

A Letter of Encouragement from Manitoulin Island

By Archbishop Anne Germond

On Sunday, October 18, I had the great joy of travelling to Manitoulin Island to celebrate the Eucharist with the five Anglican congregations that make up the island parishes: St. Paul's in Manitowaning, Holy Trinity in Little Current, St. John the Evangelist in Kagawong, All Saints in Gore Bay, and St. Francis of Assisi in Mindemoya.



What a wonderful morning it was! The church was almost full, and it was lovely to see people from across the island gathered together in worship and fellowship. The weather was beautiful, the autumn drive was spectacular, and everything went remarkably smoothly—even though the entire island was experiencing a scheduled power outage!

But these things do not faze the hardy, resilient people of Manitoulin Island. A generator was running, so we had lights, we had organ music, and all was well.

We gathered at St. Francis of Assisi in Mindemoya, where the congregation now shares its church home with Trinity Manitoulin United Church. There is something very special about this kind of partnership. When congregations from different Christian traditions come together to share a place of worship and a life of faith, they are called into a deeper relationship with

one another. It is an opportunity to discover what we share in Christ and how we can encourage and support one another in ministry.

The church itself is beautiful and rather unusual, with stone walls surrounding the sanctuary. There is something wonderfully solid and enduring about worshipping in such a place, surrounded by stones that have stood for generations.

The island congregations are currently between incumbents, following the departure of the Rev. Catherine Hazlitt to begin her new ministry in North Bay. The Rev. Doug Prebble is providing interim ministry during this time of transition. It was especially good to be together as one church family, giving thanks for the faithfulness of these congregations and the ministry they continue to offer in their communities.

I preached that morning on Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, and particularly on the importance of words of encouragement.

When Colin and I moved from South Africa, letters were an important part of keeping us connected with our families. In those early days of settling into a new country, when so much was unfamiliar and there were difficult moments, those letters and the encouragement they brought meant a great deal to us. We wrote letters home, too, sharing

our news and experiences. Even years later, our families enjoyed taking them out and reading them again.



There is something deeply meaningful about receiving a letter. Someone has taken the time to think about you, to put their thoughts into words, and to reach across the distance between you. A letter can remind us that we are loved, that we are remembered, and that we are not alone.

Paul understood this. His letters to the early Christian communities were not simply instructions about how to live. They were also letters of encouragement, written to people facing uncertainty, hardship, and questions about their faith.

And the Thessalonians certainly had plenty to keep them awake at night!

They faced persecution for belonging to the early Church. They worried about their brothers and sisters in Christ who had died before Jesus returned, wondering whether those loved ones would somehow miss out on the coming reign of Christ. Some believed that Christ's return was so imminent that they had stopped working altogether, and Paul had to address the problems of idleness and neglect of daily responsibilities. As a Gentile congregation, they also faced considerable pressure to return to the worship of false idols.

As I reflected on Paul's words, I wondered what keeps the people of Manitoulin Island awake at night. Indeed, what keeps any of us in the Diocese of Algoma awake at night?

In our churches, we worry about dwindling membership, diminishing financial resources, and the shortage of people available to carry out the ministries to which we are called. And there is that perennial question: Where have all the young people gone?

Beyond our own congregations, there are the enormous challenges facing our world. Christians in places such as Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Burkina Faso continue to face persecution for their faith. In other places, including our own communities, the message of the Gospel is increasingly questioned or dismissed.

We can find ourselves tempted to compromise what we believe, or to place our trust in the false idols of our own age—money, status, titles, and all those things that look so glittery and attractive from the outside.

Yet Paul's letter is not a letter of despair. It is a letter of encouragement and hope.

And I shared three words of good news from Paul with the congregations gathered on Manitoulin Island.

The first is that **the Holy Spirit is at work in and through us.**

It is Jesus who has saved us, not all the other things we are tempted to worship or rely upon. Throughout Scripture, we encounter the joy that comes from the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit. We see it in Elizabeth, whose baby leaps for joy in her womb, and we encounter it throughout the Gospels in Jesus' teaching and in the lives of those who follow him.

