
A TRIBUTE TO FATHER FELIX POITRAS



It is already over two months since the death of Father Felix Poitras. Because of the exceptional quality of his ministry of suffering I want to offer you, here, extracts from the funeral homily I gave, June 3, at the Ste-Anne-de-Madawaska church, following the Gospel of the Beatitudes.

FORWARD!

In a recent [French] translation of the Beatitudes, Jewish translator André Chouraki gave a somewhat new meaning to Matthew's text of the Sermon on the Mount. He translates the word 'happy' by words and phrases like 'forward,' 'march.' 'Forward, you poor,' 'forward, you humble,' 'march, you who mourn,' 'march, you who crave justice.' The translator was attempting to show, in this way, that Jesus did not only have pity on those in need but that he motivated them to journey with him. Father Felix Poitras, whose first name was quite prophetic, ["Felix" is the Latin word for "happy."] really lived these beatitudes. He lived them with courage and hope, he did not feel sorry for his poor health, but he generously kept plodding away day by day, not only through cold determination but also as a pilgrim on the way to his God and Father. Since the last three years that I have known him, I have never heard him complain once despite the pain that was his constant companion. Happy are you, Father Felix, for having walked in the footsteps of the suffering Jesus, of Jesus crucified. You believed in his words: « *Come to me, you that are weary and heavy-burdened, and I will give you rest.* » [Matthew 11:28] Father Felix had made himself a disciple of Jesus in order to learn from him who is meek and humble in heart. Nothing, therefore, could separate him from love, not pain nor suffering, nor tears, nor the days and weeks of illness, nothing could keep him from living his priestly ministry to the fullest.

WITNESS OF JESUS

And who could say whether he better witnessed to Jesus through this ministry of suffering than through all his other pastoral activities? A suffering servant, a priest and living oblation are what he gradually became, like Jesus himself who made himself humble, and humble unto death on the cross, like Jesus himself who suffered for the redemption of humankind. Happy are you, Father Felix, for having believed that your sufferings were closely joined to those of Jesus. What I wrote in my last pastoral letter, in May, I want to apply to Father Felix. Jesus identified with those who suffered and he brought a new meaning to suffering. Jesus took all suffering upon himself and made of it a stepping-stone to everlasting life. Our world groans in the hope of a new earth and new heavens. Sick brothers and sisters, you are presence of the suffering Jesus in our midst.

THE CHOICE OF JESUS

I recall and ponder in my heart the words of Pope John Paul II to the priests when he visited Canada in 1984, when he met with the clergy at Toronto, on the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross: « *The cross is the ultimate expression of Jesus' priestly service. The Son of Man being raised on the cross is a sign of the Father's love. God so loved the world that He gave His only Son so that whoever believes in him may not be lost but have eternal life. The cross is truly a symbol of divine love which the Son shares with humankind. The sacrifice of Jesus expresses more eloquently than any human voice the pastoral nature of Christ's love for his people. The cross is not raised only over the church community gathered together in faith; its sphere of influence extends over all that is on earth*

and in heaven. The power of the cross is a force of reconciliation which directs the destiny of all of creation. Just as the meaning of Christ's priesthood resides in the mystery of the Cross, the priest's life has its full meaning and its aim in that same mystery. Since we share in the priesthood of Jesus crucified, we must become more and more aware that our service is sealed by the cross. The shadow of the cross covers our entire existence as priests, calling on us to imitate Christ himself, doing so with greater and greater generosity. In this entire struggle the words of Saint Paul ceaseless echo in our hearts, "For me, to live is Christ." » [Philippians 1:21]

MORE THAN PHYSICAL SUFFERING

If Father Felix suffered in his whole body, some of these sufferings were more difficult to bear than the purely physical ones. How he must have suffered to see the indifference of some and the distancing of others from the Catholic faith. It is hard for a priest to realise that over 80% of one's parish population no longer share in Sunday worship. A pastor may even feel that he is wasting his time and even his life as a priest, and he may even come to the conclusion that his apostolate is utter failure. Father Felix was not defeatist, he knew that new shoots are springing forth in our Church. He knew how to remain hopeful and trustful, just as parents are towards children who question all the old values and no longer share in these value systems that nourished their young lives. Through St. Paul, [Philippians 2:1-5] listen to the voice of Father Felix entreating you to renew your passion for the cause of Jesus Christ: *« If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. »*

SPIRITUAL TESTAMENT

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." I believe that these words would be the best spiritual testament that any pastor could leave to his brothers and sisters entrusted to his care. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." May this eucharist we are celebrating together help us further discover the mind that was in Christ Jesus who was meek and humble in heart, whose only desire was to serve the Father with his whole life and being, being obedient unto death, suffering for the salvation of humankind. May this eucharist also motivate us to pray without cease that the Lord continue to send us good and holy pastors, like Father Felix himself. May Father Felix, from his place in heaven, continue to watch over each and everyone of us, over the parish of Saint Anne which he loved so much, over all the parishes he served, as well as over our Church as a whole. May he forever contemplate Jesus crucified but raised up forever, by the Father. May one day we too contemplate together the glorious face of Jesus.

+ François Thibodeau

+ François Thibodeau
Bishop of Edmundston

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