
LEARNING TO BE CHURCH



On May 23 I published a pastoral letter titled *Eyes Fixed on Jesus*, which dealt with paths to the future for our Christian communities. It is good to recall this living mystery that is the Church.

ASSEMBLY

It was the Lord who first gathered his people together, who gathered all his dispersed children. The communal and community response to this initiative is called *Church*. "*Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them*" (Mt. 18:20). It is the beginning of a Church. The Church is the assembly of Christ's faithful. It is an important and life-giving gathering. To abandon the assembly, to leave the Church, to cut oneself off from one's believing brothers and sisters is a serious step whose consequences we have not fully measured. No longer voluntarily joining one's brothers and sisters for the gathering and for committing oneself to the community brings about emptiness in one's life. If there are no longer any real and regular contacts with one's brothers and sisters in the faith, what kind of Church life is there? In a family, it would be impossible to talk of quality of family life if there were no vital bonds between the members of that family. It is the same thing with the Church. The Sunday gathering is as vital to the Church as it is to each and every Christian. We could even say that without the Sunday gathering there is no Church.

CHURCH AS SACRAMENT

"God has gathered all those who in faith look towards Jesus the author of salvation and the source of unity and peace. God has gathered them together and established them as church, that it may be for each and everyone the visible sacrament of this saving unity." ["Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, N^o 12, in Austin Flannery, Gen. Ed., op. cit., p. 13-14] This is the teaching of Vatican Council II. The simple fact of gathering together is a sign to the world of God's love. The church building is a sign of our gathering as Church; it is a reminder that we need to gather together. In His love for His people, God has chosen to make His dwelling place in our places of worship. He desires that we ourselves become temples of the Spirit, radiant in holiness. But if the church building is no longer a gathering place, what significance can it have, today? It is not nostalgia but a deep conviction that makes me often bring up this topic of the Sunday gathering: it can still form our Christian communities just as it did when the Church was first established in our milieus.

GATHERING-COMMITMENT

Gathering together will lead us to a greater commitment in the name of our faith. More than ever, and especially at the dawn of the new millennium, we must be to our brothers and sisters living signs of the divine love in the different areas of human endeavour: family life, economy, politics, culture, development, education. "Open wide the doors to Christ Jesus!" To be bearers of hope in our respective milieus, it is absolutely necessary to be 'plugged in' to both Christ and our brothers and sisters. We must live as a Church, pray and act as a Church. It seems to me that in order to sustain this hope of new life in the Risen Jesus, we must develop it in prayer and contemplation, as well as in our knowledge of the faith and in commitment to the Church.

LET US TAKE ASSURED PATHS

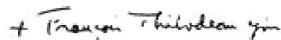
As we come to the end of a long process of consultation and reflection on the future of our Church, I want to once again express my deepest gratitude to all those who searched for the most appropriate ways to carry on among us the mission of Jesus in the midst of the world. I therefore want to publish here a number of decisions which seem to be most important for our diocesan Church. After having reviewed the recommendations made to the Edmundston Diocesan Synod, in 1995 I made public three main paths to ensure Church growth. The first dealt with the Sunday gathering, the second, with the setting up of parish pastoral councils, and the third, with the formation of parish economic affairs committees. These three paths are closely intertwined. They are necessary to our life as community. I am pleased at the reception given to these directions throughout the diocese, and am happy to note the good results which have already been achieved. We must remain ever vigilant in ensuring that these directions continue to produce the results anticipated.

THE SUNDAY GATHERING

Sunday must not be like any other day, it should be a holiday and a day of renewal, of gathering together, and of sharing, a day of growth in faith and hope. Let us not splinter our communities by multiplying the number of celebrations. Let us not abandon the Sunday gathering: it is the weekly get-together of the brothers and sisters of Jesus. There are some baptised people who have abandoned the Sunday practice for any number of reasons. I invite them to honestly reconsider their decision for doing so. Perhaps the best gift for the year 2000 could be a return to those enduring values which have left their mark in the world. Our forefathers and foremothers were believers who took time to gather together for prayer, despite the difficult situations of their time.

PARISH PASTORAL COUNCILS

I insist that parish pastoral councils continue the work they have so well begun. The PPC is a listening post and a means of coordination, one of the most important service components of the community. It is a vital organ to watch over the four great dimensions of the Christian life: it ensures that religious education is dispensed to children, youth, and adults; that the community lives in an atmosphere of fellowship and communion; that celebrations and prayers are given all the importance they deserve; and that no one in the community is left aside or forgotten. Parish pastoral councils are like the ears and mouth of the community: they listen to the needs of their brothers and sisters and point them in the right direction.



+ François Thibodeau

Bishop of Edmundston

« From A Bishop's Journal » (286) (14 July 1999)