

CHAPTER 1

ROMAN CATHOLICISM IN NORTHERN ONTARIO BEFORE 1904

Roman Catholicism arrived in what is now the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie in 1615, in the person of Samuel de Champlain. Seven years earlier, Champlain had established a fur trading post at Quebec City, and Quebec City needed a hinterland—a place which could provide furs. Led by First Nations guides, Champlain and his entourage paralleled what would become the Canadian Pacific Railway and Highway 17, the Trans-Canada Highway: From Montreal they traveled up the Ottawa River to its junction with the Mattawa River, site today Mattawa, a lumbering community. There, like the engineers who designed the CPR and Highway 17, they turned west. Up the Mattawa River system (the Mattawa River itself, Lake Talon, Turtle Lake) they went to the west end of Trout Lake, from which they made a brief portage south to the La Vase Creek. (That portage now marks the eastern boundary of the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie.) The La Vase flows into Lake Nipissing. At the intersection there was a village where Champlain and subsequent French Canadian travelers undoubtedly took breaks before crossing the largest body of water between Lake Huron and James Bay, a shallow lake which in short order can become the site of formidable storms. After crossing Lake Nipissing, they descended the French River to Georgian Bay, where Champlain spent the winter living with the Hurons. That route became a major traffic artery for French fur traders and missionaries, in large measure because Iroquois--allies of the British and the Dutch, enemies of the French--occupied the St. Lawrence valley and shores of Lakes Ontario and Erie.

Champlain, himself a Roman Catholic at the time of his 1615 expedition, left France at a time of religious pluralism. From 1562 France had suffered from religious wars, in which Roman Catholics and Protestants fought each other. A low point was the St. Bartholomew Massacre of 23-24 August 1572, when Roman Catholics murdered Protestants. One survivor, Henri de Navarre, survived by pretending to become a Roman Catholic. In 1589 he ascended the French throne as Henri IV, after whom a principal thoroughfare in Quebec City takes its name.

In 1598, Henri IV issued the Edict of Nantes, which gave Protestants religious tolerance until Louis XIV rescinded it in 1685. It was Henri IV who encouraged Champlain to develop New France, but a fanatic assassinated Henri IV in 1610. Tolerance nevertheless continued under his son, Louis XIII (1610-1643), and Huguenot (Protestant) merchants participated in the life of New France until 1624.¹ None, as far as is known, came as far inland as the Mattawa River or Lake Nipissing. In 1624, on the recommendation of Cardinal Richelieu, his chief minister, Louis XIII banned Huguenots from New France not primarily for having the wrong theology but rather for being a source of friction. As long as French people on this side of the Atlantic made life unpleasant for each other, thought Richelieu, New France would lack stability. One group would have to leave, and as Huguenots were a minority within the colony, they would be the ones to go. Thus, from 1624 until the British conquest of 1759, the religious history of New France would be almost totally Roman Catholic.

Most of the Roman Catholic religious activities of New France took place south of what would become the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie. From 1639 to 1649 the Jesuit Order had a mission to the Hurons; a prominent Sudbury parish today takes its name from a Jesuit massacred by the Iroquois, St. Jean de Brébeuf. However, the centre of the Jesuit mission was Ste Marie among the Hurons, located near Midland. Like the Jesuits of Huronia, the Rev. Jacques Marquette (1637-1675), another Jesuit, traveled along the Ottawa River-Mattawa River-Lake Nipissing-French River route before becoming famous for his exploration of the Mississippi River, but he spent most of his professional life in what is now the United States. In 1665, the Rev. Claude Allouez (another Jesuit) became the first of his order to see the St. Mary's Rapids near Sault Ste. Marie, and three years later Marquette and the Rev. Claude Dablon (yet another Jesuit) established a mission station, Sainte Marie du Sault. That station operated from the south

¹ For a commentary on the Huguenots, see François-Xavier Garneau, *Histoire du Canada* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1913-1920); H.M. Baird, *History of the Rise of the Huguenots* (London: Hodder and Staughton, 1880); Charles Bost, *Histoire des Protestants de France* (Paris: La Cause, 1961); H.H. Walsh, *The Christian Church in Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1956).

