
**« GRATITUDE TO THE PRIESTS OF YESTERYEAR,
THOSE OF TODAY,
AND CONFIDENCE IN THOSE OF TOMORROW »**



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28 November 1994

TO THE PRIESTS AND FUTURE PRIESTS OF THE EDMUNDSTON DIOCESE

My Dear Friends, it has already been nine months since I addressed my very first pastoral letter to the clergy of this beloved Church of Edmundston; it was on February 28, the day of Bishop Lacroix's death.

Today, as we near the feast of Christmas and the new year, but especially as we are getting ready to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Edmundston Diocese, I want to take this opportunity to thank you for all that you are in this Church you desire to serve with all your heart for the glory of God and the happiness of all your brothers and sisters.

GRATITUDE TO THE PRIESTS OF YESTERYEAR

I want to express, here, my gratitude to all those priests who have ministered in our territory from the very beginnings of evangelisation, in this region. Since the Catholics here were under the jurisdiction, in turn, of the bishops of Québec, Charlottetown, Fredericton, Saint John, Chatham, and Bathurst, my thoughts go to all those bishops and priests who dedicated themselves to the building up of the Kingdom of God among us. I would like to copy here the paragraphs on the Madawaska clergy which Father Louis Daigle recited from memory, last October 6, on the occasion of the 65th anniversary of his priestly ordination: I just hope that the tape recording made that evening for the Grand Falls radio will some day be transcribed for our benefit and that of coming generations.

My thoughts go first to the courageous bishops who preceded me in the see of Edmundston: Bishops Marie-Antoine Roy, O.F.M. (1945-1948), J.-Roméo Gagnon (1949-1970), Fernand Lacroix, C.J.M. (1970-1983), and Bishop Gérard Dionne (1983-1993), and I give thanks to the Lord for everything they have been for our Church. I also think of those missionaries who first came to the Madawaska region, beginning with the missionary work of Father Adrien Leclerc (1785-1792), up to the years of ministry of the Grand Vicar Monsignor Louis-Napoléon Dugal (1880-1929). I am reminded of Father Charles Swéron (1859-1864), who was the first resident priest at St-François; of Father Louis-Côme D'Amours (1880-1908) and of Monsignor William Conway, P.A., V.G. (1908-1961). I am reminded of Father John O'Leary (1868-1892), the first resident priest at Grand Falls. I am also reminded of Monsignor Numa Pichette (1938-1971), founder of the parish of Notre-Dame-des-Sept-Douleurs, and of Monsignor Joseph-Arthur Melanson who was missionary-coloniser in the Restigouche, of Monsignor Eudore Martin, Monsignor Solyme Azzie, Monsignor Camille Leclerc, the Monsignors Lang, Monsignor [Lionel] Daigle, etc. How can we not invoke the memory of all these founders of parishes in our diocese, all of which parishes were established before the founding of the diocese of Edmundston, with the exception of six: Perth-Andover (1946), Saint-Jean-Baptiste (1948), Saint-Martin (1948), Connors (1950), Notre-Dame-du-Sacré-Coeur (1950), and Saint-Georges (1950).

I also remember the precious help we received from religious communities. Already in 1869, a Holy Cross Father, Fr. Jean-B. Doucet, C.S.C., is reported at Saint-Basile; there is also Fr. J.C. Éthier, C.S.C. (1873-1875) and Father J.B. Bazoge, C.S.C., at St-François. At the end of 1903, Fathers Aimé Morin, C.J.M., Alphonse Cottreau, C.J.M., and Pierre Lechantoux, C.J.M., arrived at the Maliseet reservation at the confluence of the Saint John and Tobique rivers; they were the first missionaries to Plaster Rock in 1904, and preached missions in a number of French parishes in Madawaska County and in Maine. In February, 1946, Bishop M.-Antoine Roy signed an agreement with the Eudist Fathers to open a college in Edmundston, the Collège St-Louis, named in honour of Monsignor Louis Dugal, the Apostle of Madawaska and a great friend of youth. Much gratitude to all the Franciscans who worked very hard not only in the parish of St-Coeur-de-Marie of Baker Brook and region, but throughout the entire territory of the actual Southern Victoria Deanery. To the illustrious name of the first bishop of this diocese can be added the names of devoted confrères who, like Father Joseph Moisan, O.F.M. and Normand Thibodeau, O.F.M., gave dedicated service to our Church. How can we adequately thank the Oblates of Mary Immaculate who for close to a quarter of a century organised so many spiritual renewal activities at the Retreat House that was founded by Fathers Joseph-Aurèle Plourde and Joseph Lelannic ? Much gratitude is owed to the members of the Voluntas Dei Secular Institute who had the major seminary at Red Rapids and who continue to serve in the southern Victoria parishes. Thanks also to all the preachers and missionaries who passed our way: the Jesuits and Redemptorists, the Blessed Sacrament Fathers, the members of the St. Pius X Secular Institute, the Marist Fathers, the Missions Étrangères [Foreign Mission] Fathers, etc.

It is therefore hundreds of priests that we must carry in our thanksgiving: May the Lord give them one hundredfold for everything they did for the cause of his Gospel and his Church. They were zealous and faith-filled priests: May they be an inspiration to us today.

GRATITUDE TO OUR PRIESTS TODAY

If in 1970 we had one hundred diocesan and religious priests among us, for different reasons their number has shrunk considerably, today... The Edmundston Diocese presently has 59 diocesan and religious priests: ten incardinated priests, five of whom are members of the [Québec] Foreign Mission Society, live outside the diocese; 2 priests are incardinated in another diocese, nine are religious priests, fifteen diocesan priests are now retired or on sick leave, and twenty-three priests are involved in active pastoral ministry.

