
**« HOLY SPIRIT,
TEACH US ABOUT JESUS »**



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18 May 1997
Pentecost Sunday

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

For the fourth time in as many years I am sending you a pastoral letter on the occasion of the Feast of Pentecost. This time, in a period when we are preparing to celebrate the Jubilee of the Year 2000 dedicated to Jesus, I want to point out to you, by referring to a few events we have lived together, the ever-marvelous presence of Jesus. This is not a learned theological paper on the identity of Jesus but the presentation of a few points of reference to help us better understand the physical, spiritual, or sacramental presence of Jesus. The Holy Spirit, Memory of Jesus, will bring back to our memories everything he has taught, and he will help us recognise him at the heart of God's Word, through people and communities, through sacraments and events, because the kingdom of Jesus is already among us.

« WHERE IS JESUS ? »

I have often related this story that took place during the summer of 1996, when a child asked me where Jesus is, at which I hastened to answer that he was in his heart. At that, the child quickly came back with the rejoinder, « Could my dentist see him ? And could I see him if I had eyes inside of me ? » Today I would like to develop this rejoinder a bit more. One of the most precious gifts we receive at baptism is that of faith which helps us discern the presence of Jesus in us and in our world. It is these inner eyes that help us take a second look on what we see and what we experience.

PRESENCE OF JESUS AT THE HEART OF THE WORD

Word of God, Word of God made man, Jesus is the Gospel of the Father: Jesus himself is the Good News who came to introduce us to God and to give us his Holy Spirit. The apostle Paul appropriately says, in his letter to his beloved Timothy: « You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus; and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well. Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David... If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. » That is why I encourage you to take time, this year, to read and deepen your understanding of one of the Gospels. In the diocese of Rome, for example, each family has been given a copy of the Gospel of Mark. In the gospels you will be getting more than just biblical data or facts: it is there that you will encounter Jesus Christ himself, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Doesn't the Letter to the Hebrews remind us of this wonderful revelation: « Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by the Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. »

PRESENCE OF JESUS IN OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS

To every baptised person in our midst I would like to repeat the words of songwriter John Littleton: « You are the Body of Christ! You are the Blood of Christ! You are the Love of Christ! So, what have you done with him ? » The apostle Paul said something similar when he tirelessly repeated that we are members of the body of Christ: he had been given this revelation on the road to Damascus; Jesus had identified himself to the disciples that Paul was persecuting. In several of his letters Paul will repeat in different ways that the baptised are the Body of Christ. « Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ ? » If he entreats us to acknowledge the dignity of every person it is because we are all members of the Body of Christ. Baptised sisters and brothers, you are presence of the risen Christ in the midst of the world.

« I WAS HUNGRY »

During this decade consecrated to eliminating poverty the Canadian Bishops published an important message to thank these Christians who come to the aid of the poor and who work at building up a more equitable and fraternal world. It is in remembering the example of Jesus who came to bring good news to the poor and who identified with the most deprived that the bishops wrote that this ministry was a sign of hope for our world. « Just as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me. » Christian communities have been urged to identify with the poor in their milieu and to use the most appropriate measures to come to their help. This is a commitment that is both social and economic, cultural and political: it is a powerful challenge to our Christian faith. Here in this country, over six million of our brothers and sisters live in poverty, and in the Third World, over six billion people live in sub-human conditions: this is an insult to our God and an atrocity against

our brothers and sisters. Brothers and sisters living in distress, you are presence of Jesus the Poor in our midst.

« I WAS SICK »

When I visit homes for the elderly and hospitals I cannot help but be reminded of Jesus telling us, « I was sick and you took care of me. » He identified with the afflicted and gave a new meaning to suffering. He took our pains on himself and made of them a promise of everlasting life. Pain that is our lot in this world cannot compare with the glory promised us in heaven. Our world sighs in the hope that all will become a new heaven and a new earth. In the midst of health and social welfare reforms, new psychological problems compound the already-existing physical ones. Some cuts are immoderately painful. Sick brothers and sisters, you are presence of the suffering Jesus among us.

