
« HUMAN DIGNITY AND THE HOLINESS OF GOD »



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22 May 1994
Pentecost Sunday

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It is my pleasure to be in touch with all of you and to thank God with you for the marvels He never ceases to work in our midst, in the Edmundston Diocese. And I bless the Lord, this Pentecost Sunday, for all we have become through Baptism and Confirmation: the Holy Spirit who sends forth His vivifying breath and renews the face of the earth, was given to us in abundance. The Holy Spirit has poured out into our hearts the love of God. Countless thanks be His forever! It is through Him that you can bring forth the wonderful gifts of goodness, peace, joy, service, trust in others, and charity, to all of which I have been a privileged witness since my arrival among you.

At the heart of this feast of Pentecost, in this first pastoral letter to you I want to stress the priceless value of each person, the importance of our families, the holiness of our God and hence, the Lord's day and the future of our Church.

THE PRICELESS VALUE OF EACH PERSON

On the first day of the Christian Pentecost the marvels of God were proclaimed to one another. One could hear a multitude of people from Jerusalem and elsewhere proclaiming that God had made Lord and Christ the crucified Jesus, but now risen and exalted on high. The promise of a new and everlasting covenant had been accomplished, and the gift of the Holy Spirit was given to all. He who is Love stamped humanity with the capacity for communion: all could identify themselves as members of the same family and work together at building up the unity humankind. The Church was born as a sign of salvation, a sacrament of liberation; the mission was inaugurated for the sake of a universal ingathering. No longer was there any distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free person, man and woman: all were called to form one body in Christ Jesus. The time of the Spirit had arrived.

This same Spirit abides in us today; He is our strength and our life. He it is that Jesus had promised to send us, his Spirit who inhabits our being as His special abode. Thanks to this Spirit, everything is new, everything is renewed. Even our interpersonal relationships are no longer the same: we look upon the world's inhabitants

as our beloved brothers and sisters, as the very members of the body of Jesus. Now that the Holy Spirit has been sent by Jesus, all human beings are intimately united to one another; there is but one Body and one Spirit, just as there is but one hope, ultimately; there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

People of Madawaska, people of Victoria, people of the Restigouche, my brothers and sisters, you are what God the Father considers as the most precious in the entire universe. Each and everyone of you means a lot to Him, and are priceless; He does not cease to consider you His well-beloved children. In time of happiness as well as on difficult days, in sorrow as in joy, the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the sick and the healthy, in His Son Jesus God the Father considers you truly His beloved children.

A marvellous song invites us to sing out what we are, to sing it out in a hymn of gratitude or a prayer of petition: « Oh God, I am your child; I have a thousand signs of your love for me; I want to praise you with my song, the song of joy of my baptism. » After the example of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who is but love and goodness for each one of us, let us look lovingly and kindly on our brothers and sisters. We have unsuspected dignity, in God's eyes. May our gaze be that of God, our heart be that of God, our word and our action be those of God. In this manner, discrimination and injustice will come to an end, wrongs and insults, prejudice and contempt will be banished. Since the Spirit makes us live, let us let ourselves be led by the Spirit. Let us allow the Spirit to continue producing in us love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, faith, humility, and self-control. It is not a spirit of fear that we have received but a Spirit of strength and of love. Let us rival one another in love.

In the name of this same Spirit, we must continue to work for the welfare of our brothers and sisters, for the establishment of a more human milieu, better living conditions, and work that is not demeaning. We must work at eliminating all forms of poverty, injustice, and violence.

IMPORTANCE OF THE FAMILY

In the name of this same Spirit, we must also consider each family as one of the most precious elements of our society and our Church. God the Father, creator of the universe and of all that is in it, made man and woman in His likeness. So that they might become associated with His work of love, He gave them a heart capable of loving. God willed that man and woman created out of goodness, reach such greatness that their mutual affection would be an image of His love. Through communion of their love and destiny, He makes His life in them increase. Thanks to the Spirit who is Gift and Love, man and woman form one heart capable of propagating life.

