

# **OUR HERITAGE: A CHALLENGE AND A HOPE FOR THE FUTURE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

I am grateful for having been invited to take part in this celebration in the United States of the 175th anniversary of the foundation of the Brothers of Saint Joseph with a reflection on how our heritage is still for us a source of inspiration for the present and the future. I feel really fortunate to be here with you.

Joel helped us to focus on this heritage by reflecting on the life and work of Fr. Jacques-François Dujarié. I would like now to expand this reflection a bit in trying to identify more clearly how our heritage can be, now and in the future, be a source of hope and challenge in our life and ministry.

It is not always easy to avoid two different pitfalls in reflecting on heritage: nostalgia and restoration on the one hand, and evasion from our roots, or flight into a reinterpretation of history disconnected from the context in which it happened, on the other. The first pitfall would make us prisoners of the past as if the past and its context were reflections of the best which could have ever been experienced in history -- the "golden era" syndrome. The second would make us prisoners of our present perspective and vision -- the "we know best" syndrome. In the attempt to make clearer for all of us how our heritage is a challenge and a hope for the future, I would like to avoid both pitfalls.

I would like also to say at the beginning of this talk that I don't feel familiar enough with the present context of the United States to propose anything very concrete for the present and the future drawing from our heritage. My reflection will rather focus on some general insights I offer to each of you to reflect on. It will be up to you to see how they can be

used in the concrete situations with which you are most familiar, in the different parts of the United States where you minister.

Joel presented some patterns which emerge from a reflection on Fr. Dujarié's life. These, I think, are helpful and thought-provoking because the *qualities underlying each of those characteristics in his life were passed on to the Brothers of St. Joseph and thus constitute part of our heritage* (Letter to me, on October 13, 1994). I will use each one of these characteristics as a starting point for my reflection with you.

## **OUR STAND IN THE FACE OF THE SECULAR VALUES OF OUR CULTURE**

Joel mentioned two basic qualities of Fr. Dujarié: his **inner strength** and his **sense of determination**. And he added: *He is passionately faithful to what he has decided upon and committed himself to do; his fidelity is constant and consistent. Thus, he pursues the course he has chosen for his life with zeal and single-mindedness.* How were these qualities passed on to the Brothers of St. Joseph? Let me give you just one significant example.

Among the few circular letters Fr. Dujarié wrote to the brothers inviting them to the annual retreat, we find in some a very challenging demand, or what might seem today an impossible imposition on the brothers. Today it sounds like nothing less than a call to be heroes or even martyrs. It is good to recall the socio-political conditions of the time to have a fuller grasp of these letters. The early 1830's were years of renewed political and social turmoil in France. In fact, already in 1829, Fr. Dujarié wrote: *The fuss about the secular news must only touch your ears and you should not dwell on it. You must edify all kinds of people because they all scrutinize what you do. We are the heavenly Father's children; so we must behave as such, putting into his hands a future it is not our business to fathom.* And Fr. Dujarié goes on saying: *You will join with your neighboring confreres, walk together and get to St. Joseph on September 2nd. The retreat will begin that day.* In 1830, there was no annual retreat

(the year Charles X was sent into exile; churches and convents were searched and a number of them sacked; salaries for the priests and religious teachers were suppressed; in Le Mans, priests and religious were insulted, stones thrown at them; many brothers -- more than half remembered Bro. Rémi in 1878 -- would leave during the year). In 1831, a very short letter was sent to the brothers in which Fr. Dujarié says: *The conditions of our time do not allow me to gather all of you this year; once more, they force me to take away from most of you the opportunity which, I would like to believe, you would have taken advantage of.* In 1832, he informed the brothers about a circular of the bishop of Le Mans asking the priests not to go out dressed in civilian clothes, and in 1833, he ordered the brothers: *Wear your religious habit; do not come dressed in civilian clothes.*

Only Fr. Dujarié could have the credibility to ask that from the brothers; he knew from experience what he was asking of them; he lived in hiding for about ten years, constantly risking his life. It might be difficult for us, here and at this time in North America, to figure out such a situation and understand what it really meant. It would be practically unthinkable today to have a superior issuing that kind of order, even if based on a faith rationale.