shore, what is now the Michigan shore, of the St. Mary's River.²

Nevertheless, there was some activity here. Fur trader Étienne Brûlé traveled the route which Champlain would take five years ahead of Champlain, but Brûlé's reputation is that of a renegade from New France, hardly a devout Roman Catholic. Two Récollet priests, Fathers Guillaume Poullain (1622) and Jacques de la Foyer (1624) lived briefly in what is now the District of Nipissing, and Father Claude Pijart, a Jesuit, headed a mission to the same area from 1641 to 1650. Other Jesuits assisted him: René Maynard (1641-1644 and 1648-1659); Léonard Gardeau (1644-1646); Joseph Ponce (1648-1650); and Adrien Daran (1649-1650). Those Jesuits also launched the first Christian missions on the Manitoulin Island and along the north shore of Lake Huron, to Sault Ste. Marie itself. From his mission post at what is now Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, Father Allouez went to Lake Nipigon. He reported that some of the residents of that area remembered Church teaching even though no priest had visited them for twenty years. Others who lived in what would be the American Sault but worked in Canada included Fathers Gabriel Druillettes, Louis André, Henri Nouvel, and Pierre Bailloquet. One priest who worked in the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie until recently, Giuseppe Franchi, identified an Italian Jesuit born in Rome, Joseph Bressani (1612-1672) who worked among the French Jesuits in New France. In 1645, according to Franchi, Bressani visited the Nipissings, who lived on the shores of the lake of that name.

Through the Treaty of Utrecht (1713), France ceded to Great Britain any claims to territory north of the continental divide--lands drained by Hudson or James Bay. From 1713 until 1870 (when they became part of Canada), those lands would be the property of the Hudson's Bay Company. After British military victories in the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), France withdrew altogether from continental North America, although most residents of New France remained. In 1783, following the War of Independence in the United States, Great Britain and the United States agreed on a boundary--with a few adjustments the present boundary

². Graeme S. Mount, John Abbott, Michael J. Mulloy, *The Border at Sault Ste. Marie* (Toronto: Dundurn, 1995), pp. 1-2.

between Canada and the United States. Loyalists and land seekers from the United States moved into Canada in such numbers that in 1791, the British Parliament passed the Constitutional Act which divided “Quebec”--that part of New France north and west of New Brunswick--into two provinces. Lower Canada, so named because of its location downstream on the St. Lawrence River, would have a French Canadian majority. Upper Canada (what is now Ontario south of the continental divide) would have an English-speaking majority.

According to the terms of the boundary treaty of 1783, Great Britain was supposed to withdraw from all lands south of the Great Lakes. That promise conflicted with an earlier treaty, the Treaty of Fort Stanwix, negotiated by Sir William Johnson in 1768, British Superintendent of Indian Affairs. Sir William’s goal had been to terminate Pontiac’s rebellion, and the Treaty of Fort Stanwix “guaranteed” that the Ohio River would be the boundary between lands occupied by Europeans and lands occupied by First Nations. By 1794, Great Britain was at war against France, and the First Nations were not as formidable as they had once been. That year, by the terms of Jay’s Treaty, the British agreed to withdraw inside their allocated boundaries of 1783 no later than 1 June 1796. As a result, those residents of Sault Ste. Marie who wanted to remain British had to move to the north shore, to Sault Ste. Marie, Upper Canada (Ontario since 1867). Some did. The Canadian Census of 1881, taken before construction of the railway in what would be the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie, indicated 205 Roman Catholics in Sault Ste. Marie (which had existed since 1796) and 22 in Bruce Mines (which dated from the arrival of miners from Cornwall, England, in the 1840s.) In 1836, the Rev. Jean-Baptiste Proulx--a secular priest (neither a Jesuit nor a Récollet)--opened a mission station at Wikwemikong on the Manitoulin Island. Two years later, another--surnamed Pierz--established missions on the north shore of Lake Superior. In 1844, Jesuits replaced Father Proulx and founded a second outpost, at Garden River east of the Canadian Sault Ste. Marie. In 1848, they established a third mission station, first at Rivière aux Tourtes on the Pigeon River but relocated to Fort William (now part of Thunder Bay) the following year. These outposts served both the First Nations and people of European extraction, most of whom worked as miners or foresters.

