



***"For Christian Communities faithful to Christ
and ever more vibrant"***

**Pastoral letter
to the faithful of the diocese of Bathurst**

***+ Daniel Jodoin
Bishop of Bathurst***

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BISHOP'S RESIDENCE
DIOCESE OF BATHURST

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

To the community of the faithful,

Already two years have passed since I came to be with you as a successor of the Apostles, and I have barely begun to appreciate the immense grace that *Pope Benedict XVI* granted me by making me your pastor. The pastoral visits that I have undertaken among you have made it possible for me to discover even more the beauty of your hearts and the spiritual richness that inspires you. I have joyfully received the warm welcome that Acadia is famous for!

These pastoral visits are very important to me. I expect to schedule them on a regular, three-year basis so as to be able to visit one of the three pastoral regions of our diocese every year. These visits will make it possible for me to get to know you better and to share more freely with each one of you.

I have already discovered beautiful Christian communities. The parish priests, with the assistance of their pastoral committees, have made an effort to prepare a very varied schedule so that I would have a good overview of the various social, commercial, and municipal activities of the region. I have also participated in weekly masses and in several of your fraternal activities: picnics, suppers, brunches, recreational evenings, and works of charity. At the various planned visits, I met extraordinary people: elected officials, workers, fishers, young people, volunteers, sick people, residents of several homes, members of various movements, etc.

In the course of these visits, you have shared with me your successes, your projects, and your great desire to always be beautiful, living communities. In that way I have witnessed how deep is your faith as well as how firm is your determination to follow Christ. On certain occasions, I have also detected your concerns and your fears for the future.

The society is changing

Like me, you see that the world has changed a great deal in a short time, and continues to transform at breakneck speed. Better means of transportation, the internet, and new communication tools have beaten down the barriers of our villages, making both people and ideas more mobile and fluid.

Other scientific discoveries have upset our way of living, of thinking, of dressing, and of enjoying ourselves. Numerous habits, convictions, and traditions have also seen profound changes, often for the better. On the other hand, our society has also been afflicted with the frenzy

of consumption, of relativism, of individualism, of hostility towards or rejection of religion, as well as to its public expression.

The demographic decline and aging of the population are phenomena that continue to have serious effects on us. This due mainly to the lowered birth rate and the exodus of young families. Added to that, for a certain time now, there have been movements aimed at encouraging consolidation in various sectors : financial, commercial, and municipal.

On a daily basis, I see people who work hard, and often in difficult conditions. Many jobs are precarious and seasonal, making the future of employment in our regions unstable. Many older people have been working hard for years to save money for their old age. This is why, as a bishop, I must take care to see that the money entrusted to us by our faithful is actually used to ensure the mission of the Church to which they contribute.

The ecclesiastical fabric is changing as well

All these factors, which I have briefly listed, affect our church life. To this, we must also add the changes that are occurring within the Church itself. Our parishes can still count on a good number of faithful and a very good participation in the liturgical and fraternal activities that they organize, which delights me greatly. On the other hand, as the years go by, one notes marked changes in the annual number of celebrations : (baptisms (2189 in 1975, 754 in 2013), marriages (1074 in 1975, 156 in 2013), and funerals (675 in 1975, 945 in 2013). We also observe the aging and the non-renewal of our volunteers, of members of various religious movements or communities, as well as of our regular church goers..

What's more, we realize that, today, a majority of the youth are almost totally uninformed about the foundations of our faith and the life of the Church, even if they have been baptized. This world has become a stranger to them. And for those who are practicing, they experience the life of the Church differently than their parents. Because these young generations call on the church only at the most dramatic turning points of their lives, and they feel much less the need to celebrate regularly every Sunday, in contrast to their parents or grandparents. We also observe that these rising generations feel much less connected to their parish and involve themselves less, both financially and with their participation.

