else, you will never be a leader.

Speaking from the perspective of a young Orthodox Christian, I think that being friendly and socially accepted doesn't mean that one should compromise their devotion to God and abandon their moral and spiritual values. Young people, generally, should learn how to stand up for their beliefs, even if they had to stand alone. A long time ago, a President of the United States said: **“If you have enemies, congratulations! This means that you stood up for something.”**

The only guide one should have in life is the Lord Jesus Christ, our Teacher. His invitation **“follow Me”** of two thousand years ago is just as valid today.

Another dangerous addiction of this generation is social media: **the internet and the cell phone.**

We live in a time of unprecedented progress in communication. One click, and our message is sent to the other end of the world in seconds. While the internet offers many advantages, it is, at the same time, full of temptations and perils. The same can be said about the cell phones, which are an extension of the internet, a way of having the internet with you at all times. Texting has become the obsession of our world. Everywhere you look, people are texting or checking their phones for messages or texts from other people. The sad reality is that people don't talk to each other anymore. The spoken word is almost obsolete. And this, in spite of the fact that man was created with the ability to speak. As the only speech-endowed creature, man was supposed to use this gift/capacity in order to communicate/ talk to his/her fellow human beings and to his creator, God. If somehow, somebody from another planet were to see how people on Earth communicate with one another inaudibly, even when they get together or are on dates, they would have every right to conclude that the earthlings are deaf and dumb.

In conclusion, I'd like to propose some remedies to the aforementioned challenges/ problems the young people are facing today.

1. The millennia-old **institution of marriage** must be restored and promoted as the very foundation of our society. **Parents** should be reminded again and again of the extraordinary responsibility they have towards God and their children. In the words of one of the Church Fathers, **“the parents are the priests of their families.”** Parents should be the role models for their children, displaying faithfulness to one another and together to God, sacrificial love and commitment. **Children** must be taught, from the youngest age, obedience, respect, the value of hard work and personal responsibility. Instead of being driven out, in the name of “political correctness,” **God must be invited again** in every family and institution. A few years ago, following a school mass shooting in the US (not the one of a few day ago) a reporter was talking to a priest and he posed the following question: “How can God allow such loss of young life? Where was He?” The priest's answer was: “He was not in the school because He had been driven out.” Enter most Catholic schools today and you will see something very interesting: a big Bible on a stand and, above it, on the wall, the following message: ***“Let it be known to all who enter here that Jesus Christ is the reason for this school, the unseen but ever present Teacher in its classes, the Model of its faculty and staff, the Strength of its parents, the Inspiration of its students.*”** How wonderful is that?

2. God loves all His people and especially the young. The Gospels tell us of the time when Christ took the little children in His arms and said: ***“Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God”*** (Mark 10:13-16; Mat. 19:14).

There is also the parable of the prodigal son who squandered the portion of his property in loose living, in a far country. When, destitute, hungry and tired, he decided to return to his father’s house, his father ran toward him and embraced him, accepted his repentance and restored his sonship. I don’t have to tell you what the moral of this story is but that’s exactly the message everybody (young and old), need to hear and to know.

3. To those who have become dependent on drugs, alcohol or the social media gadgetry, we should convey the message that man was created to be dependent on God, their Creator. Instead of being obsessed with how many “likes” they get on the Facebook, they must be assured that Christ not only likes, but loves them and His sacrificial and unconditional love is all they need to fill their spiritual void and to replace their loneliness with His friendship and comfort. Youths need not despair nor be discouraged. Life in Christ is a wonderful life, full of purpose, meaning, and blessings.

4. Our youth must be reminded that their best friend is Christ, who extends His hand to save them from the troubled sea of life and guide them safely to salvation. They should be encouraged to spend their time wisely, volunteering for various causes, visiting the elderly and the sick and furthering their education in order to be the pride of their parents and useful citizens of this great nation.

May God bless our youth and our country Canada!