



From A Bishop's Journal (547)

“Through Another Door to Conquer the Future”

This was the dynamic theme of the of the graduating class Université de Moncton Edmundston Campus. On this 400th anniversary of the founding of Acadia and the 40th of the founding of the University, I wanted to recall how in 1875 our predecessors steadfastly reached a new stage in their national experience.

At the Origins of the Madawaska Region

The historian Thomas Albert writes about how, “Once upon a time, a small number of families that had just abandoned the settlement of Sainte-Anne-des-Pays-Bas [today’s Fredericton] in search of a new home, came up the Saint John River and laid the foundation of what was to become the Madawaska region. The newcomers had very few provisions or other basic necessities. Against better judgement and the foresight of the wise, they plodded on, convinced that He who feeds the birds of the air would never abandon them as long as they put their trust in Him. It was summertime, and the journey was not too difficult. Those who had never come up the Saint John River thought that they would reach the end of their long and painful travels at any time, now. Whenever they crossed a river or came upon a native settlement, or whenever the loud roar of the river was heard from afar, children would ask their parents, ‘Is this the Madawaska?’ However, they would not reach the end of their journey for ten tiring days, leaving behind them Meductec, Rapide-de-Femme, the Bois-Francs, and Tobique. There was delirious joy upon hearing the great roar of the Grand Falls which grew louder as they neared the gateway to the Promised Land. After portaging the falls, the little flotilla camped atop a cliff overlooking the inner Saint John valley and from there, going up the river, they came across the broadening valley with its softly rolling fields, hemmed in by mountains. The people had reached the threshold of a new land, the land of peace that had nourished their dreams.”

A Tribute to the Pioneers

On this 400th anniversary of Acadia, it is with the words of Father Thomas Albert that I want to pay tribute to the daring and courage of the first white settlers of our beautiful Madawaska country. It is with pride that I greet the pioneering families: the Cyrs, Daigles, Fourniers, Potiers, Ayottes,

Mercures, and Sansfaçons, without forgetting the Thibodeaus. Despite their own neediness, all of these families had faith in a better future for their children and themselves. These families were opening a new door in conquest of the future. A few years later, the young colony experienced a grave crisis. In the Madawaska region, the year 1797 is remembered as the year of the great drought and black misery. After the last frost of 1796, to cap their misfortune their meagre harvest was buried by an early snowstorm, followed by one of the harshest winters known. A sizable group of colonists sought refuge further inland along the St. Lawrence River, and others returned to Fredericton for the winter. Those who remained in the Madawaska survived exclusively on wild game and herbs. It was in those long days of hunger and anxiety that Marguerite-Blanche Thobodeau, wife of Joseph Cyr, carried out heroic feats of charity. I invite you to visit Saint-Basile and the monument erected in her honour, a decade ago. In the days of “Tante La Blanche” – as Marguerite-Blanche was known – the population numbered 400, half of whom were not yet twenty years old. If I recapitulate at length the story of the Madawaska, it is to better illustrate the motto of our graduates: *Through Another Door to Conquer the Future*. The example of our forebears can help us conquer the future with courage and boldness, however meagre our means may be. If barely two centuries ago young people could live through and survive hardship and practically insurmountable difficulties, I have no doubt that there is a future for the young to conquer even today.

Makers of Our Destiny

In 1921, Father Thomas Albert wrote: “It is by remaining faithful to its past that the Madawaska will live. It is by remaining its own master that it shall have the respect of its neighbours. Madawaska to the Madawaskans! We shall be tomorrow what today we want to be, tomorrow. We are the makers of our destiny. The task of the future is in our hands, on condition that we remain faithful to God’s plans for us. It is in our history that we shall discover the role we must play among the people around us. It is in respectful remembrance of our history that we shall find the moral strength we need to travel through time as a nation, as a people with its own identity and distinctive character, to preserve the social influence on which our future depends. The sap of today flows through the deep roots of the past. From a past enriched by sweat and blood, strong vegetation grows. From the past come lessons and examples, experiences and insights. The past is a school of respect, pride, faithfulness, generosity, and courage. In memory of those who made us who we are, at the sight of the work which marked their lives, at the thought of their heroic qualities on which the country was built, we love even more the earth we walk on, which was the theatre, both ambiguous and glorious, of so many struggles, labours, and suffering. That is why History, where the past is reflected, holds such a prominent place in every country.”

A Springboard

Far from glorifying our past unduly, I hope that this bit of history serves as a springboard for today. Our youth have everything they need to make a success of life, to be happy and make others happy. They hold in their hands the cultural and scientific tools necessary, they are daring, and have broad imagination. They can have discipline when the challenge is there and they want to respond to it. I do not fear for their future, but they shall have to struggle, struggle, and struggle again. This is the

cost of gaining the future. May Psalm 23 be with them always: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He guides me in right paths for his name’s sake. Even though I walk in the dark valley I fear no evil; for you are at my side with your rod and your staff that give me courage. You spread the table before me in the sight of my foes; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Only goodness and kindness follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for years to come.”

+ François Thibodeau ym

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

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