
INCREDIBLE HOMECOMING



When people talk about the 1994 World Acadian Congress happening that took place in southeast New Brunswick, they are unanimous in saying that it was an incredible homecoming that they experienced. With so few committees and temporary structures, no one would have thought that the event could have had such success. There were outstanding events, like the Congress opening at Cap Pelé, the Mass for the feast of the Assumption, at Rogersville, the conferences at the Université de Moncton, the world-wide telecast of the Grand Gala, the visit of the United Nations Secretary General, etc.

LOOKING FORWARD TO THE NEXT ONE!

In my last "Journal" article I mentioned the extraordinary event experienced by the first Christians on that first Sunday, the first day of the week when Jesus rose again. It was so extraordinary, so unprecedented, that the group began meeting week after week. It is true that at the *Retrouvailles Acadiennes* [Acadian Homecoming or World Acadian Congress] the fact that the event is not a weekly happening enhances the specialness of the festivities. Nevertheless, in reading the records of the first Christians, we see that the weekly gathering always retained its freshness and uniqueness; and these gatherings often lasted long - even hours!

DON'T SLEEP IN THE WINDOW!

In the Acts of the Apostles (20:7-13), Saint Luke writes the following: *On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight. There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting. A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to slip off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead. But Paul went down, and bending over him took him in his arms and said, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him." Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them until dawn; then he left. Meanwhile they had taken the boy away alive and were not a little comforted.*

GET-TOGETHERS

Down the centuries, Christian gatherings on the first day of the week took on the most varied forms, but the essential element always remained unchanged: to celebrate the Lord's resurrection and proclaim ours. Our meeting places may differ from one period to another: from an underground cave to a humble country chapel to a majestic cathedral, from St. Peter's Square to our more humble parish churches. The important thing is the sense of homecoming that we have, and the fundamental element is the community gathering. People first gathered around one of the apostles or their successors, the bishops. Much stress was laid on the Christian assembly which gathered the people around the bishop and his clergy, and the oneness of the weekly gathering was also emphasised. In the very beginning, people met together in private homes, but as the number of believers grew, they started meeting in bigger buildings called "basilicas."

WHERE DO WE MEET?

More and more parishes had to be established, especially in the countryside, and these were usually handed over to the care of deacons who could not celebrate the Eucharist. When the bishops gradually appointed priests to these parishes, these became the heart of Sunday worship. The proliferation of rural parishes during the fifth and sixth centuries caused a problem regarding where the faithful were supposed to take part in the Sunday mass. For a long time the rule stood that on holy days, and especially on Easter Sunday the people had to worship at the episcopal church, mother church of the diocese. Apart from this, the parish church was the place where the faithful were obliged to worship in.

WITH OR WITHOUT THE EUCHARIST?

Down the centuries, many groups of Christians did not always have the possibility to celebrate the Eucharist. Even today, some groups and even whole parishes cannot have a weekly Mass, due especially to the fact that there are not enough priests or that distances to go are too great. Still, people still want to gather together, and these gatherings are sure signs of the People of God awaiting the glorious return of the Lord. By the very fact of meeting together, the group expresses its faith in the Risen Christ. A multitude of our ancestors never had the opportunity of attending the weekly Mass. Still, the Lord's Day was kept at home as a day of hope, of prayer, and of rest. There were also inter-family initiatives: their getting together was a sign of their faith and hope. Just think back to the days when lumber camps were so far in the woods and the woodsmen couldn't leave: when priests were not available it was one of the supervisors or an employee who would call the men to prayer. In our country today there are parishes where weekly mass is not available, and it would be deplorable if people failed to gather together for prayer and communion because of that. On June 2, 1988, the Congregation for Divine Worship published a directory for Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest; the document stresses the importance for Christians to gather together to share the Word of God, to join in fellowship, and to receive holy Communion.

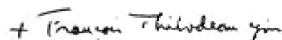
THANKING GOD FOR OUR GATHERINGS

We are very lucky, in our diocese - and this we don't repeat often enough - to be able to meet together every Sunday to share in the Holy Eucharist. This is a real grace for us, an initiative of the Lord's to enable us to join together in fellowship to share in the Word of God and receive the body and blood of Christ. It would take us an eternity to thank God adequately for such an act of goodness on His part. Why don't we take advantage of the 1997 Lenten season which is just a few days away, to join as a community in thanksgiving to God for this gift?

WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY

On the occasion of the World Day of Communications, I want to thank all those involved in the communications media (radio, press, television, Internet, telephone): it is thanks to you that we are more and more in communion with one another.

Have a good week!



+ François Thibodeau
Bishop of Edmundston