



2 July 2023

Dear Parishioners, Clergy and Faithful,

July 1st, Canada Day, has come and gone. While we can pick up controversy about our nation and some of its past injustices (this year's historic and collective sin focused on the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923), as I watched the Canada Day parade wind its way down the centre of Grande Prairie, I was struck by the number of floats celebrating identifiable nationalities within Canada. Sikhs and Punjabis in general seemed most notable, followed by Indigenous Canadians, Filipinos, even German Canadians. As I watched it all pass by, I very naturally thought of the many persons from around the globe who dream of coming to Canada, where human rights are honoured, the rule of law prevails, and freedom for the most part is respected. Canada is not "perfect", but there are many wide-open spaces in our country where her people can realize their dreams and live in security. Would that this were true for everyone, everywhere.

Sister Mary Jeanne Davidson, SSND

Sister Mary Jeanne spent the last few days back in the archdiocese, packing up some personal effects and saying good-bye to the many people that she has come to love, and that love her. Sr. Mary Jeanne came to our diocese in 2002, having spent many years previously in Peru. I was reminded by John Kuran's words to Sister on Sunday that she was very engaged in the Shine youth retreats in Peace River, but her special love was for the Indigenous peoples in Peace River, as well as in the near-by communities of Duncan's, Cadotte Lake and Little Buffalo. She recalls fondly attending the canonization of St. Kateri Tekakwitha in Rome, with some of the local people of the Peace Region.

Later this week, Sister Mary Jeanne will take up residence in the School Sisters of Notre Dame community house in Waterdown, Ontario, near Hamilton. She will be dearly missed in our archdiocese!

Religious Congregations in the Church Today

While speaking of Sister Mary Jeanne and her own community of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND), let me share with you what is happening generally in religious communities in the Church today.

I should point out first of all that the Catholic Church since earliest days has seen some women and men feel called to spend their whole life dedicated to prayer,

reflection on Scripture, and service to the poor and needy. Saints Pachomius and Anthony, St. Benedict and St. Ursula, Saints Francis and Dominic and many others have given expression to what we call “the consecrated life”, characterized by the gospel counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. In each case, the founders gathered around them other men or women who share their zeal and dedication. They lived their dedication and ministry as a community, a gathering of like-minded persons. Over the centuries, many of these communities were founded; many also have long ceased to exist. In our own day, we are seeing the shrinking and extinction of many congregations of women and men religious. Yet at the same time, other newer congregations are being founded by individuals who feel drawn by God’s call in their life to begin a new community, a new response to the spiritual needs of a new age.

Sister Paula, who came with Sister Mary Jeanne on the present trip, was telling me that in North America over the past few years, seven SSND Provinces have been folded into two. In our Archdiocese, there were over 200 Religious Sisters in the early 1970’s; we can now count them on one hand. In my own Redemptorist congregation in Canada, three Provinces have united to form one.

Will religious life ever die out in the Church? I don’t believe so. As I say, new congregations are also being founded. Add to this, that the religious life is a gift of God to the Church and for the strengthening of the Kingdom of God. God will continue to call women and men to dedicate their lives in this way. Let us pray fervently for vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

St. Bernard’s Church, Grouard

It is since my last letter that the Catholic church in Grouard was totally destroyed by fire. Our oldest historic building, and our first cathedral when our diocese was still a vicariate, this is a great loss. Declared an historic site by the Government of Alberta, this church touched the lives of countless people over the years. I’ve often likened this church as an elder, a venerable old person in the community who has seen much, and holds the collective memory of an entire community. Like an elder, of course, we should not be surprised when it dies, when it is no longer among us.

Over the past several years, we had been restoring the church. Several individuals contributed to the walls, windows, doors and front steps, and steeple. A washroom was added near the entry to the church. The outside was finished, and we began to consider how to restore the beauty of the interior. This now will never be done.

We will soon see to the removal of debris from this site, and then look to assuring that we have a church for the Grouard community. The priest who serves the Grouard community and Kapawe’no First Nation is also responsible for the Catholic communities in Atikameg (Whitefish Lake First Nation), and the Gift Lake and Peavine Metis Settlements.

Walking Together

“Walking Together” was a theme that accompanied Pope Francis’ visit to Canada in June 2022, as he spoke of healing and reconciliation among Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. At our September 2022 plenary, the Canadian bishops decided to use that same theme in our efforts going forward. To introduce and frame this theme, the Bishops’ Conference wrote four letters, which were made available in February 2023: one each for the First Nations, the Metis Nation, the Inuit people, and one letter for the whole Canadian “people of God”. I distributed these letters and my own commitment to the leadership and communities found in our archdiocese. I continue to reach out through other means to build relationships with the many peoples in our diocese. I ask all of you to keep these initiatives in your prayers.

World Wide Marriage Encounter

On the first weekend of June, I treated myself to a Marriage Encounter weekend. I had no spouse, of course, but I wanted to get a flavour of the Movement as it now exists. I had made a weekend years ago when I was a young priest; you could say this was a refresher. Archbishop Sylvain Lavoie, OMI was the priest on the weekend – he and I shared our scribblers. I was encouraged to see the connections and sharing of the lead couples and others on this weekend, which was held at St. Joseph’s High School. Marriage Encounter is not about saving troubled marriages; it’s about happy marriages deepening their love for one another.

I encourage all married couples in the archdiocese to consider taking part in such a weekend experience, when you come across it. Let it be a gift to yourselves.

Summer Plans

Many ask if I’m getting a break during the summer. Yes, among other things. My plans include:

July 7-8	Gathering at Kapawe’no First Nation, Grouard
July 11	50 th Anniversary of an “old” youth group in Toronto
July 12-22	Vacation time in Nova Scotia
July 23-25	Native pilgrimage at Lac Ste-Anne
August 3-7	Little Red River pilgrimage, Fox Lake
August 14-15	Archdiocesan pilgrimage, Girouxville
August 28 – Sep 1	Clergy Retreat, Edmonton

Through much of August, I’ll drop in to Camp St. Martin from time to time at Camp Artaban, just north of Grimshaw.

Yours sincerely in Christ the Redeemer,



Most Rev. Gerard Pettipas, C.Ss.R.
Archbishop of Grouard-McLennan