



PASTORAL LETTER
ON VOCATIONS
1990



Dear priests, religious, brothers and sisters, and young friends,

PEACE BE WITH YOU.

1. We will never appreciate enough the favour God did the world when He sent his Son to be our Saviour. Never will we thank Him enough for the grace of the Church, the gift of the priesthood, the Vocation to a full, permanent service in the Church. A special vocation in the Church, whether it be to the priesthood or to the religious life, is not a call to a sad, solitary existence. It is an invitation to share with the Saviour in His marvellous plan of salvation for mankind.

2. This call is a gift of God. No one calls himself. The one called cannot invoke his personal merit to obtain this gift. It is a free choice of the Lord.

3. This letter will bear on the subject of vocation. Five years ago, I wrote a similar letter on the same topic. Present needs call for a second appeal to you. You know that we are living a diocesan Synod. Many have answered questionnaires about our needs. The question of vocations has been in the forefront. The shortage of vocations is not limited to our region. Our country and many others experience the same limitations. In some dioceses, the bishop had to close parishes on account of the lack of priests. Schools directed by religious have also been passed to the state or to lay control.

4. I feel I am faithful to my role in letting you share my responsibility as shepherd. I invite you to reflect on the actual needs of our Church and to pray and search for the means that could ease the actual situation.

5. I beg our Lady, Mother of the Church and Saint Joseph, our heavenly Patron and Protector, to guide our efforts in finding suitable solutions to our present and foreseeable future needs.

Role of the Family

6. My brothers and sisters, you know that vocations do not grow on trees. They are reared in the families. Like any other harvest, vocations need a good soil; they need to be nurtured and protected during their growth. I know you do your best and I am sure the Lord admires you for it. The limited number of children, the desire for instant success, the thirst for pleasure, money and liberty have produced, in our young and older people, a materialistic mentality in search of immediate gratification. In spite of all this, our youth is unhappy. Parents are worried. Crime abounds, suicide and drugs have become the answer to the spiritual emptiness of sometimes meaningless lives. And yet there is a great yearning for spiritual values in our young people. They crave for meaning to their life. But truth and real values are often absent from the air they breathe, in the confused world in which they live.

7. The family is sometimes called « the domestic Church ». In fact, it is the first place where the Church is lived and experienced by the children of God. The faith of both parents can easily be passed on to their children. Their example of prayer, of honesty, of generosity can be left as heritage to their family. The first masters and educators of the children are the parents. Others can be substitutes for a while, but the lifelong values are normally those learnt in the home.

8. We all want vocations; however, few seem eager to offer their persons, very few are willing to answer the call.

Models

9. We know that models are very important in the life of youngsters. They have all kinds of idols: singers,

dancers, artists, sports champions - even spiritual masters as Mother Teresa. The actual Pope attracts many of them by his wit and dynamism. Our country has benefited from the apostolate of very generous missionaries, during the first centuries of its existence. For over a hundred years, we have sent thousands of priests and religious to other lands, to establish the Kingdom of God.

10. Our own small diocese of Edmundston has given many missionaries and continues to do so. Actually, about forty men and women, priests, religious and lay persons, continue to preach the gospel and work for the Kingdom in other countries with great efficiency. But they are getting old, and no one seems to prepare to replace them.

11. We know that the Church needs priests and consecrated souls for the service and care of the faithful. Since the Church is a eucharistic community, she is inconceivable without the priesthood. Because the Church must lead to sanctity, she needs models of holiness. The religious life is a privileged model of consecration to God for the benefit of the whole Church. Most missionaries belong to religious Orders.

The Shortage of Vocations

12. The shortage of vocations is not a worldwide crisis.

Some continents, like Africa, are blessed with many vocations, both to the priesthood and religious life. Because their Church is still young and developing, their numerous vocations do not suffice; they still need the help of foreign missionaries. In a few decades, they may become self-sufficient. In the meantime, we must continue to help them, while relying on our own manpower. It is quite normal that an old Church like ours should find in her resources the tools and the personnel needed for her apostolate. In 1988, there were 8 000 ordinations in the world. There were 92 000 seminarians studying for the priesthood. It is expected that about 25% of them will persevere to the ordination day. Out of these, there were less than 200 for the whole of Canada.

Our Laity's Involvement

13. We rejoice at the sight of so many lay persons, men and women, desirous to help and to accept getting involved in serving the community. Many are found in schools (or Sunday schools), parishes, hospitals, nursing homes, families. Others serve at the diocesan level. It reveals a better understanding of one's Baptism. The faithful realize their capacity to be fully involved in the life of the Church, in all that does not require the sacrament of Order.

Priests

14. To function, the Church needs ordained ministers for the celebration of the Eucharist, the forgiveness of sins and the gathering of the community with the preaching of the Word. Christ, of course, is and remains the Eternal Priest, the Head of his Church. But He wanted disciples to work in His name, after His Ascension. Those chosen disciples were the apostles, succeeded by the bishops and the priests. Later on, deacons were instituted as helpers to the bishops.

15. Today, we experience an upsetting shortage of candidates to the priesthood. Even in our small diocese, the problem becomes disturbing. Some large parishes have only one priest where there were three, a few years ago. Smaller ones do not have a residing priest. This trend will become more frequent during the coming years. Many religious congregations have very few - if any vocations.

16. Last year, two young men of our diocese were ordained priests. Both entered a missionary Order. Others study with the desire to give themselves to a religious cause outside our boundaries. We must respect their call and their liberty.

17. Given our actual lack of priests, I beg you to really consider it your duty to search for solutions and ways to realize the will of the Lord, who said: « Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men. » If the Church cannot live and develop without priests, the believing community must consider it its responsibility to find the candidates that will provide the service of the Word and the ministry of sacraments.

18. May I take advantage of this occasion to ask you to pray for the priests you actually have. They need your help, your understanding, your support.

Their celibate life is not always easy, nor always well understood. To be faithful to a vocation supposes generosity, piety and self-denial.

19. We celebrate today the World Sunday for Vocations as proclaimed by His Holiness, Pope John Paul. In union with the whole Catholic Church, I beg you:

1) to pray privately and in your families for vocations in our diocese.

2) to study during your parish council meetings and in other groups, like the Knights of Columbus, Catholic Women's League and Daughters of Isabella, means to raise up local vocations.

3) to speak favorably about vocations as a normal choice for youngsters or adults that might hear the call.

4) to protect our youth from what could destroy the seed of a vocation in their souls and educate them to be generous in their love for the Church.

20. Adults that are free and able to perform the needed studies are asked to think about the possibility of a second calling to serve in the priesthood or religious life.

21. To our young boys and girls, I say: Do not let the world be built without you. It will soon be your responsibility to lead it. Think of your possibilities, your talents and do not close your ears to a voice that might have resounded in the depth of your heart. Be serious and generous. Do not search only for money, immediate success or pleasure. They will disappoint you. The Lord is rich and reliable. Serve him. You will be delighted to have him as your friend and master.

22. We have just entered the month of May, dedicated to our heavenly Mother. Let her who knew the joy of Bethlehem and inherited the role of educating Jesus the Eternal Priest, inspire our priests and religious, as well as the whole diocesan family to take seriously our common responsibility to work for the Kingdom of God and the service of the Church.

The harvest is ready: who wants to be a harvester ?

+ Gérard Dionne
Bishop of Edmundston

World Sunday for Vocations
May 6, 1990