But all this shows very clearly the inner strength and the sense of determination Fr. Dujarié not only exemplified in his own life but which he was asking also from the brothers. The question for us is not so much how we would react to such a challenging order today, but rather how much do we have and live the kind of inner strength and sense of determination which our predecessors had? How do we face today a culture which is more and more secularized and whose values are less and less consistent with the Gospel values we base our life on? Many of them, in fact, contradict Gospel teachings. In his book entitled, *Psychology as*

*Religion. The Cult of Self-worship,*<sup>1</sup> Paul Vitz has this to say: *Contemporary psychology is a form of secular humanism based on the rejection of God and the worship of the self... Self-actualization, self-fulfillment, etc., are standard explanations for the purpose of everything from college education to life itself. Countless Christians worry more about losing their self-esteem than about losing their souls.*

As were our predecessors we are also called to proclaim and live Gospel values today; and as in many instances in the past, these values challenge many if not most of the beliefs and convictions of our society. What are the features of Christ's face for us in a culture which implicitly, and also explicitly at times, invites us to carve our own little Christ for our lives, a little Christ who is quite different from the Christ of the Gospel? Our North American culture, deeply influenced by a humanistic vision and mentality, is challenging us as religious. The danger is not coming from an outside enemy as was the case with the French Revolution; it is more subtle because it creeps in each of us and, without our knowledge, gradually changes our perception and our way of thinking so certain Gospel values become less and less relevant in our lives as well as in the lives of others around us. Did we and do we keep the distance necessary for us, in the name of the Gospel, to allow *both the appreciation and the critique of every culture,*<sup>2</sup> including our own? Which stand do we take concerning these secular values of our culture? Are we allowing them only to touch our ears but not to dwell in our hearts? Are we as passionately faithful to what we had committed ourselves to live as was Fr. Dujarié even in very difficult circumstances? These are the kinds of challenging questions we are faced with today and which will still be there for us in the future. We too are called to be prophets for our time. Our constitutions speak clearly about the kind of prophets we are called to be: *Prophets stand before the world as signs of that which has enduring*

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<sup>1</sup> Second Edition, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> C 2:17

*value, and prophets speak and act in the world as companions of the Lord in the service of his kingdom.*<sup>3</sup>

What happened to this important piece of heritage passed on to us by our predecessors? Where is and how do we concretely experience our hope for the future in the midst of our present difficulties within our congregation as well as outside our religious group, in the church and in society?

### **RECONCILIATION AND UNITY: TREMENDOUS NEEDS OF OUR TIME**

As a second characteristic of Fr. Dujarié's life, Joel mentioned Fr. Dujarié's role as **bridge-builder**; *he builds bridges between the people's faith and the means for them to practice it; he builds bridges for those priests who had taken the Oath and yet desired to return to formal church ministry.*

The Brothers of St. Joseph, in their own time had also to be bridge-builders after the example of Fr. Dujarié. Their main ministry was to build bridges between the people's need for education and the means for them to get it, and they had to build bridges for themselves, so to speak, given the tremendous gap in their own education. Most if not all of them were illiterate when they joined the Brothers of St. Joseph. They were generally well received in the different rural parishes where they were sent (in spite of the fact that in some places a few got into trouble and left a bad example mainly because of inadequate academic and religious formation, according to Brother André Mottais himself -- their novitiate formation was much too short: 4 to 10 months altogether).

There are many gaps to be transcended in our society and in the church today: especially gaps in the relationships among people (in families,

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<sup>3</sup> C 5:45

social associations or groupings of all kinds, church circles, and in our own congregation between brothers and priests) due in great part to the exacerbated individualism and search for an ever greater personal well-being and comfort of our North American culture. There is ample space for bridge-building now and for the future... Reconciliation and unity are tremendous needs for so many people in our world!