« I WAS A CHILD »

When we meet future mothers we are generally filled with marvel and hope. In our country where the unborn child has no legal rights, it is deplorable to have such a legislative void. It is to be hoped that courageous politicians will correct this situation so as to ensure greater expansion to the promotion of life. In the past few months the Church as a whole has called for justice for children to be born, and it sees in every new birth the marvelous gift of life and a promise for tomorrow. The Church knows and believes that Jesus, the Word of the Father, took the same route to come to us: « And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. » To be born in these days is a privilege that must be heralded everywhere. Happy the eyes that see what we see. Happy the ears that hear what we hear. Our times are inhabited with the Spirit of Jesus, Jesus lives in the hearts of our young people and shows them his concern that they may never be the victims of violence or abuse of all kinds. Young people, you are presence of Jesus in the midst of the world.

« I WAS A STUDENT »

At the heart of every school or deanery, the presence of our youth must not leave us indifferent. It is often a difficult apprenticeship to life, for them, and they must often learn many demanding things. And our times, even as we recognise their beauty and the fact that they are God's times, still remain difficult ones, times full of new challenges. Our youth must travel new and different roads. The unknown generates fear. In our youth their hearts contain hopes and anxieties, aspirations and suffering. Students can turn into winners, but they can also encounter discouraging failures. But through the major investments made by the youth themselves, by their parents and teachers, by many groups within society, one must remain grounded in hope: a new era has been grafted to yesterday's heritage. Students, your are presence of Jesus who grew in wisdom and grace, in our world.

« I WAS A WORKER, A LABOURER »

In meeting office workers, labourers, and business people I am reminded of Jesus, son of a carpenter, giving to the world the Gospel of Nazareth. Created into the image and likeness of God, thousands of our fellow citizens contribute in building up a better and nicer world, by their daily work; they share in the glorious work of creation, a huge construction site where every human is called on to develop and grow. But sad to say, such is not the lot of thousands of young people who have yet to find a first job, and of other thousands of older people who are now on employment insurance or who must rely on social welfare. Jesus, who came to us so that we might have life in abundance, has reminded us of the greatness of work when he said, « Good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your master. » Working people, you are presence of Jesus working in our midst; unemployed workers, you are presence of Jesus seeking redress in our midst.

« I WAS A LOVER »

How beautiful it is to meet lovers enthralled by one another, who can form a project of love in profound communion with one another! In the 200 or so weddings that we celebrate each year, I believe that these are truly signs of faith, hope, and love. With total trust in one another, they desire to lovingly carry out what they hold most dearly, the mission entrusted to them, to repeat once more to all of us that love is still possible today, and to remind us that the Lord loved us to the very end. They also remind us that neither distress nor anxiety, nor persecution, neither the present nor the future will ever be able to separate us from the love of God. They know that love is patient, love is kind, it rejoices in the truth, it bears all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Discovery of love leads to discovery of God; the discovery of Christian lovers can lead to an encounter with Jesus himself. Lovers, you are in the world presence of Jesus the lover of humankind.

« I WAS A PARENT »

If it is not always easy to be a child, being a parent is no sinecure, either. It is often said that to give birth to a child is to sign a contract of obligations for thirty years. Actually, it is far longer. As a matter of fact, bringing a child into the world is to surrender one's life daily for this child. Giving birth is to welcome life and help it grow, to lead the child to maturity, to educate the child that God has confided to our care. Despite misunderstandings, frustrations, and the difficult task of passing on our values to our offspring, parents can also experience a certain joy, not only the one of knowing that one has accomplished one's duty, but also that of seeing their child develop fully. The difficult sacrifices made, the countless hours spent in service to their children, the financial and personal resources expended for their well-being, all these are testaments to the importance of the task. Parents, you are presence of Jesus the Good Shepherd, in the midst of the world.

