
A TRIBUTE TO FR. ALMER LEVASSEUR (1937-2005)



The priest is called on, daily, to repeat the actions of the Last Supper in memory of Jesus. Saint Paul passed on to us what he himself received from the tradition that comes from the Lord. “[T]he Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread, and after he had given thanks, broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you.’ In the same way, after the supper, he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, whenever you drink it, in memory of me.’” And so, every time we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the death of Jesus until he comes. Throughout his 42 years of priesthood, Father Almer repeated thousands of times Jesus’ own words. The priest is truly a man of the Eucharist. In his letter to priests for Holy Thursday, this year, Pope John Paul II wrote: “These words provide us with illuminating insights for priestly spirituality: if the whole Church draws life from the Eucharist, all the more then must the life of a priest be ‘shaped’ by the Eucharist. So for us, the words of institution must be more than a formula of consecration: they must be a ‘formula of life.’”

FIRST EUCHARISTIC CONGRESS

Thinking back on Father Almer’s life I have fond recollections of 1996 when he was the first priest to coordinate the first eucharistic congress preparatory to the Jubilee of the year 2000. This first diocesan congress, which was held in the Restigouche, was so successful that in certain pastoral zones there were comments to the effect that it would not be possible to do as much. My response was that each zone organise its congress according to its own capacity and resources. The theme of this first congress was: *Do this in memory of me*. At the closing mass which took place on Corpus Christi Sunday, I said that if we wanted to discover the great richness of the mass, we would hasten to church with joy, and make sure we got there on time! We would no longer argue about how to share this gift with others. After our eucharistic celebrations our faces would reflect the Resurrection, mercy, and happiness. Homecoming celebrations that parishes periodically organise help us “recover” our roots and finely tune our sense of belonging; they could help us discover the real meaning of our existence. Every member of a group or family, every parishioner carries in him- or herself a part of our common heritage, an unpublished page or even an entire chapter of the group’s history. Every person has great value. The picture would be incomplete and the book would be unfinished, if one or the other essential element were lacking.

IN MEMORY OF JESUS

It seems to me that this holds true, also, when we do Eucharist in memory of Jesus. Every baptised person is extremely important in signifying Jesus and in recalling his presence yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Every person is a member of Jesus: if one member is missing, the memory of Jesus is not recalled adequately. Every baptised person bears a particular aspect of Jesus; every baptised person has a unique experience of Jesus: his or her life story, spiritual journey, and God’s particular call are irreplaceable and unique, and they can reveal an aspect of Jesus. It is important that each one of us keep alive the memory of Jesus. The young baptised remind us of the youthful Jesus and a youthful Church, they remind us of Jesus’ energy, his warmth and passion. Young Christians are called to build a new earth, a new heaven where the justice willed by Jesus reigns. Christian couples reveal daily to the whole world that love which God has for all of us, since He gave us His Son. Through their consecrated life, every religious brother and sister reminds us of the presence of Jesus, praying and serving, a sign of communion and fellowship, a service to our world, to the glory of our God. Every priest and bishop recalls the memory of Jesus. Their whole being recalls the memory of Jesus, they are special signs of him. The holy anointing they received makes them like Jesus. Their whole life and ministry is a reminder of Jesus the Good Shepherd, a reminder of what he was, is, and will be for our world. The entire Church is a memorial of Jesus.

FATHER ALMER WAS THIS MEMORY

Father Almer was in a special way this memorial of Jesus, through all the eucharistic celebrations he presided for the parishioners of Saint-Jacques, Saint-Basile, the Cathedral Parish, Saint-Quentin and Saint-Martin, as well as for youth groups and engaged couples, the sick and the elderly. He was a memory of Jesus through his daily prayer, his pastoral ministry, his words, and all his expressions of compassion and help. Father Almer was the memory of Jesus in the sufferings he bore throughout his life, physical suffering and psychological suffering due to his great sensibility: he could not be indifferent to all that was said against him, to all the judgments made against him, to all that was written and done against him. There was suffering, too, due to his being away from people he loved and esteemed. Keeping the memory of Jesus also means carrying Jesus' cross, having a part in the denials and treason, and sharing in the suffering, to the very gift of one's life.

COMFORTING PRESENCE

However, Father Almer did not seek our pity. In his vocation story written in 2002, he said: "What moved me first and foremost to become a priest was the desire I had to be a comforting presence to others. There was only one word that kept recurring: service! I remember that during this time of spiritual journeying I hesitated for a while between medicine and priesthood. A hesitation between "physical healing" and "spiritual healing"! I wanted to be close to others, to the suffering, to those with problems, and to lead them as best I could to a better life... A priest's life is truly a love story, a history of being in love with God and with others. It is a story made up of joys and sorrows, success and defeat, greatness and affliction, security and crisis, praise and criticism. In other words, the adventure of the priesthood is an adventure of faith: one must surrender to God who is Love. A priest's life is a mystery, the mystery of God communicated to humans to bring them what is essential to life: love. Despite my weaknesses, I want my life to continue proclaiming this essential value. Because Someone, one day, "seduced me and prevailed." And when on the final day I shall return home at the Father's call, I hope to hear him say: "Come, faithful servant..." (Mt. 25:21).

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