

Preserving the Religious Tradition in Quebec

by Bernard Brodeur, MNA

Quebec's religious heritage is threatened, particularly because of the decline in religious practice, the almost complete lack of succession among religious figures, and the reduction in parish council revenues. Places of worship, as well as rectories, cemeteries and monasteries are sold, reconverted for other purposes and sometimes even destroyed without involving in the decision-making process the local communities attached to these religious properties. In a context where this tendency will gradually increase and where current mechanisms no longer seem to meet the needs, the Committee on Culture of the National Assembly, in an unprecedented approach, took the initiative to find long-term solutions and proposed the implementation of four religious heritage priorities.



On 6 June 2006, the Committee on Culture of the National Assembly tabled its report on the future of Quebec's religious heritage. Containing 33 recommendations adopted unanimously by its members, this report stems from an unprecedented approach in the history of Quebec's parliamentary committees undertaken during an order of initiative¹.

A Substantial Heritage with a Precarious Status

Quebec's religious heritage is rich and diversified. Its presence throughout the land bears witness to the preponderant role it has played in the history of Quebec, from the beginning of the colony to modern times, when the secularization of society gradually took place. Que-

bec still boasts to this day at least 4000 cultural buildings and institutions of a religious and social nature, 2800 of which are places of worship, all religious traditions taken into account. In addition to these heritage buildings, there is an impressive quantity of moveable property and works of art such as paintings, sculptures, silversmithing, organs, stained-glass windows, sacerdotal clothing as well as thousands of linear metres of religious archives. The outstanding value of this heritage and the special place it holds in the history of Quebec are manifest in the number of religious items protected under the *Cultural Property Act*: close to 500 of these are legally protected (classification, recognition, designation), which represents slightly more than one third of all protected cultural property. In addition to this building, property and archival heritage, there exists an intangible heritage, that is, the traditions, rituals, knowledge and know-how held by priests and nuns.

This heritage, as rich as it may be, is threatened, and during the past few decades we have witnessed religious buildings left to waste or simply unoccupied. Others have been sold, reconverted and, in certain cases, even demolished, and this tendency will increase. The root of the problem can be explained in particular by the reduc-

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tion in religious practice², which has a direct impact on the revenues of parishes, several of which are no longer able to balance their budget. These parishes have under their care huge buildings that are not adapted to the reduced size of the community of believers and whose expenses for upkeep, renovation and restoration increase disproportionately to their revenues. In addition to this financial reality is the almost complete absence of succession both among priests and nuns. The merging of parishes has often been the solution of choice to cope with this lack of financial and human resources. These fusions or groupings of parishes generally lead to the closing, sale, reconversion and sometimes even the demolition of religious buildings deemed as "excess". The citizens, be they believers or non believers, have a deep attachment for this heritage, which often holds a central place in their village or community, and wish to be informed beforehand of the possible closing of these religious buildings. They especially want to be consulted in relation to prospective reconversion or demolition projects.

The moveable property, archives and religious works of art are directly threatened by the closing of churches, rectories, convents and other buildings of a religious nature, and several items of great value have been destroyed or sold in the past. The limited amount of information acquired with regard to moveable property inventories contributes to this problem since most of these objects were not indexed. Lastly, the average age of the members of the various religious communities is 80 years, which indicates the urgency to proceed with the examination of the immaterial heritage in order to have records of this living memory which all too often is transmitted by word of mouth without any information being documented.

In recent years, many legislators have been called upon or consulted in their own riding in relation to the safeguarding of a church threatened of being closed down, the inadequate upkeep of a religious building, the announcement of the sale of a monastery or the expensive restoration of a religious work of art. However, behind these special requests, for which immediate or medium-term solutions were found, there lies a general problem that requires more than simply handling individual cases as they occur. That is precisely what gave rise, in November 2004, to this order of initiative focussing on finding long-term solutions.

An Unprecedented Approach

The adoption of this order of initiative by the Committee on Culture was followed by the publishing of a consultation paper in June 2005. An extensive general consultation began in September of the same year during

which the Committee received 120 briefs and 69 answers to the on-line questionnaire. For the first time in close to twenty years, a standing committee travelled to Montreal, Gatineau, Sherbrooke, Saguenay, Rimouski, Trois-Rivières and Quebec City to hold public hearings. Certain persons who answered the on-line questionnaire were also heard during the public hearings, which is an unusual occurrence in standing committee practice. By travelling to the various locations, the Committee sought to inform and increase the awareness of local populations with regard to the importance of their religious heritage, but also to create a mobilizing effect enabling better dialogue between civil and religious authorities, heritage experts and the citizens. The comments gathered throughout the mandate and the major media coverage of the Committee's proceedings lead us to believe that its objectives were attained.

