
« THE BISHOP'S FAITHFUL COLLABORATORS »



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- I - **WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT?**
 - II - **A SPIRIT OF POWER, LOVE, AND SELF-DISCIPLINE**
 - III - **THE BLESSED DAY OF OUR ORDINATION**
 - IV - **A FERVENT SPIRITUAL LIFE**
 - V - **THE BISHOP'S FAITHFUL COLLABORATOR**
 - VI - **IN THE MIDST OF CHANGE**
 - VI - **ONLY FOR THIS...**
 - VIII - **INTIMATELY ASSOCIATED WITH THE EPISCOPAL MINISTRY**
 - IX - **MUTUAL TIES**
 - X - **« IMITAMINI QUOD TRACTATIS »**
 - XI - **AN UNFORGETTABLE PASTORAL VISIT**

25 March 1996
Feast of the Annunciation

TO THE PRIESTS AND FUTURE PRIESTS OF THE CHURCH OF EDMUNDSTON

My Dear Friends,

On this feast of the Annunciation of the Lord, on this day of the Fiat of Jesus and that of Mary, the culminating point of the salvation dialogue between God and humankind and the commemoration of the free consent of the Virgin, on the first anniversary of the announcement of a diocesan seminary at Edmundston, as we near the date of priestly ordination of our Deacon Curtis Sappier on May 25, just as I had done at the beginning of my episcopal ministry and at the onset of the diocesan jubilee year, I want to share with you my reflection on the important mission we have as Church and in which we all have a part. I do this all the more willingly since the Priests' Senate has started a serious reflection of its own on the mission of the priest in the midst of a society undergoing major changes, a reflection which the senate desires to share with the presbyterium at our next clergy meeting. Very discreetly, then, I offer you a part of my personal reflection on this matter, and I do this keeping in mind the words of Saint Peter « Be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. » May these words which I dedicate in a special way to Bishop Fernand Lacroix and Father Napoléon Michaud who have passed away since my coming to Edmundston, truly rekindle our apostolic zeal.

WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT?

A few weeks ago I sent you a document called *Prêtres: vivre plutôt que survivre* [« Priests: To Live Rather Than Just Survive »] by the German authors Wilhelm Breuning and Klaus Hemmerle. In the foreword, we read that the first concern of bishops must be for priests. By wanting to make an unusual point, the authors go so far as to affirm that a bishop is first and foremost bishop to his priests and that he cannot be bishop without first being a priest with his priests. Acknowledging that I was ordained bishop for the Church as a whole and

appointed to the beloved see of Edmundston, I hasten to list the ten priorities set by these authors, and I would like the priests of the Edmundston diocese to consider them carefully.

- 1 - My way of living as a priest is more important than anything I can do as a priest.
- 2 - What Christ does in me is more important than what I myself accomplish.
- 3 - Being united to the presbyterium is more important than being engrossed in my work.
- 4 - The service of prayer and of the Word is more important than table service.
- 5 - Spiritually guiding collaborators is more important than accomplishing the most work possible alone by myself.
- 6 - It is more important to be truly present and flourishing in few places than wanting to be everywhere but hastily and in half-measures.
- 7 - Acting in solidarity is more important than acting alone however praiseworthy it may be; collaboration is therefore more important than solitary work; communion is more important than action.
- 8 - Because it is more productive, the cross is more important than efficiency.
- 9 - Openness to the whole (entire community, diocese, Church) is more important than concern for special interests, however justified they may be.
- 10 - Being faith witnesses to all is more important than responding to all regular requests.

These ten priorities would on their own warrant taking the time necessary to discuss them. These priorities seem self-evident, but in daily life and in the midst of numerous changes, it is not always easy to keep focused on them.

A SPIRIT OF POWER, AND SELF-CONTROL

Through all these daily choices, through the comments and criticisms of life, how can one remain serene and hopeful? In reading the second letter of St. Paul to Timothy, the entreaty of this great God-possessed man echoes forcefully in my very being: « I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. »

How can we not remember that it is God who is the source of all life and growth, that it is God who gives life and growth to His people, that it is God who raises up different ministries needed, among His people? What thanksgiving we must raise up to God for the many vocations which have sprouted from our soil!

