

---

## A TRIBUTE TO FATHER SYLVIO THÉRIAULT

---



Throughout his fifty-five years of priestly life, Father Sylvio Thériault never stopped loving and inviting us to love with him. His heart was as big as the world. With you I would like to indicate four loves which were at the heart of Father Thériault, and which characterise him in a special way.

### LOVE OF THE POOR

Father Sylvio was a priest filled with compassion and fellow feeling; he had learned early in life the many limitations of every human life, one's greatest dreams as well as one's limitless needs. He had learned at the Lord's knees what mercy was all about, and he had become its daily practitioner. He warmly welcomed as a friend of Jesus all who came to him, without judging, simply loving the person. Father Sylvio had meditated the text of the Prophet Ezekiel on shepherds, as well as the Lord's great promise to his people. Father Sylvio wanted to be part of this great movement: "I myself will look after and tend my sheep. As a shepherd tends his flock when he finds himself among his scattered sheep, so will I tend my sheep. I will rescue them from every place where they were scattered when it was cloudy and dark. I will lead them out from among the peoples. I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest. The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal, shepherding them rightly." (Ez. 34:12, 15-16) In this way Father Thériault was everything to everyone of the most needy in our milieu. "I assure you, as often as you did it for one of the least one of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me" (Mt. 25:40) Father became a beggar so as to give to the poor and the needy the fruit of his soliciting. In this way he distributed a vast amount of money to the poor, concerned as he was to give food and drink to the hungry, clothing to the naked, and to visit the sick and the prisoners, and to welcome the stranger. The Lord bless this love which Father Sylvio has shown and may we, in our own lives, make concern for the poor a priority.

### LOVE OF THE WORD

Father Sylvio developed love for God's Word. He enjoyed commenting the holy text from daily Mass, and he was grateful to the Sister Servants of the Most Blessed Sacrament for having asked him to daily expound on the Word of God. The night before, he would read the scripture texts of the liturgy and let them seep in. He often commented on this grace of homily preparation. He would savour the Word of God with pleasure. He would not preach without first taking time to read the Word, meditate on it, pray over it, and contemplate it. He knew about the "four moments" of the *Lectio divina*: reading the text takes one to the bark, meditation brings one to the "meat", prayer expresses the desire and contemplation tastes the goodness of it all. *Lectio divina* was for him the school of life: the Word carried with it the grace allowing this Word to be applied day after day. It taught him the way to live on earth in the spirit of the Beatitudes; it opens one to the secrets held in the heart of God, and brings forth its fruit to help discernment in various situations. Like the Prophet Isaiah, Father could say: "The Lord God has given me a well-trained tongue, that I might know how to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them. Morning after morning he opens my ear that I may hear". (Is. 50:4)

### LOVE OF THE EUCHARIST

Father Sylvio insisted on celebrating the Eucharist daily. He knew that daily Mass, for a priest, was not just a pious devotion, but the day's most important activity. "If the service of the Word is the foundational element of the priestly ministry, the heart and vital centre of it is constituted, without a doubt, in the Eucharist, which is, above all, the real presence in time of the unique and eternal sacrifice of Christ. The sacramental memorial of the death and Resurrection of Christ, the true and efficacious representation of the singular redemptive Sacrifice, source and apex of Christian life in the whole of evangelization, the Eucharist is the beginning, means, and end of the priestly ministry, since all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate are bound up with the Eucharist and are directed towards it. Consecrated in order to perpetuate the Holy Sacrifice,

the priest thus manifests, in the most evident manner, his identity (*Directory on the Ministry and life of Priests*, 48). This life of communion with Christ made him live in communion with the whole Church, with the bishops with whom he collaborated wholeheartedly, with his confreres whom he was always happy to see, with the diocesan offices personnel whom he enjoyed, with the people of those parishes where he ministered, Saint-Léonard and Saint-Léonard-Parent, with the young people of the Catholic Action Movement and the people at the Hôtel-Dieu (St. Basile), the Orphanage, the Sanatorium, and the Centre éducatif, with the youth of the Café chrétien whose presence he always enjoyed, with those who have problems with alcohol and drugs, with the sick and the hospital staff, with all the people he considered a part of his family, with the members of the Faith and Light Movement, and with the lay people with whom he never lost touch: the source of all this love was to be found in his union with Christ in the Eucharist.

### Love of Mary

Father Sylvio had a true devotion to Mary, Mother of Mercy; this devotion he had inherited from his family, deepened in seminary in Montreal, and cultivated at the Eudist Fathers' Major seminary in Halifax. This love he would develop in his contacts with religious communities dedicated to Mary. Father could be seen every day walking back and forth across the Diocesan Centre porch reciting his rosary. He also loved to preach on Mary and of her special mission. I can attest from having heard him a number of times that at celebrations of the sacrament of reconciliation, his reflection would often be on the Virgin Mary, according to the liturgical ministry the Church was celebrating at the time. He saw in the Mother of Jesus the special relationship she had with the priesthood. It was in this trusting relationship that he could exercise his ministry in his own humble way. He knew that Mary, because she is Mother, is also the prime educator in his priesthood: she formed his priestly heart, protected him in moments of discouragement, and watched over him and his loved ones with maternal concern. Walking into his office one was met with a icon of Mary with a golden heart. As he looked on Mary, he learned from her how to be a priest, humble and modest, open to the grace of God. He could very often repeat, even in difficult times, "Let it be done according to your Word."

### ONE LOVE

These were Father Sylvio's Four Loves that moulded his life and ministry as a priest. Four loves which we ourselves can strive for, as we remember him: unconditional love of the poor, unfailing love of the Word of God, constant love of the Eucharist, and unshakeable love of the Virgin Mary, Mother of Mercy. These four loves are one in Jesus who brings to the poor the Good News of salvation, who sheds his blood for us, and who gives us his Mother.

*+ François Thibodeau*

+ François Thibodeau, C.J.M.  
Bishop of Edmundston

« From A Bishop's Journal » (532) (17 March 2004)