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## « THE BEST OF MY LOVE »



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February 1994

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### TO THE PRIESTS AND FUTURE PRIESTS OF THE CHURCH OF EDMUNDSTON

My Dear Friends,

I follow Jesus in calling you friends, since the Lord has really chosen you; he has called you, consecrated you with holy anointing, and sent you out as bearers of the Good News to your brothers and sisters.

#### **A BISHOP'S FIRST OBLIGATION**

In the « Directory of Bishops for the Pastoral Ministry, » a bishop's first obligation is described in this way: « Just as Jesus showed his love especially to his disciples when he constituted them ministers of his true and mystical Body (Cf. John 13:17), in the same way the bishop through whom our Lord Jesus Christ the Supreme Pontiff is present to the believers, is well aware that he has the obligation of giving the best of his love and solicitude to the priests and those aspiring to sacred ministries. »

During these first weeks I have been in the Edmundston Diocese I have sought to show the best of my love for each and everyone of you by repeating that the love of the Lord is from age to age. At the close of my episcopal ordination I spoke these words to you: « Priests, deacons, and seminarians of the Church of Edmundston, throughout my ministry in the Church of Edmundston I want to reassure you in a very special way how I want to be closely united to you, and get to know you better. In the weeks to come I shall visit you and greet the members of your Christian communities... Let us never doubt that the Lord infinitely loves us; he asks us to be shepherds after his own heart, to proclaim by our whole lives that the love of God is very much alive. Before all else, we must be faithful to prayer and the service of the Word. »

#### **AS WE NEAR...**

We shall soon be celebrating the beautiful chrism Mass during which we shall show one another heart-felt solidarity and true communion, as we exchange a fraternal accolade. This Mass will be like a prelude to the

great celebrations of the Paschal Mystery. Together we shall proclaim the great mystery of faith to which we are intimately associated: the death of Jesus, his resurrection, and his return in glory. A few days later, we shall all be invited to Jeff Doucette's priestly ordination: What a grace to our Church! And what obligations for us! I take it as an exceptional favour to confer a priestly ordination so soon after my own episcopal ordination.

### **AN UNCOMMON CALLING, A MAGNIFICENT MISSION**

As a successor of the Apostles I invite you, in the words of Saint Paul, to rekindle the gift which God gave you through the imposition of hands. It is not a spirit of fear that the Lord has given, but one of power, love, and self-control. Do not be ashamed of witnessing to the Lord but suffer with me, rather, for the sake of the Gospel, sustained by the power of God who has called you with a holy call not because of your works but for of His own purposes and His own grace.

The more we meditate often and together on this amazing calling and mission of ours, the more we shall be thankful and grateful, united to one another, vying with one another in showing respect for and solidarity with each brother priest and the people of God as a whole, to whom we have been sent.

I invite you to read and re-read the text of Cardinal Godfried Danneels, *Messagers de la joie*. There is room for deep reflection, here, but not for anxiety or bewilderment. We must recognise the place and the charism of our brothers and sisters, religious or lay, but we must also live fully the mission given to us by God which the Church authenticated by ordination. You are all my immediate collaborators in teaching, sanctifying, and serving the People of God. Through our whole lives, including, especially, times of moral and physical suffering, we must live and proclaim the Good News of Jesus. A deep joy, like that promised by Jesus, must be in us that we may be his true witnesses. Methods may change, but our mission remains the same. Whether I have been a priest one week or sixty years, I must live and proclaim the same Gospel. Whether I have been a priest twenty or fifty years, my prayer life must be as strong and even more so as time goes by, otherwise I am no more than a clanging cymbal or a booming gong. As a man of prayer I must dedicate a good part of the day to it. By the way, how much of my time do I spend in prayer? What do I do to cut myself away from the work or concerns that keep me from dedicating one hour or two each day to this activity? « It is not right that we should neglect prayer and the word of God. » This is the true meaning of our mission... To pray is also to let ourselves be loved by God.

Dedicated to evangelisation and rooted in prayer, we shall cheerfully take up our daily service with renewed joy and deep devotion. I have no doubt that the priestly service is demanding, that its new forms still need readjusting, but in a Church-as-Communion, the prayerful evangeliser will always be able to find a special place, the place of service, like Jesus himself who came to serve and not to be served.

As we near the fiftieth anniversary of our diocese, the example of our predecessors who built the Church of Edmundston inspire us daily to be messengers of joy. I am reminded especially of my predecessors Bishops Marie-Antoine Roy, Joseph-Roméo Gagnon, Fernand Lacroix, and Gérard Dionne. I am also reminded of all the generous priests who in our Church gave their lives for Jesus. The witness of priests who are happy in their calling and their mission, glad to serve the people of today in the service of evangelisation, prayer, and sanctification which is asked of them, this witness is a seed sown for pastoral vocations. However, a counter-witness can erase any attempt to have one listen to the vocation call and challenge.

