

Anniversaries and the blessed-of-God Saints of the Church



Photo by John Aiken - used with permission

One of the highlights of this year has been celebrating significant anniversaries and patronal feast days with parishes in Algoma. There's been at least one celebration in every deanery, each unique and each an occasion of great joy as all present gave thanks for the past, celebrated the present and began to look forward with expectation to the new future God is inviting us into.

Congratulations to St. John's, North Bay (140th), The Church of the Redeemer, Rosseau (150th), St. Thomas, Ullswater/Bent River (140th), Christ Church, Port Sydney (150th), St. Alban the Martyr, Capreol (100th), St. Francis, Mindemoya (90th), Zion Lutheran (100th), and St. Luke's Cathedral Patronal festival. In November, I will be in Thunder Bay for the Patronal festival and confirmation at St. Michael and All Angels. Thank you for the invitations to be present with all of you. I left every celebration inspired and filled with renewed energy for the awesome task of being called to shepherd God's blessed saints in Algoma for a while longer.

I love it when the emphasis during an anniversary celebration in a parish is placed on the Service of Thanksgiving in the church. Oh, don't get me wrong, the dinners and lunches are wonderful too, but the rite in our Book of Alternative Services; 'Thanksgiving on the Anniversary of a Parish', the liturgy of Word and Sacrament, reminds us that we are ultimately connected to the Eternal One who holds all things, all people, all places, and all time in God's loving hands.

The liturgy reminds us that the God we love and serve is 'watchful and caring', 'our source and our end' and asks for God's continued presence to guide us, judge us, illumine us, and bless us for the work ahead, work that takes us out into the world God loves so very much.

Having a keen interest in history (particularly Algoma's early history) it was inspiring for me to hear more stories of the blessed-by-God saints whose generosity of time, energy and skill, whose faith and determination, whose holy hands, money and hard work grew Algoma's churches from the ground up.

While the stories are from a different era, they speak of a people inspired by the revelation of God through his Son Jesus Christ to be agents of God's will and purpose in their own time. As we approach the end of 2023 with all its ups and downs, we are imbued with the same will and purpose and encouraged to move forward in the same spirit of expectancy that as God has acted in Algoma in the past that God is doing and will continue to do a new thing now and in the future.

Like our forebears, we are a very mixed bag of people – not at all perfect, but ready and willing to do God's work in the world. That makes us the 'Saints' of today – blessed- by- God¹- people, identified by what God has done in for us and not based on anything we ourselves have done. It's all God's grace.

A Saint is "Paul's noun of choice for the people of God – men and women who, no longer lost, follow Jesus in the cosmos." (Eugene Peterson: Practice Resurrection page 76)

In the very early days, our founding siblings in Christ followed Christ into the new world of Northern Ontario. While some were born here, others came from many lands bringing their families, their skills, and their hopes and dreams with them.

They also brought their faith which they wanted to live out in community. At first their life together took place as they worshipped in schoolhouses, community centres, or even in peoples' homes. There were no prayer books or hymn books, but there was Word and Sacrament and people gathered eagerly around both.

By and by, so the similar story goes, the people thought it would be a good idea to build a church of their own to bring praise and glory to God. This meant that rock needed to be quarried. Maple and Pine trees were logged and taken to a local sawmill to be converted into lumber for framing. In the winter months stones were hauled across great expanses of snow and ice. Some helped in the mill to make doors and window frames while others went to Southern Ontario on 'begging expeditions' for cement, wrought iron and carpets from presidents of great companies. The builders and crafters gave what they had in terms of time and talent, and others gave a tithe of their income as their contribution to the costs of the building and the cost of ministry.

Lay and ordained, they stood side by side and ministered together in church buildings of every shape and size in cities, towns, and villages. Some were ministered to along railway lines, while others found friends in kitchens, and pantries, and sewing rooms. They met over bread and wine in Eucharist and around the table of fellowship for Bible Study and daily prayer. The blessed saints of our Diocese encouraged each other as they watched the seeds of their labours growing into the rich legacy they have left us to steward.