With you I thank God for all the grace-filled moments we have experienced together since my episcopal appointment. I recall our first meeting, November 1, 1993, and your presence at my episcopal ordination; I also recall the prayerful moments of the first Thursdays of the month and the celebration of the Chrism Mass, on Monday of Holy Week. I recall the grace-filled days spent at Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pocatière and at the Diocesan Centre; I recall all the meetings we have had together when I made my first visitation to your parishes, and when I was there for confirmations or other pastoral events which took place in your milieus. I am reminded of your generous availability and the extraordinary spirit of faith and fellowship you displayed when the appointments came out. I recall the priestly ordination of Father Jeff Doucette which brought us together on May 21... I also recall the meetings held in the deaneries and the priests' retreat of October 10-12. With you I bless the Lord for all those grace-filled moments. How I wish I could meet with each of you in particular for sharing and prayer, if time allowed you to do so. This is my special wish for 1995.

It is hard to write about all the learning I had to do in a short time, as a newly-ordained bishop. I count on your fraternal kindness and forbearance to compensate the deficiencies which could come up in our respective relationships. I ask you that as time goes by, you help me with your prayers and advice to become with the grace of God a shepherd according to his heart.

You know all about the many challenges of today's priests, and you yourselves experience them daily. I want to mention a few of them so that we may help one another to face them with courage and serenity: a deep holiness centred on meditation of God's Word, and daily contact with Jesus through humble and trusting prayer; essential unity with the entire presbyterium joined to its bishop; constant availability to the Will of God so as to respond according to our aptitudes to the pastoral needs of our brothers and sisters; openness of heart to the 60,000 people of the Edmundston Diocesan Church; ongoing pastoral formation so as to respond adequately to the requirements of the new evangelisation; a deepening sense of pastoral teamwork and coresponsibility with our lay brothers and sisters; and unflinching hope to fight off any spirit of defeatism...

The few months I have been living with you make me certain that together we shall be able to confront these weighty challenges. I am happy to note the resumption of activities of the priest's senate; and it gives me great pleasure to see what is happening at the level of community life, at the Cathedral rectory and those of Notre-Dame-des-Sept-Douleurs and Saint-Quentin... The formation of Jesus Caritas teams among our priests gives me cause to hope... Strong ties bind us to one another, in virtue of our priestly ordination... If I be allowed to make another wish, it is to see these ties of friendship and solidarity between priests continue to grow. I am happy to note that at deanery meetings priests have dinner together; and that a few take their days off and holidays together: on the golf course, fishing, hunting, or playing cards - ties of friendship and solidarity can be forged, there, and be most beneficial to all. Going out together (a movie, workshop, concert, etc.) can be a wonderful ABC of the fraternal and priestly life and protect against devastating loneliness. I rejoice, too, that the priests can find ways of being replaced, for personal renewal, like the Pierrefonds sessions. All of this is beneficial to both the priest and the faithful committed to his care. Meeting a priest happy with himself is a serious invitation to live in the spirit of the Beatitudes.

CONFIDENCE IN THE PRIESTS OF TOMORROW

One of the graces we can ask the Lord on the occasion of this diocesan Jubilee is to send us many holy Gospel workers. The Lord is never insensitive to such a petition if it is made confidently in prayer and with the entire Church.

Last May's get-together at La Pocatière revived in each of us the hope that the Lord will send workers to his harvest... as he wills, when he wills... I rejoice that Christian communities, like those of the Cathedral and Assumption parishes, have welcomed two seminarians in their midst. The welcome that they have received, the training they are getting, and the prayers for them will lead them with God's grace to a coming ordination. We must continue all the work started.

I am happy that the Vocation Office is taking root: the team bodes well for promising results. Very interesting activities are being prepared for the coming months. We shall need boldness, tact, patience... Our own life must radiate happiness and really attract the coming generations. « Come and see » still holds true, today... If each of us who are part of the Edmundston presbyterium were to meet a young man interested in living the Gospel and becoming a priest to proclaim the Word of Life, celebrate the sacraments and serve his brothers and sisters, the Church of Edmundston would already have the promise of a wonderful future.

This vocation ministry must be based not only on our daily witness, our prayer and the participation of the community as a whole, but also on work we do at the family level, especially with young couples. The attention we pay to families will have good repercussions.

My dear friends, while recalling with you the past, the present, and the future, my intention is not to set another burden on your shoulders but rather to share with you in a spirit of fraternity the hope which is ours because of our very ordination. Jesus told his apostles that he did not consider them servants but friends. We who share a common vocation and apostolic mission can be sure of this: the Lord Jesus has made us his friends and considers us his friends. At the heart of the Christmas mystery, at the heart of this mystery which is the Church, we live in the infinite friendship of Jesus.

« We bear a treasure in vessels of clay,
Clay of our bodies and Gospel treasure.

Treasure of faith whose richness astounds us!
Treasure of life and of presence which infinitely surpasses us...

Treasure hidden in our weaknesses where your strength issues forth...
Treasure of a love which bids us live for none but you.

Treasure for a world which searches and no longer knows
How to tap the roots of its being, to be born again and so find you.

Treasure which opens itself to the heart of the poor as soon as he hears you.
But is our voice, among so many, an echo of your own ?

Treasure hidden in the silence where the old words no longer hold,
These oceans of indifference where our craft is battered.

Treasure full of your promises! But we must find them,
Strip ourselves of our wisdom, and let you dress us again. »
(Robert Lebel)

Pondering in our hearts all the events which have marked our Church in the course of her life, recalling all these priests of yesteryear and of today, and hopeful about those of tomorrow, we can very well say with the Virgin Mary, the Immaculate Conception our patroness, « His Love Is from Age to Age! »

Happy Jubilee Year! Happy Holidays!

+ François Thibodeau

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