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## HIS LOVE IS FROM AGE TO AGE!

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It is in the light of these words of the Virgin Mary that I want to look back on my vocation story. Was God's love really present to my family and to me in particular?

### IN THE MIDST OF POVERTY

I was the seventh of twelve children. While not living in dire poverty, we had few material resources. Father worked hard to feed the family: work on the farm in the spring and summer, and work in the woods in the winter. The children, too, had to work according to their ability. It was through the affection shown in the family that I had my first intuitions of God. I came to recognise Jesus more and more clearly in the bonds that united us to one another. We lived in a faith-filled atmosphere which was expressed in prayer, prayer before meals, morning and evening prayer, and worship in church. Following the family rosary, Father would remain kneeling a long period of time in silent prayer. Mother also spent long moments in prayer: I still see her in my mind's eye, praying with arms outstretched in the form of a cross. The love of God was truly present in the family.

### MOTHER'S DEATH

July 27, 1961: I had just had my twelfth birthday. Mother had been in hospital for a week; doctors have diagnosed meningitis. Mother's last words were to father, to ask that my brother and I eventually continue our studies for the priesthood. Father agreed and she thanked him with a beautiful smile. But how would this happen? August 5, 1951: Mother dies at the age of 44, leaving father alone with 11 children, a little sister of mine having died in 1948 at the age of five months. As was the custom then, mother was waked at home three days and nights. During this time, the assistant priest visited the family to offer his condolences. Taking me aside, he told me that I had passed the entrance exams two weeks before, and informed me that I was accepted at the Saint-Jean-Eudes College, and my classics studies would take place at the Saint-Coeur-de-Marie Minor Seminary; he himself would find the money to pay for my tuition. To do so, he asked the local lumbermen to each cut a cord of wood for a future priest; because of this, I shall never know the names of my generous benefactors. August 9, 1951 was the date of mother's funeral. The church, all draped in black, was filled with people. During the afternoon, following the funeral, family friends came with an offer to adopt one or the other of us... Father thanked them for their kindness and understanding: "It is bad enough that they are orphans, without their being separated from one another." Father would be widowed five years, providing for the younger children. Throughout this difficult and tragic period, our faith in divine Providence never flagged. The death of someone as loving as mother would always remain an unhealed wound, but the love of God was there. Throughout my life I have felt mother's presence at my side, and her tender care of me has been felt many times. She left us all the exceptional values of kindness and solidarity.

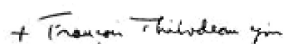
### SCHOOL AND SEMINARY

September 5, 1951 marked my first trip to Québec. It was also my first day at the Saint-Coeur-de-Marie Minor Seminary, lodged at the Saint-Jean-Eudes College, a school for students who think they might have a vocation as Eudist priests. Used as I was to wide-open spaces, I suddenly found myself enclosed by fences, with the odours of the Anglo-Pulp Mill poisoning the air. October 3, 1951: I become a runaway! With the help of a friend

I manage to make it back to Saint-Odilon. Noticing my absence, the director of the seminary notified my parish priest. When I arrive, my family is waiting for me at the bus stop. Father, whose reaction I quite feared, said aloud: "I knew very well that you were too young to go off to boarding school!" But I believe that St. Theresa of Lisieux, whose feast day it was, had a hand in this. The priest came to the house and asked whether I wanted to return to the seminary or stay home. On my bus trip back home I had had the time to reconsider my action, so I answered, "I'll go back tomorrow!" Thanks to the assistant director and my spiritual director, I continued along the path I had undertaken. Studies went well, interspersed by many periods of prayer and reflection. Retreats and days of recollection are a great aid in learning to discern God's call, whose presence is always there. Following the students' retreat capping six years of classical studies – a retreat animated by a Vincentian priest, Father Maurice Couture, who is now the Archbishop of Québec – I asked to join the Eudists. September 7, 1957, at the age of 18 I, along with six fellow graduates were "clothed with the cassock", when we began our training as future Eudists. Following two years of philosophy at Saint-Coeur Seminary in Charlesbourg, Québec, from August, 1960 to July, 1961 I was sent "into the active life" to Université Saint-Louis in Edmundston. In September of 1961 I and a few other theology students are welcomed to Saint-Jean-Eudes Seminary in Limbourg, Québec, by Father Fernand Lacroix, the superior. I became a full-fledged member of the Congregation of Jesus and Mary (the Eudist Fathers) October 1, 1961. This was followed by tonsure and minor orders. I was ordained subdeacon June 3, 1964 by Bishop Paul-Émile Charbonneau, and deacon by newly-consecrated Archbishop Joseph-Aurèle Plourde whom I had known in Edmundston. On Saturday, May 8, 1965, Archbishop Plourde came to Saint-Odilon to ordain me to the priesthood. On my souvenir card I had the following words inscribed: *Love is not loved enough: let us love one another!*

#### **A WONDERFUL MISSION**

For 37 years now the Lord has continued to show me His love. After teaching religious studies at Saint-Jean-Eudes College I had the privilege of taking a three-year course at the Laval University School of Social Service. In May, 1971, Cardinal Maurice Roy appointed me director of social services for the Diocese of Québec. In May, 1986, Cardinal Louis-Albert Vachon appointed me editor in chief of *Pastorale Québec*. In June, 1990 the Superior General of the Eudist Congregation asked me to take over the charge of provincial superior of the Eudists in North America. On October 23, 1993 the Holy Father appointed me the fifth bishop of Edmundston, and on January 9, 1994 Bishop Gérard Dionne, assisted by Archbishop Donat Chiasson and Bishop Fernand Lacroix, C.J.M., with eleven other bishops present, consecrated me bishop. Based on Holy Scripture and the rich Eudist spiritual heritage, I chose as my motto: *His Love Is from Age to Age*.



+ François Thibodeau, C.J.M.

Bishop of Edmundston

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