
**« IN THE HOLY SPIRIT,
LET US LIVE OUR MISSION OF LOVE
TO THE LIMIT! »**



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31 May 1998
Pentecost Sunday

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

KEEPING ALIVE THE MEMORY OF JESUS

For a fifth consecutive year I take the opportunity of the beautiful feast of Pentecost to write to you. The Holy Spirit given to us especially at baptism and confirmation continues to fill us with the love of God and to faithfully guide us in the mission entrusted to us.

What is this mission ? It is to keep alive the memory of Jesus. It is to tirelessly go out and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and to make disciples by passing on to them what Jesus has handed down to us.

For this to happen it is vital for us to welcome and acknowledge in the depths of ourselves the Spirit of Jesus. « You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses (...) to the ends of the earth, » was Jesus' promise before ascending to the Father.

After reflecting on the fidelity of some of our ancestors in the faith in the Old and New Testaments we shall realize that we are called to deeply live our own fidelity to the Lord with the courage, boldness and imagination that the Gospel gives us.

FAITHFUL LIKE PETER

I spent ten days in Rome at the end of March, 1998: days of prayer, reflection, and rest. I prayed and prayed to the Lord Jesus, his Mother and his Apostles to help me live in a holy and faithful way the episcopal mission that was handed on to me in 1993. Every day I had the occasion of visiting one of the city's churches. That was how I was able to get to the *Domine, Quo Vadis* church on foot; the church is near the Catacomb of St. Callistus, and it was popularized by the novel-turned movie, *Quo Vadis*, written by the Polish Nobel laureate Henrik Sienkiewicz (1840-1916). According to tradition, the church marks the spot where Peter, on the verge of leaving Rome in order to avoid being persecuted, imprisoned and tortured, met Christ on the Appian Way. And Peter would have asked him, « Quo vadis, Domine ? » (« Where are you going, Lord ? ») And the Lord would have answered, « Venio Romam iterum crucifigi. » (« I am going to Rome to be crucified anew. »)

A FIDELITY PUT TO THE TEST

Are we not tempted to drop everything when faced with incomprehension from others, with indifference, suffering, and persecution ? At such times Jesus meets us along the road in order to finish the task that had been given to us. But rather than the reproachful tone we may feel underlies the words above allegedly spoken to Peter by Jesus, we could hear his friendly and merciful words, similar in feeling to those he spoke to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, « Et tu, amice, quo vadis ? » « (And you, my friend, where are you going ? ») Words such as these would have helped Peter review his growth and his entire life in an atmosphere of complete trust. In this new pastoral letter I want to ask the Holy Spirit to manifest Himself once again to each and everyone of us as the supreme consoler, as the gentle host of our souls, « Sweet refreshment, sweet repose; » I ask Him to « bend the stubborn heart and will, / melt the frozen, warm the chill, / guide the wayward home once more! / Come, O Father of the poor, / come, whose treasured gifts ensure, / come, our heart's unflinching light./ Cleanse our soiled hearts of sin. / Arid souls refresh within, / wounded lives to health restore. »

« WHY HAVE YOU TOLD ME TO LOVE ? »

Whether one be in charge of a diocese, a parish, or a family, there are times when one would be very tempted to give up such a seemingly burdensome, even inhuman, task. When this happens, the prayer of Father Michel Quoist could easily come to our lips: « Lord, why have you told me to love my brothers and sisters ? I have tried but I come back to you frightened. Lord, I was so peaceful at home, I was comfortable and had settled down. But you discovered a chink in my armour, a breach in my fortress. Like a cold shower on a sleepy face the cries of others woke me up; like a gust of wind, a friendship shook me up; as a shy and unassuming ray of sun, your grace has challenged me... These have come at me from every quarter in successive waves, one wave pushing onto the other, shoving the other forward... I can't any more! It is just too much! This is no life! Lord, I have lost everything and am not even my own person; there is no more room for me, in me. » - « Fear not, says the Lord, you have won everything, because while your stronghold was being stormed by others I, your Father, I sneaked in among them. »

