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## OUR SCHOOL OF FAITH IS ALREADY TEN YEARS OLD!

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On Sunday, April 30, at 4:30 P.M., a special celebration at Notre-Dame-des-Sept-Douleurs Church will mark in simplicity and joy the tenth anniversary of the School of Faith [French Sector]. The founding of the School, along with its constant growth and excellent results, is truly worth noting. "Honour and glory to all our builders: We are proud, it is our story, here!"

It was my immediate predecessor, Bishop Gérard Dionne, who conceived the idea of establishing such a School in Edmundston. While he was in Sudbury he had the opportunity to see for himself the beneficial effects of the anglophone School of Pastoral Work in that diocese, and to establish a similar service for the francophones of the Sault Sainte-Marie Diocese: the École française de pastorale.

Following the departure of Bishop Lacroix who had reorganised the Edmundston Diocese along the lines recommended by Vatican Council II, Bishop Dionne's desire was to establish here a School of Faith along the same lines as what had been organised in Sudbury; its aims were to be the same, too: revive in the baptised their reasons for believing, open to them the riches of the Word of God, give them the opportunity to experience together for a few hours the life of the Church, and awaken them to their mission in their own milieus.

### **MARKED BY A SURPRISING GRATUITOUSNESS**

What made for the School's originality was that its activities unfolded free of charge. "You received freely, give freely" (Mat. 10:8). Just as faith is a free gift of God, participation in this School, whether teachers or students as well as the administration, all were marked with the sign of gratuitousness. It came as a great surprise not only to people in the diocese but to all those who inquired about the School and were told that everything was free of charge. Some saw this as "tempting" God, while others regarded this as one of the numerous "miracles", one of the marvels with which Providence graced us, the secret of which it knows how to keep well hidden!

### **TEACHERS AND REGISTERED STUDENTS: RECORD BROKEN!**

Bishop Dionne first called on the four priests who were then teaching at the St-Louis-Maillet University Centre. Father Robert Simard, C.J.M., who was the first academic director of the School, was charged with setting up the curriculum, while the Bishop himself was the School's director general. Plans were for the School to open in 1986, but as early as September 1985, Father Jean-Guy Lachance gave a first session on the topic of "Faith." Bishop Dionne had estimated 12 students registering: "Like the twelve apostles," he would say; and with a bit of optimism, he figured that he would be most happy to have 25 registrations... but that first year there were 134 students! This had been un hoped-for and unforeseen, like many events produced through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. But what a message was being sent! There was a thirst for learning about God, the Gospel, and the Church. People were thirsting for this, and we had to give them this fresh water of the Word of God.

## **MORE THAN SEVEN YEARS!**

The School had planned a registration of four years' duration, with courses being given for a maximum of seven years, since the programme was spread over a four year period. But come September, the School of Faith will be inaugurating its eleventh registration year. Thanks to God and to all who collaborated in this project, the most optimistic forecasts were greatly surpassed and the hopes raised were largely met. "God's ways are not limited by our desires; He surpasses them greatly, in His infinite goodness!" In the course of these ten years, the curriculum was modified in order to adapt to different circumstances, but the general outline was always respected so that from the very beginning one had the impression of having found the formula which best suited the people of our diocese.

## **ALL UNITED IN THE FAITH : 1891 REGISTRATIONS**

From year to year the School of Faith has welcomed a new class of faithful who come to deepen their faith. More than 600 persons signed up for one course or another: and there were 1891 registrations. Regular attendance and faithfulness in following the classes of the School of Faith, in initiating themselves to Holy Scripture and even in falling in love with the sacred text, and the desire to live the Gospels in their milieu, raise the enthusiasm of the School's authorities who repeat the words of St. Paul: "... I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you - or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine" (Rom. 1:11-12).

## **MARVELLOUS DEVOTEDNESS**

We must point out the extraordinary devotedness of the many professors - priests, religious, and lay persons - who freely gave many hours to deepening and communicating so marvellously the Good News of Jesus. In going over the story of the School of Faith with teachers and students, it is as if what is being experienced is one of those precious moments of the primitive Jerusalem Church where enthusiasm for the faith had gotten hold of everyone and enflamed all of Jesus' followers. We must also note the work of many other persons who generously support the School of Faith activities, whether they be at the Diocesan Centre or at the parish level. This too is faith-filled generosity!

## **A WELL-APPRECIATED HARVEST**

According to Bishop Dionne himself, two major pastoral activities of our diocese were brought to life at the School of Faith: the Diocesan Synod and the great parish missions. These had not been planned for, at the inception of the School, but Divine Providence had its views, and today we can be deeply grateful and tell God that His love is from age to age (Luke 1:50). What will happen to the School of Faith? Since those responsible for it are people of deep faith and great boldness, I believe that God willed this School and that He will maintain it for as long as He wants, despite difficulties encountered. If each parish in the diocese could find five persons for the School of Faith, not only would we be breaking the record of the first year, but also an assured biblical renewal throughout our Church. The time spent together in searching and sharing the Word of God can have only beneficial effects. The Word of God is alive and active in our personal and community lives. On April 30 we shall continue to study the results of this School. May the Lord bless the coming years of this indispensable School of Faith.

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