Our church leaders, and in particular Pope John-Paul, called the entire church to a new evangelization as we prepare to celebrate our entry into the 3rd millennium. Fr. Dujarié's example as a missionary, an evangelizer, is challenging us today and for the future. How will we be able to build bridges between the people's more or less confused spiritual quest and the means for them to find what they are looking for while there is among Catholics, and even among us, a general distrust of the church as an institution? Maybe this is yet another gap to be bridged, that is, between our desire to see the institutional church become more pastorally sensitive to the complex problems of the people of our times and the way to make it happen in our daily experience with them by proclaiming the Gospel as the Good News for their lives. How can we be bridge-builders for that to become a reality? More than ever before, people around us need to be "brothered"; they need to know and experience they are important enough for somebody to care for them. This was a major concern of Fr. Dujarié's ministry to the people through the Sisters of Providence and the Brothers of St. Joseph -- they were sent to care for those most neglected: the poor sick and the uneducated children in the rural areas of the diocese of Le Mans.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNION AND COMMUNITY**

Joel sees Fr. Dujarié *as an elder, a leader who by his integrity and dignity guides his communities and protects their interests*. Leadership is not an easy task today to say the least. Situations and problems are very complex and there is no easy solution. As public witnesses of the Gospel, however, we should still be ready to offer some leadership in today's church and society in the name of Gospel values for which we have committed our

lives. Our role is important, but still more important are the quality and integrity of our lives as disciples to which we have committed ourselves to live as community. Dujarié responded to the call of gathering people in the name of Jesus for the benefit of other people in need.

In spite of difficult situations they had to face, the Brothers of St. Joseph, as Joel stated earlier, *made the effort to stay in contact with one another and maintain some realistic balance between community and ministry... As much as it was feasible - and often it was not - they tried to keep in touch with one another... Thus, as much as feasible, the brothers remained in contact with and supported one another, exchanged experiences, encouraged one another, looked out for one another's interests, humbly acknowledging their own weaknesses and struggles and failures.*

As much as at the time of Fr. Dujarié and the first Brothers of St. Joseph, but for different reasons and in different ways, our world, I believe, is in great need of solidarity, communion and unity. Fr. Dujarié and the brothers sensed the importance of communion and community among them, challenged as they were by the demands of ministry and the particular social and political conditions of their time. Their example should help us today and in the future in deepening our own sense of the importance of communion and community among us for the benefit of the people *whose lot we share... supporting men and women of grace and goodwill everywhere in their efforts to form communities of the coming kingdom.*<sup>4</sup> No more than they are we immune to the danger of sacrificing one to the demands of the other, that is, of sacrificing communion and community to the demands of ministry. We thus tend to put our commitment to live in community and our concrete ministry to the people in a dialectic relationship and so respond to the needs of our times on the basis of personal choice and decision (which, by the way, fits very well the more individualistic mentality of our time). If we yield to such a view, we

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<sup>4</sup> C 2:12

are not offering any alternative to a mentality which contributes greatly to the disintegration of solidarity and threatens every kind of covenantal relationship among people. To help us not fall prey to this danger, our constitutions remind us that we are sent as Jesus was: *Dying and rising with him in baptism, his followers are sent to continue his mission, to hasten along the kingdom... Wherever through its superiors the congregation sends us we go as educators in the faith to those whose lot we share...*<sup>5</sup>

## THE CALL TO LAY DOWN OUR LIVES WITH CHRIST

The fourth aspect of Dujarié's life mentioned by Joel is his role as pastor. This aspect is certainly the most prominent in Fr. Dujarié's life. The one which brought the Brothers of St. Joseph and the people to characterize him as the "good Father." His whole life had meaning in so far as it was a life given entirely to others, and especially for those most in need. His sermon at his installation as pastor of Ruillé speaks eloquently to this: *How happy I am to offer the sacrifice of my blood and my life for those whose salvation I have so many times made this same sacrifice throughout the last three years, staying constantly at the foot of the scaffold, to offer spiritual help.* Keeping in mind Fr. Dujarié's life, we know he was not speaking metaphorically. And we can readily recognize in this Jesus' warning to his disciples: *Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple... none of you can be my disciple unless he gives up everything he has.*<sup>6</sup> This page of the Gospel is not very attractive today in our consumer society. It is much easier to remember the joys of being Christ's disciple than to keep in mind and be ready to pay concretely the cost of this discipleship. Fr. Dujarié gave us the example of one who was ready to pay such a cost with his own life.

