
2001: INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF VOLUNTEERS



The United Nations Organisation has decreed the year 2001 as International Year of Volunteers. It is a special opportunity to raise awareness of the number of volunteers among us, and of their irreplaceable mission. Without depreciating the work of salaried employees, we can state that through their work volunteers bring to our world more than a measure of kindness and solidarity: it would be difficult to plan and organize things without them. The same can be said concerning the Church down the centuries.

AT THE CORE OF THE GOSPEL

A cursory reading of the Gospels is sufficient to discover the number of people who must have been around Jesus to help him carry out his mission. Saint Matthew's Gospel is an example: Jesus is constantly among people. Without being logistics or management specialists, it is easy to see that it would not have been possible for Jesus to teach, multiply the bread, cure the sick and the lepers, even enter a village without a minimum of people to look after his needs. Besides, the evangelists inform us that Jesus was accompanied by many disciples, several of whom were women who remained faithful to him to his very death on the cross. They were surely among the first to hear the words: *"Whoever gives a cup of cold water to one of these lowly ones because he is a disciple will not want for his reward."* And again, *"He who welcomes a prophet because he bears the name of prophet receives a prophet's reward; he who welcomes a holy man because he is known to be holy receives a holy man's reward."* [Matthew 10:42, 41]

THE MULTI-FACETED CHRIST

Discovering volunteers in a Christian community is a wonderful adventure: we would never have believed that there were so many of them! We would never have believed that they represent so many facets of Jesus himself: Jesus praying, Jesus helping, Jesus teaching, Jesus comforting... Look around and see for yourself. See those volunteers who form the choir on both weekday and Sunday; so many artists and believers in the liturgy: through its liturgy committee, its lectors, its greeters, its liturgical expression, its decorations, its collectors, its cantors and servers, through its ministers of communion to the assembled community and to the sick and shut-in, each Christian community actualizes Jesus offering to the Father the sacrifice of his whole life. Look at all these volunteers who tirelessly devote themselves in religious education and sacramental preparation: and those parents who are teachers of religion to their own children. So many people implicated in such an endeavour! And all these people who spare no effort in baptism and confirmation preparation, as well as in preparation for the reception of first reconciliation and first communion. And what of those who minister to the sick and who are there for grieving families and individuals, and those involved in marriage preparation and in vocation ministry, who counsel possible candidates to the religious or missionary life, and future candidates to the priesthood

IN THE MIDST OF DAILY ACTIVITY

A picture of Church volunteers is getting into clearer focus, but we have not explored all of it. I would need to take the five categories of candidates nominated in the last years for the Bishop Marie-Antoine Roy Award: it would be an amazing cross-section of our community. I gladly refer you to this list. See all those who devote

themselves to organisations and associations of all kinds: Knights of Columbus, Daughters of Isabella, Scouts and Guide, Catholic Women's League, Brebis de Jésus Children's Group, Faith and Light, Femmes chrétiennes Movement, Charismatic Renewal, etc. Then there are those involved in preparing post-funeral meals and Christmas baskets, and food bank volunteers whose concern for the needy extends throughout the year. We also have those who welcome newcomers, strangers, migrants, and visitors to the community; and all those people who administer the community property and real estate: several among them do this on a voluntary basis. We also have those who are concerned with family and youth ministry: youth groups and help for future mothers, Birthright, Pregnancy hotline, suicide hotline, help to single parents, to separated and divorced persons, etc.: a world in itself whose main objective is to help their brothers and sisters be happier.

IN THE MIDST OF THE DIOCESAN CHURCH

I could go on for hours enumerating the parish volunteers, there being so many for so many different services, according to the talents of the local community and its members. And the same applies to our diocesan Church: I never cease thanking God for these thousands of volunteers who build up our diocesan Church according to the gifts they have received. How to express my personal gratitude and that of the entire Church for all those who are members of diocesan councils, commissions, and committees: Bishop's council, Priests' Senate, Diocesan Pastoral Council, Diocesan Council for Economic Affairs, Diocesan Liturgy Commission, Diocesan Catechetical Committee, Mission Committee, Vocations Committee, Diocesan Seminary, Diocesan Council for Development and Peace, Diocesan Marriage Preparation Services, School of Faith, Pastoral Formation sessions, diocesan radio and television ministry, diocesan library services, etc. We should not forget the Diocesan Centre director and the diocesan Internet webmistress, a new service to spread news from our diocese throughout the world. Simply type diocese-edmundston@nbnet.nb.ca to get online with us: here you will find the history of each parish and organisation, and you are kept abreast of what is happening in our local Church.

YEAR OF GRATITUDE

What with everything our volunteers are and all that they accomplish, I have but one wish: That throughout the year 2001 we be grateful for the services they perform, and that the entire year be one great thanksgiving for all our volunteers. With all my gratitude, friendship, and prayer.

+ François Thibodeau

+ François Thibodeau
Bishop of Edmundston

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