
MINISTERS OF HOPE (1)



On behalf of the diocesan Church and in my own name I would like to express gratitude to all those who year after year prepare their brothers and sisters to celebrate one or the other of the Church's seven sacraments. These people are true ministers of hope. The final aim of these sacramental preparations and celebrations is to make these brothers and sisters better disciples of Jesus, according to the directive he gave before being taken up to heaven: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you. And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world." This promise is full of hope in both joyful and difficult days. In hectic activity, in moments of fatigue, routine, and discouragement, we must remain focussed on hope! Especially so when our children, after having received one or the other sacrament, do not return for a time to those who were their catechists.

PASTORAL CONCERNS

On a number of occasions I mentioned the concern I have with catechists and pastoral leaders for the "emptiness" that follows the reception of a sacrament. During baptism, reconciliation, confirmation, and first communion preparation, we can feel a current of strong faith go through both parents and children, when they discover the beauty of becoming a child of God and a member of the Church, or the happiness of receiving the forgiveness of God, of feeling His presence, of receiving the divine Breath. It is so wonderful to take part in these preparations! Parents and children are filled with wonder as they realise God's goodness to them! However, as soon as the celebration is over, months or years can pass before other links are forged with the community. Do we have a right to expose the sacraments to such emptiness and absence? It is here that one needs a very strong dose of hope. It is then that we must remind ourselves that the one who sows is not necessarily the one who harvests. During my forty years of priestly ministry I have celebrated countless baptisms, confessions, marriages, and confirmations. I was only God's instrument at this particular point in a certain person's life, and I must surrender that person to the grace of God. Since my episcopal ordination in 1994, I have confirmed some 8,000 youths: I must let the Holy Spirit work in the heart of each one of them, and I must remember that the gifts of God are ungrudgingly given. God gives in abundance, just as He does in nature. We have only to look at all the seeds in a flower, to discover the richness of the divine gifts for man and woman.

"I BELIEVE BUT I DON'T PRACTICE MY RELIGION"

In the Rimouski archdiocesan bulletin of last November I came across a piece on religious practice, which made me think. The words are not meant to justify one's absence from the Sunday liturgy, but they are points worth pondering. Perhaps those we have prepared for sacramental celebration practice more than we believe! Here is what Lise Fortin of Matane has wrote: "I often hear the words: 'I believe, but I don't practice my religion.' When I hear this, my mind starts turning: What does it mean, to practice one's religion? And I see all these young students who for ten months straight get up every morning and try to give the best they have to their studies or training. Yes, you student, you practice patience and the yearning to achieve! And you who are searching for meaning to your life, you practice perseverance! You who are struggling to give what is necessary to your children, you practice self-sacrifice! You who refuse to cheat on your partner, you practice fidelity! You who turn off the TV when it is nonsense, you practice discernment! You who share your joy and pain, you practice trust! You who renounce the hell of drugs, you practice moral strength! You who comfort the sick person, you practice compassion! You who get along with those around you, you practice peace! You who discover the beauty in you, you practice self-esteem! You who congratulate others, you practice valuing them! You who fellowship, you practice the spirit of belonging! You who fight illness, you practice hope! You who make yourself close to others, you practice love of neighbour! You who are fed by the Word of God, you practice wisdom! One day, a friend of Jesus asked him: 'How will we tell who is a disciple of yours?' And Jesus

answered very simply: 'By the love they show to one another!' And you, and you, and you... what do you practice? Think for a minute... and you shall find!"

CALL TO PERSEVERANCE

All these "practices" can have their source in the seeds you have sown in the hearts of those you have met along your path! We must affirm this in order to find meaning to the human effort expended and all the sacrifices made. I see in these practices the fruits of the Holy Spirit! We have only to look at our own lives: we do not always say which person left his or her deepest mark on us! That person would perhaps be the most surprised, if we were to mention this. We find in Holy Scripture a solemn declaration on the effectiveness of God's Word; this can be a motivation to those who share the Word with others: "For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to him who sows and bread to him who eats, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it" (Is. 55:10,11).

THREE OTHER SACRAMENTS

I would need to write longer to express my gratitude to all who prepare their brothers and sisters to celebrate Christian marriage or the anointing of the sick. I would also have to talk about our priest formation teams. In each of these sacraments we must discover the power of hope which changes everything: couples open to life and fertility, as a sign of their love, brothers and sisters who welcome the hope of the resurrection, and brothers who welcome the love of God, for love of their brothers and sisters. We shall return to this!

+ François Thibodeau

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

« From A Bishop's Journal » (577) (26 January 2005)