The Committee also conducted visits to churches, monasteries and a museum. In October 2005, a Committee delegation also took part in an international symposium held in Montréal under the theme "What Future for which Churches?", where some thirty experts and practitioners related their experiences. At the suggestion of several of the groups heard during the public hearings, a Committee delegation participated, from 5 to 10 February 2006, in a study mission in Belgium and in France, two primarily Catholic and Francophone countries disposing of much experience as regards the protection and promotion of their religious heritage³.

In order to properly underline the importance the Committee grants to better dialogue between the civil and religious authorities, the experts and the citizens, it proceeded with the public launching of its report, on June 6, 2006, at Saint-Roch Church in Quebec City in the presence of over 200 guests from various backgrounds.

The Religious Heritage Priorities

At the conclusion of its work, the Committee unanimously decided that four major priorities must be implemented. The first of these priorities concerns the recognition of this heritage, since we cannot make informed choices if we do not fully understand the issue at stake. Hence, the Committee proposes to complete the inventories of religious property, to carry out the inventories of moveable property and to institute an examination programme for the purpose of promoting the immaterial religious heritage. It has also been proposed that priority be given to the inventory of religious archives and organs and that training and research be fostered in this field.

The second priority involves the protection measures to be implemented. The Committee proposes to establish

a one-year moratorium period regarding religious buildings and cemeteries, so as to inform the citizens of their possible sale and to involve them in finding new roles for them. It also recommends the adoption of legislative measures permitting the Ministry of Culture and Communications to classify certain religious buildings as heritage sites, and this, in addition to the protection measures stipulated in the *Cultural Property Act*. Since the adoption of such measures is likely to take some time, the Committee deems it necessary to declare a moratorium beginning on the date of the tabling of its report until January 1, 2008, so as to suspend the transfer or modification of religious buildings and cemeteries.

The third priority concerns the transmission of this heritage to future generations. Hence, the Committee proposes that measures be adopted to support the efforts to promote the religious heritage, to encourage religious tourism and to increase the awareness of young people with regard to this heritage. It further recommends the organization of a national day celebrating the religious heritage, similarly to the holding of Culture Days.

The final priority aims to improve the management of this heritage by consolidating the coordinating role of the Ministry of Culture and Communications within the machinery of government and by acknowledging local and regional responsibilities in the matter. In the same manner, the Committee proposes that the Quebec's Religious Heritage Foundation be eventually transformed into a religious heritage council and that new responsibilities be assigned thereto, particularly as regards reconversion assistance, counselling services, support and awareness-raising. The Committee is of the opinion that it is necessary to continue public and recurrent financing of the new heritage council, but that it must also diversify its financing options by establishing a matching fund promoting the financial participation of private sector enterprises⁴.

The opinion is widespread that there is presently a "momentum" in Quebec on the matter of preserving this heritage, and the Committee proceedings contributed, jointly with other initiatives, to bring this issue to the forefront. For this reason, the Committee members are confident that the various actors concerned by the report

will follow up on the recommendations as expeditiously as possible.

As I mentioned during the two-hour debate on the report from the Committee in the National Assembly last June, this order of initiative on Quebec's religious heritage certainly was the highlight of my parliamentary experience since my election as Member for Shefford in 1994. As an elected official, it is relatively rare to be able to carry out such work, in collaboration with colleagues from both the Government and the Official Opposition, in a serene climate that is free of partisan politics. It was a challenging task, what with our numerous meetings, but so very rewarding. I was particularly pleased that the Committee on Culture was successful in tabling a unanimous report containing realistic recommendations to the Government, a report that was most favourably welcomed by the population as we witnessed on the occasion of its public launching last June 6 at Saint-Roch Church in Quebec City. This document should change the course of things and contribute to preserving Quebec's religious heritage, which represents our tremendous artistic, historical and cultural national wealth.

Notes

1. The standing committees of the National Assembly may, on their own initiative, examine any matter of public interest that falls within their terms of reference. These mandates differ from those ordered by the Assembly and allow the committees much more autonomy when carrying them out.
2. Quebec's population numbered 80% of practising Catholics in 1960 and today has only between 5% and 10%.
3. The summary of the study mission is available in French on the Internet site of the National Assembly at the following address:
<http://www.assnat.qc.ca/fra/37legislature2/commissions/Cc/Patrimoine-mission-France.pdf>
4. The French version of the Committee report is available on the Internet site of the Quebec National Assembly at the following address:
<http://www.assnat.qc.ca/fra/37legislature2/commissions/Cc/rapport-patrimoine.pdf>. The English version of the report is available on request.