



Father Curtis Sappier

## ORDINATION HOMILY - FATHER CURTIS SAPIER

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EMERITUS BISHOP - DIOCESE OF EDMUNDSTON

MAY 25, 1996 AT TOBIQUE FIRST NATION, NB

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**Curtis** woli Nigiguh,

Sagom,  
nagà bsiu woli Nidtabiig yud Negwudgug:  
Gamòtch Gtchipud Bemgisgahg, tchéou Gilawaw,  
nagà gtchi Wolidehasawagon, tchéou bsiwota Gilun.  
Dabelamalag, Gbejiangowa, nagà Gmilgoniya, Bahdoliyasol.  
Golidahaswelaba, èduchi Gjidbag yud, nagà èduchi,  
gzelamalinog, gisiuhlinog.  
Dolèleman Curtisol, Gilawa, Bahdolyasawin, dchiou bsiwotè,  
Bahbadomwey Imiyéwigewam.  
Medgibul Giziuhlinog, medgimiou, wolèiuhdog Gziwenog,  
nagà bsiwotè, Sgidginuh. (Woliwon)

Now I will translate for those who might missed a word or so.

Dear parents of Curtis,  
dear Chief and friends of Maliseet,

This is a great day for you. It is also a great joy for us all. The Lord visits you in a special manner by giving you a priest, taken from your ranks. Accept our congratulations for this great grace coming from a loving God. Curtis, one of your sons, becomes a priest in the universal Church. God bless your families and all your Nation.

Your Excellency, Brother priests, Brothers and sisters:

At the Beatification of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, the Pope said to the First Nations of America:

« I encourage you as Native Peoples  
to preserve and keep alive your cultures, your languages, the values and customs  
which have served you well in the past and which provide a solid foundation for the future.  
Your encounter with the Gospel has not only enriched you;  
it has enriched the whole Church ».

And the Canadian Bishops wrote in different documents:

« When the Europeans arrived, this world was new for them,  
but surely not for the nations that had lived here for thousands of years  
and that offered them hospitality ».(Quebec)

Brothers and friends:

We have just heard the Prophet Joel (2,28) tell us:

« In those days, I will pour out my spirit in everyone:  
your sons and daughters will proclaim my message;  
your elderly will have dreams, and your young will see visions ».

Yes, we are now experiencing a vision of the power of God.  
As Paul wrote to the Galatians whom he had begotten a first time in baptism (4,19)

« My children, for whom I suffer a second time,  
the same kind of pain that a mother endures at childbirth;  
so I suffer for you until Christ's nature is formed in you. »

A new call has been heard, a new vocation has blossomed among the First Nations.  
Let us rejoice and give thanks.

A vocation is a mysterious thing. God has many ways to call someone. When the Apostles came back from the Ascension of their Master, Peter asked the group to suggest candidates to replace Judas. They prayed the Holy Spirit, drew lots which designated Mathias. Later on, the same process was used for the choice of deacons. The community found the candidates, the Apostles confirmed them in their function. This method is not totally abandoned.

Years ago, a bishop was touring a region of his diocese which had not as yet given a priest to the Church. He begged the people not only to pray for vocations but to find candidates in their midst. Sometimes later, men and women gathered to pray, and were faced with the request of the bishop.

They looked around and agreed on one particular candidate. He was free, pious, had an academic preparation, and was well seen by the population. They proposed his name. As prudence suggests, the bishop contacted people who knew him. All agreed that he was a good candidate, but warned that he would never offer himself. He would have to be asked. Which was done. An interview was prepared during which the bishop asked:

« Have you ever thought of becoming a priest ? »

The surprised man, with tears in his eyes and a choked voice answered:

« I have, years ago, but thought it impossible ».

History tells us that it became possible. This story is could be more common if parishes were more closely involved in finding vocations. A community is responsible for its own survival, for the presence of pastors, the celebration of the Eucharist, the proclamation of the Gospel. It could provide for some an occasion to realize what they secretly desire.

Dear Bishop Thibodeau:

Since your arrival as first pastor of this diocese, the Lord has blessed you in many ways. Today you have the particular privilege of ordaining a first member of the First Nations in Eastern Canada. We share your joy and thanksgiving. Your prayers, your communicative piety, your serene hope are just beginning to bear fruits. We wish you an abundant harvest of vocations to continue the work inaugurated on the first Pentecost Sunday.

Chers confrères:

Une ordination est toujours une grande fête pour un presbyterium. Ce jour est doublement festif puisqu'il est une première dans l'histoire de notre diocèse et les environs. Remercions le Seigneur qui ne cesse de prendre soin de nous et nous assure selon son dessein les ouvriers dont nous avons besoin. Il faut continuer à solliciter de notre Sauveur les ouvriers dont notre monde a besoin. Curtis rejoint nos rangs dans la confiance et l'abandon. Recevons le comme un frère et une promesse.

Brothers and sisters:

What is a priest ? Vatican II tells us that:

« Priests, like Christ the Eternal High Priest,  
are put aside to tend the faithful,  
preach the Gospel, forgive sins, as priests of the New Testament ».

In the Liturgy of the Eucharist, holding the place of Christ, proclaiming the mystery of faith, they unite the prayer of the faithful to the sacrifice of their Head, rendering present the sacrifice of the New Testament until the Lord comes,

and carrying to the throne of The Most High the prayers of their flock. Fathers and leaders, they gather their people as a family, nourishing the same ambition of becoming every day better children of so loving a Father. Searching the Scriptures, they must believe what they read, teach what they believe, live what they teach. They render Christ present; through them the faithful join all those who share the same faith, receive the same sacraments, share the same Eucharist. The faithful priest is Christ living among men. He is the good shepherd leading his brothers and sisters in the way to happiness, unity and sanctity.

