

Archbishop Smith reflects with gratitude on a year of challenges, difficulties and hope

It's been a momentous year in the Archdiocese of Edmonton.

In February, the Catholic community lost its beloved [Archbishop Emeritus Joseph MacNeil](#) at age 93. During his 26-year term, he committed himself to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, empowering lay people in the Church and extending the Church's efforts in social justice.

A month later, [Bishop Gregory Bittman](#) was appointed Bishop of the Diocese of Nelson in southeastern B.C. He left the Edmonton Archdiocese after 22 years as a priest, and nearly six years as its first-ever auxiliary bishop.

This year, the headlines were dominated by the clergy sex abuse crisis primarily in the U.S. but also in other countries. In the fall, Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith addressed the crisis in a news conference and announced the Archdiocese will be reviewing its own practices and protocols in light of updated and expanded [national abuse prevention guidelines](#).

In a year-end interview, Archbishop Smith reflects on the past year, initiatives related to his pastoral letter [Living in the Word of God](#), and where this vision is taking the faithful of the Archdiocese in 2019. The interview has been edited for length.

As you look back on 2018, what are you most grateful for?

My gratitude goes to the Lord first and foremost above all, but what I think of are the people. Our beloved Archbishop Emeritus Joseph MacNeil went home to God and that, for me certainly and I know for many in the diocese, was quite a moment of transition. It was a difficult time and certainly a moment of sadness.

And just around that same time our Auxiliary Bishop Gregory Bittman transferred to the Diocese of Nelson. Lots of adjustments were necessary because of that, but I found that the Lord was raising up and in fact – hindsight's always perfect – had been raising up people that would step up and fill the various roles.

What are you looking forward to in the next year and what gives you hope?

I do look forward – it sounds kind of strange – to more of the same because more of the same is life in the Church. It's being open to how the Lord is guiding us. He remains always the head of the Church, he's always moving us to

a deeper fulfillment of the Father's plan in our lives, and it really doesn't get more exciting than that when you think of it.

We don't know the challenges, we don't know the difficulties that await us, but we can always approach those with confidence because we're not alone. The Lord's going to see us through it all, whatever may come our way. So that's what gives me hope, Jesus gives me hope.

What do you say to Catholics whose confidence in the Church and its leaders has been shaken by the abuse scandals and critics who may feel emboldened to intensify their attacks?

One of the lessons learned over the decades is that this kind of a horror – it's a sin, it's a crime – festers when it's left in the darkness, when it's not talked about. It's not a pleasant thing to talk about and I would be the first to admit some nervousness around it, but we have to. So I'm taking every opportunity I can.

When I'm in a board meeting, when I'm doing a parish visit, or if I'm talking to teachers or whoever – if they don't bring it up, and sometimes people can be a little bit hesitant in the presence of the archbishop to bring this up for fear of embarrassment or something – I bring it up.

Again, I think the way forward on that has to be the way of transparency, accountability, and openness. Tell me your questions and I'll do my best to answer, and I'll demonstrate how we are day in and day out striving to be accountable. Nobody in the Church is immune to accountability for their actions and that obviously includes the bishops.

What challenges does the scandal present in terms of evangelization, vocations to religious life and growing the Church?

What I say to folks is, 'Don't be afraid to say that you're embarrassed or ashamed by this.' We all are heartbroken. But the more we can openly talk about it, the more we keep it in the light, that is the way it seems to me, the way forward by which we can all walk through this and ultimately find the light in all of it.

Among the various groups I've been reaching out to and talking to on this issue, foremost was the [group of seminarians](#) at St. Joseph Seminary. I think the question of who they can trust in all this will naturally weigh on them, but as I listened to them and heard their very forthright questions, what I also heard was an abiding conviction that 'If the Lord is calling me to this and calling me to this at this particular moment in history, it is for a reason. And I trust in the Lord.'

Some of them I think have this sense that this is not the time to run from the Church, this is the time to run even more forward into the Church, because we

love it.

With respect to the growth of the Church, there's an expression in the back of my mind from Pope Francis. In this context he said when a tree falls in a forest you hear the crash and your attention gets focused upon that crash. That's all you hear. What we don't hear is the silent growth of the whole forest. So we are focused, and I think we need to be focused, upon the crash of this horrible scourge of sexual abuse. We need to hear it in order to deal with it, but at the same time, because it is the Lord's Church, because the Holy Spirit is at work, we know that the whole forest, the whole Church, still grows.

