

---

## A TRIBUTE TO FATHER NARCISSE GAGNON (1914-2004)

---



As we begin the funeral liturgy for a priest, we tell the Lord that the priest we are committing to the earth answered His call for love of Him and love of us. "We recommend your servant whom you have chosen to be a priest in the manner of the Apostles. We cannot forget that he answered this call for love of you and of us." This short prayer is a thumbnail summary of a priest's life such as was that of our friend Narcisse.

### AN ANSWER OF LOVE

God called him in a special, personal way to be a priest. From all eternity God had considered him and imperceptibly, over a long period of time – even from his mother's womb – prepared him to serve his brothers and sisters. He formed him to one day be His messenger of joy and ambassador of the Gospel of Christ. In the midst of a large family – he was the eleventh of twelve children – in a family where prayer and the sacraments held pride of place, he gradually discovered God's call. He left home and his native province to go to Collège Sainte-Anne at Church Point, Nova Scotia, to do his classical studies. There he joined two pious and highly commendable associations, the Association of the Sacred Heart and the Association of the Blessed Virgin. Following a vocation retreat, he entered the Halifax Major Seminary, along with 27 other seminarians. In 1941, during World War II, they were 25 to be ordained. Father Narcisse answered the call to ministry out of love of God and love of his brothers and sisters. How can we explain otherwise his ten years as a young assistant and thirty-eight years as pastor, without this love he carried in his heart for God and his fellow man?

### WORK OF EVANGELISATION

Like the bishop whose collaborator he is, the priest's desire is to faithfully and ceaselessly proclaim Christ's Gospel, and opportunities abound to do this work of evangelisation through day-to-day contacts or at special moments with a particular person or family. Or again, on the occasion of a birth or baptism, sacramental preparation, marriage, and funerals. All these events can be favourable opportunities for evangelising, as the priest sees the persons and events, so to speak, in a new light as he brings good news, full of mercy and compassion. In this way the priest contributes to building the Body of Christ and looks after the people of God as a father, welcoming the poor, the stranger, and all who are in need, with love, in the name of the Lord. Throughout his long years of ministry, Father Narcisse was faithful to this Gospel instruction. When he accepted the responsibility of social pastoral ministry, he was aware of his responsibility for forming Christian communities at home and abroad, to social justice. The Christian's daily life is like evangelical leaven at home, at school, at work, in social, civic, and cultural life, and it is there that the Christian contribution lies. This is how Father Narcisse was concerned for forming from an early age those who showed leadership qualities. He worked with the Acadian Education Association and the Young Catholic Farmers. He joined in the March of social welfare recipients, and he insisted that the rights of minorities be respected and promoted. The active charity of a bishop and his collaborators must shine with integrity, sincerity, and greatness of soul. It is in this way that is shown God's gratuitous love for the people of our time. All works of piety, assistance, and Christian commitment must reflect authentic charity: this is the best argument for getting people to glorify our Father in heaven, who makes the sun rise on good and bad alike, and who sends rain to the just and the unjust.

### LEADERSHIP FORMATION

All who are in charge of parishes are asked to contribute to the formation of true witnesses of the faith by promoting vibrant Christian communities where the Word of God is present and active, thanks in part to catechetical activities where the Christian faith is welcomed and passed on, where Jesus is better known, loved, and celebrated, and where social justice is a special characteristic of the Christian community, especially in its concern for the poor and the needy. In fact, the Christian message brings to the person's very attitude towards God that person's attitude towards one's neighbour. One's love of God is effective depending

on one's love for and service to others. Love of neighbour and justice are inseparable. Love is first and foremost an absolute requirement of justice, that is, the acknowledgement of the neighbour's dignity and rights. If the Christian message of love and justice is not made real in acting for justice in this world, it will seem hardly credible to people today. Father Narcisse heard these words of the World Synod of Bishops on Justice, in the fall of 1971. He had taken note of the stirring documents of the bishops, especially those on a society to be remade and "From Word to Action."

#### **JUSTICE AND CHARITY**

The Church is not the only one responsible for justice in the world, the World Synod of Bishops stated. However, in this field it has a specific and proper responsibility which is part of its mission to witness to the world to the requirement of love and justice that is found in the Christian message. Fighting for justice and helping transform the world are truly constitutive dimensions of the Gospel message which is the mission of the Church for the redemption of humankind and its liberation from all oppression. Let us consider these challenging words: "for love of God and love of us." Let us also ask ourselves whether we truly love God with heart and soul, and with all our strength. Let us ask ourselves what is the degree of our love for our brothers and sisters. The love of God has been put in our hearts as it was in the heart of Father Narcisse: we have to respond to this love every day, throughout the weeks and years of our lives.

*+ François Thibodeau ym*

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

« From A Bishop's Journal » (576) (19 January 2005)