
BUILDING THE CHURCH TOGETHER (3)



Our hearts carry a wonderful secret, a treasure to be shared first with our loved ones, and then with all those around us. We are infinitely loved by God the Father; Jesus has revealed Him to humankind. Not only was this the principal reason of his proclamation, but he proved it by giving up his life for us. We are constantly reminded of this, in our religious education programmes. And we who have been baptised and confirmed are called upon to be special witnesses and heralds of this great news. To join in the catechetical undertaking is to join in building up the Kingdom of God – just like the mustard seed planted in good soil! Besides, this Word concerns not only persons but families, too.

FAMILY MINISTRY

It has often been recommended that the Diocese of Edmundston have its Family Ministry Office; this was one of the specific recommendations of the 1987-1990 Diocesan Synod, but because of certain constraints, financial and otherwise (lack of qualified personnel, etc.), this Office has yet to be established. This is a challenge still to be picked up! One needs only to look at the work done by other dioceses, to get an idea of the requirements of such a ministry; one must also take into account the exhortation of Pope John Paul II on the work of the Christian family in the world today. One has only to join in the lively discussions now taking place regarding the definition of marriage, to realize a little more the greatness of the challenge. However, in re-developing family ministry, we have something to fall on! There are many beautiful things taking place in our families. Besides, a diocesan committee on family ministry has been hard at work, this past year. Marriage preparation sessions are given in each of our deaneries, along with parish meetings of parents preparing their children to receive the sacraments. These were occasions for pleasant and fruitful meetings. The same also applies to meetings of pastors or the parish team on the occasion of parish and family events: births, deaths, illnesses, etc. One must not forget, either, the wonderful work achieved by the Centre Sérénité and by such groups as the Cursillo, the Knights of Columbus and Daughters of Isabella, Marriage Encounter, the Catholic Women's League, etc.

STEPS TO BE TAKEN

While ensuring the complete success of our major financial campaign, we shall have to adopt a family ministry programme suited to the expectations of families concerned, as well as to Church expectations. It is the Church's desire to be with Christian families on their spiritual journey. The Church supports efforts that ensure adequate preparation to those who want to start a family. The Edmundston Synod not only stressed the obligation to attend marriage preparation programmes, but also their indispensable need. These sessions have evolved with time; their short duration is not a passport to a seamless married life, but rather a bird's-eye view of what could be a careful preparation to life as a couple. What means are truly taken by future spouses to ensure the growth of their love, one which resembles the very love of Christ? There has even been talk of some kind of catechumenate of celebration of Christian marriage similar to that of the progressive journey of catechumens to baptism. The celebration of Christian marriage requires a high degree of freedom and maturity: who today knows the meaning of Christian marriage? Called to mutual love and to the gift of life, do Christian couples know that they are signs of the love of Jesus Christ for humankind? Some kind of "post-marriage" ministry will also have to be developed: following a successful marriage celebrated in faith and hope, we must ensure that the couple grow in love which is strong enough to confront the day-to-day reality, the trials of life, mourning, and periods marked by all kinds of regression.

A MESSENGER OF SALVATION TO THOSE IN DIFFICULTY

Family ministry to be developed will have to be attentive to new family situations. The multiplicity of separations and divorces raises questions in couples and reconstituted families. These situations are a big challenge to all pastoral action that to be, in word and deed, a messenger of the salvation offered by Jesus to those whose married life is stable as well as to those who have experienced marriage breakdown. The Church must be a sign of the unconditional welcome offered by Jesus to those who labour under heavy burdens: the Church must respect the dignity of all. We must therefore reaffirm loudly that the divorced and remarried are members of the Church, and we must develop with them a pastoral ministry of welcome and evangelisation. This means that we must continue developing in a special way attitudes of openness, understanding, and support towards those who feel excluded because of their marital situation or because of their sexual orientation. Developing community networks concerned with welcoming and visiting the wounded and the excluded would be an important step taken in our diocesan life. The formation of such support and affirmation groups for those who have been bruised by life would help them live their faith, and celebrate; it would also help them take on responsibilities in their own Christian communities.

INHUMAN TASKS?

If I owe it to myself to believe that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed which will grow into a high shrub where birds can perch, if I owe it to myself to believe that it is the families themselves that must evangelise families, I cannot, however, keep from thinking about the indispensable role of a sound ministry to families, a ministry whose primary function would be to give families a sense of self-worth and of value to society, so as to challenge them and help them. Those responsible for family ministry could organise family gatherings periodically, hold conferences, seminars, and sessions to help young parents in their task of educating their children; parents could also be invited to days of renewal. Activities at the parish level could be promoted: monthly family masses, family days, celebrating anniversaries. Special, discrete attention should be paid to needy families. Also, one should not be insensible to the elders in our families and communities. The priest sociologist Jacques Grand'Maison writes: "These silver-haired lovers have so much to teach us. In a rock-splitting cold world, their human warmth is a living legacy. Do you believe that there is no longer any room for these happy witnesses of the enduring, these poets of our childish dreams, these watchers of our every enthusiasm, these saints of noble daily life, these hope-filled souls in the midst of our discouragements?"

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