The status of the Clergy

As for the clergy, you know that it is aging and that their successors are not coming forward. Currently, there is no candidate in the seminary and it takes eight years to train a priest. Presently, the diocese has 38 diocesan priests and 6 religious priests. But of this number, only 11 are in charge of 56 parishes as parish priests, two are collaborating vicars, three are chaplains, and ten are retired, offering their services occasionally to the parishes. Only three priests are younger than 50 years old. In a mere five years, only 6 or 7 will be serving as parish priests for all the parishes of the diocese, with some retired priests acting as occasional vicars. This shortage is already affecting communities who now have Sunday mass only once a month or every two weeks. The current priests are very generous (even at a quite venerable age!) and they give of themselves without counting the hours. But as you can see, they sometimes suffer from exhaustion and fatigue. We can no longer ask a single priest to carry out the work that 9 priests and 3 vicars carried out before for the parishes in their charge. Something has to change.

Finances

At the financial level, the people who contribute are as generous as they ever have been, and the parishes can happily count on devoted volunteers, as well as on the good advice for management that does wonders with little! But the cost of living keeps going up. The parishes struggle to make ends meet. In spite of their constant efforts, several can no longer keep up. The number of donors is falling and the volunteers who organize the fund-raising activities grow old and leave us. We must be inventive to find long-term solutions.

The Patrimony

Our ancestors built big, beautiful churches which perfectly suited their needs. Over time, we have become strongly attached to these churches, so rich in memory and so well-integrated into our environment. But in our time, certain church buildings require enormous expenditures for repair and maintenance that go well beyond the financial and human capacity of our communities. Thus, there is an obvious lack of correspondence between the size of this patrimony and the size of the population in general and the number of regular church goers. Since governments and municipalities do not want to get involved financially in the maintenance of the religious patrimony of the province, everything rests on the shoulders of our communities. As a Church, we cannot save all the patrimony that we would like to! And this is not our role, either. But we do our best to help the Christian communities maintain the churches that will be useful to them for evangelization, whether they are patrimonial or not.

It is also necessary to understand that the Church cannot ask its faithful to give of their time or their money to other ends that go beyond or contradict its mission. The Church's goal is always to favor the faithful and the survival of the community well before the patrimony, which is only a means to evangelize. What good would it do to put all our energy and all our money into keeping some churches standing if, because we have used all our energy and money for evangelization, the churches end up empty of church goers and priests, converted into museums, conference rooms, or restaurants in order to generate revenue?

As it was for our predecessors, the Church must have the places and means necessary for its current and future needs of evangelization. We will watch over them with the help of everyone. But in order not to betray Christ, we must be vigilant and always maintain a steady heading towards the mission that he entrusted us with.

What Church teaching tells us

In challenging times, a return to the origins is always indicated. By rediscovering our reason for being, we can better spell out what we desire to become and find the necessary means to achieve that.

Pope Jean-Paul II often asked us to recall that “the missionary activity still represents, today, the greatest challenge for the church.”¹ As the Latin American bishops affirmed in their fifth General Conference: we cannot remain impassive in the face of a passive threat within our churches,” but we must transition “from a ministry of simple conservation to a truly missionary

¹ *Redemptoris Missio*, 1990, n. 40.

ministry.”² *Pope Francis* reminds us that “every Christian is a missionary inasmuch as he has met the love of God in Jesus Christ; we no longer say that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries,’ but always that we are ‘missionary disciples.’”³

So, just what was this mission that Christ entrusted his Apostles with and entrusts us with today? The Gospel of Saint Matthew reminds us:

“Go! Make disciples of all the nations: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; teach them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28, 19-20a)

Pope Francis encourages us to rediscover this missionary zeal, to come out of our sluggishness, so as to “be a Church of “coming out” to announce the Church to all, in every place, on all occasions, without hesitation, without repulsion, and without fear.”⁴ “He hopes that all communities will act in such a way as to use all means necessary to make progress *on the road of ministry and missionary conversion, that does not leave things as they are.*” We must be “*on a permanent mission.*”⁵ He exhorts us as a particular Church to enter into a determined process of discernment, of purification, and of reform.⁶

Furthermore, the *Second Vatican Council* had already presented ecclesiastical conversion as a permanent reform of itself by faithfulness to Jesus Christ: “Any renovation of the Church consists essentially of a greater fidelity to its vocation.”⁷