THE FIDELITY OF GOD

Before considering the quality of our fidelity it is important to turn to our God, the God of total fidelity, and to worship Him for His incomprehensible merciful love for every human being. It is as if we were hearing Jesus say to us: « Be faithful as your heavenly Father is faithful. » The psalmists never tired of singing about the divine faithfulness: « I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens... Let the heavens praise your wonders, O Lord, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones. » Mercy, love, gentleness, grace, fidelity - FAITHFULNESS: these realities cannot be dissociated from God; His merciful love does not cease to extend to all humankind. The short Psalm 117 testifies to this:

« Praise the Lord, all you nations! Extol him, all you peoples! For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. » Psalm 100 is a variation on the theme: « Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing... For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations. » And in her marvellous Magnificat, the Virgin Mary gives thanks to God for His merciful and faithful love: His Love Is from Age to Age. Created in the image and likeness of God we, God's creation, are charged with revealing this faithfulness of God. The liturgy of the Church puts the following words on our lips: « God who is faithful and just, listen to your Church at prayer, as you listened to Jesus your servant. When her breath dwindles within her, let her live from the breath of your Spirit, that she meditate on the work of your hands so as to go forward free and trusting, to the dawning of her Passover. » In time of trial, a prayer such as this has the power to rekindle our hope.

FAITHFUL LIKE MOSES, JEREMIAH, AND GIDEON

Charged with freeing his brothers and sisters from the yoke of oppression, Moses quickly learned what this difficult mission required of him. Still, despite much recrimination from the people and all sorts of pressures on him, Moses maintained a steadfast courage.

It was also the same with the prophet Jeremiah. Many times he entreated the Lord to release him of his mission. One of the most poignant pages in the Bible show us this inner battle of Jeremiah. « O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me... If I say 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name', then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. »

As for Gideon the Judge, the Lord's leadership never cease to amaze him, to such a point that he must actually make an act of faith. A battle was on the verge of being waged between Gideon's 32,000 Israelites and the Midianite enemy. The Lord challenged Gideon by telling him « The troops with you are too many... Israel would only take the credit away from me, saying, 'My own hand has delivered me'. Now therefore proclaim this in the hearing of the troops, 'Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home'. Thus Gideon sifted them out; twenty-two thousand returned, and ten thousand remained. Then the Lord said to Gideon, 'The troops are still too many; take them down to the water and I will sift them out for you. ... All those who lap the water with their tongues, as a dog laps, you shall put to one side.» The 10,000 soldiers who had knelt to drink were sent back to their own tents, leaving only 300 troops with Gideon. It was truly the Lord's might that won the battle over the Midianites, that day.

FAITHFUL LIKE JESUS, MARY, PETER, AND PAUL

Sent by the Father to heal and save humankind, Jesus « humbled himself and became obedient unto death, and death on a cross. Therefore God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name. » To be faithful to the end, Jesus gave his life freely by carrying out his Father's will to the limit.

A meeting of two 'Yeses' at the Annunciation, Mary's yes accepting God's offer, and Jesus' yes, welcoming the Father's will, is a constant invitation to the faithful. It was in faith that Mary accompanied her Son to Calvary, and she carries on this mission of hers down the centuries, as she continues to show her constant concern for the Church of her Son.

Despite his unbelievable betrayal, once repented, Peter strengthens the faith of his brothers and sisters. In his old age, he had to let himself be led by Another and he gave up his life by being crucified like his Master, but upside down.

In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul the Apostle lists what it cost him, to be faithful to Jesus: « Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea, on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. » And after such an enumeration he can declare, « I have fought the good fight, » and « For me, to live is Christ. »

FAITHFUL LIKE THE FIRST MISSIONARIES

If you ever have the chance to read about the sea voyage of the first missionary sisters to New France, it will be worth your while. Courageous women they were, these Augustinians and Ursulines, as they set forth in the midst of dangerous seafaring conditions, in order to respond to the needs of their brothers and sisters, especially in the areas of health and education.

Missionaries with hearts burning with Gospel zeal have no fear of giving up their lives for Jesus and his Message. John de Brébeuf, Isaac Jogues, and their companions, after having made themselves 'all things to all people', bore final witness to their love of Jesus and their brothers and sisters by undergoing martyrdom.