« I WAS ELDERLY »

Elderly people among us are getting greater in number. They are justly considered courageous pioneers who helped in the development of our villages and towns, and who passed on to us the precious heritage of a strong faith, boundless courage, an exceptional tradition of mutual help, vigour and resourcefulness worthy of mention. Life did not always favour them, they have had to struggle to live and survive. If several of our elderly can now enjoy more agreeable days than before, such is not the case for those seniors whom age has condemned to poverty and loneliness. The living conditions of these people must constantly be the focus of our concern, because we owe them so much. If the gospels mention a few elderly people like Simeon and Ann who recognised the saviour of humankind in the child being brought to the Temple, we must in turn recognise Jesus who chose to be with the elderly. Older brothers and sisters, you are presence of Jesus passing on the deepest values to the other generations.

« I WAS A MISSIONARY »

The feast of Pentecost - like that of the Epiphany - invites us to turn our gaze towards our brothers and sisters throughout the world, to introduce them to the Gospel of Jesus. There is no other name under heaven that is given us than that of Jesus through whom we must be saved. The mission of the Redeemer Christ is still far from being completed. It is the Spirit who urges us to proclaim God's mighty deeds. The Church has never had more than now the opportunity to spread the Gospel by word and witness, to everyone and all peoples. The dawning of a new missionary age is close at hand, says Pope John Paul II; it will become a bright day, bearing much fruit. Our diocesan Church rejoices in the fact of the presence of men, women, and young people from our midst, in other Churches: their witness stimulates our daily commitment. Missionaries, you are presence of Jesus sent by the Father, in the midst of the world.

« I WAS A RELIGIOUS »

Our diocesan church rejoices in the fact that it has no fewer than 250 religious priests, brothers, and sisters. We owe them an enormous debt of gratitude for all they have done in the fields of pastoral work and education, social and health services, and for all they accomplish today as remarkable partners in the mission of Jesus. I know that the people of our diocese can appreciate the greatness of this amazing contribution to the life of our Church. A few months before being appointed bishop I had joined in the celebration marking the 350 years of the Eudist Congregation, an unforgettable festivity to warn the hearts of those who joined the festivities. This year is the 75th anniversary of the founding of the congregation of the Filles de Marie-de-l'Assomption and the 50th anniversary of the arrival of the Marist Sisters in Canada, at Saint-Léonard. Next year will mark the 125th anniversary of the arrival of the Hôtel-Dieu Sisters in the Madawaska Region. Religious priests, brothers and sisters, through your lives consecrated to the Blessed Trinity, you are a favoured sign of the brotherly and loving presence of Jesus, Religious of the Father, in the midst of the world.

« I AM YOUR BROTHER »

These words from scripture which my predecessor Bishop Gérard Dionne adopted as his episcopal motto remind us of the wonderful reality that we are all brothers and sisters; one fellowship binds us to the men and women of all times and continents, whatever their condition of life and work. On Jesus' lips these words remind us that we are all of the same race because of his taking flesh among us. At the heart of the most painful situations, whether family problems or social and economic ones, it is Jesus who reminds us, « I am your brother. » In the midst of spousal and family violence, in the midst of brutal discrimination, at the very heart of those dramas caused by drugs and other mind-altering substances, can we not hear behind the cries of our brothers and sisters the very voice of Jesus challenging us? Victims of violence in all its forms, you are presence of Jesus, our abused brother, in the midst of the world.

IN THE MIDST OF OUR COMMUNITIES

« Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. » « And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. » Two declarations of Jesus which reveal to us his desire to remain with us, but also a declaration of a deeper mystery: Jesus gave his life so that we could become a nation, one that offers itself to God, one which proclaims and serves God. This was the main topic of my 1996 Pastoral Letter. To discover the presence of Jesus at the heart of our gatherings is to discover also the priceless value of the Sunday gathering, the place of our weekly being-sent-forth to our respective milieus. This is one of the privileged places of the Lord's presence. He stands among his people to share with them the bread of the Word and of the eucharist. The first communities were of one mind and one soul, they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Members of our Christian communities, you are presence of Jesus in the midst of your world, a presence that is full of hope because you proclaim the coming again of Christ in all his glory.