The Blessed Day of Our Ordination

As I remind you of your ordination day, how can I forget what I became on this blessed day of May 8, 1965... You yourselves so kindly noted it, in May! How can I not recall the charge of Archbishop Joseph-Aurèle Plourde as he bid me pray, proclaim the Word of God, devoutly celebrate the mysteries of Jesus Christ the great High Priest, and live in heart-felt communion with the Church? How can I not rekindle the gift of God within me, as I read the prayer of ordination which is recited by the bishop:

« Lord, grant also to us fellow workers [to exercise the apostolic ministry]. Almighty Father, grant to this servant of yours the dignity of the priesthood. Renew within him the Spirit of holiness. As a co-worker with the order of bishops may he be faithful to the ministry that he receives from you, Lord God, and be to others a model of right conduct. May he be faithful in working with the order of

bishops, so that the words of the Gospel may reach the ends of the earth, and the family of nations, made one in Christ, may become God's one, holy people. »

A FERVENT SPIRITUAL LIFE

Hardly ten years ago at his meeting with priests in Montréal on September 11, 1984 Pope John Paul II said: « It is from your ministry carried out with conviction and centred on the Eucharist that your spiritual endurance is developed, an endurance which must be maintained by times of personal prayer. As servants of the Word of God let yourselves be challenged, refashioned and comforted by it. As gatherers of the community and responsible for unity, allow yourselves to marvel at the work which the Lord has wrought in his people. As ministers of the sacraments, let yourselves be converted by what they celebrate. »

Beloved brothers, this is a very exciting programme, whatever our age, whatever our state of health, whatever our ministry. It would be very beneficial if, in small groups, you were to take each of these short phrases and meditate on them at length.

THE BISHOP'S FAITHFUL COLLABORATOR

At the opening of the festivities marking the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of our diocese I expressed my gratitude to all the priests of yesterday and today for the work accomplished with their bishops, and which they continue to pursue today. I do so again today: it would be difficult if not impossible for me to carry out my ministry if you were not there twenty-four hours a day throughout the year. For over two years now I have gotten to know you, and I honestly want to tell you how much I admire the devotedness and generosity you display in your daily ministry. Only the Lord, the Good Shepherd, knows the cost of accomplishing this ministry day by day, as well as the degree of holiness it requires, a holiness which must not stop growing in prayer and charity.

IN THE MIDST OF CHANGE

I state this unequivocally: Do not fear either the past or the present. The ministry given to you on the day of your ordination remains basically the same despite the many changes that have occurred in your daily life, in your Christian communities, and in the world as a whole. The priest's ministry has remained the same: *The bishop's faithful collaborator so that the words of the Gospel may reach the ends of the earth...* It is basically for this reason that men are ordained by bishops: to be faithful collaborators. This is the mission of the priest, and the first meaning of his ordination. The mission of the priest cannot be understood apart from the bishop's. That is why there cannot be any priest who is « vague ». He must necessarily be his bishop's faithful collaborator. This implies deep mutual bonds that must exist between the priest and his bishop. These bonds are a lot closer than those between employer and employee. They are bonds created by a holy ordination, bonds of life and of mission, bonds of faith, hope, and love, obedience and fidelity, bonds that are so fundamental that in breaking or altering the least bit this unity with his bishop, the question arises whether the priest would have any « raison d'être ». He is the bishop's faithful collaborator, this is what he was ordained for. If there were no fidelity or collaboration, what other meaning could be given to ordination? It would be hard to find one. Saying this is not to state that I have found fault with your collaboration or fidelity. Quite the opposite, but I make this statement in homage and gratitude to all the priests who have given and continue to give their lives day after day to the cause of Christ and his Church.

ONLY FOR THIS...

