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## FIRST REACTIONS ON MY FOURTH PASTORAL VISITATION

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What are my first reactions of this fourth intensive pastoral visitation, now that it is over? What remains of all the contacts established and meetings held, of these eighteen days of being in the Grand Falls Deanery? It is in a spirit of gratitude and petition that I want to make this evaluation.

### GRATITUDE

My first reaction is one of gratitude towards all those who took seriously this pastoral and missionary undertaking, and who made it possible: the priests, pastoral agents, members of the parish pastoral councils, and all those who welcomed me so warmly in faith and friendship. They had to devote much time to these visits which added to their already busy schedules. Week after week there was much movement and going to and fro from one parish to another. And so, my heartfelt gratitude to all.

### LIVELY FAITH

The respect shown to the bishop, the priests and the sisters was steeped in simplicity and fellowship. The bishop is recognised as being sent by the Lord and one of his special witnesses. And I believe that this view is passed on from one generation to the next. The youth also show respect toward their bishop, often timidly but always genuinely. What they write to me in requesting Confirmation is full of affection and mutual prayer.

### HEROIC PAST

Pastoral visitations are an opportunity for me to read over the documents relative to each parish, to take down a few notes and pass on these historical bits to the present generation. What struck me especially in these stories is the courage, determination, and perseverance of these pioneers, their sense of mission, and their vision. We see the quick development of these communities, some of which - like Drummond - were restructured up to four times.

### A LONGING FOR JESUS

Because of the problems in maintaining religious education in the schools due to the heavy workload of certain teachers, or due to the fact that some are neither interested in nor have the time to teach it, parents have reacted positively to the setting up of parish- and home-based religious education. If these initiatives were not to be pursued in the future, there would be a grave danger that the Gospel of Jesus would be lost to the people and that Christian values would no longer influence daily behaviour. If there are people who are less attached to the cause of the Church, there are still those who want to live and pass on their faith to their children.

## **FAMILIES**

I have done no research in this field but I was able to see that so-called traditional families can live side by side with "nuclear," often one-parent families. Sometimes the grandparents are part of the family, and other times they are not. The increase in poverty seems to affect more those families which have been touched by divorce or separation.

## **COMMITMENTS**

Commitments to the community are many, but there is no guarantee of a steady stream of volunteers. In several places there is a wish to have new volunteers continue the work undertaken. The rotation of members within organisations and a limited term would help get new associates. I congratulate and thank those who are involved in the liturgy, in sacramental preparation, and in religious education. Thank you to the baptised and confirmed who unhesitatingly witness to their faith at school as well as in their economic, social, cultural, and political milieus.

## **TARGET GROUPS**

Three groups have often been mentioned: the poor, the youth, and the elderly. Poverty has increased throughout New Brunswick, according to recent statistics and the needs expressed. Young, well-educated young people still have difficulty finding adequate work; others have lost faith in the future; the youth suicide rate has grown. The opening of a number of youth centres is a hopeful sign; it is regrettable that organisations like the Scouts and the Guides do not reach as many youth as before. And regarding the elderly, there are some who are lonely and needy: governmental politics are often inadequate in matters of housing and income.

## **RESTRUCTURING**

The establishment of pastoral zones where pastors and pastoral agents meet on a regular basis is a special form of collaboration and support. Many noteworthy examples of inter-parish cooperation are given: religious education, mutual aid, and information networking. It is not always easy to look beyond one's own community to the needs of others. There are beautiful examples of local initiatives in taking over a number of responsibilities, especially in those places with no priests on a regular basis. The situation of our priests is critical: the numbers are few, the task is heavy, health is affected, and there are no supply priests. Unless priests are discharged of all administrative tasks and inter-parish pastoral teams are formed, the immediate future is imperiled if there is illness or the retirement of one or another priest. Rather than resign ourselves to the actual lack of priests, several baptised and confirmed do not fear to commit themselves to service of their communities, and this, in the name of their very baptism.

## **VOCATIONS**

The Grand Falls Deanery has given a great number of priests, sisters, and brothers and missionaries to the Church. This has often been pointed out to me; I thank God with you for all these calls of God and all the yeses to them. I am certain of this: the Lord is still calling people to the service of the Gospel and the Church. May they respond with enthusiasm and courage. May the Risen Jesus be always with us and give us his Spirit for the greater glory of God. Have a good week.

+ François Thibodeau

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Bishop of Edmundston

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