Whether in the Madawaska, Restigouche, or Southern Victoria regions, we, too, have had our pioneers of outstanding faith and charity. The Saint-Basile bicentennial album tells about the hardships suffered by the first white inhabitants to reach the Saint John River Valley. So much misery and such dire poverty. Sister Bertha Plourde's biography of Archbishop Joseph-Arthur Melanson writes about the difficulties met in colonising the Restigouche. And the same can be said about the Tobique River Valley. Through poverty there arose noteworthy fidelity and solidarity.

It would take countless pages to inform ourselves of this fidelity of our ancestors, but what is most important is to acknowledge these examples as a precious heritage and pursue the task undertaken. The Sacred Fire, the Holy Spirit who animated them must stifle in us every shred of weakness, indifference, and weariness. The challenges of today are too great and too urgent for us not to pick them up as did our forebears in their own day. « Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints. »

A WONDERFUL MISSION OF LOVE

The main thing about the February diocesan pastoral session was the common recognition that what is most urgently needed for our Church is that all the 60,000 faithful of the diocese be party to the mission of Jesus in the Madawaska, the Restigouche, and Southern Victoria. Each of us according to our own means and capacities must proclaim the gentleness of God. Priests, religious, pastoral agents, everybody, we who are the 'faithful' of Christ Jesus all have the same mission, that of proclaiming how far has gone and still goes the love of our God. His Love Is from Age to Age. The person and the message of Jesus, Christ and Lord, man and God, his words and actions must still have as great a power of attraction and enticement as they had for our parents and great-grandparents.

His enemies branded Jesus a 'seducer,' so great was the spiritual attraction emanating from his person. In the midst of our Western societies that can no longer hide their deficiencies and dysfunctions, their poverty and their despair, the Church must be present to all, today, not only with human warmth but also in dialogue and openness to what is being said not so much by words but by what is experienced and lived; the Church must strive to assume all of its responsibilities in bringing about a world of peace and justice.

THE MISSION OF EVERY BAPTISED AND CONFIRMED CHRISTIAN

In line with the faith of one's baptism, everyone is called to proclaim with one's own life, in the working place as well as in the leisure world, that one is infinitely loved by God. One's profession of faith is not found only within liturgical celebrations: one can proclaim God to the whole of creation spread before us. « Maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen. » The baptised and confirmed confess God lovingly present to every human being. They respect all persons in their dignity of children of God, they respect the environment and act as stewards of what has been handed over to their care for use by all.

The baptised and confirmed proclaim the coming and presence of Jesus, true God and true Man, in the midst of our world. Along with Vatican Council II, the baptised and confirmed also recognize that the joys and hopes, the sadness and anguish of the men and women of our time are also those of Christ's disciples, and nothing that is truly human fails to find an echo in their hearts. There is a community composed of men and women united in Christ, guided by the Spirit as they press onwards towards the Kingdom of the Father, and who bear the message of salvation intended for all. The Christian community cherishes a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history. They must always be ready to account for the hope, founded on Christ, that is theirs.

PRESSING QUESTIONS

You who are reading this were certainly baptised, at one time. What are you doing with your baptism? What are you doing with all the talents and aptitudes you have? What services can you render in your milieu? What can you offer to the youth who are looking for positive values, to the elderly looking for a sense to their old age, to the poor begging for food and understanding, to the sick waiting for a gesture of gentleness and friendship? What have you to offer your fellow citizens in the name of your baptism, in your social and political involvement, at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels? Yes, what services can you render your neighbours? The gifts you have received that allow you to grow in life were given for the growth and development of your neighbour.

I am addressing myself in a very special way to our young people: Not only are you the hope of the future but today you are a richness to our world. Your vitality, your enthusiasm, your vision of the world, your dreams and projects allow us a glimpse at the future, one that is full of hope. I want to tell you with Jesus that if you share your Christian faith, it is not a dead-end future that is opening to you but one that opens to the light. Your presence and your original input are essential to the building up of your communities. And I want to tell you once again that I have full confidence in you. If it has not already occurred, may you experience in an intimate way the Risen Jesus, the Living One. May you catch yourself whispering 'Let me find you in my life, let me keep my lamp lit, let me choose to be trusting, to love and to know I am loved.'