Curtis, this is the call you answer today in a definitive manner. You know the man I spoke about at the beginning of this homily; the man who considered it impossible for him to become a priest. That man is now seated on your very chair.

We have lived together the moving first moments of your calling. During those short meetings, when you gave me your acceptance, a historical event was written; a first member of our local First Nations had raised the challenge to undertake the long journey towards the priesthood of the Catholic Church. That day was the sowing of the seed; today is the reaping of the harvest. You had tears in your eyes at the thought that a secret desire, deemed impossible, could eventually become a reality. Today, we have tears in our eyes at the thought that the impossible dream has become true. From eternity God had planned that this Reserve would one day germinate the first fruits of the Holy Priesthood among the First Nations of Eastern Canada. It is your privilege, people of Maliseet to see one of yours put aside for the special service of the Church. It is also a favour of the Lord that the Sappier and Perley families would give the first priest to your so deserving age old Nations. May you be blessed, Peter and Bertha and your numerous children. Be thankful today, Be thankful everyday.

Not long ago, Judge Graydon was invited to give the Convocation address at his Alma Mater: St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish. Among other beautiful things he said:

« In my culture, women are recognized as the primary teachers beginning with the child in the womb. It continues as a life long vocation. I once asked my mother when someone stops being a parent. Her response was 'up to the moment you die' ».

A close friend in Fredericton asked me where I was born. I told him:

« On the Tobique Indian Reserve ».

He asked me why I chose to be born in a place like that.

« I told him that I wished to be near my mother. »

Of course Graydon, it can be handy to be close to where your mother is when you are born!

Families of this Tobique Band, be worthy of the grace that visits you. God shows you his love in a special manner today. With Saint Paul writing to the Ephesians, you can say:

« Blessed be God,  
Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ,  
with every spiritual blessing, higher than heaven itself.  
He has chosen us in Christ, before the foundation of the world,  
to be saints, to be blameless in his sight, for love of him ».

So rich is God's grace, that it overflowed upon us in a full stream of wisdom and discernment, to make known to us the hidden purpose of his will. In him it was our lot to be called, singled out beforehand to suit his purpose; we were to manifest his glory, we, the first to set our hope in Christ. In him you too learned to believe, and had the seal set on your faith by the promised gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Ephesians of old are the Maliseet Nation of today. The same promise is realized on your own land. Joined by members of other First Nations, raise your hearts to so kind a Father who has chosen you to bear a special fruit of love, and make him a means of salvation for many. May this priest be for you another subject of a legitimate pride; you have many reasons for rejoicing, like the worthy men and women who single out this Reserve, let alone your promising youth. You have nothing to envy to anyone. You have filled all the ranks of services to society, to the

Church, to history itself. As Pope John Paul said when he visited our country, you are a Holy people, living on a holy land.

As for you, Curtis, my brother, the hope of your nations, the joy of the Church in Eastern Canada, Curtis, "remember Jesus Christ. He is risen". You are his witness. He sent the Holy Spirit on his Apostles and on you today, in the same manner. You are not called to serve a dead Lord and a dying Church. Both are very much alive. Make yours what Paul wrote to Timothy:

« As for you, man of God,  
aim at right living, faith, holiness, love, endurance and kind forbearance.  
Fight the good fight of faith;  
lay your grasp on life eternal.  
I adjure you before the God who gives life to all things,  
before Christ Jesus,  
fulfil your charge without stain of reproach  
until the day when our Lord Jesus Christ appears.  
Make yourself a model of speech and behaviour for the faithful ».

Consider the grace that is given you by the imposition of hands. You do not receive a spirit of fear but of courage to preach and serve. Be faithful to the mission that is bestowed upon you. We are not called on account of our personal merits; it is for the service of our brothers and sisters. Your ministry will not always be easy. At times you will feel frustrated. People will not meet your expectations. Do not forget that we are all human and weak. Your hope is in the grace of God and the efforts of men. Be a man of hope and patience.

We are all with you; we will fervently pray the Lord and the Saints for you while you lay down on the ground of your fathers; we will intercede for you when the bishop imposes hands on you followed by the clergy; for my part, I will have in mind the prayer that Graydon used at the Antigonish meeting:

« Oh Great Spirit whose voice I hear in the winds,  
Hear me, for I am young, small and weak.  
I need your strength and wisdom.  
I seek strength, Oh Great One,  
not to be superior to my brothers and sisters,  
but to conquer my greatest enemy, myself.  
I seek wisdom,  
the lessons you have hidden in every leaf and rock,  
so that I may learn and carry this message of life and hope to my people.  
May my hands respect the many beautiful things you have made.  
My ears be sharp to hear your voice.  
May I always walk in your beauty  
and let my eyes ever behold the red and purple sunsets.  
So when life fades like the setting sun,  
my spirit will come to you without shame ».

We praise Jesus for you and with you; we ask Our Lady Of Guadalupe who appeared to an Indian in Mexico, to protect and guide you, as well as St. Anne the patron Saint of your parish. During eternity we will praise the Lord for the 25th of May 1996 when you became the first priest of the Catholic Church from among the First Nations in Eastern Canada.



First Mass



First Mass