

A CATHOLIC ELDER SPEAKS TO HIS PEOPLE

by Fr. Jacques Johnson



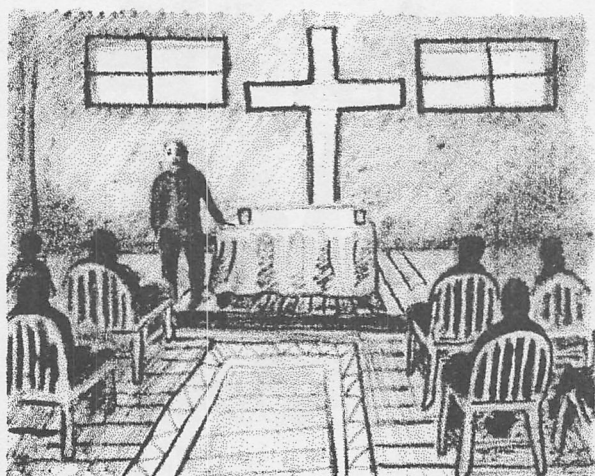
Mr. Thomas Roberts was a gentle and a quiet man. He and his wife lived in Fort Vermilion in Northern Alberta. Both of them were in their late eighties, both spoke only Cree.

It was only a few days before Christmas when they were brought the sad news of the death of

...their son Willie. She received this news with sorrow and many tears. This would be the seventh of her fourteen children that she would be burying.

The grandfather showed little emotion. He sat on his bed and smoked in silence. After awhile he expressed to Father Paul, who was present, how he could not be sad at the thought of his son's death. "He is presently walking with God," he said, "we are the ones who should be pitied, suffering as we are, while he lives in peace and happiness."

Later, in the church basement, people gathered around the casket for the prayers. The two Sisters at the Fort led the large congregation in prayer and hymn singing.



At one point during the course of the evening the old grandfather got up and addressed his relatives and friends in a moving speech. It was filled with words of consolation, encouragement, and Christian hope in the face of the difficult trial they had to overcome. The assembly was deeply touched. They had not expected such a speech, not only because the old man was talking in the presence of his dead son, or because of his age, but also because he had never been known to speak in public before.

the grandmother. "We are the ones who should be pitied," he declared, "we are the ones who are in pain and who know all kinds of sufferings. She is in peace, she walks with God and lives in happiness." He spoke to them of heaven and of the hope that is ours in the resurrection.

He then proceeded to speak about his wife and he listed out some of her qualities. He expressed how good a person she was, how devoted she was to her 14 children whom she had raised very well. She was a kind person and she welcomed whoever would come, and she would feed them. She had never taken liquor in her life, but had spent much time in prayer as she had a strong faith and a deep trust in God.

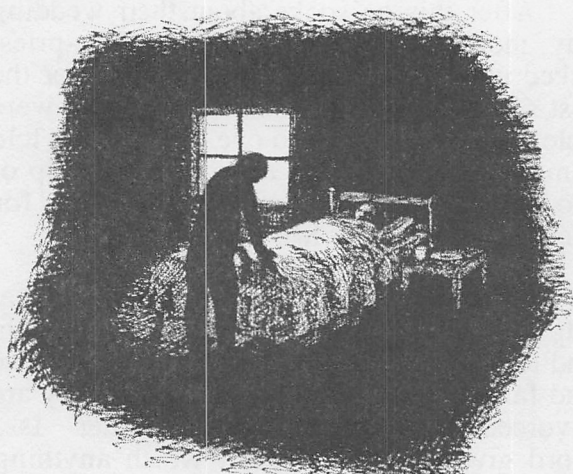
After this he spoke about their wedding day, more than 67 years before. "The priest asked us if we agreed to live together for the rest of our lives and whether or not we were able to remain faithful to one another. We told him YES, and we were able, with the help of God, to live up to that promise. I thank God for the good years we've had together."

"I wonder though," he added, "about what happens today when couples come in church, and to the priest and to God they promise love and faithfulness, and after two years they are divorced. How can that be, I wonder. Is a word given, nowadays, not worth anything anymore?" he asked.

Again he spoke about drinking and he asked the people to look at the terrible consequences of excessive alcohol in the homes. It brought quarrels, fights, and marriage breakups. Because of it, many married people and children are being hurt. He encouraged them to turn to God and to pray more. He pointed out how prayer had been of major importance in their own marriage and how it brought peace and forgiveness, harmony and increased love.

Later that winter I learned that his eighty seven year old wife had also died. She had been several weeks in the hospital, slowly becoming weaker and weaker.

Her husband was also in the hospital at the time, but on a separate floor. When he learned that his wife had passed away, he asked to go up and see her. He stood at the foot of the bed, caressing her feet and expressing out loud how beautiful he felt she was. He praised her character and many qualities. He also expressed how happy she must be as she walked with God in heaven. "I do not cry," he said, "because she was once in misery and is no longer miserable." But even as he spoke his eyes filled with tears.....



He volunteered to speak at the funeral of his wife as he had done for his son a few weeks before. He left the hospital to come to the church that morning, and even though he was quite weak he left his cane behind: "God who is all powerful will give me the strength", he said simply. After the priest's homily, the old man came forward and with a strong voice he addressed the assembly in Cree.

His first concern was to console his people and he reassured them about the well being of

Father invited Mr. Roberts to speak at the funeral mass if he so desired. The elder replied, "You tell me when the time has come." After the priest's homily, Sister Claudette went to the old man and told him that the time had come for him to speak.

The congregation that filled the church saw the venerable gentleman get up, and with the aid of his cane and little steps, carry himself to the side of the altar. Then he turned toward the people and began his speech with the greeting: "My beloved brothers." Then for close to 15 minutes he spoke with great strength, in a voice that filled the church, and in the manner of a born orator. He captivated his audience totally.

He spoke about the death of his son, encouraging the people to believe in the afterlife, in the power of God and in His love that take great care of us and make us live even when things look hopeless. He then spoke vigorously against the heavy drinking that was going on, and the suffering that alcohol was creating in the community, and urged people to greater moderation and sobriety.

Lastly he warned against the "new religions" that are putting doubts in many minds and he pleaded with them to remain steadfast in their Catholic faith. He finished with the Cree word "Ekouse", meaning "I have spoken."

As I was in this part of the country shortly after Christmas, I went to visit the old couple and their family to bring them words of friendship and also to pray with them. One of the sons who was almost blind lived with his parents. He willingly served as our interpreter. I confess that I was deeply moved and awed when I met these good and simple people. We talked about their family and the difficult life they experienced in the forests, by rivers and lakes in Northern Alberta. I was touched by their warmth and wisdom.

This venerable Catholic elder ended by thanking God for the gift of his wife who was a precious treasure for himself and his family. Soon, he hoped, he would join her and live with her and God in happiness for all eternity.

He was an old man who had never gone to school, who probably could sign his name only by a cross, who lived amid poverty and little comfort. Yet, as a distant witness, I marvel at how God's Spirit touched his life, and how this humble man was able to react to life's great tragedies with such peace, with such lucidity and strength. He was a true witness of the resurrection. A witness also of a true Christian marriage whose example of faithful love can benefit all of us.

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