



From A Bishop's Journal (709)

A Tribute to Father Gaëtan Bernier (1967-2007)

Father Gaëtan Bernier passed away July 31, and his funeral was held in the Saint-Jacques parish church, August 4, the feast day of St. John Vianney, the “Curé” of Ars (France), a saint to whom Father Gaëtan was especially devoted. Like the Saint, he liked to bring God’s forgiveness to all who desired reconciliation with the Redeemer. And like the Saint, he wanted to proclaim the Word of God to the people and open to them the treasures of the Eucharist.

“Gospel Treasure”

In looking back on the quality of Father Gaëtan at the A.-M.-Sormany Regional High School in Edmundston, and his ministry at Notre-Dame-des-Sept-Douleurs, Notre-Dame-du-Sacré-Cœur, Immaculate Conception, without forgetting Saint-Jacques and Assumption in Grand Falls, I am reminded of the words of priest-singer Robert Lebel: “We bear a treasure in earthen vessels, the earth of our bodies, a treasure of the Gospel. Treasury of faith and hope, whose richness surprises us. A treasure of life and presence which infinitely surpasses us. A treasure to a world searching without knowing how to go down to the very roots of its being, in order to be reborn and find itself. A treasure that opens to the heart of the poor, as soon as his voice reaches him. But is our voice, among so many, an echo of yourself?” We think of the many homilies he shared with us, short, concise but full of life, given at youth masses, family masses, and funerals. His hope-filled words went straight to the heart of his hearers and rekindled in them a desire to be true disciples of Jesus.

“Hidden in our Weaknesses”

Father Lebel continues: “A treasure filled with your promises. But to see it we must strip ourselves of our wisdom and let you cover us. A treasure hidden in our weaknesses where your strength is shown. A treasure of love that presses us to live for you alone. A treasure buried in the silence where old words no longer do. These oceans of difference where our boat has been tossed about.” We who have faith, hope, and love are more than millionaires despite our weaknesses, our illnesses, and our suffering. We are bearers of the Good News of God, of His kindness, His compassion, His affection: we bear in ourselves, in the weakness of our beings, God Himself who made Himself everything to all people.

“In Your Holy Wounds”

In his vocation story, Father Gaëtan talks of his three favourite devotions. The first to brighten his life was the special devotion he had to the wounds of Our Lord Jesus Christ. He doubtless joined countless thousands in praying the *Anima Christi*: “Soul of Jesus Christ, sanctify me. Body of Jesus Christ, save me. Blood of Jesus Christ, inebriate me. Water from the side of Jesus Christ, purify me. Passion of Jesus Christ, strengthen me. Oh good Jesus, answer my prayer. Hide me in your holy wounds. Never let me be parted from you. Defend me against the Evil One. Call me, at the hour of death, and make me come to you. Admit me in the company of your saints, so that I may praise you for ever and ever.”

Disciple of Brother André

It comes as no surprise that Father Gaëtan had a great devotion to Brother André: his humility was a constant lesson to him, and his preaching to all the sick without exception made him turn to the sufferings of others rather than to his own. He was always happy to anoint the sick during the novena to the feast of St. Ann. His kindness gave comfort to the sick he met in the hospital hallways. And Brother André brought him to his great friend St. Joseph in whom Father Gaëtan had complete trust.

Disciple of St. John Vianney

Father Gaëtan read many times over the biography of St. John Vianney. The sainted Curé of Ars, born May 8, 1786, and died August 4, 1859. On this anniversary of his, let us reflect on a few words that must surely have touched Father Gaëtan throughout his life. Here, then, are a few words about the cross:

- “At baptism you accepted a cross that you may not lay aside before your death.”
- “The cross embraces the world. It is planted in the four corners of the universe. There is a piece of it for everyone.”
- The cross is the wisest book that we can read. Those who have no knowledge of this book are ignorant even if they know all the other books.”
- “A house that is built on the cross will fear neither wind, nor rain, nor storms.”
- “If we could spend a week in heaven, we would understand the price of this moment of suffering. We would not find the cross too heavy, and no trials would be severe enough.”

Words of St. John Vianney about Priests

- “How great is the priesthood! If the priest realised this, he would die... God obeys him: he speaks two words and Our Lord descends from heaven at his words, and hides inside the small host.”
- “The priest will know himself well only in heaven.”
- “If we understood the priest well on earth we would die, not because of fear but from love.”
- “If I met a priest and an angel I would greet the priest before the angel. The angel is a friend of God, but the priest stands in His place.”
- “Oh! Do not speak ill of priests!”
- “When you see a priest you should say: ‘Here is the one who made me a child of God... the one who purified me after my sin, and who gives food to my soul.’”

A Disciple of the Sulpicians

I want to express my deep gratitude to the Sulpician Fathers of the Grand Séminaire of Montréal. These formators deeply marked Father Gaëtan. They gave him wisdom and pastoral maturity. They taught him the Church's great traditions and everything about Church renewal in the wake of Vatican Council II. It was always a blessing to Father Gaëtan to keep contact with his teachers who lived what they taught. As we neared the celebrations marking the 350th anniversary of the coming of the Sulpicians to Canada, Father Gaëtan and I had enjoyed the beautiful book published last spring, called *Sulpiciens de Montréal – une histoire de pouvoir et de discrétion 1657-2007*. ["Sulpicians of Montreal – A History of power and Discretion 1657-2007"]. We had already talked about the forthcoming celebration.

A Disciple of Doris and Monique

Far from me to wound their modesty, I want to stress the great contribution of Father Gaëtan's parents in his preparation for the priesthood and the exercise of his apostolate. The Church of Edmundston owes an immense debt of gratitude to Mr. and Mrs. Bernier who were there for him from his childhood until today. I believe that Cardinal Newman's prayer could join that of many parents who watch over their beloved children: "Oh my God and Saviour, you who bore for me so much suffering with patience and strength, give me courage, if I must go through such trials, to bear them with patience. Grant me this grace, O Virgin Mary, you who witnessed your Son's suffering and who suffered with him, to be associated with his sufferings and yours when I suffer, and to obtain through his passion, and through yours merits and those of all the saints, salvation for life everlasting." Rest forever, Father Gaëtan, in the peace of Christ.

+ François Thibodeau *in*

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Bishop of Edmundston

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