



## Fr. Bernard de Margerie, 1934-2024

### Reflection by Nick Jesson for the PCE AGM, March 19, 2024

I first met Fr. Bernard in June of 1994, after I had been hired as the new director of the Centre. I was to start in September, but Bernard was leaving on sabbatical before I would arrive. So, the Board arranged for me to come for a week in June to learn from him about the Centre and its work. He was living at Mazenod, the Oblate residence beside Queen's House, so he arranged a room for me. During the week, we went to meetings and drove around the city and to nearby parishes, and he introduced me to many of the key people that I would work with over the coming years. We spent time in prayer morning and evening with the Oblates and with almost everyone that we met.

I recall a piece of advice that he gave me that week. We were driving to a gathering somewhere, and we were talking about my studies and my interests. He had told me about how he had been available to preach in any church about Christian unity. I was astounded to hear how he had visited hundreds of churches over the previous ten years to preach about unity. We talked about the exchange of gifts that occurs when we meet with others and share spiritual and theological conversations. As he parked the car, he turned to me and said, "It is important to be well grounded in your own faith tradition. Find a parish which you can call home. Make sure that you remain close to your church and remember who you are. This will help you share openly with the churches you meet."

I was only 28 years old when I was hired, at least 20 to 30 years younger than everyone else on the Board. Yet, I always felt affirmed by him. During that week, we had a chance to talk, and he seemed genuinely interested in me as a person and how I had come to my ecumenical interests. He affirmed me in my new role and offered me his support and prayers.

When I arrived in the office in September, I found on the desk a note from him with a scripture passage, I Timothy 4:12 – "Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity." While I came to the job nervous about my own abilities, he gently reminded me that it was not my work that I was called to, but God's. Our work is the response to Christ's prayer "that all may be one."

Other than my grandmother and my wife, Bernard is the only one who regularly called me by my full name, Nicholas. Although, from Bernard, it was the French, Nicola. I interpreted it as a sign of affection, but also that he genuinely cared to know me as a person. It is hard to explain, but I sensed that he saw me more clearly than I do myself.

Over the years, Bernard was completely affirming of me. He knew that people would continue to call upon him to speak on ecumenism or continue his role. He was always careful to discuss things with me before starting a new initiative or accepting an invitation to speak. I was always happy to have Bernard there because he brought energy and passion to the work, and of course, he was always an inspiration to me.

Though Bernard preached in hundreds of churches, he only had one basic sermon. In it, he spoke about the gospel call to Christian unity. Based on John 17:21, the same text that he chose for his funeral, he preached a simple message. As disciples of the Lord, we are all called to fulfil Christ's dying prayer, "that all may be one." The continuing divisions in the church constitute a great act of disobedience.

At the vigil and funeral, much was said about Bernard's advice, "Stay humble!" This was undoubtedly a compliment offered because we were at risk of pride. He was a man of prayer, and he invited people to share in this, particularly through his book of prayer and the many opportunities for prayer that he arranged, formulated, or led. He insisted that spiritual ecumenism is at the heart of the ecumenical movement, but he never stopped there. He knew that relationships, not theological agreements, are the tissue and ligaments that hold the Body of Christ together. He also knew that relationships are fragile and transitory. Everyone's role ends as they move on to new experiences, work, and places. To set the personal relationship between Christians in a longer-lasting form, he had a penchant for forming committees and other ways of institutionalising the ties between churches.

One aspect of Bernard's ministry that was not highlighted during the funeral was his support for the formation of ecumenists across Western Canada. One of the committees he formed was the oddly named "Western Diocesan and Eparchial Coordinators of Ecumenism," an annual conference and meeting of the Catholic ecumenical officers in Western Canada. Begun in 1984, this group is still strong and continues to support the formation of new ecumenical officers and the development of resources for dioceses to deploy in their ecumenical programs. Outside of the actual conference planning, Bernard also supported numerous clergy and lay people in Catholic parishes and dioceses across the country but mainly on the prairies. Together with his friends, he planned the Summer Ecumenical Institutes and provided personal and prayerful support to others struggling to establish an ecumenical programme.

He was also a founding member of the United Church of Canada-Roman Catholic Dialogue in 1974 and continued to be involved for many years. He also contributed to the Anglican-Roman Catholic and the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue. In his retirement, he joined our local Evangelical-Roman Catholic dialogue in Saskatoon.

I learned most of what I know about Bernard from other people. He didn't talk much about himself. But he revealed one aspect of his personal identity to those who knew him. He had a twin brother, Benoit, who died when they were quite young. He grieved this loss forever. You may have noticed that his email address was [jumeau@hotmail.com](mailto:jumeau@hotmail.com). Jumeau is French for twin. Bernard also liked the disciple, Thomas, not because he was the doubter but because he was a twin.

I have a favourite photo of Bernard. In November 2013, we held an Evangelical-Roman Catholic prayer service at Circle Drive Alliance Church. Bernard was asked to preach. In the photo, Bernard is standing with an open Bible in his hand in front of a simple cross with a white shroud. I like this photo because that day was a joyful taste of the unity to which we are called. But also because of how the Evangelical and Catholic congregation received Bernard. He was loved and treasured for his simple yet faithful witness to the unity already present among us, even between Catholics and Evangelicals, who still regularly consider themselves sibling rivals.