Jesuits founded their Manitoulin Island mission station at Wikwemikong 9 July 1844. French Jesuits had laboured there since 1648, before the Iroquois annihilated Huronia the following year. Another Jesuit, Father Louis André, attempted to proselytize in 1670, but working conditions were so bad that on one occasion he had to eat his own moccasins in order to survive! After that experience, he suffered from stomach disorders. In 1838, Monseigneur Rémi Gaulin oversaw the building of a church which would be the centre of a parish which included most of the Canadian shores of Lakes Huron and Superior. Ferdinand Roque, who reportedly was fluent in Ojibway, settled in Killarney to the east. Having left Boucherville (south of Montreal) to serve under Abbé Jean-Baptiste Proulx at Penetanguishene, he became a teacher, catechist, and interpreter. Between 1844 and 1904, 91 Jesuits—priests and brothers—served at Wikwemikong. There they operated separate schools for boys and for girls, as well as a night-school, presumably for adults. From Wikwemikong, Jesuits traveled to places around Lake Huron: Fort LaCloche, Killarney, Birch Island (near Little Current), Thessalon (otherwise known as Rivière-aux-Sables, then Mississauga), Spragge, Massey. There was an ongoing presence at Sault Ste. Marie from 1846, and clergy from there served Garden River and points east. Jesuits began to work at Fort William in 1849. Until 1870, the Jesuits worked among Canadian Indians. Around 1870, they extended their interests to the forestry workers of Algoma, and with the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1883, parishes for people of European extraction became critical. Parishes followed the tracks: on the transcontinental line, North Bay, Sturgeon Falls, Verner, Warren, Markstay, Sudbury, Chelmsford, Cartier, Chapleau, Port Arthur, Fort William; on the branch line to Sault Ste. Marie Copper Cliff, Espanola, Massey, Blind River, Thessalon. From 1886 until 1941, the Jesuits transferred these parishes and mission stations, one by one, to the authority of the Bishop of Sault Ste. Marie.³

^{3.} Lorenzo Cadieux, S.J., *Fondateurs du Diocèse du Sault-Sainte-Marie* (Sudbury: Société Historique du Nouvel Ontario, 1944), pp. 5-35; Frank A. Peake and Ronald P. Horne, *The Religious Tradition in Sudbury, 1883-1983* (Sudbury: Journal Printing, 1983), pp. 2, 4, 10. See also unpublished draft manuscript by Giuseppe Franchi, “Italians on Lake Nipissing” (1984), stored at the Cathcom office, Sudbury.

Until the Canadian Pacific Railway reached Northern Ontario in 1883, most Roman Catholic residents of Ontario were of Irish extraction. The major exceptions were French Canadians who lived in the Ottawa River valley and the Cornwall area. Continental Europeans did not migrate to Ontario in significant numbers until the twentieth century. As a result, most Canadian bishops were either English-speaking people of Irish descent or French Canadians. The first three Bishops of Sault Ste. Marie would come from the first category, the other two from the second. With both language groups inside the Roman Catholic family, all bishops would have to deal with language issues.

The Canadian Pacific Railway reached North Bay and Sudbury in 1883, then veered northwest along the north shore of Lake Superior to Port Arthur and Fort William (nowadays the combined community of Thunder Bay). Thence it went westward to Kenora, on the north shore of Lake of the Woods, and towards Winnipeg, capital of the Province of Manitoba. A branch line along the north shore of Lake Huron linked Sudbury with Espanola, Blind River, Bruce Mines, and Sault Ste. Marie. Building the CPR had been a dream of Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald. His government had to resign in 1873 because of scandals associated with its construction, not much of which had actually taken place, but Macdonald returned to office in 1878 and unveiled his National Policy in 1879. Two goals of the National Policy were to complete the CPR and, in order to make it economically viable, to attract people who would live along its tracks. If hardly any consumers and producers lived between Montreal, the eastern terminus, and Vancouver, the western one, costs would have been prohibitive!

With the CPR came forest workers, farmers, and, in short order, miners and merchants. Trees were ubiquitous, and workers in Mattawa, North Bay, Sturgeon Falls, Sudbury and points west could chop trees and send them to markets which needed them for construction and for the manufacture of paper. The nickel industry guaranteed Sudbury's survival, especially after the United States Navy discovered--in tests, confirmed in the Spanish-American War of 1898--that protection from a nickel alloy rendered its ships almost unsinkable. Foresters and miners needed to eat, and farmers moved into the Lake Nipissing lowlands (between Sturgeon Falls and

Warren), the Sudbury Basin, and the lowlands adjacent to Lake Huron to grow food. Merchants accompanied these workers. Until the arrival of railways, heavy settlement not adjacent to water arteries had been next to impossible. A technological breakthrough (the train) opened a new chapter in human development.

