
I NEVER THOUGHT THAT I WOULD ONE DAY BE BISHOP!



Even if Saint Paul asserts that it is something noble to aspire to being a bishop, I had never entertained such thoughts in me before I was appointed by Rome bishop of Edmundston. In a few days now I shall be celebrating the seventh anniversary of my episcopal ordination, so with you I would like to give thanks to the Lord for the mission he has given me, and to pray to him as I did that first day, to ever remain faithful to him. Brother bishops and priests, baptised and confirmed brothers and sisters, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for everything that you are to me.

A WEIGHTY CROSS

Within two weeks of my appointment as bishop I joined the Atlantic Provinces bishops for my first "ad limina" visit [to the Vatican]. On the way out of his private chapel Pope John Paul II gave me a pectoral cross, and what a cross it is! On it is engraved the threefold episcopal ministry which was newly-given to me: proclamation of the Word, celebration of the sacraments, and being shepherd of the Church of Edmundston. At the centre of the cross there is the figure of Christ asking Peter, "Peter, do you love me?" On this anniversary of my episcopal ordination I review what this seventh year has been like, to what extent have I proclaimed this Word of God? How have I celebrated the sacraments, and in what measure have I been your shepherd? This really calls for humility and for true surrender to the Lord's great mercy.

PROCLAIMING THE GOOD WORD OF HOPE

During the Jubilee Year I preached practically every Sunday. In fact, I had made it a point to undertake a pilgrimage to every church in the diocese in order to receive with my co-parishioners the graces of the Jubilee. What a joy it was for me to preach at the triduum of the consecrated life at the Hôtel-Dieu of St-Basile, and to participate in the Jubilee's Fifteen Days at Ste-Anne-de-la-Pocatière. In this way I gave dozens of homilies in the course of the year. But to this I must take up the pen also to speak the good word. By way of the "Bishop's Journal" which I publish weekly I want to reiterate the love of God for us all week in, week out. So many questions confront me, as shepherd of the flock. *"The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ -- and their shepherd -- as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community of people united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit in their pilgrimage towards the Father's kingdom, bearers of a message of salvation for all of humanity."* [Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, No. 1] This is the teaching from Vatican Council II which I endeavour to live daily among you. In the priority given to the episcopal mission, every bishop strives to respond to the wish of Christ: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations. Baptize them... [and] teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you." [Matthew 28:19-20]

CELEBRATING THE CAUSE OF OUR HOPE

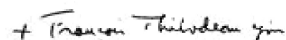
In his life of prayer, in his praying the divine office and celebrating the sacraments, the bishop praises the Author of our Charity, Jesus Christ the Lord. It is the great sacrament of the Eucharist which I celebrate the most often; it signifies the great alliance of a new covenant in Christ. Throughout the preparations for the Great

Jubilee and its celebration, this great sacrament was first and foremost, in our actions. At the heart of the four hundred or so celebrations held throughout the diocese this year, my aim was to proclaim the presence of Emmanuel, "God-with-Us", and all of his blessings. I was with much spiritual joy that I confirmed Confirmation to over one thousand children throughout the diocese. The seriousness of the preparation and the participation of their parents, sponsors and teachers are really uplifting. Although the numbers were not as great I nevertheless had the privilege of baptising a few babies and blessing some marriages, but it was a rare occasion when I had the opportunity to give the sacrament of penance and reconciliation to my brothers and sisters. At the Jubilee celebrations held at Ste-Anne-de-Madawaska it was through the anointing of the sick that I was able to express the compassion of Jesus for the sick. Finally, on May 20 I had the great joy of ordaining Ivan Thériault to the priesthood: a great gift to our diocesan Church! May all these sacraments be as many hymns to God's everlasting love!

SOWERS OF HOPE AND UNITY

I cannot hide the fact that this episcopal year was the busiest ever, not only due to all these teachings and celebrations but primarily because of my fifth episcopal visitation, this time to the Edmundston Deanery. At first there was hesitation on my part for undertaking this, not because of any misgivings – far from that! – but because I wanted to give these visits as much depth as I had given to the other four deaneries. The Edmundston Deanery has a population of 24,000, while the other four together comprise a population of 29,000... It was a wonderful, excellent visitation! I have so many thank yous to address to the parish pastoral teams and the hundreds of people who welcomed me to their homes, businesses, and community. A collection of writings which I published in October, 2000 – *Tenez en éveil la mémoire de Jésus* [Keep in Mind the Memory of Jesus". Forthcoming in English. Tr.] – is a report of the 32 pastoral visitations whose object was not only to get to better know you but also to increase your love of Jesus, your faith and your hope in Him who came among you two thousand years ago. May all these visitations give the same message to all those I have met, that "the love of God is from age to age". Thanks to all those who daily invite me, I experience the warmth of sharing the community life: no event makes me indifferent, it sometimes expresses happiness and fellowship, at other times it marks a stepping stone, a field ready for the sowing. I am certain of this: not all the trees have been planted, nor all the grain sown. Heirs to a long history, there is a wonderful future ahead of us, thanks to the communion which bonds us together, thanks also to the will of building together "a kingdom of justice and peace, of life and truth, of love and holiness."

At this time of the seventh anniversary of my episcopal ordination I once again assure you of my affection and gratitude, and I ask your prayers and solidarity. Let us carry out together the mission given to us.



+ François Thibodeau
Bishop of Edmundston

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