The bishop's mission is extremely broad, weighty, and demanding; so is it also with the priest. You only need to recall the commitments the bishop makes at the time of his episcopal ordination and you will understand that the priest, whatever his age, state of health or actual job, will have to share the bishop's mission until the latter's death. Until the final day of his life, because of his ordination the priest will have to collaborate with his bishop in proclaiming the Gospel of Christ faithfully and with persistence, to keep unblemished the deposit of faith according to the Tradition received from the Apostles, in order to work at the construction of the Body of Christ which is the Church and to remain united to it under the authority of Peter's successor and to obey him faithfully, to care for the people of God like a father, to guide it along the path of salvation, to lovingly welcome the poor and the stranger and all those in need, to seek out the lost sheep and gather them all into Christ's sheepfold, and to pray without cease for the people of God... These are a few of the obligations the bishop enters into at his ordination. « The Code of Canon Law » and the « Directory for Bishops in Their Pastoral Ministry » specify other pastoral responsibilities. The priest who is essentially a faithful collaborator of the bishop has no need to fear being unemployed!

INTIMATELY ASSOCIATED WITH THE EPISCOPAL MINISTRY

The ministry entrusted to diocesan priests is mostly for parish communities, but as you can see by the long list of a bishop's duties, parish ministry does not exhaust the collaboration required. Even beyond retirement age, the same collaboration, the same fidelity but differently perceived, is required. Even if today there are many lay people especially pastoral agents collaborating in the Church's mission, we must nonetheless assert that priests, because of the ordination which makes them their bishop's faithful collaborators, must pursue their own mission while deeply respecting all new ministries and services appearing in the Church. The priests' mission prayer, celebration of the sacraments, and governance of the people of God must be continued in close collaboration with the bishop according to the legislation of the universal Church and the particular legislation of the Church of Edmundston.

MUTUAL TIES

By stressing the nature of priestly ordination it is possible to rediscover the vital bonds uniting us to one another. On this day of the Annunciation of the Lord, we can contemplate at length the Son placing all his joy at being the beloved Son of God the Father. We can also admire Mary who put all her joy in being the handmaid of the Lord and in carrying out God's will according to His Word. As for me, strong bonds unite me to the beloved Church of Edmundston, therefore to each one of you in the presbyterium. And I know that the feeling is mutual with you. At a time when we search for the deep meaning to life's existence, it seems to me that in reaffirming the fundamental meaning of priestly ordination we also acknowledge the greatness, the height and the depth of such a life and such a mission which are centred on Christ, on his Gospel, and on his Church.

« IMITAMINI QUOD TRACTATIS »

I hope that the above reflection will help shed light on the path we must follow amidst today's countless changes. If I have any wish in these days of celebration, commitment, and searching, it is for us to remain faithful to God the Father who calls us in His Son through the gift of His Spirit; it is also the wish that we remain faithful to the ecclesial mission which has been given to us in the midst of the world, that of welcoming like Jesus the Good Shepherd every man, woman, and child who comes to us; that we be attentive to the Word of God we read, and to the teaching of the Church that we believe; that we live the Gospel we proclaim and teach; and that humbly and daily, in peace and joy, in holiness and justice, with feeling, persistence and readiness, we live with all our being this gift of God, this gift of Jesus for the life of the world.

AN UNFORGETTABLE PASTORAL VISIT

Appended to this letter is a copy of the accounts I wrote following the intensive pastoral visitation of the Restigouche Deanery parishes of Saint-Quentin, Kedgwick, Saint-Jean-Baptiste and Saint-Martin. It was as bishop in deep communion with his presbyterium and the diocese of Edmundston that I made these visits. I share these accounts with you because they really describe a Church event. The priests, sisters, and parish pastoral councils really worked at preparing it, and they deserve our deep gratitude. Contemplating the mystery of the Incarnation is inseparable from contemplating the mystery of the Visitation, as I was reminded by the Filles de Marie de l'Assomption Sisters at Saint-Jean-Baptiste and Saint-Martin. Following the example of Mary who despite her own pregnancy took it on herself to visit her cousin Elizabeth, following the example of Jesus the Good Shepherd who went from village to village searching out his lost sheep, following the priests who came before us and who carried out their pastoral visits to the people in their care, and following the pastors of today who find new ways of evangelisation, let us maintain a keen sense of mission and let us carry out together the priceless mission of Jesus.

+ François Thibodeau

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