
BUILDING THE CHURCH TOGETHER (2)



The major financial campaign we, in the diocese of Edmundston, are involved in is only one aspect of the wonderful work site which is spread before us. We must build together for our loved ones, present and future, in the form of lasting family- and parish-based religious education, appropriate family and youth ministry, suitable training for parish pastoral personnel, and pastoral restructuring according to our needs. Let us take a look at what the immense field of religious education has in store for us.

A ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-YEAR OLD STORY

If our Christian faith has been passed on from generation to generation, we must give thanks to God for the stalwart missionaries who reached us by foot and canoe, from Québec and Acadia. We owe a debt of gratitude to the first Acadians who maintained the faith alive in their families. There were few priests with the people returning from Deportation, and parents made it their duty to pray together as a family and to pass on to their children the heritage of the faith they themselves had received. School houses were built, but as early as 1870 New Brunswick legislation prohibited denominational schools. It was to counter these “Godless schools” as they were then known that the Religious Hospitaliers of Saint Joseph came to Saint-Basile. A people’s faith cannot be extinguished by a law. Many Catholics, especially the Francophones, confronted the new law and succeeded in gradually inserting religious education either before classes or after class hours; they even managed to keep “the crucifix in the schools,” according to the expression of the time. On the Anglophone side, a network of Sunday schools was established, and much effort went into ensuring religious education. The advent of new school structures, especially regional high schools, put into question all of these small gains of the people; the heavy workloads of teachers and staff, school bus schedules, government policies, and cultural and religious changes, all of these were catalysts in terminating all religious education programmes in schools to such an extent that in some areas the children did not even remember how to make the sign of the cross or recite the “Our Father.”

TO FILL A VOID...

We do not yet fully realise how much gratitude we owe our teachers who gave their all to educate our children and youth in the faith: only God can truly reward their long hours of religious education and involvement in sacramental preparation. This example can help us understand the hole left by the termination of religious education in our schools. If overnight mothers were to hold back their work at home for even a few hours, perhaps we would then have a slight idea of what has happened to religious education, in the last few years... This resembles what Sylvain Lelièvre sings about the mother who suddenly leaves her daily job... The diocese of Bathurst has greatly helped by allowing us to use all of their family- and parish-based religious education programmes. Sister Irène Pelletier, F.M.A. enthusiastically set to work on this in her usual methodical manner. She was joined in this by several collaborators, and the parents’ and pastors’ response was exceptional... In the space of a year or two all the programmes were ready to use. Thanks to the translation work of Father Leo Grégoire, the Anglophone Sector was able to introduce the same programme. A diocesan committee was appointed for support, input, and feedback. As far as adult faith education is concerned, the diocese continues its effort through the School of Faith in both sectors, French and English; the French École de la Foi is starting its nineteenth consecutive year, while the School of Faith is into its eighteenth year.

A PASSION

Of all the Vatican Council and Synodal exhortations on religious education, the one I feel the strongest about is the one concerning developing in every diocese, “a veritable passion for religious education, a passion rooted in an organisation which is adapted to local needs, and effective,” and “establishing a global catechetical programme, well articulated and coherent, suited to the real needs of the faithful, and suitably situated within the overall pastoral plans of the diocese.” The Catechetical Directory published by the Holy See is replete with reflections and recommendations, but I believe that if we continue together to develop in our parents, children, and pastors a real passion for religious education, we will have made good and indispensable progress. It seems to me that this is what we are achieving! Added personnel will help us make greater strides. For example, if in each deanery there were someone to help the parents concerned, this would be a great asset in welcoming and deepening the Word of God, and – for our children – in making an unforgettable encounter with Jesus our Friend.

NEW PATHS

We shall have to always keep in mind that the child is at the heart of the catechetical encounter, hence the importance of taking into account his/her emotional, intellectual, and religious development. Jesus Christ the Good News is the very heart of Christian living. The Spirit helps us live the project of God our Father, revealed to us in Jesus. Religious education, inspired by the first Christian communities, introduces the child to the major dimensions of Christian life: fellowship, personal and community prayer, celebration of the Eucharist, knowledge of the Word of God, and transformation of one’s milieu according to Gospel values. In the coming months and years, the diocesan committee will have more specific directives regarding the faith awakening of the little ones (0-5), Christian initiation of the 6 to 13, youth ministry, and religious education teacher training, all of this in union with the parents. Let us continue to build our Church together!

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