
A REVIEW OF MY PASTORAL VISITATION (1)



Between January 3 and April 4, 2004 I made the pastoral visitation of the thirty-two parishes of our diocese. After ten years as your bishop, I wanted first to thank the population for its support and prayers for me, and present our Church's pastoral priorities. During this visitation I presided thirty-three Eucharistic celebrations, the Eucharist being the source and summit of the Christian life. In this and the next several messages I want to give you a succinct report of these great moments of fellowship I enjoyed. I want to thank all those who made these visits possible, especially the moderators and their pastoral teams.

DECREASE IN POPULATION

Comparing statistics of December 31, 1994 and December 31, 2003, quite a surprise awaits us. In 1994, the total population in the diocese was 60,163, with 54,253 Catholics; in 2003, the total population had decreased to 52,536, with a Catholic population of 49,839... a decrease of over 7,000, in 9 years, with a decrease of 2,700 Catholics... This decrease is being felt in most of our parishes. The December 31, 1994 report noted 684 baptisms, 795 confirmations, 191 marriages, and 495 funerals for the year, the year 2003 recorded 531 baptisms, 701 confirmations, 144 marriages, and 533 funerals. In 1994 there were 45 diocesan priests, 11 religious priests, 153 religious sisters, and 2 religious brothers; in 2003 the figures indicate 37 diocesan priests, 9 religious priests, 108 religious sisters, and no religious brothers... A smaller population, more funerals than baptisms, fewer marriages, and a smaller number of priests and religious... Behind the figures which deserve our close scrutiny, it is people that we have to welcome and love and offer the Gospel of salvation.

PEOPLE OF DEEP FAITH

During the ten years I have been with you, one of the convictions I have about the people of our diocese, and which my 2004 visitation has once more confirmed, is that our people are men and women of faith, and even of deep faith. I have been able to see this for myself in the way you have welcomed me as your bishop in my frequent visits to the different Christian communities, in the sacraments I have celebrated with you – especially the Eucharist and confirmation – and in the five Eucharistic congresses we held, in your steadfast commitment to catechetics and religious education, and in all your acts of kindness to everyone. I hope that this faith of yours always be there, that it continue to increase, and that you be able to pass it on to your children and grandchildren. This is why family- and parish-based religious education is so important. This is why family ministry is also important: it concerns 16,500 families. This is why youth ministry is so important today, for faith to grow and be transmitted from one generation to the next. I hope that you always be proud of your faith in God revealed in Jesus our Saviour, and faith in the love that was showered on us through the grace of the Holy Spirit given to us. Yes, be proud of your Catholic faith, be proud of the life of faith which you received in abundance, be proud of the wonderful gifts you received at confirmation, to help you witness to the hope you have. You who have received the sacrament of matrimony, be proud of the covenant that exists between you, and the wonderful covenant which Christ has made with you.

PEOPLE OF DEEP LOVE

My hope would be that you experience daily, in good times as in bad, the love you received from your parents, your educators, and your pastors. We shall be recognised as disciples of Jesus by the love that we have for one another. I pray that hope always be with you, because a Christian who would have no hope in the future would be saying that God can do nothing new, and that God does not care for His people. We have been given all that we need to continue building together a world of peace and justice. And all of us, by our baptism and confirmation, have our part to do in the building up of our Church.

PRIESTS WANTED

We must continue praying for vocations; we must continue finding the people we need for our pastoral life. After enjoying years of abundance, our Church is now faced with a serious priest shortage. Following the death of Father Sylvio Thériault, there are now only 40 priests in the diocese of Edmundston, 30 diocesan priests, and 10 religious priests. At present, in some parishes of Southern Victoria there are masses only every fifteen days. 17 parishes no longer have a resident priest. Of the 40 priests in the diocese, there are 19 in full-time ministry in our 32 parishes, four priests are chaplains in institutions, 10 collaborate occasionally in ministry, and 5 are retired, sick, or handicapped. Besides, the list of priest replacements gets smaller by the year. We have no seminarians, at this time, which means that, without ordinations, there will be but 9 diocesan priests below the age of 70, in ten years. However, I am convinced that the Lord is calling to his service as much today as before, and I am also convinced that he will not leave His Church without priests. We must find among us the workers that the Church needs. For this reason, I appeal to the young and the not so young of the diocese to take up the challenge posed by the urgent situation of our diocese: If the Lord calls, may they respond generously. The Lord will be ever at their side, as they journey with him. Last March, a young man in Edmundston shared with me his desire for the priesthood, and this was, for me, an encouraging sign throughout my visitations.

MEN OF GOD

In my pastoral visits it was a great joy for me to meet the priests who minister in these parishes or who collaborate in this indispensable ministry. I give thanks to the Lord for the quality of these men who dedicate themselves to the people, I thank God for their generosity, their welcome, and their understanding. I thank God for their faithfulness, perseverance, and courage: they have been able to adjust to difficult situations, and they did this in faith and trust. They were able to develop exceptional "adaptability": their love of Christ and his Church urges them constantly to dedicate themselves to the cause of the Gospel.

+ François Thibodeau

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

« From A Bishop's Journal » (536) (14 April 2004)