PRESENCE OF JESUS IN THE SACRAMENTS

The liturgy is one of the most important places where the presence of Jesus is active in our world. A liturgy of the Word reminds us over and over how Jesus is the very Word coming to us today. It is a Word of Life that gathers and nourishes. I urge you to have a deep devotion for these celebrations of the Word. Whoever ignores Scripture runs the risk of ignoring Jesus himself. It is the Word that gives meaning to each of the seven sacraments; it is an essential component of every sacramental celebration; it is too bad that too often we only skim over the proclamation of the Word, especially in the celebration of the sacrament of penance

and reconciliation. In what follows I would like to briefly recall this presence of Jesus at the heart of the renewal of each one of the seven sacraments.

« BAPTISED IN JESUS »

It is with gratitude and pride that we acknowledge the renewal already taking place for the adequate preparation and celebration of baptism. Parents, baptism preparation teams, pastors and pastoral agents are taking great care in this preparation. If such a celebration is a special event for the new-born's family, such is not always the case for the parish as a whole. In many places it will be important to place greater value to baptism preparation ministry so as to better indicate that the reception of a new member in the community is a major event. United with Jesus himself, the baptised person becomes sign and presence of Jesus in our world today.

« CONFIRMED IN JESUS »

Jesus not only gives himself, but he also gives us his breath of life, his Holy Spirit. I warmly congratulate all the parents, catechists and pastors for all they are doing for a renewal of this sacrament. The celebration of such a sacrament does not concern only the one to be confirmed, but the community as a whole. It is the community also that is renewed by the Spirit who gives it the power to witness to the presence of Jesus in our world, and renders it more and more responsible for the community's future.

« NOURISHED ON JESUS »

This third sacrament completes the Christian initiation cycle. Nourished by the body and blood of Jesus, Christians not only do eucharist but day by day become eucharist themselves. This deep communion with Jesus and his members inspires one to communion with one's brothers and sisters. This is what we call building up the kingdom of Jesus. This is a movement of renewal since every eucharistic celebration sends forth the Christian on a mission in the midst of the world. The Eucharist becomes the very heart of the mission. Between 1996 and the year 2000 we shall have held five diocesan eucharistic congresses in preparation for the year 2000, to help us keep the memory of Jesus alive.

« CONVERTED AND RECONCILED »

It is not always easy to perceive the renewal behind this sacrament which for centuries focused on obtaining forgiveness. The renewal will require much more effort if we want to promote this sacrament as a sign of forgiveness and of reconciliation enlightened by the Word of God. « Repent, and believe the Good News. » This invitation of Jesus is still being made today. It is the basis of the Gospel of Jesus: with a new heart and a new mind it is possible for us to have the love, kindness, mercy and faithfulness of God and to believe in the confidence he has in us, which allows us to keep on being associated with his mission despite our sinful state.

« WITNESSES OF GOD'S LOVE »

There seems to be an ever-growing and marvelous deepening of the sense of Christian marriage. Thanks to adult religious education, to marriage preparation sessions, to homilies on the topic, and to family counseling services, we are getting a better grasp of the mission associated with this great sacrament. Jesus acknowledges the love of man and woman and makes it a sign of the love that he has for humankind. Givers

of life, the Christian couples are bid to grow in love by witnessing daily to the love of Jesus. Through the grace of this sacrament ever-renewed in prayer, dialogue and celebration of the other sacraments, spouses can not only persevere in this mission but also develop fully.

« UNITED WITH THE SUFFERINGS OF JESUS »

The sacrament of the anointing of the sick is a gift from Jesus. In it he brings comfort to a sick brother or sister. « Do not be afraid: I am with you. » If Extreme Unction, because it referred to extreme of final moments was viewed for what it actually was - of death at one's door - the renewal of this sacrament of the living which is the anointing of the sick is better accepted and celebrated. Through this sacrament, Jesus joins his own sufferings to those of his suffering brothers and sisters. Jesus took all suffering upon himself, and this should be enough for us to take up our daily cross and that we bear it together, he with us, and we with him.

