

Gratitude for 2017, hope for 2018

Archbishop Richard Smith, leader of the Catholic Archdiocese of Edmonton, says he's even more excited about the potential of Alberta's Catholic community than when he first set foot in the province a decade ago.

"It's every bit as exciting, possibly more so, because when I first came here I was absolutely new to the province," Archbishop Smith said.

"After 10 years of experience, boy I just know that there are great, great things that can happen if we surrender to the primacy of grace, surrender to the power of the Spirit working in and through us."

In a wide-ranging interview, Archbishop Smith reflected on the challenges facing the Catholic community and highlighted major achievements within the Archdiocese over the past year.

In March, the Archdiocese was [awarded accreditation from Praesidium](#), an international firm, for achieving the highest standards in abuse prevention and promotion of safe environments within its parishes and institutions.

On July 1, Archbishop Smith and his counterparts across Canada [consecrated their dioceses and eparchies to the Blessed Virgin Mary](#). The bishops also did so collectively in the fall to cap off Canada 150.

In September, Archbishop Smith released his pastoral letter [Living in the Word](#) which guides and sets priorities for the Catholic community and clergy.

And in December, the Archdiocese launched [Grandin Media](#), an online media portal to tell the Catholic story in Western Canada and to apply the lens of faith to issues that matter.

Grandin Media asked Archbishop Smith to reflect on the past year. His answers have been edited for length:

As you look back on 2017, what are you most proud of?

I guess the first thing I'd want to say is that I don't think of it in terms of pride. I think of it in terms of gratitude, because we recognize that at the end of the day, it's all God's work. God makes things possible. God is the one who inspires initiatives and brings them to completion.

What comes to mind is the act of consecration to Our Lady of the diocese and the country. It was important for me personally. If you were to look at my coat of arms, for example, there's a lot of blue on it and that's for Our Lady.

Reliance on Mary, and prayer to her, has always been a cornerstone of my life as a disciple, as a priest, and now as a bishop. I have absolute confidence that because of the act of consecration, made in faith and with confidence in Our Lady, that it's going to bear fruit for the diocese and our country.

I'm grateful for the pastoral letter. This was a long time coming. [The letter] centres upon the call, the call that has come to us from Pope Francis but that goes back ultimately to the Gospel, to be authentic disciples, authentic followers of Jesus. And how does that take shape? Well, central to that has to be an encounter with Jesus in his Word.

How this will, in fact, play out remains to be seen. It's a living process.

[Grandin Media](#) is dedicated to telling the Catholic story, telling the good that is unfolding in people's lives when they do engage with the Word, when they do allow the Gospel to take root in their lives. Many of us are tired of having the Catholic story told by people and organizations that don't understand the Catholic story. Well, we do. So let's tell it from within.



Gary Gagnon heads the newly formed Office of Indigenous Relations for the Archdiocese of Edmonton

We have established the office for relations with indigenous peoples ... How do we grow in mutual understanding and in mutual walking together in the light of the faith of the Church, in the light of our concern for the common good? To have that office established that will not just help me in that process, but also – and more importantly – signal to everybody else how important this is to the Church; I think it's critical.

This past year we received formal accreditation from Praesidium for our whole Called to Protect process here and the establishment of safe communities in our parishes. To have that formally recognized by an independent third party and to have that accredited, tells us we're on the right track.

You launched listening sessions in regards to your pastoral letter and *Amoris Laetitia* – Pope Francis' reflections on the family. What has been the feedback?

What I'm hearing from a lot of the families is that it's not an easy thing in this day and age truly to be Catholic, to stand up and be identified as Catholic, to live our Catholic faith in an overwhelmingly secularizing kind of a society. So there is that instinctive looking for community of like-minded people, people who share the faith so they can be strengthened.

I'm finding too that, from our young adults, there is a real anxiety in their hearts about – as they put it – 'not measuring up'. How do we help people understand that they have an inherent dignity, an inherent beauty and an inherent worth, that comes simply from the fact that they are a child of God?

The final thing that dawns on me is the extraordinary influence that's happening today, in families, through all that comes at them through social media, through the Internet, and so on. Again, a recurring theme is the horrible presence of pornography.

Family life is so vital to the life of our society. It's so central to the life of the Church that we have to be with families. We have to accompany them and help them live out what it really means to be a family as God has fashioned the family.

There seems to be a perception that the Church is not progressive and that it's backward. Why do you think that perception still exists? How do Catholics meet that challenge?

Let me start first with the challenge part because that's very real and I hear this a lot from people, especially when I'm sitting down with young people today.

They're not shy about saying that it's difficult to stand up and be counted as a Catholic because every so often society doesn't understand it, doesn't agree with what they believe our teaching might be. And very often the disagreement will be based upon a misunderstanding of what the Church teaches.

It is a strong challenge to be faithful and to be faithful to the Lord and to be ready to speak and to give witness, which is counter-cultural in many, many ways in our day. How do we find those communities of support that can people be more deeply grounded in their faith and sure of it and faithful to it?

If developments in society would move away from surrender to God, towards an adoption of belief only in self and the acceptance of a mindset which sees the self as radically autonomous; if we see developments in society that are counter to the Gospel, which are rooted in sin, disobedience to God, developments which cause divisions among people from the Church, that's not progressive, that's going off the rails. That's going backwards.

The Church has a call to read the times ... and then to speak the Gospel, to speak the truth, to those times. In no way can the Church become the echo of the times. What the Church echoes through history is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Very, very often that truth runs counter to the various spirits of the age throughout history. Well, so be it. We are called to be faithful to our Lord and faithful to the Gospel and faithful to the truth and the hope that it communicates.

In the history of the Church, is this a particularly critical time or simply a wave that will pass?

No, I think this is a particularly critical time. More and more our people's mindset today is being shaped by ideas and trends which are not just opposite to the Gospel but inimical to it.

We find ourselves immersed daily in a barrage of messaging and words with which the Church has difficulty competing. People are constantly on the Internet, constantly on the radio, constantly on social media, constantly watching television shows. The Church doesn't have that kind of communicative capacity.

If we do not have the ability to assess all of that critically in the light of the Gospel, we can find ourselves shaped by it. Examples [are] the redefinition of marriage in our society. When I look at the legalization of assisted suicide and euthanasia, when I see the continuing broad societal support for abortion, it's clear that we have major trends in our society which do run counter to the message of truth and beauty and love and human dignity that is communicated through the Gospel.

We have a major challenge before us as a Church to find ways to be in the midst of all that messaging and to sanctify it all with the beauty of the Gospel.

What are you looking forward to this year and what gives you hope?

What gives me hope is always the Gospel. It's the Lord who initiates. It's the Lord who brings to our minds different initiatives and by His power brings them to conclusion.

What I'm looking forward to is just engaging the challenges.

One of the things I've loved about the Albertans that I have come to know and love here in this province is when there's an issue, the response is 'How are we going to deal with this? Let's get 'er done. Let's get at it.'

Now we need to nuance that a little bit in the light of faith. It's with Christ, in Christ that we say, 'We can do these things.'