Pope Francis' response to the abuse crisis has come under criticism from [Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano](#), a former apostolic nuncio to the U.S. What are we to make of this?

I have to say frankly, I have some of the same questions a lot of other people do. And like everyone else, I would like to have very swift answers and clarifications of things. At the end of the day though, what I say to people, what I say to myself, is I don't know all the facts. I don't know why things are taking the length of time that they are from the Holy See to deal with some of these issues.

The guiding principle in all of this is we have to be very careful, precisely as a Catholic people, not to allow our trust in the Holy Father to die. He's our Holy Father, and he is for the Church that visible sign and instrument of the Church's unity. And if we separate ourselves from him in any substantial way, that weakens the communion. That weakens the unity of the Church, and that's not Catholic, that's not us.

Clericalism has been mentioned in this discussion. What is clericalism?

The Holy Father himself in a letter to the Church identified this as a key element in this whole sex abuse crisis. We have to understand this and grapple with it: that whole sense of entitlement, a sense of power differential over others, a sense of being immune from accountability, and all those kinds of ideas that go with clericalism, the mindset that would see ordination more in terms of power than in terms of service. These are the sorts of things that can lead to various forms of abuse: Abuse of conscience. Abuse of power. Abuse of another person.

Ordination does insert one into the hierarchal structure of the Church and with it comes a certain authority to govern, teach, sanctify, but the way that is exercised – and it must be exercised – makes all the difference. It has to be exercised in humility, out of the sense that I am a servant of the Lord and have nothing to offer other than what He gives me and any gifts the Lord gives me are for the service of others, not for my own self-aggrandizement.

Governments are moving in a direction antithetical to Church teaching (for

example the Canada Summer Jobs attestation, Bill 24 supporting gay-straight alliances, the possible expansion of assisted suicide). How should the Church react?

I think that question of engagement in politics needs to be understood on a number of levels. The first dimension would be civic engagement generally, where the Church says to all her members 'Be involved in the life of community. Work toward establishment of the common good.'

Secondly, because we are concerned that whatever policies are enacted support human dignity, we want to know what they are. Are these things that further and enhance human dignity or things that would act counter to it? Whenever anybody's essential human dignity is threatened, we need to speak. We're impelled to speak from the Gospel itself.

What we're finding more and more right now is that what is legally allowable in this country may not necessarily be morally correct. So legally, there's access to abortion. Legally, one can now have assisted suicide and euthanasia. These are grave sins. They're crimes against humanity and these are not things that can in any way be considered morally right or good even though the law allows them.

Finally, there are some times when a policy or laws are enacted which would put pressure on our Catholic institutions and put pressure on us to act in ways, speak in ways, that are counter to who we are. These simply must be resisted. No outside force, government, or political party can tell us how to be Catholic. We have a way of doing things. We have a body of belief, and this animates everything we do.

Your pastoral letter references placing the Word of God at the centre of home life. What's your assessment of this?

In the first two years of implementation we've been looking upon that hearing: what are you doing in your home to read the Bible together? To create a sacred space where the Bible is honoured? What are you doing in the parish communities? In the communities of lay associations? Wherever disciples are gathered, what are you doing to listen to the Word of God and make that Word first? Grandin Media through vlogs and all these other things it's instituting has been helping people put the word of God first.

This coming year, we start to move into the doing. Doing for the Catholic is three-fold: worship, witness, and service. So coming this fall we will start to look at worship in the life of the Christian. What is worship? What is its dynamic? How is God calling us out of ourselves to worship Him? How is that a response to the individualism wreaking such havoc in our society today? These are some of the questions I want to get at when we talk about worship, so I'm looking forward to that.

Your pastoral visits to parishes this year have included 'town hall' sessions. What have you learned?

Often they will be opportunities for them to ask me questions to clarify the position, the teaching of the Church vis-à-vis some of the things they might read about in the media, things happening in our hospitals, in the schools. So I can clarify things for them in those respects but generally, what animates it all – and this is what's so wonderful – is just a love for the Lord, love for the Church.

It's a great opportunity just to be listening to people on their daily lives, their family concerns, the challenges they face as disciples today, and grappling with all that together is a real joy.