
A REVIEW OF MY PASTORAL VISITATION (3)



My 2004 pastoral visitation gave me the opportunity to visit each of our thirty-two Christian communities, thank them for their constant support, and share with them my concerns regarding the shortage of priests and religious, and new pastoral aides. At the completion of this visitation I believe that it is urgent to pursue our pastoral readjustments.

PASTORAL READJUSTMENTS

In the last five years, the major readjustment we have had was the establishment of parish pastoral teams ministering to one, two, and even four parishes. In several places, such an institution as pastoral teams has helped us better understand the lived experience of surrounding parishes and to gradually lead up to the establishment of a real pastoral "unit" composed of several parishes. The question is whether these "units" will be as diversified as the parish pastoral teams are. I would not be surprised that they will be, since pastoral realities are so diverse, from one place to another. One thing is certain, however: a parish that would be tempted to isolate itself from the others would soon be deprived of the services basic to the pursuit of its mission. The more open a parish, the greater the chances of living and surviving. Besides, there is not only the liturgical side to consider. Approximately 20% of the population attend Sunday celebrations; the percentage has appeared to me to be higher in some places and lower in others. A thorough evaluation would give us a clearer idea of the reality. The liturgical life remains very important, and we must not neglect to carefully plan and celebrate every liturgy, to make it as meaningful an experience as possible. It bears reminding that Vatican II insists that the people fully and actively participate in the liturgy.

THIRTY-FIVE THOUSAND ABSENT

More than fifty masses are celebrated in our diocese, every Sunday, for the fifteen thousand or so who regularly attend church; along with family-based religious education, this is the community's main activity. However, close to thirty-five thousand people are absent, thirty-five thousand whom I did not have the pleasure of meeting during the pastoral visitation. If each person must answer for him- or herself why he or she is absent from Sunday worship, I am not indifferent to the phenomenon. In a recent reflection of mine titled "Are Our Sundays Still Easter Sundays?" I addressed this turning away from the Lord's Day practice. This "absence" bears heavily on local communities. It would be so beautiful to see the whole community gather together! I am reminded of Jesus' parable where the Master invites everyone: "Come and eat, the table is set!" But those who had been invited began to excuse themselves (Luke 14:15:20). We must realize that it is becoming increasingly difficult for the "practising" to support the buildings and services. Must we continue to maintain as many services and buildings? This question has often been raised, especially at this time when we are holding the financial campaign. As odd as it may sound, some of the "absent" are more "conservative" than the practising: they especially do not want adjustments that would bring about major changes. Would they then be willing to give the equivalent of what they would give at the offertory collection during the year? Our churches must not become museums but must remain the house where all the baptised regularly meet. True, I have not had the opportunity to attend mass in all of the thirty-two parishes, but I believe that in all the celebrations I presided, I have met only about 500 people between the ages of 20 and less... Still, in the last ten years I have confirmed over 8,000 young people who were all enthused at the prospect of witnessing to Jesus. I have been told that these young people are under some kind of peer pressure keeping them from attending parish celebrations. A critical question is: How do we interest those who are absent to participate in our Sunday worship?

FOUR DIMENSIONS

If the parish is a celebrating community, it is also a community which looks after the Christian formation of its members, their life of charity, and their commitment to their milieu. It is good that more and more parents are becoming involved in their own religious formation and that of their children. May this continue! The disciples of Jesus must be more and more grounded in faith through a better knowledge of Scripture and of Church teaching. There are so many controversial subjects today that we need “wise” people who have been able to incorporate their faith to their daily lives. It is important that these disciples of Jesus be able to get together with brothers and sisters who want to know and love Jesus Christ and his Church. If the Church of yesteryear could give firm support to its Christian communities it is because they truly were – like the first Christian communities – “devoted to the apostles’ instruction and the communal life, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). Today, the community can be served in new ways, through small groups, parish cells, base communities and associations.

MUTUAL COMMITMENT

The Church is ever looking for new leaders. It appears to me that one way of giving our communities the leadership they need is through associations, movements, and committees. One example I want to mention is the volunteer movement as we have been experiencing it throughout the diocesan financial campaign. This activity has required hundreds of volunteers to visit a considerable number of potential donors. The formation given to these volunteers gave them a better knowledge of the Church today, and of its projects for tomorrow. This simple operation could produce significant results: new leaders are discovered, and they learn much from their co-parishioners, by forming Church together. We must find opportunities and develop mini projects in our respective milieus, to journey together in faith. The school for leaders begins at the grass roots: partnerships develop, and before long there arise those who are to be leaders in the faith, to be involved in the different areas of the social, cultural, and economic life of the community.

+ François Thibodeau

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

« From A Bishop’s Journal » (539) (04 May 2004)