
**« MEN OF THE DEEP,
CAST IN US A DESIRE FOR GOD »**



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Pastoral Letter to the Priests of the Diocese of Edmundston
23 February 2000

My Dear Friends,

One year ago today February 18, the priests' senate made one of the most significant recommendations in its history by proposing, as a major diocesan direction, the creation of parish pastoral teams: this would have short- and long-term repercussions and would modify the life and ministry of priests. Far from « committing hara-kiri » or « shooting oneself in the foot », the priests' senate took a courageous and realistic position, and asked the priests in active ministry to focus on the essential thrust of their priestly ministry: proclamation of the Gospel, celebration of the sacraments, and formation of lay parish leaders. It is on these topics that I want to share with you today, in a spirit of fraternity, simplicity, and truth.

A LONG PROCESS

For more than two years now we had been looking for new solutions to new situations facing us; the people of the diocese spared no effort searching for the best approaches. All levels of the diocese were consulted, whether at the parish or deanery level. A general meeting of the clergy was held in the fall of 1998. Many proposals and recommendations were submitted to me; they were most important in the decision-making process to be undertaken. I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to all those who were involved in this difficult process of pastoral restructuring.

PRESENCE OF PRIESTS

You priests were involved at all levels of this process, either personally or through representatives: to you too I express my gratitude and that of the diocesan Church. I am not embarrassed to say that it was because of your being involved in the whole consultation process that it comes as no surprise that at that February 1999 meeting of the priests' senate there was unanimous agreement regarding the creation of parish pastoral teams. And just as you were present at this major phase of decision-making, so is it important that you continue to be involved in the crucial phase of implementation. You have in you and around you everything you need for the success of this major pastoral direction, just as you could demolish, if you so wanted, all these efforts of our diocesan Church.

LIMITED OPTIONS

Did we have any choice to do otherwise ? Yes we did, if our aim was simple pastoral readjustment for a few months or years. No, if our aim was to find a longer lasting way of doing things, keeping in mind the recommendations of Vatican Council II and the possibilities given by the actual legislation of our Church. When I came to you in 1994 I had before me the recommendations of the diocesan Synod, but first and foremost I had 42 diocesan priests and 15 religious priests ready to collaborate generously, according to their own personal abilities, to the advancement of the Kingdom of God. I still feel great joy at having found and at still finding this strength of soul and heart within our presbyterium. Still, considering the age, health and availability of each one in the presbyterium, alternatives had to be found to situations arising. Should we create megaparishes, new parishes, one or two deaneries ? It would have been possible, but at what human cost ? Suppress parishes or places of worship? This would have been possible, but at what human cost ? Have several parishes in the care of one priest ? This too would have been possible, but which priest would have accepted them, and for how long ? We had to be careful not to wear out the priests who were still active. So, what was there to do ? What were we to do, since actual legislation demands that there be one priest per parish and that it be the same regarding a parish pastoral team ?

AN APPROPRIATE SOLUTION

We believed that the best solution for now, one that would also work on a long term, would be the setting up of parish pastoral teams that could minister to one or several Christian communities, a team composed of three to five persons upon whom would rest the parish pastoral responsibility, rather than a single person carry the burden alone. The team would include a priest who would be freed as much as possible from administration so as to dedicate himself as fully as possible to his specific ministry. This is the process we underwent these past few years, which has brought us to the situation we have today. This was our collective choice, and I hasten to congratulate all the priests who have already implemented this process by associating sisters and lay people to their ministry; I also congratulate the entire presbyterium for its solidarity in these changes. I admire you and assure you of my unconditional cooperation. I know that this new process is not easy and that it raises many questions regarding our ministry as a whole: «& doing with » is often far from « having do »; we have been so used, conditioned, and seen as men with near-absolute power, that it is not always easy to share with others tasks which devolve to a team. It is not overnight or suddenly that one learns to consider one's team members as partners in the same mission.

PATIENCE, KINDNESS, WELCOME

Since it is brothers and sisters who because of their baptism want to offer their availability and experience to the Church, I count on you to help them fully and collegially accept those responsibilities I have given to them. I count on your kindness, on your sense of humanity and your experience to help them take up their share of ministry, just as you would have appreciated that someone do the same towards you at the beginning of your

ministry. And if in your community there are people who are adept at material administration, trust them fully. Far from leaving you at loose ends, your surrender of material work will allow you to give yourself more fully to new missionary projects. At all times, be welcoming: like Jesus, continue to open your arms to those who come to you. This will require much from you, but the way you welcome others says more than you think about the Gospel you would like to proclaim. People expect their priest to be a welcoming person. Compete among yourselves as to your respect and love of others. Be careful about the subtle snares of power: always keep before you the example of Jesus who is among us as the Servant who came to serve and not to be served.

PRIESTLY SOLIDARITY

Since one-third of the 50 priests of our presbyterium are now working with parish pastoral teams, does this imply that the other members of our presbyterium are now out of work, with no ministry, no mission?... Of course not! They carry out according to their availability the tasks given to them, and daily and occasional ministry. Hence I hasten to remind you that all the priests of the Edmundston diocesan Church are coresponsible with me for the future of our beloved Church of Edmundston. You, diocesan priests incardinated in the Diocese of Edmundston, you are my first collaborators in the ministry I am called to exercise here, in proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus, the celebration of the sacraments, and service to my brothers and sisters. And you, too, religious priests who minister in the Church, through your ordination you share with me in this apostolic task.

