
ELEVEN YEARS AFTER THE DIOCESAN SYNOD (1987-1990)



At three consecutive meetings the Diocesan Pastoral Council – with Father Roger Dionne, coordinator of the momentous activity that was the Synod, and the twelve synod committee chairpersons – made an evaluation of the Edmundston Diocesan Synod (1987-1990). A round table discussion recalled the recommendations bearing on the diocesan structures as a whole, the ordained and baptismal ministries, religious life, the family, family and social problems, pastoral ministry to different groups, sacramental and liturgical pastoral practice, parish structures and services, adult faith education, youth, and social communications. What brought about this evaluation? The answer lies in the fact that for three years, twenty-five years after the unforgettable Second Vatican Council, the Holy Spirit spoke to our Church in a very special way. It is in deep union with the members of the Diocesan Pastoral Council that I give you a report of these three meetings.

MUCH PROGRESS

Looking back at our diocesan Church following Vatican Council II and looking at our situation today, we realise how unforeseen the journey was that we made together! The word “synod” – *sun-odos*, in Greek – reminded us that we were on the same journey together, like Jesus’ disciples returning from their first mission, the pilgrims at Emmaus who, after difficult moments were warmed by the presence of the Risen Christ, and the apostles carrying the Good News of the return to life of Christ Jesus. Before the publication of the Synod recommendations, it was evident that the process itself of the Synod shaped our Church’s pastoral thrust, modified the priest-religious-laity collaboration, and raised questions regarding the type of Church we were raising up. Besides, the social and religious situations have been largely modified. The overall Sunday practice plunged dramatically in several places. On the other hand, the establishment of family- and parish-based religious education seems very promising both for parents and children; parents’ involvement in their children’s sacraments of Christian initiation, and penance and marriage preparation by the parish are all new elements in [the Francophone sector of] our diocesan Church. Back in 1990 we could predict a smaller number of priests, but we could not say that the number of retired or ailing clergy would outnumber those in active ministry. While we had recommendations regarding the twinning of parishes and the need of discharging priests from all administrative tasks, no one could foresee that pastoral restructuring would be needed so quickly, nor that parish economic affairs committees would be indispensable to every Christian community. While we had considered the creation of parish pastoral councils, we could not imagine that the creation of parish pastoral teams propounded by recent Church legislation would be a basic pastoral tool in our milieu. Back in 1990 we had acknowledged the absence of youth in our Sunday gatherings, but we could not foresee that the Diocesan Youth Council, and [Francophone] youth movements such as Weekend Jeunesse, ACLÉ, and ALPEC would disappear altogether.

MISSION AND EVANGELISATION

The reflection of the Diocesan Pastoral Council then focussed on the mission of the Church and on evangelisation, both of which are indispensable and urgent. Pastoral restructuring was a wonderful opportunity to replace the Church’s mission in the midst of the world, to tell our brothers and sisters of the Father’s great love which still reaches us today, to proclaim the great paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus, Christ and Lord, to emphasize the extraordinary and always present work of the Holy Spirit in the heart

of every baptized and confirmed Christian, to remind us that we are, through baptism, members of Jesus Christ, and that together we make up his Church. In order to work at such a mission task we have had to train good Gospel workers: this was the reason for the creation of the School of Faith and the Pastoral Formation Programme in both French and English sectors. To these invaluable tools of formation were added the Charismatic Renewal and the Mess'AJE Scripture Renewal [in the French sector].

A NEW SPRINGTIME

Pope John Paul II reminds us that we are at the dawn of a new springtime, a new millennium, and that this missionary millennium is full of promise: that we are called to live holy lives, to pray alone and as a community so that our homes become "schools of prayer", that we must renew ourselves in the Word of God if we are to proclaim it to others, and that it is important for us to live daily the mystery of charity and of communion. Religious education and training sessions must continue. We must be innovative, creative, and daring, to announce in our milieus the Good News of Jesus. If parish missions stimulated reflection on the wonders of baptism and brought into being gospel sharing groups, they did not always reach those who have stopped attending the Sunday gathering; new ways will have to be found to reach them, ways as simple as having an interesting neighbourly conversation, holding homecomings, and making phone calls, without forgetting modern means of communicating. The Bishop's pastoral visitations in each of the 32 parishes, and the five diocesan eucharistic congresses have helped open up parishes to outsiders, and make us become more aware of the diocesan Church and of our Church's sacramental riches.

FAMILIES, YOUTH, AND THE POOR

Three target groups were always at the forefront of discussions, just as they were at the Synod: the fragility of the family: it is an anchor of life in the community and in society, and is therefore important that there be adequate preparation for taking up marriage and family commitments. Youth, confronted with difficult choices, are often left to fend for themselves in the face of undue social pressures, they experience a tragic void in traditional values, and in the lack of adequate role models. The World Youth Days is a stepping stone for reviving the diocesan youth ministry. The ever deepening chasm between rich and poor is also felt in our midst; a reflection on "the excluded" among us reveals the drama of the marginalised among us.

VOCATIONS

If there is one area which is most urgent, it is raising awareness of the mission of every baptised person in a more and more secularised society: the witness of our immediate ancestors can help us recover courage and boldness to proclaim our faith. The shortage of priestly, religious, and missionary vocations must seriously challenge every community: in the short term, the very future of our Church is at stake. The support of our priests now, of possible candidates, of the Diocesan Seminary, of parish pastoral teams and of family- and parish-based religious education must be our main priorities, these coming months.

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