
FOR THE HOPE OF THE WORLD (1)



On this ninth day of January of the year 2002 I want to thank the Lord for the eight years of episcopal ministry I have exercised among you, in the diocese of Edmundston. I ask the Lord to complete and improve all that I should have accomplished, of this mission. Referring to the theme of the last Synod in Rome, in October, 2001, I earnestly pray to be "a servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the hope of the world". May these not be merely words repeated, but may I truly be among you a hope-filled person! I want to quote from the Canadian bishops at the 2001 Synod, in reference to the bishop's mission today.

GOD HAS VISITED HIS PEOPLE!

Bishop Raymond Lahey of St. George's, Newfoundland, gives us a fresh description of the word *épiscopè*. The Greek word which gave rise to the word 'episcopal', 'bishop', is usually translated 'overseer', but according to biblical tradition the word would be better translated as 'visit'. According to this deeper meaning, the bishop would no longer be considered as 'an overseer' but rather as one who keeps alive among his people the mysteries of salvation. The bishop, the 'visitor' reminds one, first of all, that, in Jesus, "God has visited His people". The bishop witnesses to the fact that each local church community is a place where people can experience the primary quality of this visit: God's mercy. A deeper meaning of the word *épiscopè* specifies better why Vatican Council II described bishops as 'Christ's vicars or legates' to his people. The bishop is really Christ's vicar or legate precisely because he comes among the people of God as a sacrament of the divine mercy which Christ, their Leader and Saviour, has acquired for them.

A GRACE-FILLED ENCOUNTER!

Through his teaching and proclamation of the Word, the bishop is keeper of Christ's saving visitation. By celebrating the sacraments and especially the Eucharist, he makes present in the here and now and from age to age, the grace-filled encounter of God's visitation. The task of governing the Church is most fully realized when he ensures within the local Church the practice of mercy that God's visitation demands, so that it never regards mercy as something abstract, but lives in the communion that God's mercy requires, and reaches out to others with that same mercy. I will thus be his concern to see that the local Church attends to the needs of the young, the poor, the sick and the suffering, that it is engaged in the struggle for justice and peace, and that its doors are always open wide in welcome. This consistent proclamation, celebration, and living out of the grace of God's merciful visitation will keep the local Church from any perception of being a Church that excludes, and will conform it instead to the image of Christ, its great 'Shepherd and Bishop', who came to rescue the lost and the scattered. [Cf. Most Rev. Raymond J. Lahey, Bishop of St. George's, *The Bishop: Sacrament of God's Visitation*, Ottawa, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2 October 2001.]

CONDITIONS FOR BEING WITNESSES OF HOPE

Bishop Pierre Morissette of Baie-Comeau, Québec, referring to a consultation with a few Canadian associations of the faithful, gives a few characteristics of a bishop who would be seen as a witness of hope in contemporary society. First of all, the bishop is a witness of hope when he is a man of faith. This faith reminds him that the world today is God's world and God has not deserted it. It is faith which recalls the

promise of Christ: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of time" (Mt. 28.20). Far from being naive optimism, the bishop's hope is rooted in the paschal mystery and in the conviction that Christ conquered death. The bishop is also to be a man of vision. This means that he needs to draw on tradition as a source of wisdom, but at the same time assuring that the Gospel is expressed within the existing cultural framework, without losing its force by being treated in a banal manner nor becoming incomprehensible or muted through the mere repetition of dated formulas. At the same time, the bishop is to be attentive to the signs of the times in order to perceive the major questions at work in our society and discern the seeds of life which the world today is the bearer.

COMMUNION AND DIGNITY

The bishop nurtures the hope of the local Church by encouraging its communion and growth, following the example of the apostles. It is from this perspective that the bishop is to discern charisms and talents and to organize the various ministries which are to be at the service of the People of God so all is accomplished in harmony. He is to keep in balance the various tendencies that are to be found in the Church, and to manage conflicts so the Christian community is not permanently divided but capable of growth. The bishop is also to be one who encourages peace and unity without impeaching legitimate diversity. The bishop is seen as a sign of hope in the Christian community when he promotes human dignity. Our world suffers from a number of great divides -- between North and South, colonizers and Native Peoples, the rich and poor in each of our countries, the generation gap and the division between men and women. These divides mean that people are finding themselves dominated, exploited, marginalized. The bishop is a witness of hope when he brings the Gospel in a way that is socially engaged for our own time and age.

COMPASSION

The bishop is a witness of hope when he reflects the goodness and compassion of Christ for all who suffer - those without shelter, without advocates, the excluded. Pope Paul VI said that "the modern person listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers" (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, 41). Knowing how to put words into action and to maintain consistency between discourse and practice, the bishop can be a witness of the hope which is powerful enough to renew the face of the earth. [Cf. Most Rev. Pierre Morissette, Bishop of Baie-Comeau, *The Bishop As Witness of Hope*, Ottawa, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 05 October 2001.]

A WISH

In concluding these words of my two brother bishops, my wish is that I truly be such a witness of hope. In a subsequent communique I shall draw on three other interventions by other Canadian delegates to the Bishops' Synod: those of Bishops Gilles Cazabon, O.M.I., Joseph Houry, and James Weisberger. Have a good week!

+ François Thibodeau

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