At the heart of every family, at the heart of our families there is a permanent feeling of urgency, that of building an affectionate, welcoming place where each family member feels warmth and support, where each one can share with the others and grow in love and solidarity. The family has gone through deep changes, these last few years, but it still remains our vital milieu. Hence the need of ensuring that each family be given the attention it needs. In our milieu there is still room for the Christian family, where there is room for giving and forgiving, for sharing and accepting others, for helping one another and for growth, there is need for the family where there is room for education and growth in the faith, and for prayer life. This family unit is the basic unit not only of society but also of the Church. I rejoice at all the links that are created despite new challenges and major difficulties faced by families, I rejoice at the links of fellowship and goodness that bind family members throughout their lives. It is good for us to remember that our families were exceptional agents of evangelisation, in our region: the Christian faith was handed down in this way from one generation to the next. Concern was always there to present Jesus as our Saviour and friend, as the one who alone could understand, take on our pain, give meaning to our lives, and journey with us. I rejoice at this life of faith, at all

the profound Gospel values that we can still find in several families. Christian parents who have been married before the Lord, share with me the mission of love you were both given. By your love you witness to those around you how much the Lord loves us. This is an irreplaceable ministry that you have, and we need you. Families among us, you remind us once again of the power of love and of unity in diversity.

Religious of the diocese, you are a precious aid to us. By your whole lives dedicated to the Blessed Trinity you remind us of the fraternal communion that must exist among us: We are all brothers and sisters in Christ. You also remind us of the service of love rendered by Jesus, when he was among us: We must serve one another. May the Lord continue to give our Church men and women who are free to love and serve others.

Pastoral agents, the Edmundston Diocese Church needs you in order to meet new situations that have arisen in our midst, in the areas of faith education, catechetics, sacramental preparation, training of new Christian leaders, youth ministry, and ministry to the elderly, the sick, workers, and the poor. May the Lord continue to bless His Church and each one of our Christian communities with people such as you!

Priests and future priests, the Edmundston Diocese Church needs you to reveal Jesus, true God and true Man, to proclaim the Word, to celebrate the sacraments and build up the community. This will always require a deep prayer life, concern for each individual, and discrete and permanent service. As members of the presbyterium you bear with me in a special way to the end of your lives the episcopal ministry that is mine.

NECESSARY CHANGES

Important changes will have to be made in all our communities and the diocese as a whole, so that all the baptised and confirmed, and all the ordained in our diocesan Church be able to carry out the mission that is theirs.

More and more will inter-parish and even deanery-wide services have to be established, whether for youth ministry, religious education, ministry to the elderly and the handicapped, with drop-in centres, and services for students and workers. The enlarged parish or the deanery itself will have to become a major point of reference, an essential support, a place of renewal and inspiration. It will be like a general mobilisation of the entire population for the sake of carrying out the required mission. And constant prayer will have to accompany this mission task; already, from all over we form a wonderful prayer network.

At the diocesan level we shall have to pursue what has already been undertaken, so as to be ever at the service of parishes and deaneries: religious education, pastoral ministry formation, missionary formation, family ministry, School of Faith [École de la Foi], Spiritual Life Centre, diocesan seminary, etc. All of these contribute in carrying out the Diocesan Synod recommendations and in ensuring the expected renewal.

We can make ours the words of Saint Paul to the Ephesians: « (The holy people of God is organised) to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ... Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. »

Faithful to the mission given, we must continue on without fear of what is asked of us. The Risen Lord supports us with the gift of his Spirit: he is the Road we must follow.

With zeal we build together the Kingdom of Jesus.
With love we shall build up the Kingdom of Jesus.

We pray together in the midst of the world;
We pray together to the Lord among us.

Together we carry the Good News;
Together we carry peace, love, and joy.

Together we form the Church of Jesus,
Together we form the Kingdom of God.

Let us say once again to Jesus, in the depths of our hearts, « We want to live the mission of your love, Lord Jesus Christ, we want to live the mission of your love together in the Spirit. »

May the Virgin Mary and her divine Son grace you with abundant blessings. The love of God is truly marvellous, and His love is from Age to Age.

+ François Thibodeau

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