« DEACONS, PRIESTS, AND BISHOPS OF JESUS »

Jesus was established priest of the new and everlasting covenant through the anointing of the Holy Spirit, and it was Jesus' will that there be a diversity of services in the Church. It is Christ himself who gives to all the redeemed the dignity of the royal priesthood. Out of love for his own, he chooses those who will share in his ministry, through the imposition of hands. They shall have to devote themselves to serving his people, to nourish it with his word and give it life through his sacraments. They are to be authentic witnesses to faith and love, ready to give up their lives like the Christ, for their brothers and sisters. These words from the preface of the chrism mass proclaim what deacons, priests, and bishops become, through ordination: distinctive witnesses to Jesus' love, messengers of Jesus' joy, ministers of his Word and sacraments, and servants of the people of God.

PRESENCE OF JESUS AT THE HEART OF DAILY EVENTS

One of today's most committed women, Madeleine Delbrel, states that the Lord Jesus makes himself known as well along our streets as in our daily problems; that he speaks as well in the midst of his brothers and sisters traveling along as in the terrible agitation of the assembly line. A diligent reading of the gospels bring out the fact of the Risen Jesus continually present to the life of his disciples: presence to Mary Magdalene and the other women who came to the tomb, present to the disciples at Emmaus, presence to the apostles, presence to hundreds of disciples. It is therefore not surprising that it be the same today. He himself had promised it: « Remember that I am with you always, even to the end of time. » All through time this presence of Jesus has been emphasised. Closer to us, the fathers of the Second Vatican Council, following Pope John XXIII, acquainted us with the method of the signs of the times. Members of the Catholic Action movements know about this method, through the review of life exercise. « You are there in the midst of our lives, and you it is who gives us life; you are there in the midst of our lives, filled with life yourself, O Jesus Christ. » These words from a popular French hymn are a profession of faith that we can repeat, in the personal and community events we are part of, such as being involved in Sunday School programmes and the Sunday gathering, in the diversity of services to be rendered, in the future of our parishes, and in socio-political commitment.

PARISH-BASED RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The gradual disappearance of religious education in the [French] schools raises a question: « What must we do today to ensure that the Gospel will be proclaimed tomorrow to young and elderly alike ? » The example which the anglophone parishes of the diocese can pass on to us is an invitation to do as they do and adapt this religious education to our own milieu. During my pastoral visits to the Southern Victoria Deanery I was

able to witness the remarkable devotion of parents-become-catechists to the children of their own milieu. What imagination! What regularity! Churches and rectories resembled beehives of activity as 50, 60, 70 youths spent Sunday morning involved in religious education. Through commitments such as these the Good News of Jesus reaches the children. In the French sector, one of the priorities is to prepare to take on religious education at the parish level. « And you, what do you say about Jesus, in your milieu? »

SUNDAY GATHERING

It came as a brutal shock to discover or acknowledge the fact that Sunday Mass attendance was only between 15% and 20%, in our parishes. Following the example of my predecessors, and in the wake of the Diocesan Synod, I reminded the people on several occasions of the importance and meaning of the Sunday Mass attendance. I am heartened by the fact that in a few parishes there seems to be a tangible increase in the those attending. The absence of 80% to 85% of a community raises questions, here as in other dioceses, regarding the maintenance of several services we are striving to maintain; this decrease can also call to question the very existence of one parish or another. It would be terrible if our beautiful churches were to become empty buildings, repositories of things past, while they are called to be, according to the prayer for the dedication of a church, « images of Christ. » If the Sunday gathering does not constitute a unique expression of the faith of Christians, it nonetheless remains one of its most concrete indispensable signs. « And you, how do you celebrate your faith in Jesus with your brothers and sisters? »

VARIETIES OF SERVICES

I am pleased that in several communities there are more and more lay people, through the beneficial presence of pastoral agents, parish pastoral councils and different parish committees and organisations, taking an active part in the life of the parish. There are thousands of volunteers who devote themselves generously for the betterment of their community. We must truly rejoice that in each parish there is a pastoral council; along with the pastor, the PPC is the main agency for coordinating all pastoral activities. The PPC must be « the eyes, ears, mouth, hands and heart of Jesus the Good Shepherd. » This organism is the one that ensures that the spiritual and pastoral needs of the community are truly met. It also has as its primary goal ensuring that the members of the community's needs be genuinely fulfilled. It also sees to it that all the parishioners live together in harmony, that religious education is dispensed correctly, and that the liturgy be well prepared and celebrated. It ensures that its members be more and more responsive to transforming their milieu along Gospel lines, especially by showing concern and care for the most deprived and the suffering. « And you, how are you the image of Jesus the Good Shepherd, for your brothers and sisters? »