To the men and women who in this way have contributed to giving new lives to the world, to couples which union has brought together, to couples united in the sacrament of matrimony, to couples suffering separation or divorce... to all of them I wish to express my gratitude for this marvelous gift that life is. To the extent that you can, protect and intensify family life according to the possibilities that you have. There are many challenges, today, as well as many obligations; nonetheless, it is my prayer that bonds of tenderness and affection - oftentimes in different forms than before - continue to develop between you and each one of your children. Families today are experiencing very deep changes, but it is of the greatest importance that they remain havens of peace, goodness, mutual help and growth-producing. May they also be a school of life and holiness, in the midst of our daily joys and sorrows: may we discover, there, God ever at work so that each family member may grow and develop according to all the qualities placed in him or her by the Creator.

Parents united by the sacrament of matrimony, continue to give your life for others, after the example of Jesus who revealed to us that there is no greater love than this. Continue to raise your children, born of your love for one another, in faithfulness to the Gospel. Seek first of all the Kingdom of God and His justice. Give to prayer its rightful place: those moments you will have consecrated to God in thanksgiving and petition will become moments of inestimable peace and unity. Continue to be useful to those around you. Continue to be

warm and welcoming to the poorer in your midst. May you always give thanks for what you became, on your wedding day. May the demands made by the Church at the time you exchanged vows continue to produce in you and your family an abundant harvest of peace and joy. By basing yourself on your mutual love and on the love of Christ, take an active part in the construction of a kinder and more just world. As much as possible, be happy witnesses of true love to young lovers who are looking forth to establishing their own family and who are looking at you with a critical eye. Tell our people that love is possible and that even after ten, twenty, or even fifty years of conjugal and family life, there is much room for joy, freedom, growth, happiness, solidarity, and peace.

THE HOLINESS OF GOD

If human life has so much dignity, and if family life is so important, it is because we have been created in God's image and resemblance. And if God was able to marvel at the work He had accomplished, if He cried out that it was all very beautiful and very good, we can in turn marvel at God Himself. We can praise Him, bless Him, thank Him, congratulate Him for all that He is and all that He does. It is good and fitting to do so every time and every place, to borrow an expression of our liturgical celebrations. « He holds in his hands the depths of the earth and the highest mountains as well. He made the sea; it belongs to him, the dry land, too, for it was formed by his hands. Come, then, let us bow down and worship, bending the knee before the Lord, our maker, for he is our God and we are his people, the flock he shepherds. Come, let us sing to the Lord and shout with joy to the Rock who saves us. Let us approach him with praise and thanksgiving and sing joyful songs to the Lord » (Ps. 95).

We can sometimes ask ourselves whether we are honest with God, whether we truly give Him the attention and thanksgiving that are His due, whether God makes any difference in our lives. True, many things and activities have lost their spiritual centres, but could it be that during the course of days, weeks and years we have become unjust towards God Himself? It is true that He does not need our praise; still, He is the one who inspires us to give Him thanks. Our songs and prayers add nothing to what He is, yet they draw us closer to Him. We need Him and His infinite love. He willed to need us for the purpose of manifesting His own love to our brothers and sisters.

His love of people is so great that He accompanies us night and day, He gives us life, movement, and being. In the daily existence we receive from His graciousness, we acknowledge Him as the Creator of every element and Master of all times and history. Our whole being is a gift of His graciousness: may our existence be consecrated to Him and may our life proclaim His praise! He has given over His creation to our care so that, admiring His work we may ever give Him thanks. He has done even more: He gave us His beloved Son who lived our earthly life, who suffered, died, and rose again. By the blood that was shed by Jesus, by the outpouring of His Spirit, God the Father assembles His children in a vast family, and this people, united by the Holy Trinity, is the Church, Body of Christ and Temple of the Spirit.

And the marvels accomplished by God among His people are numerous. We recognise this fact in the following hymn: « In his Paschal mystery Christ performed a marvelous deed: we were once slaves to death and sin, yet we are invited to share his glory, and we henceforth bear the glorious names: holy nation, redeemed people, chosen race, royal priesthood; we can proclaim to the world your mighty acts, you who called us out of darkness into your marvelous light ». Not only heaven and earth are filled with the glory of the Lord, but we bless him who comes in His name to free and sanctify.

