



The Venerable The Archdeacon of Saint Francis

Anglican Diocese of Quebec

March 19th 2015, *St Joseph of Nazareth*

Brothers and Sisters in Christ.

When I met with the Vestry of St Barnabas, North Hatley on March 1st to discuss the process for discerning the future of the parish, I began by pointing out what I believed to be necessary components in that discernment. To begin with, I suggested that from all the information available to me the primary area that needs to be addressed is an unhealthy parish dynamic. It seems as if there may be simply too many 'cooks in the kitchen' or, more precisely, too many people that think they are the primary leader(s) of the parish. This in itself is a difficulty, but it is exacerbated if some of these individuals display consistent bullying behaviour patterns. Vexatious behaviour is not just discernable in the way individuals treat one another, and most especially speak to one another, but also in the manipulations behind the scenes designed to disenfranchise parish communities as a whole. No-one wants a parish from a Trollope novel with high drama amongst a few large egos, usually over small issues, which is really nothing more than the forcing of one individual's or group's will over others.

In a Christian community the voices of everyone must be able to be heard. This is a direct result of the equality of all humanity, both in our unworthiness, and in the dignity we have been given through our Redemption. The Eucharist week by week is a sign of this equality in the eyes of God. St Paul teaches us that we all have aptitudes and vocations and that these differ from individual to individual and also from community to community. Yet different vocations within the Church are not ranked or distinguished by human values of social status, wealth, or privilege. Actually Christ does make a distinction, always put the poor, the inarticulate, the uneducated, and the underprivileged first. This means listening to them first and raising them up before giving heed to those who already possess these gifts. I believe the Anglican community in North Hatley is fighting to be faithful to this principle.

I suggested to the Vestry that this diagnosis was well recognised by the community, and like an addict seeking healing, sought to distance itself from these behavioural patterns in order to maximise the chance of recovery. A straw vote of the members of Vestry confirmed that this indeed is the case. This is an exceptionally mature and positive step. The community as a whole will thrive only when this destructive behaviour is addressed straight on and acknowledged. To do this does not mean to, once again, form an 'us' and 'them' party but rather to commit to helping one another change an underlying cultural pattern. It is hard to break destructive habits, and it takes time and community support to do so in a parish. I imagine it will involve conflict management and education for the congregation by a professional.

Several priests and wardens seem to have been the focus for intimidation, drama, gossip, vexatious behaviour, and bullying over the years. The Vestry believed that most of the new clerics that come to the parish are heralded with Hosannas with hopes that they will be the 'new' saviour. Then after three to five years the crowd turns and chants something else entirely.

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Before the decision to seek a new incumbent can be made, it is clear this behaviour must be addressed to ensure the safety and well-being of whoever is called and the leadership raised up to assist them.

The other issue I raised with the Vestry was the relationship of the parish with the local community. The financial statements make it clear that there is little priority given to mission and ministry in the local area. In quoting Archbishop William Temple's famous line "The Church is the only community which exists primarily for those who are not yet her members" I sought to remind the parish that the church is not a liturgical club designed for its membership and their comfort but rather the communing of the faithful to equip and enable them for their baptismal vocation of service to the world. This duty is clearly laid out in the Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer. There is a huge need in the Eastern Townships, and with the resources available at St Barnabas it should, by rights, be a key player in the life of the wider community. I suspect that the level of drama in the parish over relatively trivial matters and the humming telephone wires over who said what to whom is partially a symptom of not being engaged in this primary work in the wider community. This mission and ministry not only put trivial matters into their proper perspective, but give a positive focus for the energy of the parish. It also allows the 'gated community' mentality to be positively confronted. North Hatley is part and parcel of the culture and geographic reality of the Eastern Townships. To pretend it is hermetically sealed and that what happens in Ayer's Cliff or Magog is of no concern is to deny the veracity of the Incarnation. Christ became flesh in a particular culture, time and place in order to universalise the Gospel. We too are called to do the same. As the famous Canadian Jean Vanier consistently reminds us "The Word became flesh so that flesh may become Word." The Vestry welcomed this observation and expressed a wish to see this mission focus become a reality.

The last specific issue I would like to raise with the parish is simple to request and harder to fulfill. I would request that we be honest, patient, and kind with one another throughout this process. This means not making things up, not repeating random gossip, but going to the source for information. It means not scapegoating, and not behaving in an undignified and irascible way. It means not losing your temper with one another.

It also calls for intellectual integrity. This means being honest about the various proposals and weighing them with an open mind for what is best for the whole community and the long-term viability of the parish. I am aware that this is not always the case. Many seem to have already decided what the agenda is going to be, what the outcome of that agenda should be, and declared that they will abandon the community if it does not go the way they believe it should or that they will actively seek to undermine it. This is way, way, too much drama over agendas which are not yet set and outcomes which are still unknown. I have been disturbed by those who have declared a strong animosity towards the new Ministry Model and, when I have questioned them as to why, have discovered that they knew either little about it or had incorrect (often biased) information. If you are either for or against this particular option then, as C.S. Lewis quotes, it should be 'based' on something. Make your decisions based on knowledge, the reality of the many parishes in the model, and what is actually happening in terms of ministry, mission, finances, and numbers in these communities. It may very well be that this option is not the correct one for North Hatley but to decide it is the wrong way before proper discernment, information gathering, and analysis is done goes against rational decision making.

In regards to the motion before you at the next special vestry I have little to say and the Wardens will address their thoughts to you. To me a period of discernment before deciding what to do next is obvious. It is the only way to ensure the summer residents have a part in the discussion, and the only way to test if the model does or does not have anything to offer the parish. To decide that this possible option is not worth exploring is premature. Practically, there is almost no possibility of finding a new Incumbent by the end of June.

I am aware that many in the parish are damaged and exhausted by the politics of the distant and recent past and want nothing more than to move forward peacefully in mission and ministry. I trust this is the vast majority of the parish and that this good will and desire to serve will lead the parish of North Hatley into a new chapter in its life.

*Yours in Christ,
Edward OGS*