
REDISCOVERING THE WONDERFUL MISSION OF THE PRIEST (1)



The numerous changes taking place in our Church and our country have greatly modified the “status” given to priests in general and each and every priest among us. Pastoral restructuring, too, has been instrumental in altering the image we had of these men whom we held as “unique and special”, and around whom the life of the Church evolved. Mass media has over saturated the population with negative news of the clergy, and serious acts made by them have tarnished the image we had of these dedicated men; in certain places, the trust we had in them has been irremediably broken. Nevertheless, we must reaffirm that the Church of Christ cannot exist without priests. We must together rediscover the wonderful mission of the priest, a mission totally dedicated to proclaiming the Word of God, and to achieving holiness and creating unity.

PRIEST-MISSIONARIES

We had to wait many years before the diocese experienced in the 1970s an unprecedented number of priests. That period was short-lived, however. Between 1860 and 1870 there were only seven priests in the whole of northern New Brunswick but then, there were neither people nor parishes! Saint-Basile was erected in 1792, Saint-François in 1859, Grand Falls in 1868, Saint-Hilaire, in 1869, and Saint Ann, Maliseet, in 1870. The priests in those days were “missionaries” who had to travel vast distances on foot, horseback, and canoe. Where there were rectories, the priests would settle down for a while, but their missionary spirit always urged them forward towards new communities. In this way missions and chapels were built in other areas. From 1872 to 1886, Sainte-Anne mission was looked after by Saint-Basile and Saint Leonard [Van Buren]. In 1880, Saint-Jacques became a mission of Edmundston, in 1890 Green River was given to the pastoral care of Saint-Basile, and in 1919 the mission of Saint-Joseph was looked after by Edmundston. Parish priests in Drummond were ever mindful of what was taking place in Southern Victoria; it is to them that we owe the coming of the Franciscans who laboured 75 years in the region. Two other religious congregations, the Eudists and the Holy Cross Fathers contributed to the development of our parishes, in the beautiful Tobique and in Upper Madawaska. In 1904, three Eudists became the first resident priests at Maliseet, ministering Maliseet itself and the surrounding region.

PRIEST-COLONISERS, PRIEST-PASTORS

It was thanks to priest-colonisers that the Restigouche missions took root. Father Arthur Melanson, the priest-coloniser from Balmoral, gave us the parishes of Très-Saint-Sacrement, in Saint-Quentin, and Notre-Dames-des-Prodiges, in Kedgwick. He was succeeded in his fledgling ministry by remarkable priests. In this manner Father Melanson’s young curate, Father Eudore Martin had the responsibility of the church, rectory, and school, and of clearing the land for these buildings. “The apostle of Jesus Christ was not discouraged, he was strong with the power of the Almighty, and the heavier the burden, the greater was his trust in God,” wrote Germaine Bergeron-Fournier in her book *Petite histoire paroissiale*. Gradually, these priest-colonisers were given the more traditional titles of pastors and curates.

PRIEST-EDUCATORS, PRIEST-CHAPLAINS

As the number of clergy increased, their pastoral ministry became more diversified. More than a hundred Eudist and diocesan priests served at Université Saint-Louis in the first twenty-five years of its existence. Several religious communities had their own chaplain: as early as 1920 the Religious Hospitallers of Saint

Joseph, at Saint-Basile, had their own resident chaplain, as did the Marist Sisters and the Blessed Sacrament Sisters. Thanks to the development of the Catholic Action Movement, several priests became chaplains to youth groups and rural youth. Several priests became military chaplains, etc. There were also school chaplains, hospital chaplains, and even chaplains to municipal services. Every organisation prided itself in having its own chaplain. Even now, the Knights of Columbus and the Daughters of Isabella have their respective chaplains.

PRIEST-MODERATORS

The 1983 Code of Canon Law introduced a new “kind” of priest. In pastoral teams ensuring ministry in a parish, the priest member of the team is called the “moderator”, and he serves as go-between with the diocesan bishop. The word “moderator,” as a legal term, sounds very strange to us. The Code uses the word in several places to designate one in authority at the head of a religious institute, a congregation, or religious society. In pastoral teams the bishop must appoint a priest as moderator of the pastoral charge, enjoying the juridic power of a pastor, though he may not be so in the strict sense. Thus it is that since three years we have fifteen priests in our presbyterium who are “moderators”. Church legislation provides that, for lack of priests, the local bishop may judge it necessary to have a joint exercise of the pastoral charge by a group of people, or “pastoral team.”

PRIEST-EVANGELIZERS

In this bird’s-eye view of our religious history we can make out the main features of each type of priest mentioned, but what seems to me fundamental and universal is the passionate love of Christ Jesus and zeal for his Gospel which incited these men to bring to those furthest away the Good News of the Gospel. Nothing could dampen their zeal, in days of yore, and nothing can dampen the zeal of today’s priest-evangelizers. We are certain, even as we carry our treasure in very fragile containers, that nothing can separate us from the love of God. “God’s flock is in your midst; give it a shepherd’s care. Watch over it willingly as God would have you do, not under constraint; and not for shameful profit, but generously. Be examples of the flock, not lording it over those assigned to you, so that when the chief Shepherd appears you will win yourselves the unfading crown of glory” (1 Peter 5:2-4).

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