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<sup>5</sup> C 2:10 and 12

<sup>6</sup> Lk 14:27, 33



Not many of us here in North America are or will be called to be constantly at the foot of the scaffold to offer help to others. Again, our constitutions call us to reflect on this particular point: *The Lord Jesus loved us and gave up his life for us. Few of us will be called to die the way he died. Yet all of us must lay down our lives with him and for him. If we would be faithful to the gospel we must take up our cross and follow him.*<sup>7</sup> Whatever the concrete circumstances we live in, as Fr. Dujarié, we *must be men with hope to bring.*<sup>8</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Fr. Dujarié's life and the example of the first Brothers of St. Joseph cannot but be a source of hope for us today and for the future. The circumstances in which they lived were far more difficult than ours today: the post-revolutionary years were for French society as well as for the church a time of uncertainty and instability, calling for much discernment and courage. The situation of the small community of the Brothers of St. Joseph was not much better; from 1830 onward, many would leave and few would come in. Remember that only 13 of them in 1831 signed the agreement between Fr. Dujarié and the brothers to remain committed to their institute until death given the "sad condition of the present time which so to speak takes away from us any hope of prospering and even of remaining in existence for much longer as a group...". The entire text of this agreement<sup>9</sup> is worth reading carefully and meditating because it conveys very clearly their deep conviction that God would not let them down whatever would happen. Their example is calling us forth to work toward "acquiring the mind of Jesus Christ", as Fr. Dujarié wrote to the brothers in 1825 inviting them to the annual retreat, to witness to the Gospel in our own time and circumstances.

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<sup>7</sup> C 8:112

<sup>8</sup> C 8:118

<sup>9</sup> See p. 27

As for the challenges we can draw from the heritage we have received from Fr. Dujarié and the first Brothers of St. Joseph, presented here as questions facing us, many are already incorporated in some fashion into the text of our constitutions as the different quotations I have used here can testify. These challenges concern both our attitudes and ministries. But it seems to me that the most important ones are about our attitudes based on values contrary to the tendency today to emphasize "role orientation" rather than "value orientation." Emphasizing "role orientation" easily puts us in a dialectic and we are then caught in calculating our energy investment in different directions which often become competing fields: our ministry or ministries, our circle of friends and colleagues, our community, and so on. This "role orientation" becomes a kind of centrifugal force which tends to foster lack of integration in our lives, whereas "value orientation" will foster deeper integration of our lives. *"We live and work as priests and brothers together. Our mutual respect and shared undertaking should be a hopeful sign of the kingdom, and they are when others can behold how we love one another."*<sup>10</sup> The main value we are called to pursue as Holy Cross religious, in our life and work, a value which is capable of deepening our personal and community integration, is clearly indicated by this particular paragraph of our constitutions.

I would summarize the different questions I have raised in this presentation in five different challenges we are called to meet today and in the future. Four concern our values and our attitude toward values, and one concerns our work or ministry:

- 1. The first challenge is to witness to the total Christ of the Gospel as the ultimate value instead of yielding to the pressures of our culture to carve own little Christ who fits our personal needs. This is not an easy task; it is a personal as well as a community challenge.***

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<sup>10</sup> C 2:11

2. *The second concerns the stand we take in our daily lives in the face of the secular values of our society. It might happen that we are so immersed in them that we can hardly identify them anymore, or at least a number of them, as contrary to the Gospel values we have based our lives on.*
3. *The third is about our inner strength and the sense of determination we have in facing the particular difficulties of our times.*
4. *The fourth is questioning the quality of our faithfulness to what we have committed ourselves to live through our vows. Are we as passionately faithful as was Fr. Dujarié even in very difficult circumstances?*
5. *Finally, how are we bridge-builders for the people of our time who experience so much brokenness? How can our ministries be truly oriented toward building bridges in the future for them to answer the needs of the time?*

The heritage bequeathed to us through the life and work of Fr. Dujarié and of the first Brothers of St. Joseph in a time of serious political and social difficulties is indeed a cause for pride, and hope for the future. They lived through a time of transition in the aftermath of the French Revolution which has much to teach us who are also called to live through a time of rapid changes in history though much less turbulent than theirs. Their example can help us to live our religious commitment all the more since our world is suffering from a confusion of values and an overemphasis on gratifying personal needs as the main goal of existence.

Gérard Dionne, C.S.C.  
Brothers of Holy Cross  
Montréal