



From A Bishop's Journal (742)

Restigouche, the Blessed Land

On March 17 I had the honour of celebrating the Chrism Mass in the church of Notre-Dame-des-Prodiges in Kedgwick, on the occasion of the centennial of the first Mass celebrated in the Restigouche in 1908 by Bishop Joseph-Arthur Melanson.

The Beautiful Restigouche Country

We are in the beautiful Restigouche country: a blessed land, a land sanctified not only by its founders but also by its 6000 baptised and confirmed who live there today and witness with their entire being that this is a land blessed by God, and that for a century now, Holy Mass has been celebrated here to the glory of God and for the salvation of the world. Visionary that he was, Bishop Melanson once said that there would one day be villages all along the railroad line between Campbellton and Saint Leonard, where the land is favourable to lumbering and farming. While Bishop Melanson at times celebrated mass for the woodsmen in their camps, it was really all along the railway line that Masses were said. All that was needed for an altar was tree trunk, and with great devotion, hymns and prayers were raised to God for all these people whose common lot was poverty, misery, and even devastating forest fires.

The Eucharist Builds the Church

“The Church lives from the Eucharist,” said Pope John Paul II on Holy Thursday, 2003, in his encyclical letter on the Eucharist. You are right, then, my dear people of the Restigouche, to celebrate this year what was at the very heart of the origin of the region, that is, the celebration of the first Eucharist by Father Melanson at the very beginning of colonisation, there, in 1908. Good seed was thus put into the ground, and it grew and brought forth the holy people of God. Priest-poet Robert Lebel would sing: “As we put in a garden in the early summer, as we scatter the seed on the land in May, let us place in the heart of the Gardener, early in the morning, the work of our hands and our desire to love, just as we put in a garden. And may God be always at the heart of our homes as a refrain of love at the heart of our songs.”

Four Parishes

It took much love to build the four Restigouche parishes of Notre-Dame-des-Prodiges, Saint-Jean-Baptiste at Oliver Siding, Saint-Sacrement of Saint Quentin, and Notre-Dame-de-la-Paix in Saint-Martin of the Restigouche. “As we pass on the flame bearing the love of God by proudly holding the bright candle that passes through time, so that its bright sun shines in their eyes.”

Bishop Melanson

Bishop Louis-Joseph Arthur Melanson was born March 25, 1879, in Trois-Rivières, Québec. Since his father worked for the railroad, young Arthur lived in a number of places: Ste-Flavie, Petit-Rocher, Glen Levit, and New Richmond. When the Bishop of Rimouski refused to admit young Arthur to the Major Seminary in Rimouski, he turned to the Bishop of Chatham, and was ordained July 9, 1905. The young man was so tired and weak that he passed out during the long ordination ceremony. Disabled three months by typhoid fever, Father Melanson was appointed assistant to Father Walker, the pastor of Val d’Amours, Coolbrook, and Glen Levit. In 1907 Father Melanson was appointed pastor of Balmoral, and the Bishop also asked him to minister to several mission churches and lumber camps in the Restigouche, where hundreds of men spent the better part of the year working. On July 20, 1908, on the very day that Québec celebrated its three hundredth anniversary, the young missionary priest celebrated the first Mass before a crowd of courageous colonists kneeling on the bare ground. Father Melanson told his flock about his prayer to God: “A few minutes ago as I held the sacred host over your heads, under this beautiful, pure sky, in this virgin forest, unconscious witness of this sacred ceremony of the consecration, I asked God in the Eucharist to answer the prayers of this last of the Apostles, and to raise up, all along this railroad line, large, beautiful, and prosperous parishes where His holy Name would be blessed, loved, and worshipped. May one day the joyous sound of our Catholic bells be heard in the woods of this immense forest. That was my prayer, and nothing more.” However, Father Melanson was prophesying a wonderful future for 20th-century Restigouche, growing as it did amidst great joys as well as great difficulties. The prayers of the young priest were answered, and he pastored the parishes of Saint-Quentin (1910) and Richards (1911).

Father Thibault, Father Martin...

It would take several hours to tell the story of Father Jean-Baptiste Thibault (pastor from 1915 to 1940) and Monsignor Eudore Martin, pastor of Saint-Quentin from 1914 to 1951. The parish histories tell of the wonders which God wrought for His people, from the very beginning. We also learn of the solidarity, kindness, and mutual help of neighbour to neighbour. When in 1996 I had the pleasure of visiting each of these four parishes, I was happy to write a brief historical account of each of them. When the nice season returns, do not forget to visit the woods museum: you will be amazed at what you discover! “My Life is the Woods,” as a local book is titled. My own father would be very much at ease, there. “Just as we offer a flower out of love, as we carve a heart on the bark of today, let us dress in lively colours the celebrations, homecomings, and moments of happiness that always seem too short to us.”

A Memorial

A celebration like ours today is a memorial of everything that the Lord has made and continues to make in his Church. The Eucharist builds the Church, but the people themselves are not strangers to this: God has distributed graces abundantly, and He continues to do so today through the baptised and confirmed, through the sick who join their suffering to that of Jesus the Redeemer, through all the priests and bishops who tirelessly trekked the woods and fields, through the pastoral agents and the members of pastoral teams, and through all the parents and educators who show us every day God's kindness to His people. May Our Lady of the Assumption and her divine Son grace us with their choicest blessings.

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03-26-08