



Archevêque de Montréal

Pastoral Letter:

Time to awaken the soul

March 25, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In a world developing without any thought of God and which prioritizes what can be seen, touched and quantified, human beings do not cease to be made for God and to seek the type of meaning in life that can bear the failure, frailty, suffering and death we all experience.

What happens to the meaning of life that is based on success in the event of failure; on health, in the event of illness; on fame, in the event of public humiliation; on wealth, in the event of impoverishment? As some have expressed so well, can it not be said that the day we comprehend the meaning of our death is the day we comprehend the meaning of our life (cf. Saint-Exupéry).

What happens to our sense of meaning when our thirst for the absolute and for ultimate happiness is defined by limited experiences, the sum total of which will always be limited, leaving us with a sense of emptiness (cf. Blondel).

In a universe where we cannot see beyond that which is visible – i.e. matter – everything perishes in the end. If all perishes in the end, then life has no real meaning. “Let’s eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” (Saint Paul). When we talk about the sustainable development, is it not also necessary to talk about the sustainable meaning of life itself? And to speak of “sustainable meaning” regarding life, are we not speaking of eternity, an eternity looming on the horizon of our life, toward which we journey; eternity, which approaches us and which we embrace.

Eternity, as the fullness of eternal life, as the existence of God, as an encounter with God. This might sound very abstract, yet there is nothing more concrete. We know from experience that neglecting God leads to neglecting human beings, neglecting the dignity of the human person whose very life has inherent value, from conception to natural death.

God, who is Spirit, establishes our mode of being by giving coherency and meaning to our existence and life. When we no longer know what it is to be a human being, man and woman, it is a sign that we no longer know God. When human beings are nothing more than the result of chance that eventually dissolves like a shadow in the night of death, paradoxically, this becomes the sign that God exists. When there is no longer a sense of journeying through life, there is no longer meaning in life. But human beings resist the absence of meaning. They know in the depths of their soul, at the bottom of their hearts, in the pinnacles of their minds that they thirst for a continuous source of water, for water that remains, eternal life. They thirst for God. Their thirst, which is impervious to all neglect, indifference and evasion, is a sign that this thirst exists in the world but is not of this world (cf.

Saint John Paul II).

If only matter, plants, animals and biological bodies existed, there would not be a thirst for the absolute, there would not be a deep aspiration to get the most out of life, love and happiness. If human beings were only bodies, only limited desires would exist. Human beings forget their sense of humanity the more they forget that which God desires, present within them (cf. Henri de Lubac).

Isn't it time to reclaim the soul, essentially the spirit dimension that is open to God, which knows and acts through the body? It is not for the soul to neglect or repress the body, as it is not for the body to neglect the soul. Human beings exist body and soul. "I am body and soul." The human body is an established entity, but it exists with the soul.

It is within the soul that the thirst for infinity reverberates, the desire for an undying love, the hope of bearing fruit that will last (St. John). My heart beats in the soul and it wants to beat forever (cf. Péguy).

The soul is invisible, yet it is still visible. When I forget it, it is at the expense of my humanity; it diminishes my strength to live and love freely. The weakness that occurs in a body that does not breathe properly is a sign that the body is made to breathe, so too, the weakness that pervades a life without love is a sign that life itself needs to breathe. I exist, body and soul, and I am made to breathe, body and soul. I am a body that must breathe, but I am also a soul that must breathe. The body is made to breathe the surrounding air. The spiritual soul is made to breathe God who is Spirit.

The soul that breathes is a soul that prays. As all saints testify, prayer is the breath of the soul. To become aware of the soul is to become aware of prayer. To discover prayer is to discover the soul. Prayer is the most humblest of states and actions, in which I recognize that I am a creature of God.

In prayer I stand before God, Infinite and Eternal, whom I adore by prostrating myself, body and soul. I yield to Him: Holy God, I adore you from the depths of my heart (cf. the angel at Fatima), and into your hands I commend my life and spirit (cf. the Cross of Christ). In God's presence, I discover who I am: I am created in the image of God, I am loved by God, and I am called to love God and others. God's commandment itself reveals to us precisely who dwells in our hearts, but we no longer hear: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength, and your neighbour as yourself (cf. Bible).

When I experience the deepest aspiration to love unconditionally to the "nth degree," when this desire leads me to endure suffering and pain, I am also experiencing that my soul is profoundly thirsty for goodness and truth, beauty and unity (cf. Zundel). I am a soul comprising mind and heart. I am a soul that animates a body, a mind open to God, a heart made to love and be loved.

In our dialogue with the world, we often say what we think people are ready to hear. Yet, human beings keep searching, often in places other than themselves, at the periphery of their soul. Perhaps, they're fleeing their innermost selves, sensing that if they stop, their life will be transformed, perhaps challenging preoccupations to which they are attached.

Even if we have faith, we might have forgotten—if not neglected—our soul, delaying prayer until the next day oftentimes. May God set us right, may the Holy Spirit lead us to stand before Jesus Christ and adore Him, may Jesus Christ transform us into children of light (cf. Saint Paul), and sons and daughters of the Eternal Father.

Only by doing so will we awaken our soul and become "soul awakeners" in the world today, which has been described in various terms: post-Christian, modern, postmodern and secular.

Cultures are varied and changing. Times vary. Yet, human beings remain human beings; something we need to recognize continually in the light of reason and faith. Ample sources can be found in the Bible, the Magisterium and the Doctors of the Church. There is no lack of such references in the lives of saints, and Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit fill us abundantly with grace.

We are called in these times to a deep awakening of the soul. Young people, couples, families and the elderly are waiting for the Word of life: souls, wake up, stand up, body and soul.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Christian Lépine". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

† Christian Lépine
Archbishop of Montréal