The Rev. Richard Taylor, first incumbent of St. Francis, Mindemoya, concludes his memoir on the building of that church with these words, "The worship space is truly holy and lovely, with a flickering light marking The Presence. And the people are glad to go up onto the House of the Lord; they and their children. For ever and ever. Amen."

This year our beloved Diocese is celebrating it's 150th Anniversary year. I pray that we will continue to experience the Presence of God in our midst and the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through us. That same flickering light of Christ, marking His Presence shines on in Algoma. It has never gone out and it never will because this is God's church.

As I reminded the 'blessed by God' saints in anniversary celebrations, God is a God of surprises who shows up when we are least expecting to find God, like now, when the going is tough as we continue to rebuild after the Covid-19 pandemic and the loss of so many 'blessed by God' saints in our churches.

That was Jacob's experience when he laid his head on an ordinary stone as he fled from his home and his brother's wrath. That wasn't a holy place and Jacob was anything but holy himself, yet, in that place, God renewed the covenant he had made to Abraham and that stone became the Stone of Presence, a tangible reminder that ever faithful God had not abandoned him.

A much-loved reading at anniversary celebrations from 1 Peter speaks of us all being Living Stones. At baptism we received the gift of the Holy Spirit which I think of as being the mortar that binds the living stones that make up the body of Christ, the household of God.

As we mark our 150th Anniversary year, we also look to the past with thankful hearts for what has been and to the new future to which God is inviting us now. At the end of the Diocese of Algoma's 50th Anniversary year in 1923, Archbishop George Thorneloe made the following remarks about the diocese he'd served faithfully for over 26 years in his journal. I love his words. Let us claim them for ourselves for the next 100 years.

"The past has been the seeding time, before us lies the harvest: it is ours to reap. An abundance of blessing awaits us if we will rise up to claim it." (Life, Work, Memoirs – George Thorneloe page 80)

The year of our 50th anniversary was marked by a spirit of faith and hope. Little did Archbishop Thorneloe know that just a few years later the world would be hit by the Great Depression, and that there would be a Second World War. Yet the Diocese continued to grow and to flourish.

Our 100th anniversary was celebrated in 1973 and was the last year of Archbishop William Wright's (Algoma's longest serving bishop) episcopacy. Here is our centennial diocesan prayer:

"O God of our fathers, who has brought and blessed thy church in this Diocese of Algoma through a hundred years; accept our thanksgiving and we beseech thee so to renew in us Thy spirit that we may steadfastly seek Thy Will for us and for our children, and both in life and worship may show forth thy love and magnify Thy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

The year of our 100th anniversary was marked by a spirit of faith and hope.

And now we find ourselves in 2023, our 150th anniversary year. We live in a changed and constantly changing world, but we also live in faith and hope. In response to Archbishop Thorneloe's remarks in 1923, our Diocesan mission, and the readings of the day, Archdeacon Jay has prepared the following prayer for our use. Let us pray this prayer with one heart and voice on Reign of Christ Sunday, November 26th, 2023.

Diocese of Algoma 150th Anniversary Prayer

Blessed are you, God of steadfast love, for you seek and gather the lost and scattered. Your goodness endures from age to age.

We give you praise for your faithfulness to all generations, particularly over the past one hundred and fifty years in the Diocese of Algoma. We raise our voices, too, in thanksgiving for the pioneers in faith who traversed this Diocese, sowing the seeds of a harvest that is ours to reap for the life of the world.

Open our eyes and hands to those who hunger and thirst, those without shelter or place, and those who suffer infirmity or oppression, that we may be the presence of Christ to them, and encounter the presence of Christ in them.

As we turn our gaze to the future, give us grace to claim the abundant blessing awaiting us, so we may know what is the hope to which you have called us, the riches of your glorious inheritance among the saints, and the immeasurable greatness of your power for all who believe.

Make of our lives a continual telling of the gospel story so, with passion, imagination, and deep commitment, we may continue to share in the gathering work of Christ Jesus the Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

May God, who began a good work in us, carry it until it is finished. And one day may we be reunited with all those who have gone before us and all those who will come after us.

Your blessed-by-God bishop,

+Anne

1. Peterson, Eugene *Practice Resurrection: A Conversation in Growing Up in Christ*