We must, therefore, set our eyes and our hearts on Jesus Christ in order to be able to reform the structures and the means that we have been given in order to find what is most appropriate for the current world and the present life of our Church. As *Pope Francis* says, we need “church structures that enable us to stimulate an evangelizing vitality, structures that are animated with new life and an authentic evangelizing spirit in the *“fidelity of the Church to her own vocation,”* in order not to be corrupted in a short period of time.”⁸

As *Pope Francis* tells us over and over again, our Christian communities must “*stop being self-referential*” and “*self-centered,*” but rather be turned towards others who also need to meet Christ and be transformed by Him. We must “come out of our comfort zone and have the courage to meet all those “*on the periphery*” who need the light of the Gospel.”⁹ He thus reinforces the message of *St. Jean-Paul II*, who affirmed to the bishops of Oceania: “all renewal in the church must have the mission as its purpose, in order not to run the risk of being a self-centered Church.”¹⁰

And *Pope Francis* insists on restating it like this: “the ministry in missionary terms requires that we abandon the comfortable pastoral criterion that “*we have always done it like that*” (we could add: “*We have always celebrated here*”). I invite each one to be audacious and creative in this duty to rethink the evangelizing objectives, structures, style, and methods of their own communities ...

² *5th general conference of CELAM, Document of Aparecida*, 2007, n. 548 et n. 370.

³ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, n. 119.

⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, n. 30.

⁷ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1964, n. 6.

⁸ Ref. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, n. 26.

⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, n. 20.

¹⁰ *Ecclesia in oceanis*, 2001, n.19.

what is important is not to walk alone, but to always count on our brothers, and especially on the leadership of the bishops, in a wise and realistic pastoral discernment.¹¹

The parish

The parish is “the presence of the church in a subdivision of territory of a diocese, a place to hear the Word, to grow in the Christian life, a place of dialog, of announcement, of generous charity, of adoration, and of the celebration of the sacraments.”¹² Being related to the diocese, the parish is not an absolutely essential reality like the diocesan Church which is, *in a precise location*, the realization of the holy, catholic, and apostolic Church that we profess in the Creed.¹³ It has not always existed whereas the Christian communities predate them. The parish has always been at the service of the pastoral action of the diocese, because the parish serves the mission, and not the other way around.¹⁴

It has evolved according to the times. During the first 1500 years, the Church made contact with the faithful in a diocese with mainly the parish cathedral of the bishop, which could be found in a major city, and with the monasteries, the abbeys, the sanctuaries, and a multitude of chapels or devotional oratories in the countryside. The systematic laying out of the diocesan territory in a network of parishes did not come into existence until after the decision of the *Council of Trent* (1542-1563), which encouraged it. The Code of canon law of 1917 transformed this recommendation of the Council of Trent into an *injunction*: henceforth, the territory of all dioceses must be subdivided into parishes.¹⁵ As the years went by, the parishes continued to metamorphose so as to adapt to the specific needs of the time.

In our diocese, the parishes have also evolved. They have recently been organized into “*pastoral units*” because they were no longer able, individually, to “offer within themselves the entire evangelical mission;” that is, all the pastoral services that are essential “to become a Christian and make the Church from the birth into the faith through baptism to the entry into eternal life through the funeral services.”¹⁶ (for example, have its own parish priest, presbytery, etc.) Now this is achieved through communion with each other. Today’s communion of bell towers supplants the wars of bell towers of times gone by!

We recognize that now, after ten years of existence, these pastoral units have become, in essence, the “*new parishes*” as defined by *Pope Francis* in his apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*: “The parish is “*a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach.*”¹⁷ *Pope Benedict XVI* had already expressed this at the *Synod on the New Evangelization* of 2012¹⁸ and *Pope Saint John Paul II* did so as well, in 1999, when he affirmed that a means of parish renewal could be to consider the parish as a “*community of communities and of movements.*”¹⁹ Furthermore, this reality has existed for years in the mission field.

¹¹ Ibid., n. 33.

¹² *Synode sur la nouvelle évangélisation, Proposition 26.*

¹³ A. Borras, *Les communautés paroissiales*, 1996, p.16-17.

¹⁴ Ibid., n. 18.

¹⁵ Ibid., n. 16.

