



23 May 2023

My dear parishioners, priests and all peoples of our region,

On May 22nd, one of the oldest and most historic churches in the Archdiocese of Grouard-McLennan was irreparably destroyed. St. Bernard's Church in Grouard was our diocese's first cathedral, built when the Episcopal Vicar of Athabasca, Bishop Emile Grouard, chose Lesser Slave Lake Post as the seat of his diocese. Bishop Grouard, being himself a skilled artist, painted with his own hands the mural that was displayed behind the altar of St. Bernard's. After the vicarate was transferred to McLennan in 1942, and the current cathedral was completed there in 1945, St. Bernard's Church was no longer our diocese's cathedral. But, over the many decades that followed, it remained the beloved parish and house of prayer for the people of Grouard.

Its destruction by fire marks a sad moment for the many people who have fond memories of this church. Frequent Masses, baptisms, funerals, confirmations and confessions took place between these walls, which are now charred and rendered as rubbish.

We cherish and hold dear what is old. Persons, things and places that have been with us for a long time deserve a certain reverence. They stir our memories with thoughts of the past events which have marked our lives. They are tokens and touchstones of what is dear to us – whether that be a special person, a photograph, a ring, a hand-written letter, a piece of clothing, or the grandeur of a church. We hold these dear, and all of this is especially true of St. Bernard Church in Grouard – a place of immense historical significance and many cherished memories. And even more, its a church that was still in use more than 120 years after its construction. We, alive today, still went there for Masses and other sacraments. It was not only a monument to the past, but a vital part of the present, and a building our diocese has been trying to restore, little by little, to its original beauty.

And beautiful it was. Marked with Roman arches and hardwood floors, beautiful and truly unique religious art and statues, we have been building new memories each time we walked through its doors. I mourn greatly the loss of this church. I regret the incident that led to its destruction. I love its history

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and its beauty. I was grateful for its present service to those who still entered its doors with faith, hope and love. Its loss saddens me.

While all this is true, I am not overcome by this loss. Nobody lost their life in this fire. A church has been destroyed but the Church – church with a capital C – will never be destroyed. The people of God, the Body of Christ, lives on. A building is lost to the flames, but the flames of faith kindled there are not. The Good News of Jesus Christ is as present and alive as ever. The community of Grouard has lost their place of worship, but they have not lost their faith in the Creator and the Son, Jesus Christ. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we trust that the faith community in Grouard will live on. Christ is with us. Alleluia!

Sincerely in Christ the Redeemer,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "+ Gerard Pettipas, C.Ss.R.". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Rev. Gerard Pettipas, C.Ss.R.
Archbishop of Grouard-McLennan