THE FUTURE OF PARISHES

We have good reason to give thanks to the Lord for the four new priests he has given our diocesan Church, in recent years. However, to human eyes these four cannot compensate for the number of priests who have died or who are retired. If until quite recently parish direction and administration rested for the most part in the hands of the parish priest, today we must accept the challenge of the new situations that we know. We shall need the courage of new beginnings and an optimistic view of the future of our Church. I mentioned in one of my recent « Journal » messages regarding the founding of St. Patrick Parish that at the time of foundation of Assumption Parish in Grand Falls (1860), there were only seven diocesan priests for the entire northern part of New Brunswick, for the whole of the new diocese of Chatham. In the weeks and years to come we shall have to decide on the pastoral restructuring necessary, considering the number of priests and pastoral agents available; this will require us to make difficult decisions so that through the setting up of new structures and services we be able to continue to be signs of the presence of Jesus in the midst of our world. « And you, how do you consider the present and future of our Church so that it become, for coming generations, a sign of the presence of Jesus at the threshold of the new millennium? »

SOCIO-POLITICAL COMMITMENT

At the onset on his papal ministry, Pope John Paul II urged us not to be afraid and to open our doors to Jesus: « Open! Open the doors wide to Christ! » « Open up the borders of countries, the economic and political systems, the enormous sectors of culture, civilisation, and development to his power of salvation. » Are we sufficiently aware that our social, cultural, and economic commitments are extraordinary places where the presence of God is at work? That in electoral campaigns, whether they be municipal, provincial or federal, it is possible for us to pave the way to Jesus. « And you, what door are you opening to Jesus, at the heart of the events lived by our society? »

CONCLUSION: AT THE HEART OF OUR DECISIONS

It was in a spirit of fellowship that I wanted to share these convictions and questions with you: the conviction that the Risen Jesus is truly the Word of God, Good News of the Father; the conviction that the Risen Jesus is really at the midst of people and communities, at the heart of sacraments and events. Thanks to the Holy Spirit, it is in faith that we can discover this presence and recognise The Living One. I have also share with you some of my questions: in small groups, in parish communities, it will be important to find answers to them. Fidelity to Jesus induces us to carry out today what he himself would do: here again it is with faith in the Risen Jesus that we walk towards the future. Just as there are many rooms in the Father's house, I believe that there are many avenues leading to Jesus who called himself the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

At the end of this pastoral letter I share with you a hymn I composed in the context of vocation ministry activities. By choosing one or another of these paths may we, through the Holy Spirit, encounter The Living One in the midst of our world!

*We want to free humankind
And lead it to the Father.
We want to travel with Jesus.*

*Perhaps the road to Bethlehem, the glory of God, and promised peace,
Perhaps the road to Nazareth, manual labour and the happiness of the poor;
This road is the call of Jesus.*

*Perhaps the road to Jacob's Well, Messiah and people, and living water.
Perhaps the Mount of Transfiguration, the dazzling Son, the pitched tent;
This road is the call of Jesus.*

*Perhaps the road to the Upper Room, washing of the feet and love sought,
Perhaps the road to Golgotha, the raised cross and the blood shed;
This road is the call of Jesus.*

*Perhaps the road to Emmaus, hope regained and the Friend recognised,
Perhaps the road to Galilee, death overturned, Christ raised up;
This road is the call of Jesus.*

Through these recollections may we, thanks to the Spirit of Pentecost, recognise the Risen Jesus Christ and follow him. May this year dedicated to him be truly an encounter with him. May the Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus, help us discover that the Love of God Is from Age to Age.

Solidarity and blessings in the Lord.

+ François Thibodeau

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