THE SAME VITALITY

I count on all the priests, diocesan and religious, more than ever to daily inject, with God's grace, more energy into our diocesan Church. I count on each one of you more than ever. I trust that you are men of prayer, men of God: nothing can diminish this ministry we accepted at our ordination, not age, nor fatigue, nor illness, nor social or ecclesial change. I trust that you will continue faithful in celebrating in faith the mysteries of Christ, especially the eucharistic mystery and the sacrament of reconciliation according to Church tradition, for the praise of God and the sanctification of His people. I trust that you accomplish with wisdom and dignity the ministry of the Word, proclaiming the Gospel and explaining the Catholic faith. I count on each and everyone of you to steadfastly serve and direct the people of God, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Convinced that it is this same Spirit who animates our Church, it is with constant eagerness that we must place ourselves at His service. He is the one who will make us produce the fruits of peace, unity, joy, and hope.

TOWARDS A CHURCH-AS-COMMUNION

The Holy Spirit was there amidst the many changes we have experienced together, these past few years; He was even leading us on. Is it not this same Spirit who inspired the Fathers of Vatican Council II with a true Church-as-Communion? Our ordination commitments came before any appointment. It is true that most of the diocesan priests lived their commitments within parish ministry, but this form of ministry did not exhaust the duration or condition of our commitments. Beyond parish boundaries, one is called to Church work in communion with one's bishop and the presbyterium, in other areas, whether they be ordinary or original: chaplaincies, occasional ministry, prayer, counseling, diocesan services, resource person, ministry of suffering, presence to groups, associations or organisations.

GOD'S TIME TODAY

Dear friends, the forty years or so we have lived since the announcement of Vatican Council II can look like the People of God's long trek through the desert: there are striking similarities. But what is even greater is the « time of God » given to us, for us to fully and abundantly experience today as Church. Our young Church has picked up many challenges and set out without always knowing where the road would lead... Long before the

creation of our diocese, the same thing was happening... Had it not been for the persistent and humble intervention of Sister Maillet with the Bishop of Montreal, on September 18, 1876, what would have become of the foundation of the Hospitallers of Saint-Basile? What would have happened to health care, in our region? Without the establishment of Saint-Louis College in 1946, where would higher education be, today, in our region? Without the tenacity and constancy of parents and families, what would have happened to Christian faith, in our region? Without the apostolic zeal of our predecessors and the courage of our colleagues today, what would have happened to our Church?

RICHES OF OUR PRESBYTERIUM

I sometimes hear: « We are a presbyterium of only fifty »; but this very fact is our wealth! When I think of my confreres in Northern Canada I can see how Providence graces us in a thousand ways. What a tragedy it was for the bishop of Moosonee who had only four priests for a population of 20,000, to lose his youngest priest, last December... Of the 50 priests comprising the presbyterium, one-third are still working full-time in parishes: this is remarkable wealth! Then there are the splendid occasional and most appreciated collaborations. Imagine all the potential that is there: in the eyes of the Lord and in my eyes, too, you are of extraordinary value. Your witness of life, your prayer life, your pain, your concerns, your friendship have immeasurable value. You are all full members of the Edmundston presbyterium. Priests of the Lord, bless the Lord, bless Him for the whole Church, and especially for the Church of Edmundston.

INDISPENSABLE COMMUNION

I conclude this letter by insisting once again on the indispensable communion which must exist among us: the texts we read in the *Liturgy of the Hours* never cease insisting on this visible and concrete unity between the priests themselves and with their bishop. If in some places the Evil One takes pleasure in sowing discord and even prompts some to gossip maliciously against brother-priests, with God's grace may it never be so among you. Let us flee more than we would a contagious disease, conversations which would lead us to speak negatively of our confreres or the bishop. We know our own limitations: let us be kind and merciful to others, as we would want them to be to us. Rather than speaking ill of another, let us take time to pray for him and love him. And if we reach a deadlock, let us have the courage to speak in charity to the confrere who is not yet sufficiently perfect in our eyes.

In this year 2000 my hope is that the faithful of the diocese find in our presbyterium priests who are happy and smiling, priests who trust in the future because they are certain of Christ « yesterday, today, and forever ».

MEN OF THE DEEP

Shaped by the Word of the Lord,
Tried in the fires of the Passion,
Having now overcome all fear,
Apostles of Jesus, for his Church
You are the building blocks
Which nothing can shake.

He makes you his workers.
He places himself in your hands;
He, the architect, the master builder,
Becomes the cornerstone holding you,
Living stone and daily bread
For whoever announces him, carries him.

What intoxication, pure and sober, surprises you?
What folly of love and of fire?
What wisdom more absurd than the wind?
The Spirit breathes on you, men of the deep,
Cast within us the thirst for God,
And cast off again, with us in tow.

+ François Thibodeau ym

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