¹⁶ Routhier, G. et A. Borras, *Paroisses et ministère*, 2001, p.62.

¹⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, n. 28.

¹⁸ *Instrumentum laboris*, 2013, n. 107.

¹⁹ *Ecclesia in America*, 1999, n. 41.

In our regions, the current parishes have been, above all, Christian communities born in the heart of a pre-existing parish (a mother parish) before branching off and becoming “parishes” themselves, after having fulfilled certain conditions. Various Christian communities still exist within these same parishes: we have only to think of various prayer groups, of present ecclesial movements, of religious communities, of residences for the elderly, etc. (believers who assemble regularly to inspire and strengthen each other, celebrate, fraternize, and work in the world without having all the attributes of a parish).

Recently *Pope Francis* reminded each bishop “that he must always promote the missionary community in this diocesan Church by pursuing the ideal of the first Christian communities, in which the believers had a single heart and a single soul *cf. Acts 4, 32*). »²⁰

The first Christian communities

St. Luke revealed to us this ideal of the first Christian communities in the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles (*Acts 2: 42*). He presents them as being

- diligent to the teaching of the Apostles,
- faithful to the fraternal communion,
- faithful to the breaking of the bread (Eucharist),
- faithful to prayer.

They did not have churches as such, but appropriate places (often their homes) to gather and celebrate. They were not numerous and were persecuted for their faith. Close to each other, the members formed “community.” By the love they had for each other, they bore witness to the presence of Christ in the world. The offerings at the celebrations were intended to help the “poor” of the community.²¹ They were reputed to be filled with hope and joy: the joy of Easter, and the confidence of knowing that the Saviour was always present in their midst and preceded them on the road of Evangelization, on the way of Love (*1 John 4, 10*)

The four pastoral axes

We could summarize their pastoral life on the four principal axes:

- **The education of the faith** (*teaching*) consisting of presenting Christ to the new generations and nourishing the faith of the believers by listening to the Word of God, Bible circles, the sharing of the Gospel, catechism for all ages, the catechumenate, the preparation of the sacraments and the follow-up after the celebration, the training of adults, and the various ministries of supportive care.
- **brotherhood** (*communion*) that is, the unity within the community by fraternal activities, a warm welcome, visits, care for one another, attention to young families, to newlyweds, etc.
- **Celebration of the faith** (*sanctification*) by the sacraments, the celebrations within various groups and prayer movements, the official liturgy of the Church, and the popular devotions

²⁰ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, n. 31.

²¹ Cf. S. Justin, *Apologie I*, 67, 6: “Those who have resources and who wish to give, may they give freely what they want, and the total is brought to the one who presides and who comes to the assistance of the orphans and widows, to those who are abandoned because of illness, or for another reason, to those who are in prison, to strangers taken in; they serve all those who are in need” : PG 6, 429.

(divine reading, lauds, vespers, Eucharistic adoration, prayer, meditation, the rosary, the way of the cross, pilgrimages, etc.)

- **Involvement or presence in the world** (*announcement*): any activity intended to witness our faith in the world by relieving the poor, taking care of the sick, of the suffering, of people who are alone or injured, and seekers of God.

The necessary means

And now, following in the footsteps of these first Christian communities, how can we remain or become Christian communities that are still vibrant and faithful to the mission that Christ entrusted us with? **What means** do we need to achieve it? **What pastoral conversion** do we need?

- **Vocations**

“Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” (Matt 9:38)

The presence of the priest in the Christian communities is capital. The People of God need a pastor; that is, a shepherd chosen by the Lord and who is sent to act in His name and to guide them. But in the presence of the exhaustion and the current shortage of priests of the diocese, what should we do? We think spontaneously of the next coming of foreign priests. As you know, I have already undertaken to approach various religious communities and I hope with my whole heart that some will come soon to lend us a hand. But it is only a short-term solution. Because a Church that cannot produce presbyterial or religious vocations is a local Church whose future is uncertain. We must ask the question: “When was the last time that I called on, encouraged, or supported a young person from my parish to respond positively to the call that the Lord made to him to become a priest or a member of a religious order? How long ago was the last ordination of a young person from my parish for the diocese? Do I pray for a young person from my family or from my parish to be called to become a priest or a member of a religious order? How can we support the involvement of young people and their families in the liturgies and in the parish life? What is the situation with young servants of the mass?”