Many of these new arrivals were French Canadians from the Province of Quebec. The CPR provided economical, efficient transportation from Montreal, and the mid-1890s were a period of high unemployment across North America. Families had little choice but to relocate where jobs were available. Moreover, agricultural land inside Quebec had become scarce. In the late nineteenth century, French Canadians had large families. It was possible to sub-divide farms among the sons and their sons, but after a point, such farms were no longer economically viable. Already some Quebecois had migrated to the United States and the Canadian prairies. Completion of the CPR provided opportunities inside Canada and closer to their cousins and grandparents. Some became farmers who grew vegetables for the farmers and forest workers of the neighbouring communities; some became forest workers, railway workers, miners and merchants.

The French Canadian factor was strongest between North Bay and Sudbury, the Northern Ontario stretch of the CPR within the diocese closest to Montreal, and in the Chelmsford Basin near Sudbury. In 1901, the year of the last Canadian census before the creation of the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie, those claiming to be "French" numbered 617 in Mattawa, 488 in North Bay, 585 around Chelmsford. By 1911, North Bay had 1,446 such people; Sturgeon Falls 1,239; Sudbury 1,518. Not surprisingly, these communities developed substantial Roman Catholic populations as well. The census of 1901 indicated 966 Roman Catholics in North Bay, 838 in Sturgeon Falls, 1,095 in Sudbury, 735 in Balfour-Chelmsford, 4000 in Sault Ste. Marie. The census of 1911 reported that thousands of French Canadians, as well as people of Italian and Irish extraction, lived at Port Arthur and Fort William, what is now Thunder Bay. (Of course, some of those Irish were undoubtedly Orange or Protestant Irish; the census makes no distinction.) In 1891, the year of the first census after the rails passed through northeastern

Ontario, 1,335 residents of Sudbury claimed to be Roman Catholic. Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and Lutherans numbered 997. Eleven said they were Jewish, and another eleven fell into the category of “Others or None”. The Eastern Orthodox community, so prominent at a later date in Sudbury’s Ukrainian, Serb, and Greek communities, did not exist at all. During the following decade, Sudbury experienced a population loss. The census of 1901 indicated 1,045 Roman Catholics; 839 Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and Lutherans; 71 Jews; 7 Eastern Orthodox; and 10 “Others or None”.

Until Pope Pius X (1903-1915) created the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie in 1904, Roman Catholic activity in Northern Ontario was the responsibility of the largely Irish Diocese of Peterborough. This made sense only inasmuch as until 1904, Peterborough’s was the most northerly diocese in Ontario. There were no readily accessible rail routes or highways between Peterborough and the new settlements north of Lake Nipissing, the French River, and Lake Huron. A priest of Irish extraction, David Joseph Scollard, was already living in North Bay, and he was a close friend of Alphonsus O’Connor, Bishop of Peterborough. The latter encouraged Scollard’s candidacy as first Bishop of the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie.⁴

Meanwhile, the Jesuit order bore most of the responsibility for Roman Catholicism within what would become the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie. Lorenzo Cadieux, S.J., the pre-eminent Jesuit historian of the diocese, says that in 1904 the diocese contained 64 churches. Of these, the Jesuits had founded 58. They also directed 14 of 19 missions to its Canadian Indians. Father Cadieux estimated that in 1904, 20,064 of the diocese’s 31,064 Roman Catholics were French Canadians. Some 5000 were Indians.

Parishes which pre-dated the formation of the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie include Notre-Dame-Du-Rosaire, Blezard Valley (1901); Ste-Famille, Blind River (1898); St-Joseph, Chelmsford (1896); St. Stanislaus, Copper Cliff (1900); Notre-Dame-des-Victoires (Field),

⁴ For biographical information on Bishop Scollard, see Nancy Saunders, “Bishop Scollard and Northern Ontario”, essay submitted as partial requirement for a Master’s degree at Laurentian University, Sudbury, Ontario, 1998.

1902; Immaculate Heart of Mary, Garden River (1852); Immaculate Conception, Massey (1889); St. John Francis Regis, Mobert (1895); what would evolve into the Pro-Cathedral of the Assumption, North Bay (1881); what is now Precious Blood Cathedral, Sault Ste. Marie (1875); Sacré Coeur, Sturgeon Falls ((1885); Ste-Anne, Sudbury (1883); St. Ambrose, Thessalon (1902); St.-Jean-Baptiste, Verner (1895); St-Thomas Apôtre, Warren (1901); Immaculate Conception, West Bay (1850); St. Basil, White River (1891); Holy Cross, Wikwemikong (1838).⁵

⁵. *Canadian Catholic Church Director, 2001* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2001), pp. 736-744.