



## **From A Bishop's Journal (679)**

### **Successor of the Apostles (1)**

**T**he next two weeks, to mark my 13<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ordination as bishop, I would like to offer you the complete text of the homily which Bishop Gerard Dionne gave in the Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Edmundston, January 9, 1994, feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

#### **Baptism Inaugurates Our Spiritual Lives**

The Apostles sadly wended their way down the slope of the Mount of Olives. The Lord had just left them. He would return, but for now they must go back to Jerusalem and await in prayer the coming of the Holy Spirit which the Lord had promised to send them “a few days hence.” Several of the Apostles had, like Jesus, been baptised by John in the Jordan, and they could understand the meaning of his final words: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations. Baptise them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Because of Jesus’ baptism our waters have been able to purify from sin. As Jesus’ baptism inaugurated his public life, so does our baptism inaugurate our spiritual life in the Triune God. Jesus’ baptism is the image and promise of our new birth in the sacrament of regeneration. This is the meaning of today’s feast of the Baptism of the Saviour, the day on which a man was told by God, “You are my Son, in whom I am well pleased,” because “God so loved the world that He sent His only Son, so that the world may have life through him.”

#### **Election of Matthias**

Let us return with the Apostles to the Upper Room. Angels had told them to stop looking up at the skies, to get back to Jerusalem and stay there until the coming of the Holy Spirit. By order of the Master, they devoted themselves to prayer, along with over a hundred disciples, among whom was Mary, the mother of Jesus. This mention of the mother of Jesus is very consoling, because wherever the Church is, there is Mary his mother. She was in the Upper Room for the joy of the Apostles. She is in our church for the ordination of François, because this church is dedicated to her and this diocese prays for her protection. Peter, who a little while before had been given the keys of the Kingdom, Peter who is the rock on which the Church’s edifice will be built while the other Apostles with him are the foundation of the new family; Peter who is already recognised as leader of the group, stands in their midst for the first time as visible head of the new Church, and speaks: “We were twelve, and one of them is no more. He must be replaced. It is entirely fitting that one of those who was of our company while the Lord Jesus moved among us, should be named as witness with us to his resurrection.” Two men were nominated: Joseph called Barsabbas, and Matthias. Then

followed a short prayer: “O Lord, you read the hearts of men. Make known to us which of these two you choose.” The choice fell to Matthias, who was added to the eleven apostles. The Apostles do not themselves choose a successor, but they pray the Lord to fill the position left vacant. Later, when the Apostles want to ensure the apostolic succession, they shall use special gestures still in use today, like the imposition of hands and a prayer to the Holy Spirit. We see Saint Paul reminding Timothy of this: “Do not neglect the gift you received when, as a result of prophecy, the presbyters laid their hands on you” (1 Tm. 4:14). And this is what we shall do in a moment, for the same reason.

### **Members of the Apostolic College**

The preceding paragraph spoke of the election of Matthias as a member of the apostolic college. The main reason for our celebration is to repeat this same process for our local church. All we want is to make sure that the Church continues, and the condition is that there be a bishop for this community. We are here to secure for ourselves a successor to the Apostles, because the Church is founded on them and cannot continue without them. Bishops are the Apostles for the Church of today. In a surprising summary, Vatican II tells us that “Bishops by virtue of their sacramental consecration and their communion with the head and the other members of the College, are established as members of the Apostolic body. As such, they become successors to the Apostles for the pastoral care of the faithful committed to them.”

### **Peter Gives a New Bishop to the See of Edmundston**

Just as it was Peter who took the initiative to fill a position in the original group, it is still Peter who took the initiative to fill the vacant see of Edmundston. It is in this way that is created unity and solidity within the College. Since the group of Apostles had one of them for leader, their successors the bishops must also have one among them as their leader. He who succeeds Peter as Bishop of Rome has always been acknowledged and accepted by the bishops as their leader. This explains and justifies his intervening in the appointment of bishops. Today, Peter bears the name of John Paul II, and we thank him for having ensured the apostolic succession in our region. This does not mean, however, that the bishop is the Pope’s representative in this diocese. The local bishop does not represent the Pope, no more than Andrew, John, and James represented Peter in the first College. All were Apostles, like Peter himself, but he was their leader. The bishop guides his diocese as the vicar and legate of Christ for the Church. To him, too, Christ spoke the words: “Go, teach, govern.” The Pope’s role is to maintain unity among the bishops, to allow them to be a college; he watches over the Church’s unity in charity. “Once you are converted, confirm your brothers,” Jesus had charged Peter. In the twelfth century Saint Thomas à Becket, Bishop of Canterbury and martyr of the English Church, wrote to Bishop Gilbert: “Since we are charged with taking Christ’s place on earth, we have been given the glorious name of bishop. We have replaced the apostles and the apostolic men at the top of the hierarchy of the Churches, so that through our ministry the empire of sin and death may be torn down. On the day of our consecration we promised to watch over the teaching in order to nourish ‘the faith’ of our faithful.” (To be continued)

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