- **Permanent deacons**

“For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor 4: 5)

A significant ministry in the Church is that of permanent deacon: men, married or not, in communion with the Bishop and his presbyterium, giving themselves permanently to the service of the diocesan Church. Third degree of the sacrament of the Order, they are far from being sub-priests. They do not have, as do the bishops and the priests, a ministry of presidency and of action in the name of *Christ as the head of the church* “but rather a ministry of service for the people of God in the diaconia of the liturgy, of the word, and of charity.” (Canon 1009 #3). Although they have not existed in the diocese up to now, we have decided, after consultations, that the time has come to set up a committee that would oversee the welcoming future candidates and supporting them afterwards throughout their training program.

- **Committed volunteers and lay persons**

“Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him”. (Col 3: 17)

As the *Vatican Council II* reminds us, lay persons must “assume in the Church and in the world their part in what is the mission of the People of God altogether. It is appropriate for them to live their life in the world and in profane affairs. They are called by God to carry out their apostolate in the world like leaven, thanks to the vigour of their Christian spirit,” in particular in their places of work, of study, of recreation, and, of course, in their own family.²²

What is more, lay people are also called to carry out responsibilities within the Church itself, both at the diocesan level and at the parish level. The priest is, of course, the first one responsible and he is indispensable as a parish priest within a parish, but not everything should rest on his shoulders. He should surround himself with volunteers to ensure the vitality of the communities. Currently, you, the lay people, are numerous in responding positively and in working actively in the communities. You are the greatest treasure of the parishes and we are very recognizant of you. We say as much for the members of religious orders who have been and still are vital forces in the parishes. Our Church owes them a proud candle!

On the other hand, the parish priest also has the duty to “discover and discern in the faith the charisma of the lay persons in all their forms, from the most modest to the most elevated, to recognize them with joy and to develop them with ardor.”²³ That would be done so as to call certain ones of them to become precious collaborators in each one of the communities and to make sure that the various pastoral axes remain active. Would it be possible to contemplate training teams of three or four lay persons who, in each one of the communities, would become representatives or agents, in close connection with the parish priest?

How can we involve all the generations of lay persons in our communities? How, as disciples of Christ, can we be present in the world of workers, of artists, of professionals, of the government, of the world of business, or with the sports teams? How can we summon, with courage and creativity, the non-believers and the seekers of God?

*“In order for the parish to survive, it must become a community of communities ... no longer an “entity of consumption” but an entity that identifies itself by people and their Christian lives rather than by a building; by a witnessing of Jesus Christ and a universal mission rather than by a territory.”*²⁴

- **Initiation to Christian life**

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received ...” (1 Cor. 15: 3)

Our parishes are lucky to be able to count on numerous catechists, enthusiastic men and women who generously give of their time to nourish the faith of our young people, as well as all those people who, having met Christ, desire to walk with Him. These catechists have a very important mission in the Church: to *initiate to the Christian life* all those who are entrusted to them. They are thus more than teachers who must give a teaching about Jesus and about the rudiments of our faith. They are above all “*witnesses*” of the Christian life: their mission being to initiate to all the axes of vitality of a Christian community (*education, brotherhood, celebration, sharing*) and not only to the first one.

²² *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 1965, n. 2.

²³ *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 1965, n. 9.

²⁴ *La dynamique missionnaire de la paroisse*, Commission de la doctrine de la CECC, 2013.

Do the catechists of our communities understand their role in that way? Do they also encourage the creation of close and frequent bonds between the community on the one hand and the young people and their families on the other hand (the parents always being the first ones responsible and witnesses of faith for their children, *the domestic Church*)? If so, what are they doing to achieve it?

- **The liturgy**

“Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” (John 6: 53-54)

The liturgical celebrations are the expression of our faith. What is more, the *Vatican II Council* strongly reaffirmed that “the Eucharist is the source as well as the summit of life and of the mission of the Church because the communities are born from the Eucharist, which is the body and action of the Church.²⁵ Thus, “no Christian community can be built if it is not rooted and centered on the celebration of the very holy Eucharist.²⁶ Furthermore, no disciple of Christ must forget this request of the Lord: “Do this in remembrance of Me” (Luke 22:19).