THE DAY OF THE LORD

After having considered the dignity of members of the diocese, after having stressed the importance of the family and the holiness of our God I would like to conclude by looking with you at two extremely important topics: the Day of the Lord, and the future of our Church.

Sunday is the Day of the Lord: the way it is celebrated is an indication of our faith in the Risen Christ, a sign of our hope and an opportunity to grow in love as members of the same Christian community. We must rediscover together the deep meaning of Sunday and celebrate it with the entire community: it is a day of joy and celebration, it is a day like no other day, it is the day that the Lord has made.

I have asked that the Day of the Lord become re-valued for what it is: a period set aside for the family to get together, share together, celebrate together, and pray together.

This could mean the following:

On Sunday, family members meet together, visit one another, phone one another, relax together, share a meal together; fragile bonds are renewed, contact is established with those who are distant, reconciliation is made, and time is made for family prayer.

The Day of the Lord is one of joy for each and everyone, including parish priests and heads of families; it finds once again its importance and meaning; it is a time of celebration and of faith renewal.

The Sunday community gathering is most meaningful, and focus is on this gathering; schedules of our celebrations are revised to maintain only one Mass, generally: in most parishes, this should be enough; exceptionally, there could be two masses, one of them being held Saturday evening, specifically for those who could not conveniently attend on Sunday. All other celebrations could be eliminated: liturgy committees would no longer have to wonder about a multitude of celebrations but would concentrate all its energies and creativity on the Sunday Mass. As for the president, his efforts and those of his partners would be focused on welcoming the members of the community. In some churches it would be fitting to establish a convenient place of welcome and gathering. More time would be left for preparing consistent and lively homilies. In most of our parishes, the multiplicity of week-end celebrations has led to the splintering of our parish communities. It is important that together we rediscover the meaning of gathering together, the significance of the Day of the Lord, and the sense of belonging to a Christian community. The rescheduling of our celebrations would have beneficial consequences: it would allow to bring more care to song and prayer, allowing for the greater active and conscious celebration by all the baptised who come to the gathering. In this way, the priest would have more time to give to the liturgical and catechetical formation of different committees; and no one in the community would be forgotten.

Sunday could be a time for prayer and spiritual renewal. It is not forbidden to have, sometime during the day, morning or evening prayer, or other indications of faith and charity. Looking back at our history, we discover how our predecessors developed a sense of creativity: stress was first and foremost on the parish high mass, but other opportunities were there for gathering and prayer: benediction, vespers, processions, holy hours, novenas, etc..

It would be a good idea that in the same milieu there be some coordination to allow participation by those who, because of work or other occupation, cannot take part in their parish gathering. Moreover,

since the priest will have to be more and more of a missionary and minister to different communities, it is important that zone schedules allow sufficient time for going from place to place, for welcoming and celebration. It would be neither normal nor healthy for a priest to celebrate in three different places within three hours.

In order to avoid a watering-down of the desired Sunday renewal focused on the community assembly, it would be important to reflect together on whether Saturday afternoon eucharistic celebrations are warranted. The Diocesan Synod forcefully insisted on this; the Holy Spirit has spoken to our Church, regarding the Lord's Day: let us not risk opposing Him. If we believe in the importance of gathering as a community on the Day of the Lord, it will not be necessary to impose other legislation on this, whether it be regarding celebrations in special homes or recreation centres, weddings or funerals. The loftiest motives can be invoked to justify such and such a celebration, but following the Synod, I beg you to seriously consider the meaning of the Day of the Lord, the meaning of the Sunday gathering, the importance of the parish community, as well as everything that goes against these values.

I am certain that liturgy committees will find and suggest simple ways to remind us of the Lord's Resurrection: each gesture, including the printing of a parish bulletin, can be an opportunity for faith education. In this way, the rite of sprinkling with water, a reminder of our baptism, can be very significant. Meaningful gestures, respect for the truth and vitality of the liturgy, promoting the personal and community dimensions of prayer, these are the great objectives of liturgy committees that are concerned with the vitality of our gatherings and with making them interesting and meaningful.