Like the Thessalonians, we walk uncertain paths. We cannot always see what lies ahead, and we do not have answers to every question. But as Christians, **we can be sure-footed in our journey**, trusting that the Holy Spirit continues to work in and through the Church, and in and through each one of us.

The second word of good news is that **the Gospel of Jesus Christ is durable. It is long-lasting.**

The Thessalonians persevered because their faith was deeply rooted in the message of the Gospel. The difficulties they faced were real, but those difficulties did not have the final word. They could continue to live with hope because they knew where that hope was grounded.

Standing in that beautiful stone church on Manitoulin Island, there was something especially meaningful about speaking of a faith that endures. The stones around us were a wonderful reminder of the generations of faithful people who have gone before us, building and sustaining communities of worship and passing on the good news of Jesus Christ.



This is why we keep returning to the Scriptures. They remind us of God's faithfulness across generations and help us to remain rooted in the good news of Jesus Christ, even when the world around us seems uncertain.

The third word of good news is Paul's invitation to **turn away from the false idols and temptations of the world and keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.**

At that point in my homily, I sang to the congregation those beautiful words from the old Gospel hymn, *Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus*:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of the earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.

It is such a lovely reminder that when we turn our attention toward Christ, the things that so often consume our thoughts and anxieties begin to take on a different perspective.

But I did not want to leave the congregations with words alone. I wanted to offer both a challenge and an invitation.



Remembering how much the letters we received from family meant to Colin and me, and how Paul's letters encouraged the early Church, I invited each of the island congregations to **write a letter of encouragement to a neighbouring parish of another denomination.**

Not a letter asking for something. Not a letter suggesting that one church is doing better than another. Simply a letter offering a word of encouragement, written in a spirit of collegiality and Gospel sharing rather than competition.

Gathering in a church home now shared by Anglicans and members of the United Church made this invitation especially meaningful. Here was a congregation already living into a closer relationship with its Christian neighbours. Such relationships ask something of us. They invite us to move beyond our own familiar traditions, to listen to one another, and to recognize the gifts that each brings to our shared Christian witness.

We know that our neighbouring churches are often facing the same challenges that we are. They, too, may be wondering about their future, their resources, and the people they are called to serve. How wonderful it would be for them to receive an unexpected letter from another Christian congregation saying, in effect, *We are thinking of you. We give thanks for your ministry. Be encouraged in the work you are doing.*

And then there was a second invitation, which involved something rather delicious!

I had brought along a large bottle of maple syrup for each of the five congregations, produced locally in the community of Desbarats, along the Huron Shores.

I invited them to use that maple syrup to host a pancake breakfast—a community gathering where they could invite neighbours, share a meal, make new friends, and offer encouragement to those who might especially need it.

It need not be complicated or elaborate. Sometimes the simplest gestures of friendship and hospitality can mean the most.



A letter. A word of encouragement. A pancake breakfast shared with friends and neighbours.

These may seem like small things in a world filled with enormous challenges. But I believe they are precisely the kinds of things through which the Holy Spirit continues to work in our communities.

As I drove home from Manitoulin Island on that beautiful autumn afternoon, I was grateful for the opportunity to worship with these faithful and resilient congregations, and for the reminder that the Gospel continues to bear fruit in ordinary, everyday acts of love.

My hope is that the invitations I extended on Sunday might travel beyond Manitoulin Island, too. Perhaps there is a neighbouring congregation that would be encouraged by a letter from your parish. Perhaps there is someone in your community who would welcome an invitation to breakfast, a conversation, or simply the reassurance that they have not been forgotten.

We may not be able to resolve all the things that keep us awake at night. But we can encourage one another, remain rooted in the Gospel, and trust the Holy Spirit to continue working in and through us.

And that is very good news indeed.

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