



From A Bishop's Journal (630)

Pastoral Orientation Congress for a New Evangelisation (2)

The French sector Pastoral Orientation Congress will be held at the Diocesan Centre on March 14 and 15, 2006; the English sector will hold its congress at Assumption Church in Grand Falls on March 18. Following the three years of intensive discussions at the Edmundston Diocesan Synod of 1987-1990, it is of the utmost importance to have an over-all review of our pastoral activities and our pastoral readjustments. In deepening our understanding of the demands of the Church's mission, a preparatory committee composed of representatives of our five pastoral zones carefully prepared a working paper with over sixty recommendations which are to be decided on at the congress. It is important that these recommendations be carefully considered in every parish by the parish's pastoral team, the various parish committees, organisations and associations.

Years of Change

The diocese of Edmundston must face the fact of the constant reduction and advancing age of its clergy. There are only eleven priests incardinated in our diocese working full time in parish ministry. It is a blessing that they are seconded by five religious priests and two priests from other dioceses. Presently, the five religious priests minister to nine of our thirty-two parishes; they have no long-term commitment to the diocese. The average age of our priests is 67.3 years. In the 1990s there were over fifty priests working in the diocese. Besides, the population of our milieu has very markedly decreased. While in New Brunswick, according to the last census, the population as a whole has decreased by over 4% from the previous census, the percentage is much higher in our region. In the 1990s the population totalled over 60,000, 52,000 of whom were Catholics. Today, the population is 52,614, with 49,628 Catholics. We must also consider the aging of our population, a constant decrease in Sunday religious practice, and a minimal attendance of our youth in liturgical celebrations. Who, on the short term, will take charge of our Christian communities? We actually have only one seminarian in major seminary. In the last twenty years, thirty priests have died, and six were ordained.

Economic Constraints

Several churches are nearly empty, on Sunday. Do we have the means to keep as many places of worship open? The financial burden of keeping such buildings (church, rectory, parish hall) depends solely on the Sunday offering and parish dues received. Many parishioners are personally experiencing poverty: unemployment or precarious jobs. Parish committees of economic affairs (PEACs) have to practically work miracles to face increases in insurance premiums, heating bills, and manpower. In some places we have had to reduce services by having a common secretariat serving several parishes or publishing one parish bulletin for an entire pastoral unit. There are sixteen parishes with no resident priest, and several rectories are empty except for the secretary's office and a few pastoral activities.

Manpower Wanted

It is of the utmost urgency that the faithful of the diocese assume what was for a long time exclusively the domain of the clergy and religious communities. More and more lay people have become involved in liturgy, catechetics, sacramental preparation, ministry to the sick, and other religious activities in our milieu. If the double challenge of establishing pastoral teams and catechetics teams has been picked up in our diocese since 1999, it is thanks to the priests and the generous people who became involved because of their faith. However, it is hard to always try to find new people to fill our pastoral needs. Similar to our hockey teams, it is important for us to have "recruiters" on the road all year long.

Notice: Changes!

All changes in structure or in ways of doing trigger anxiety, concern, and resistance. Changes are made easier when they are publicised long beforehand in both parishes and the media. They are made easier when we carefully eliminate all details that could trigger controversy or feelings of favouritism. These changes are affirmed if we show concern in constantly building bridges between communities through common actions. Success of the restructuring programme basically depends on two points: an awareness of our baptismal responsibilities, and the adequate preparation of the faithful to accept the necessary changes.

Urgent Recommendations

The pastoral orientation congress preparatory committee makes two recommendations: first, that the faithful of the diocese courageously and resolutely accept that new pastoral restructuring is necessary to ensure the vitality of our diocesan church. Second, that meticulous attention be paid in carefully

planning these changes, and that a process of consultation and awareness raising of parishioners concerned by these changes be implemented.

Prayer to Our Lady

“Immaculate Virgin, Mother of Jesus and our Mother, you glorify the Lord for having worked wonders in you and you proclaim that his love is from age to age. Since the diocese of Edmundston is dedicated to you in a special way, we come to you, trusting that you intercede for us with your Son Jesus. Pray for the nations of the earth, pray for all who have been called to baptism, pray for our bishop and all the other shepherds of this Church, pray also for all those in difficulty and for the needy. May we, like you, witness to the love of the Lord and bless his name forever. Amen.”

+ François Thibodeau yin

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

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