If Sunday is truly experienced as a family and as a parish community, it is probably the best pledge for the future of our communities and the promise of priestly vocations. In the midst of these gatherings, the indispensable role of each baptised participant and the wonderful ministry of him who is there as the servant of the people of God, sanctifier and educator, would be easily perceived. Sunday is the memorial of Christ's Resurrection: may it be for the entire community an Easter day and why not a Pentecost day ?

THE FUTURE OF OUR PARISH COMMUNITIES

I am neither pessimist nor fatalistic regarding the future of our parish communities. « Happy the eyes that see what you are seeing! Happy the ears that hear what you are hearing! » These words of Jesus can be applied here, in this diocese of Edmundston, if we collaborate wholeheartedly in the extraordinary work of the Spirit of Pentecost. If each baptised Christian strives with all his might to become what he is as son of God and member of the people of God, if every baptised person strives with all her heart to become what she is as a daughter of God and a member of the people of God, we have nothing to fear, and our vocation and mission will carry us far together. « Who will separate us from the love of God ? »

If each one of us truly lives his or her own baptism, if we fully take on our responsibilities in our parishes, in our milieus, if we welcome the word of God and apply on a daily basis, the Holy Spirit will continue to raise up leaders to guide His people and lead it to its fullest development. The ways of leading and governing may change, but there is still a Gospel to welcome, study, internalise, and transmit. In our communities we must be attentive to the Word of God, to the apostolic teaching transmitted to us by the Church, to the prayer and celebrations of the community, and to the fellowship which daily unites us to one another. If we fully live the great commandment of love, we have nothing to fear: our communities will continue to be brotherly and sisterly, and missionary.

In the heart of our faithfulness to the Gospel, in the midst of the attentive concern we have for our brothers and sisters, the Lord will continue to raise up prophets who will speak and act in his name, missionaries to bring forth the Good News of salvation to various places, servants to respond to human necessities, and priests to proclaim the Gospel, serve the Church, and offer prayer in the midst of God's people. It is to the Church as a whole that the responsibility is given to discern the calls of God today, to challenge the baptised regarding these calls, and to accompany with our support and prayers those whom the Lord has chosen.

As soon as I arrived in your midst I spoke of the urgency of developing a vigorous and bold vocational pastoral ministry. I have blessed the Lord for the remarkable fruitfulness of the Church of Edmundston over the years, in priestly and religious vocations. On this very day, the Lord graces us with a new priest, Father Jeff Doucette: what goodness on the Lord's part, but also what obligations are ours to thank him and ask him to send labourers to his harvest. It is not foolhardy to think that the diocese of Edmundston could eventually have not only a house of formation for its future priests, but also a training programme for those young and not so young men who are called to the priestly life.

The day when the sower stops sowing would mark an end to the harvest, but if the sower sows, there is room for hope, even for « one hundred to one », as Jesus says. With the grace of God, what we will have sowed today in vocational ministry will bear abundant and un hoped-for fruit. « What is needed is to believe in these calls of God, to pray, and to act, » said a seminary director in South America who had just welcomed some one hundred young seminarians.

The diocese of Edmundston has a population of sixty thousand, in thirty-three parishes. Thanks to God, twenty or so priests are engaged in serving the believers; pastoral planning has been undertaken in order to ensure quality service to the entire people of God. But we must be more vigilant and daring to challenge and accompany future shepherds; the Lord has never abandoned his people, he will continue to watch over his Church. He will continue to choose living stones to build his Church. May he bring forth in his Church an abundance of fruits of the Spirit which he gave her on Pentecost Sunday; and may the people that is his never stop progressing in faith, hope, and love.

May these few pages repeat my firm desire to contribute with you to the task of evangelisation and to the building up of this young Church of Edmundston. May we carry on the work already begun, by respecting always more the human dignity of each person and each family, by making our Sundays truly days of the Lord, and by sowing seeds of hope for the future of our Church. May the Virgin Mary, the Immaculate Mother of Jesus, repeat for us and with us that « the Love of God Is from Age to Age ».

Brotherly greetings and abundant blessings.

+ François Thibodeau

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