This is why it is primordial for every Christian to celebrate Sunday as if it were “*the Lord’s Day*.” In the first centuries, as Saint Justin reported, Christians from the cities and from the countryside were found gathering in the same place to celebrate the Lord at the price of their lives. ²⁷ Several martyrs were unafraid to affirm proudly to their accusers, “We Christians cannot live without the Lord’s Supper.²⁸ Saint Ignatius of Antioch described the Christians as being “*those who live in the observance of the Lord’s Day*.”²⁹

What is the situation for us today? Are we still as proud and diligent about the Sunday gathering? Are we sensitizing our young generations about the importance of the Sunday precept, the importance of keeping Sunday holy? Is the attendance still numerous enough to ensure worthy and nourishing celebrations (consisting of singing, of music, and various interveners)? Are our liturgies deep, carefully-prepared, full of the sacred and of beauty? Can one find there all the categories of age as well as numerous families?

When it is “*the Lord’s Day*”, which is “*Church day*,” the entire Christian community should celebrate the Eucharist: either in their own surroundings or, in the absence of a priest, by getting together with a neighboring community since, as *Pope Saint John Paul II* reminded us, “a truly Eucharistic community must not turn in on itself, as if it were self-sufficient, but it must be in symphony with each other catholic community and in communion with its Bishop and the Roman Pontiff.”³⁰

On certain occasions, it could happen that Christian communities are called to hold Sunday celebrations of the Word to allow them to sanctify their Sunday. These will exist only temporarily, and must be clearly conceived to give “*hunger for the Eucharist*” and arouse in the faithful an increased momentum of prayer for a calling to the priesthood.³¹

²⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, 1964, n.11 et *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 2007, n.15.

²⁶ *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 1965, n. 6.

²⁷ Cf. *Apologie I*, 67, 3-5PG 6, 429.

²⁸ *Acta SS. Saturnini, Dativi et aliorum plurimorum martyrum in Africa*, 7, 9 et 10 : PL 8, 707 ; 709-710

²⁹ *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 2007, n. 72.

³⁰ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 2003, n.39.

³¹ *Ibid.* n. 33.

- **Financial resources**

“And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.” (Ac 2, 44-45)

In order to offer good services, at both the diocesan and the parish level, we need financial resources. How can we offer quality diocesan services to train and sustain the lay persons in the various sectors of the ministry without these resources? The people of our diocese are proud, they have a good heart, and they are very generous. They participate widely in the fund-raising activities, in the various collections, and by various gifts. I am exceedingly delighted by that. But the financial resources are becoming more and more limited as the years go by. Are we still using them advisedly? For the best, in order to faithfully fulfil our mission?

We should ask ourselves the following questions: What percentage of the financial resources of the parish are allocated to pay the parish priest? Could we pay possible foreign priests or members of religious orders who would come among us? Would we be ready to make a contribution for trainers? What is the percentage of energy, of time, and of financial resources devoted by the parish to the poor among us? To the sick? To the young people who do not know Christ and to those who desire to nourish their faith? To the young families and those in difficulty? To people who are alone? To the elderly living at home? To the immigrants? To all those who are searching for a spiritual path? To our neighbor who is hungry, thirsty, who needs clothing, etc?

And now, what is the percentage of energy, of time, and of money that the parishioners devote to the maintenance and the renovation of their church? ... With such results, are we still faithful to the mission that Christ entrusted to us? If not, what can we do? Do we give the impression that the parish asks for money only for its own existential needs and that it spends little or nothing for pastoral services to its own parishioners and to the people among whom we live?