### **PRAY THE MASTER**

In my very first address as fifth bishop of Edmundston I said: « We shall have to set as priority prayer to the Lord to send workers to his harvest, shepherds after his heart, to our parishes, our towns and villages, our

workplaces and places of leisure: priests, religious brothers and sisters, pastoral agents, and Christian leaders, so that each community can continue to be vibrant, fraternal, and mission-minded. »

I am sure of this: The Lord has not stopped calling our people to his harvest. We must prepare the way of the Lord, discern his word, and not harden our hearts. Today's voices are many: can we discern and listen to God's voice ? Our Edmundston Church has experienced exceptional vocational fruitfulness. From the most humble quarters to bigger communities, the Lord has called the young and not so young. We have to start walking again and get on the same wave length with young people, to tune in on the same Lord who at times takes divergent roads. And I am also convinced that we shall need in the Maritimes a major seminary for our future priests. And why not at Edmundston ?... In close communion with the other francophone bishops of the Atlantic region, I want to study this project at greater length; this project appears to me a vital necessity. It is important that the major seminary be visible to our people and that our youth be able to develop there a feeling of belonging to the same Church.

In the months to come we shall have to develop a vigorous vocation ministry: we shall be able to do this together, in the context of ceaseless prayer for this intention. The vitality of the people of God depends on this.

### **PASTORAL READJUSTMENTS**

The general diocesan consultation now taking place brings home to me daily specific expectations regarding pastoral attitudes that I must guarantee, and the decisions and actions I shall have to take. With the provisional bishop's committee I am looking closely at and examining each of the answers received. With help from the diocesan councils and services we shall specify, following the 1987-1990 Diocesan Synod, the priorities to be established. A year of study or a pastoral internship could possibly be of great help, in this. Perhaps by being available for being occasionally replaced - perhaps by being part of the « bank of substitutes », you could render enormous service to the people of God. The will of God could be to continue or to undertake a beautiful parish evangelisation, formation, and sanctification ministry. You with your bishop, your brother priests, the people in your milieu, and your spiritual counsellor are the ones to discern this will of God which must guide us in all things.

As a follow-up to the Diocesan Synod I ask all the priests to disengage themselves from all administrative tasks: there are so few priests left that it behooves them to dedicate themselves exclusively to prayer, evangelisation, and the sanctification of the people of God. I ask those in charge of parishes to set up by January 1, 1996, two committees in each parish: a pastoral committee and an economic affairs committee. Further specifications will be coming shortly. As required by Code of Canon Law, the appointment of a diocesan treasurer will be a great help for these finance committees and an added protection for all of us. When I make my pastoral visitation to the parishes, together we shall look at how we can best serve the people of God by going forward with the major recommendations of the Diocesan Synod and the major directives of the Holy Father, especially those indicated in his post synodal exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*.

Several mandates are coming to an end. I plan on making appointments with a specific term of office: one year for an administrator, and six for a pastor. I count on your customary total availability, while taking into consideration the aptitudes and state of health of each one. In order to develop priestly solidarity we shall have to promote the voluntary grouping of priests: it would be well that in each deanery there be such a grouping. Each deanery could promote this. There are large rectories: why not get together ? Together we could develop a life of prayer and mutual help, we could share common expenses and pool our energies and capabilities. It usually depends on us for a dream to be realised. The actual financial context forces us to radical solutions so as to invest more in pastoral ministry than in the maintenance of many, often underused, buildings.

## SHEPHERD ACCORDING TO THE HEART OF JESUS

« Tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it ». May this wise counsel from the first letter of Peter rekindle our enthusiasm; and may these words of the holy Curé of Ars direct our steps along the road of happiness and renewal: « Man has a beautiful function, that of praying and loving... You pray, you love: this is man's happiness on earth! » I do not believe that there are any other paths available to the priest than those of prayer and love.

As I come to the close of this first pastoral letter, please receive as an expression of my affection and love for you the following song I wrote for the 26th anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood, at the time when as provincial I called forth a deacon confrere to the priesthood. This song is most timely at this time when I call our friend Jeff Doucette to the priesthood in the diocese of Edmundston.

O beloved of God,  
be in all places  
« the one sent by the Most High »  
since our Saviour, blessed of the Father,  
has chosen you today  
to teach his people.

O beloved of God,  
be in all places  
a « good shepherd of the flock »  
since our Saviour, the Supreme Shepherd,  
has called you today  
to gather his people.

O beloved of God,  
be in all places  
« praise of the Lord »  
since our Saviour, mediator to the Father,  
begs you today  
to comfort his people.

O beloved of God,  
be in all places  
« pure offering to the Lord »  
since our Saviour, the Eternal High Priest  
consecrates you today  
to sanctify his people.

O beloved of God,  
be in all places  
« Eucharist of the Lord »  
since our Saviour, the true Bread of Life  
gave up his body and blood  
to nourish his people.

+ François Thibodeau *ym*

+ François Thibodeau, C.J.M.  
Bishop of Edmundston