

Northern dioceses among top priorities for new bishops' conference president

Like anyone starting a new job, Winnipeg Archbishop Richard Gagnon concedes there is going to be a learning curve involved as he settles into his new role as president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCC) for the next two years.

But Gagnon has shown since he first joined the priesthood in 1983 that he's a quick study.

Of particular concern to him is to make sure his new role as CCCC president doesn't adversely affect his ability to maintain the service he provides as Archbishop of Winnipeg.

"It is above and beyond being a bishop, you have to strike some kind of balance," Gagnon said.

Gagnon, who is adding the role of CCCC president to his existing duty as Winnipeg's Archbishop, is not a novice when it comes to learning how to strike such a balance.

He served as CCCC vice-president for two years under former CCCC President Lionel Gendron before being elevated to the CCCC presidency at the end of the annual CCCC Plenary in Cornwall, Ont., on Sept. 27.

"I've been involved as vice-president and I've observed the commitment involved of being president. It is another level of commitment," he said in a phone interview from his home diocese.

He sees his role as CCCC president as being a facilitator, of making sure that the collective decisions and initiatives of Canada's bishops are acted upon with the support of the CCCC.

"The role of the president is not to come with any kind of platform or agenda," Gagnon said, but to follow through on CCCC permanent council and executive decisions.

"My job is really to kind of facilitate the decisions," he said. "I don't come in with a list of different things for the CCCC to do."

Gagnon, born in 1948 in Lethbridge, Alta., moved to British Columbia with his family when he was young before studying philosophy, history and English at Simon Fraser University and completing a B.C. Teaching Certification in 1976.

Eventually he undertook his seminary studies at Pontifical Beda College in Rome

from 1978-1983 and was ordained into the priesthood in 1983. He was installed as Bishop of the Diocese of Victoria in B.C. in 2004 and then as Archbishop for Winnipeg in 2013 by Pope Francis.

While Gagnon said he doesn't enter his new role as CCCB president with a direct agenda, there are issues the CCCB has championed that he is eager to continue moving forward. One that he feels is of unique importance is continuing partnerships and resource sharing between the Canadian Church's northern and southern dioceses.

"Some of the northern dioceses cover such large areas of land with very little people, they don't always have the resources to do all the work they want to, and that is where partnerships with some of the larger southern dioceses where we can assist is very important," Gagnon explained, adding it is also important in the ongoing efforts of reconciliation with Canada's Indigenous communities.

Although the issues that the CCCB brings forward in its annual plenary sessions "will change from year to year," issues at the forefront at last month's plenary included ongoing discussions and advocacy for religious freedom and continuing efforts to address abuse of minors.

Gagnon said there is a strong, ongoing determination to continue to review all Church activities through the lens of protecting minors and how to best implement the directive to put the well-being of minors at the forefront of all Church activities.

"Ultimately it is up to each diocese in the Church and they can require a lot of assistance in continuing this commitment and in sharing best practices, which is why we have established a working group to help monitor greater conformity in reaching these goals and offering supports," Gagnon said.