



From A Bishop's Journal (623)

125th Anniversary of the First Mass Celebrated in Saint-Jacques

On October 30 I had the pleasure of joining with the faithful of Saint-Jacques to mark the 125th anniversary of the first mass celebrated in the parish. That was in 1880. I congratulate the organising committee for this celebration. It is important for us to remember our roots, our history. To celebrate the 125th anniversary of a first mass is to remember the mystery of the First Mass, the Last Supper, it is to recall the service Jesus rendered humankind, and to remember the generous daily service of those pastors who celebrated the Eucharist. It is interesting to note that from 1880 to 2005, the parish of Saint-Jacques has had 13 pastors and 18 curates. There have been 6,806 baptisms, 1,537 marriages, and 2,261 funerals. In 1918, 53 parishioners died of the Spanish flu, 31 of them being children.

The First Mass in History

Saint Matthew records an extraordinary statement from Jesus: “The greatest among you must be the servant of all.” We know very well that the most humble servant, the most devoted, the most unpretentious, the most efficient was Jesus himself: he gave his life for his friends. The night before he died he washed the feet of his disciples, at the Last Supper. It is important to remember the very first mass in history, which took place on Holy Thursday. Saint John the Evangelist does not record the institution of the Eucharist, but he writes about the washing of the feet. “Before the feast of Passover, Jesus realised that the hour had come for him to pass from this world to the Father. He had loved his own in this world, and would show his love for them to the end.... During the supper, Jesus rose from the meal and took off his cloak. He picked up a towel and tied it around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet and dry them with the towel he had around him. Then he came to Simon Peter, who said to him, ‘Lord, are you going to wash my feet?’ Jesus answered, ‘You may not realise now what I am doing, but later you will understand.’ Peter replied, ‘You shall never wash my feet!’ ‘If I do not wash you,’ Jesus answered, ‘you will have no share in my heritage.’ ‘Lord,’ Simon Peter said to him, ‘then not only my feet, but my hands and my head as well...’ After he had washed their feet, he put his cloak back on and reclined at the table once more. He said to them: ‘Do you understand what I just did to you? You address me as “Teacher” and “Lord,” and fittingly enough, for that is what I am. But if I washed your feet – I who am Teacher and Lord – then you must wash each other’s feet. What I just did was to give you an example: as I have done, so you must do’.” What a First Mass! What an example! As Robert Lebel puts it in song: “Like him, to know how to set the table, getting up each day and serving, like him, out of love.”

Father Louis-Côme D'Amours

Father Louis-Côme D'Amours, who celebrated the first mass in Saint-Jacques, was born in Trois-Pistoles, Québec, September 20, 1841. He was ordained to the priesthood in the Chatham cathedral by Bishop James Rogers, at the age of 37. He was first a curate at Saint-Louis-de-Kent for a year, then was appointed pastor at Caraquet, and was there for only a year. In 1880 he was appointed founding pastor of the parish of Notre-Dame du Madawaska – also known as Notre-Dame du Petit-Sault – in Edmundston, where he served until his death in 1908. For 12 years he ministered to the neighbouring mission of Saint-Jacques until 1892, when the mission was raised to the status of a parish. In 1880 the Saint-Jacques mission had 98 families; today the population is composed of 4482 people in 1367 families. While New Brunswick's global population decreased by 4%, according to the last census taken, we see here the expansion of an entire population.

Demanding Ministry

The missionaries, pastors and curates who followed one another at Saint-Jacques had only one goal: to bring the Good News of Jesus by forming day after day a vibrant Christian community of witnesses of Jesus the servant of all, remaining faithful in both prosperity and hardship, to the mission they had received. This mission of shepherding was demanding, and it remains so to this day. The Church's actual legislation requires that the pastor be known for the fidelity of his doctrine and his personal morality, and that he be moved by apostolic zeal. "The parish priest has the obligation of ensuring that the word of God is proclaimed in its entirety to those living in the parish. He is therefore to see to it that the lay members of Christ's faithful are instructed in the truths of faith, especially by means of the homily on Sundays and holidays of obligation and by catechetical formation. He is to foster works which promote the spirit of the Gospel, including its relevance to social justice. He is to have a special care for the Catholic education of children and young people. With the collaboration of the faithful, he is to make every effort to bring the gospel message to those also who have given up religious practice or who do not profess the true faith."

Wonderful Ministry

"The parish priest is to take care that the blessed Eucharist is the centre of the parish assembly of the faithful. He is to strive to ensure that the faithful are nourished by the devout celebration of the sacraments, and in particular that they frequently approach the sacraments of the blessed Eucharist and penance. He is to strive to lead them to prayer, including prayer in their families, and to take a live and active part in the sacred liturgy. Under the authority of the diocesan bishop, the parish priest must direct this liturgy in his own parish, and he is bound to be on guard against abuses. So that he may fulfil his office of pastor diligently, the parish priest is to strive to know the faithful entrusted to his care. He is therefore to visit their families, sharing in their cares and anxieties and, in a special way, their sorrows, comforting them in the Lord. If in certain matters they are found wanting, he is prudently to correct them. He is to help the sick and especially the dying in great charity, solicitously restoring them with the sacraments and commending their souls to God. He is to be especially diligent in seeking out the poor, the suffering, the lonely, those who are exiled from their homeland, and those burdened with special difficulties. He is to strive also to ensure that spouses and parents are sustained in the fulfilment of their proper duties, and to foster the growth of Christian life in the family. The parish priest is to recognise and promote the specific role which the lay members of Christ's faithful have in the mission of the Church, fostering their associations which have religious purposes. He is to cooperate with his proper bishop and with the presbyterium of the diocese. Moreover, he is to endeavour to ensure that the faithful are concerned for the community of the parish, that they feel themselves to be members both of the diocese and of the universal Church, and that they take part in and sustain works which promote this community." I have pointed out only three points in the Church's

legislation: a pastor's responsibilities are very heavy; he could not carry them out without the grace of God and the collaboration of all the faithful.

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