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## A TRIBUTE TO OUR ELDERS

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I would be hard pressed to find a more meaningful text than the twenty-fifth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel as a theme for a meeting of elders who have dedicated themselves so selflessly and generously to serving their brothers and sisters, in gestures of welcome, in caring for them and sharing with them food and clothing, in visiting them in times of difficulty, whether at home, in the hospital and nursing homes, even in detention centres. « As often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me. » Jesus also says that he rewards a hundredfold whoever gives a glass of water in his name.

### « A GRANDMOTHER IS SOMETHING GREAT! »

I would like to mention two events which have influenced my reflection on our elders. The first took place the evening of my ordination; my maternal grandmother had just turned 88. Bishop Aurèle Plourde who had ordained me in St. Odilon, my home parish, had mentioned the bonds uniting a family among themselves and a parish, on the occasion of an ordination. At the meal, my father was called on to speak, his first public speaking ever. Do you know what he said? « If we are here tonight it is to Grandmother Poulin that we owe it, when she allowed her daughter Yvonne to become my wife! » By saying yes to life, by cooperating in the projects of others, we allow our brother or sister to grow and develop. A grandmother is something great! It is great, being an elder. A decision is something great, it marks us for life, it marks us for eternity. Accepting or refusing life has consequences both for this life and the next. « If we are here, we owe it to Grandmother! »

### A SPECIAL LINK

Grandmother was precious in our eyes, she meant a lot to us. She was a special link in the call to the priesthood which I was given to hear. I am certain that not only on the day she consented to her daughter getting married but throughout her long life, Grandmother worked and prayed for vocations to the priesthood, in her family. I am, certain, too, that she also prayed for her descendants who accepted the call to marriage: she prayed for their happiness, that he meet a good girl, that she meet a good young man. She paid close attention to the future of her nine children, 53 grandchildren, 92 great grandchildren, and 3 great great grandsons. My tribute to her is a tribute to all the elders among us who have sowed life and love around them. The garden they have tilled and cultivated now produces a beautiful harvest.

### ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF LIFE!

The other event I want to mention in relation to my grandmother was the celebration of her hundredth birthday. While my mother – her daughter – lived only 44 years, Grandmother lived to the age of 101! It was on January 9, 1977 – 17 years before my ordination as bishop, January 9, 1994. The St. Odilon church was full to capacity as people gathered to pay tribute to the parish's first centenarian. I met Grandmother at the church door. She took my arm and we entered the church together. I will never forget the scene: Grandmother holding my arm, both of us walking up the centre aisle together. Most impressive moments, moments of simplicity and greatness, moments charged with emotion. When we reached the front of the church I was so overwhelmed with emotion that it was too much. It seems to me that these few short moments were filled with all the past; so many memories welled up in me, but these memories were charged with the present: Grandmother was

standing at my side, bent by the weight of a hundred years. I think that one of the secrets of her long life was the meaning she charged it with. She accepted her life just as it was given by God. Things were not always easy for her; she must have felt like she was imposing on others; I sometimes heard her ask why God did not come to get her, while he took others who were much younger than she. If there had been no meaning to her life, if she had not believed in life, if she had not believed in the Lord, Grandmother would not have lived as long. She believed in life. The Lord granted her a long life, and in this life there was great quality. Walking up the long aisle of the parish church with her, I thought about the meaning of life, of her life, but I was also thinking of all the elderly, the old and the very old.

## GIANTS OF OUR HISTORY

It is my opinion that our elders are truly giants of our history. They are like trees planted in our heartland. They are the cedars, maple, oak, hardwood trees, strong, deep, rooted among us. They have marked and still mark our history; they created most of our institutions, and they have been and still remain the bearers of our greatest values. They were and are still believers; they believed and still believe in their neighbours; their word was and still remains true. It seems to me that these giants can still inspire our history, our collective life, just like the great prophets who came before Jesus. They were makers of justice, charity, and peace; they were courageous, they had a sense of self-sacrifice, gradually or suddenly they gave their lives daily, and day after day they walked in faith towards their ideal. They progressed, they journeyed, they never stopped. That January 9, 1977, I walked up the church aisle with Grandmother. I was journeying with her, so frail on the outside yet so rich inside. At 100 she was still walking on; together we walked to the altar of the Lord to give him thanks. These two events marked me deeply, and I wanted to tell you about them very simply, in gratitude to Grandmother, in thanksgiving to the Lord, in thanksgiving to all the elders in our midst.

## WE NEED YOU!

Dear elder brothers and sisters, continue to give meaning to your lives: your wisdom, your prayer, your presence, your perseverance and persistence make our world a better place. I end with these few lines by Jacques Grand'maison: *«They have so much to teach us, these elders of the third age. In a world frozen to the bone, their human warmth is a living legacy. Do you think that there is no longer any room for these living witnesses of what is imperishable? These poets of our childhood dreams, these watchers of our every energy, these saints of noble daily life, these "hoppers" in the midst of our surrenders? Like the great pine tree in front of the old homestead, you have something in you that is eternal. Your memory connects us with history. We need you, companions of the night.»*



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