



The Venerable The Archdeacon of Saint Francis
Anglican Diocese of Quebec

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Candlemass

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. John 15:1-2.

Dear Friends in Christ,

It is becoming clear that the Diocese of Quebec, and thus the Deanery of St Francis, has finally come to her day of reckoning. For decades secularists and Christians alike have predicted the decline and fall of the Anglican Church in this Province. We all know that there is truth in this, have war stories to tell one another about our fight for survival, and have watched as despite everything we have tried the predictions have slowly come to pass. Many remember the days of full churches and Sunday schools wistfully, dwell in nostalgia, and lament the state to which we have sunk.

You will have all seen by now the figures that have been published in newspapers across the country about the current state of the parishes in the Diocese of Quebec:

- 80% Have fewer than 25 congregants on Sunday
- 64% of Congregations predict their closing or amalgamation within only 5 Years
- 50% Have fewer than 10 services a year
- 45% are Running a deficit
- There are only 4 full-time priests left in the Diocese

In our own Deanery, the three short years since I have been here, has witnessed massive change. Ten parishes have closed. This last year alone I deconsecrated: St James the Less, Compton; St Barnabas, Lac Megantic; and St Lawrence, Lawrence. Four more parishes have joined the Deanery Ministry Model: Magog, Ayer's Cliff, Hatley, and Coaticook. The Deanery Models now consists of fifteen parishes: Christ Church, Canterbury; Holy Trinity, Denison Mills; Holy Trinity, Kirkdale; St Anne's, Richmond; St Augustine's, Danville; St Barnabas, Milby; St George's, Ayer's Cliff; St George's, Lennoxville; St James, Hatley; St John's, Brookbury; St Luke's, Magog; St Paul's, Bury; St Paul's, Sydenham; St Peter's, Cookshire; St Stephen's,

THE VENERABLE EDWARD SIMONTON OGS
PO BOX 35001, 147 QUEEN STREET, LENNOXVILLE J1M 1J7, QUEBEC
TELEPHONE: 819 679 9957
E-MAIL: esimonton@quebec.anglican.ca

Coaticook; and gives pastoral oversight to the Grace Christian Home; Place Sanborne; St Francis Manor; St Paul's Rest Home; and the Wales Home. There are eight parishes that are still on their own, and of those, four are in the midst of discerning whether to join the model, two are facing an uncertain future, and the other two the Deanery Ministry Committee is not knowledgeable about enough to make a prediction as to their future. The Diocese has been collecting information and strategizing at the Diocesan Executive Committee for over a year trying to determine the best way to address the crisis in which we find ourselves. These proposals will be brought to the Diocese at a Synod later this year.

Many have found the cold reality of the dire predictions coming to pass shocking, some have become despondent, and many have tried to shelter from the wind with denial. They still refuse to believe that it is really happening and live in a state of denial. To them it seems as if the prediction of our death has been premature and if we hold to the old paths all will come right. I understand this and deeply sympathise with it.

Yet the Deanery of St Francis continues to surprise me, and I am happy to say that it is usually a pleasant surprise. Most of the faithful have embraced the change, and often contrary to what they expected, found by doing so, new life. The Deanery has seen a renaissance in its vocation of mission and ministry since the new model came into being. Lay leaders have been enabled to take on responsibilities undreamed of even a decade ago. There are teams of Pastoral Visitors and Deanery lay Readers crisscrossing the Deanery and ministering in parishes they had once known only in name. There are now seven different youth groups in the Deanery participating in a wide variety of activities from gaming, putting on plays, organizing special evenings, parties, pub quizzes, engaging in Christian education, and planning excursions to Quebec City, Ottawa, and Scotland. There are two active EfM groups running, monthly workshops for Lay Readers and other lay ministers, social outreach groups engaged in school breakfast programs, book studies, a new prayer shawl ministry, new liturgical approaches such as Messy Church, the revival of old ones such as the quarterly Choral Evensongs and Wine and Cheese receptions, new Sunday schools coming into being, fun groups like the Soup Sisters who put on a monthly soup luncheon, as well as one-off events like the Yuletide Celebration or the Gilbert and Sullivan evenings. The energy that has been released is not just hopeful; it is the sign that there is still life in the old girl yet.

The arguments about the benefits of the new model for long term viability, survival, and renewal have been well rehearsed before: the enabling of lay ministries, the healthy identification of Anglicans with the other Anglicans in the Deanery instead of just their own parish family, the financial benefits, the structural and administrative benefits, the deeply Christian financial philosophy of not treating anyone differently because of how much money they possess, the liturgical and worship revival it can bring, as well as the long term stability it can provide. I will not elaborate further.

I believe that we are now coming to the crunch. When Christ said that he did not come to judge the world but that by his coming the world had been judged, he is saying that by his incarnation people are faced with a crucial decision that will have deep consequences for them and the world. It is his existence that forces the question, even if that is not the reason he came. We are now faced with a similar question and our decision also will have deep consequences for our survival as a church. How do we discern Him working in the Church now? Do we follow in faith or turn back in fear? Do we try

something new together? As the Rural Dean said to me recently “I would rather try something new and exciting, looking for a way to really live and die with integrity, than just sit and wait for death to come.”

In the end, money and physical resources will not be our problem. Those who survive these crucial years will benefit from the past ministry of all the parishes and faith communities that have finished their race. The Diocese, freed from dissipation, will have the resources to enable new initiatives and support growth. This is not a far off vision – I am talking about next year! The Diocesan Executive Committee supports the Bishop in his plan to release capital to bolster the life of the church in those areas in which we can discern the gifts of the spirit in action. Practically this means that those parishes engaged in new ministry and mission initiatives will be financially supported to increase their probability of long term viability. Those who continue to meet only for worship, follow the same patterns, and show no interest in going it together will be left to fend for themselves. One of the Deanery Lay Readers quoted Benjamin Franklin in the sermon at Ayer’s Cliff last week “Either we hang together or we shall hang separately.”

The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Matthew 3:10

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins addresses this conundrum. The lamp oil represents the life of the spirit manifested in Her fruits. It is about waiting on the Lord so that one is ready to move when the time is right. If one is not ready then the moment is lost, the Bridegroom comes, and the door is shut. Although we mourn for the legendary unicorns looking wistfully through the rain at the ark with its doors sealed tight, it would be unethical to allow everyone else to drown. Much of Christ’s teaching was about being ready, what we particularly concentrate on in Advent. Tragedy is often about missing the moment, not acting when one could and it being too late once one realises it.

I believe our forebears missed the right time for discernment in the middle of the last century and did not observe the handwriting on the wall. The horrific experience of the two World Wars and the disorientation and identity crisis left in the wake of the fall of the world’s largest empire left them desperate for security, tradition, and stability. Unfortunately the worldview and its traditions to which they clung for this stability was already dying. In so doing they confused the Gospel with a particular culture and so tied us to sinking ship. Often we do not see the immediate consequences of misreading not discerning the signs of the times faithfully for our own generation. However, they are still real and will be revealed with time, in our case sixty years later. I pray we will have the wisdom to judge differently in our generation.

From what I have seen here in the Eastern Townships, we are extraordinarily lucky that a new vision has been caught by so many just in the nick of time. Much has had to be pruned back in our attempt to save the vine. To my relief and joy, it has worked and new sprouts are making their appearance known every day. In spite of the negative press, in spite of our radical reduction in size, we are still alive and we are faithful. Add to this the courage to explore new possibilities and new ways to minister to our neighbours and in our communities, and we have all we need to thrive.

They will still bear fruit in old age; they will stay fresh and green. Psalm 92:14

Yours in Christ, Edward OGS