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## « A CHANNEL OF YOUR PEACE »

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I was deeply touched, on Sunday, February 23, to listen as the children of St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in Plaster Rock recited together the prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, at their Sunday School class: « *Lord, make me a channel of your peace.* » These words brought back to my mind the 75 years of Franciscan presence in the Southern Victoria Deanery. If the Eudist Fathers were the first priests to take up residence in the territory, they were followed by a diocesan priest [Fr. Frederick Ryan, who ministered throughout the Tobique from 1906 to 1921] and members of the Voluntas Dei Institute; but for years the missions were ministered to by the Franciscan fathers and brothers.

### SOUTHERN VICTORIA DEANERY

As a matter of fact, it was in 1921 that the Franciscans came to Maliseet following an invitation from Bishop Patrice-Alexandre Chiasson of Chatham (1920-1938), to look after the different Tobique missions. During these years the deanery maintained as many as ten churches with up to eight priests. The Bairdsville church, south of Perth-Andover, was bought from the Methodists in 1934; it was closed in 1977 and sold in June, 1980. The mission Red Rapids, founded in 1885, had a church in 1931; [The church was demolished in 1972. Services continued in the former Voluntas Dei Seminary chapel.] the parish was closed in 1992. Now in 1997, there are eight parishes with a population of approximately 3,500, with two resident priests, Fathers Leo Grégoire, I.V.D., pastor of Maliseet, Perth-Andover, and Aroostook and celebrant at Plaster Rock, and Curtis Sappier, administrator of the parishes of St. Patrick at Limestone Siding at St. Joseph, Tilley. Father Frédéric Poitras of Grand Falls ministers every Sunday at Blue Bell and Anderson Road.

### AROOSTOOK, THE « SHINING RIVER »

On Saturday, February 22, I had the pleasure of visiting the parish of Our Lady of Mercy at Aroostook, which has a Catholic population of about 167. After meeting with the parish pastoral council I visited a few families of shut-ins. Following a pot-luck community supper we had the Saturday evening Mass, at the conclusion of which the parish organist<sup>11</sup> was recognised for her forty years' service. The parish was founded in 1926, and a monastery was added in 1935. It was then that the Franciscan community transferred from Maliseet to Aroostook, from which place the missionaries radiated to the different missions. The last Franciscans left Aroostook in 1986, and the monastery was demolished in the fall of 1990. We shall never forget the work that was accomplished by the fathers and brothers in this corner of the diocese. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the diocese of Edmundston, Mrs. Teresa Madore of Anderson Road and Fr. Leo Grégoire published a book telling of the outstanding 75-year Franciscan presence in the beautiful Tobique country, where St. Francis of Assisi would have felt right at home in the midst of the beautiful scenery, with its waters, valleys, and woodlands. If Aroostook was once an important railroad junction for wood products and potatoes, it now draws a fair number of tourists and international golf players. Proud of their friendly parish, the Aroostook parishioners have been able to hold on to their church, a major symbol of their faith. Generous volunteers have succeeded, with their pastor Fr. Leo Grégoire, to make of the parish a vibrant and neighbourly community. According to research done by Fr. Leo, the word "Aroostook" means "Shining River," [Cf. C. Keith Wilbur, *The New England Indians. An Illustrated Sourcebook of Authentic Details of Everyday Indian Life.* Old Saybrook (CT): The Globe Pequot Press, 1978, p. 87] a fitting description of this beautiful region.

## PLASTER ROCK

According to the *New Brunswick Tourist Guide*, Plaster Rock is the gateway to the high Northern Plateaus, home of outdoors sports activities. It is the kingdom of sports outfitters, the paradise of deer hunters and of Atlantic salmon and trout fishers. Main tributary of the Saint John River, the Tobique has 137 navigable kilometres. The green waters of the river running through hills of red gypsum gave the village its name. Economic activity is based on agriculture and forestry, and the main employer is Fraser Company. The Eudist Fathers came to Plaster in 1904, and they were followed by Fr. Frederick Ryan; then came the Franciscans, Father Louis Daigle, and members of the Voluntas Dei Institute. The population of Plaster Rock stands at 1200, with 385 Catholics. Mr. Harold Short-Evans is pastoral administrator of St. Thomas Aquinas, and he works in close collaboration with the parish pastoral council.

## TURNED TO THE FUTURE

It was on February 23 that I made an intensive visit to this courageous community. Following celebration of the Eucharist and Confirmation, I visited the different classes: this important initiative could serve as an inspiration to several francophone communities. Following a community lunch I met with the members of the parish pastoral council, and we shared especially on the situation of the poor of the area and how the next five years will shape the community, pastorally speaking. Following a visit to the Fraser mill, I visited a few of the Manor residents. Then there was a fellowship supper with ministers of other religious denominations and their spouses. It is important to note the quality of these regular ecumenical relationships, as well as the input of lay people in many community functions.

## A PRAYER THAT IS EVER-NEW

Distinctly new situations challenge us more than ever to be channels of peace in our milieu, at home as well as in the social, economic, religious, economic and political spheres. And here, we are not talking about any old peace, but about being channels of the peace brought by Jesus and based on justice, truth, liberty, and love. As one young person put it, "*God puts the wind in our sails.*" « *Lord, make me a channel of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow your love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is error, truth; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.* » With all my heart I thank those who made my visit a successful one.

Have a good week!



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