- **The buildings**

“And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts.” (Acts 2: 46)

We are not ever Christians all alone! The term “church” comes from the ancient Greek “ekklesia” meaning “assembly of the people.” The Christian communities have always needed places to gather since, by our baptism, we become members of a new and large family. Until quite recently, these places were adapted to the needs of worship and to the financial and human capacity of our communities. But is this still the case today? What will the situation be in the near future? Do the necessary maintenance and repairs consume too much or, in certain cases, all of the energies and financial resources of the parish? Is the church still a place that favors the blossoming of the community, or, on the contrary, has it become a ball and chain keeping us from being a “Church” and of fulfilling its mission? Have we already contemplated partnerships with the municipalities, with replacement locations, or alternate solutions in the event that financial impasses or repairs to the current building clearly exceed the financial and human capacity of the community? Could we, as Christian communities of the same unit, stand even closer together and pool our resources and our locations to better face the future?

As the years go by, what has become of our churches? Are they now safe deposit boxes open only to regular church goers on the occasion of the Sunday celebration? Can we still consider them as oasis's of peace, full of transcendence and of the divine, allowing believers to gather there at certain hours of the day and transients and seekers of God to meet the Other there

and to let themselves be touched by Him? Many conversions have nevertheless taken place in the history of the Church. Do we also have chapels or oratories of adoration? Finally, would it be possible to contemplate our churches as places of listening, of sharing, and of counseling? A place where one could confide in God, but also meet a priest or a spiritual guide? Could our sanctuaries assume a greater role in this way?

A Christian community is a community of faith

“... Continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven.” (Col. 1:23)

Little does it matter the means that we use to render our Christian communities vibrant, we must never lose sight of the fact that a Christian community is first of all and above all a community of faith. Faith is the basis of everything. Without it, the Church no longer exists. All that we have just listed, the four axes of evangelization, the vocations, the ministries, the vitality of the communities, their witnessing, etc., evaporates. We must, then, nourish our faith by good moments of prayer and enlarge this gift that we have received from God. As *Pope Benedict XVI* emphasized: “At the origin of the fact of being Christian, there is not one ethical decision or one grand idea, but the encounter with an event, a Person, who gives life a new horizon and in that way its decisive orientation.”³² From that we derive the importance of witnessing about this decisive encounter with Christ and of always keeping it active by sustained time of personal prayer and community praise.

The younger generations are imbued with grand ideas. They are ready to sacrifice for different causes related to peace, justice, the love of one’s neighbor, and in particular, the poor of our society. They want to live the gospel values fully. But all they lack is to meet Christ and to let themselves be transformed by Him. They could do so if they met on their path true witnesses of His presence. Could we be these witnesses? How should we respond to their thirst for meaning, for interiority, and for spirituality? Could they find in our diocese or in our parishes places of fraternity, of exchange, of cultural or recreational activities? Training camps? Movements or prayer groups for them? Liturgies adapted to their sensibility and to their rhythm of life?

Let us be inspired by *Pope Francis*, who explained recently the reason for the existence of his next *Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*: “The Church, in this time of great changes of era, is called to offer more forcefully the signs of the presence of the closeness of God. This is not the time for distraction, but, on the contrary, the time to remain vigilant and awaken in us the capacity to look at the essential. This is the time for the Church to find the meaning of the mission that the Lord entrusted it with on Easter day: to be a sign and an instrument of the mercy of the Father (see John 20, 21-23).”³³

Conclusion

“And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28: 20b)

The Church is more than 2000 years old. She has lived through many transformations, many trials, many persecutions. And Christ has always accompanied her and sustained her. One hundred fifty-five years ago this year, the diocese was born and it covered at that time half of New Brunswick. It consisted of some sixty missions with only seven priests and simple chapels in a world still marked by persecution. Our Ancestors always remembered Christ’s promise that he

³² *Deus Caritas est*, 2005, n.1.

³³ Homily of Pope Francis, *First vespers of the II Sunday of Easter*, April 11, 2015.

would never abandon them. From that came their confidence and their indestructible hope in the future. Like the most beautiful of their treasures, the families were committed to transmitting their faith preciously from generation to generation, and have done so to us, today.

In their footsteps, we remain faithful to Christ and we are rediscovering our first mission. With the Grace of God, we have all the ways and means necessary to be, today and tomorrow, vibrant Christian communities, still capable of shining the light of Christ and of transmitting it proudly to future generations.

With my fraternal benediction

+ Daniel Jodoin

Bishop of Bathurst, April 25, 2015