
THE FUTURE OF OUR DIOCESE (1)



Over 180 people attended the fourth pastoral study session at the Diocesan Centre, February 4, 5, and 6, 1998, around the theme *The Future of Our Diocese: Pastoral Restructuring*. The resource person was Fr. Gilles Routhier of Université Laval in Québec. What follows are major excerpts from a personal summary written by Sister Geraldine Brotherton, F.M.A., throughout the session. These reflections are offered to the session participants as a tool to aid in their ongoing reflection and continued action.

INTERESTS AND CONCERNS

The objective of the session was to allow ourselves to be transformed in such a way that we would return home with enthusiasm to take up the challenges awaiting us. The future holds out many challenges that call us to life. Fr. Routhier stated, "If you are so many here it is because of your concern for the future of your parishes. There is interest, but there may also be a certain amount of fear that [the parish's] very survival is at stake, and we want to ward off any evil spells." Fr. Routhier then drew a brief sketch of his pastoral experience: as a missionary in Hudson's Bay where he had a parish whose dimensions measured 1,100 Km. north-south/250 Km. east-west. He then went to Québec's North Shore to a parish 120 Km. long. He was then sent for further studies at the Sorbonne University in Paris, where he was in close contact with a parish whose population numbered 47,000. Following which he was sent to pastor a parish along the Québec south shore. This implies that the word 'parish' covers several different realities. And it is no tragedy to have different kinds of parishes.

NECESSARY TRANSFORMATION

Our parishes must be recast, if they are to be vibrant; otherwise they will become fossilised. It is important not to be defensive about it or be resistant to this, one ought not function just by reacting according to one's apprehensions. We are not specialists in resuscitation, but we have to risk being midwives to help with the birth of new modes of living the parish reality. Our parishes will change: Are we to be victims or agents of these changes? Are we to just suffer these changes with resignation as a bad throw of the dice, or are we to be major players, in these changes? How shall we react? Our parishes are going to change... into what? And why? Besides, what is the cause, the origin, the source of these changes? Why do we need a parish? What do we do with one?

MISSION OF THE CHURCH

What is our mission, for the next few years? In what way will awareness of our mission direct the life of our parishes? It is important that we first look at our mission, it gives us a project and allows us to look to the future not in terms of decrease, compared to the past. The mission opens us onto an exciting adventure. One does not readjust or restructure only following a study of a situation, but also because the mission itself demands it.

It is important that the starting point be the mission rather than ourselves, because it directs our attention to God who loves and serves the world through us. The focus is never on the number of those sent out but on the command to "go to" God's beloved world. We are not present for the sake of structures but for the people

themselves, and the mission takes us back to this fundamental premise. It is among the people that we shall re-focus on the God who sends us out, and this is the reason of our existence. It unites us, to start with the question of mission, because then there is room for everyone.

God's BUSINESS

Mission is God's business, even though we have believed that it is ours. Mission is God's action of sending us out, of God's concern for the world. We are God's instruments for carrying out the mission, so we shall not fear that this service of God to others be given more adequately, in a way better adapted to the world of today. The Church's objective is to reveal God's love for humankind. It is only after this that we shall find the appropriate means of communicating it. God sends us: we are but servants. We must be docile and open to this God who commissions us. The first reason for pastoral restructuring is the relationship that exists between God and the world. We must re-think things as they relate to the mission; then only will we find the means. Otherwise the whole exercise becomes a patch-up job.

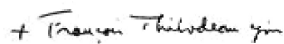
DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN MISSION AND MEANS

The Church's mission is not to maintain an inherited network of parishes. Mission does not equal the sum total of the work to be done or the amount of work being done. The Church's mission is not to be seen in the number of pastoral tasks accomplished. We sometimes risk identifying mission with the work we do. They are not the mission but an expression of what mission is at a given moment. There are some things that appear and others that vanish. Wanting to maintain all of our actual pastoral tasks could be an obstacle to the Church's mission being carried out. If we do not consent to having some things disappear we probably keep new pastoral actions more adapted to today from appearing. A bad question would be to ask, "What are we going to do for the parish's status quo to continue, but with fewer people involved?" In taking that route we shall quickly hit a stone wall. The mission does not equal the number of pastoral tasks which we are now keeping.

A SESSION PARTICIPANT'S PRAYER

« God our Father, guide our steps during this time of discernment in our diocesan Church. May our hearts be open to change, and may we, through word and deed, bring a new breath of renewal to the entire diocese. May the gospel of Jesus Christ be our strength, in the numerous challenges that will arise, and may each member of your Body, Jesus Christ, become aware of his or her place in the Church. We thank you for your Breath of life, the Holy Spirit who brings joy, peace, love and happiness during this wonderful journey we travel together in hope. »

Have a good week!



+ François Thibodeau
Bishop of Edmundston

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