



Most Reverend Raymond J. Boland

Bishop Emeritus

Diocese Kansas City ~ St. Joseph

The French Connection

The Contribution of French Catholicism to the Church in North America

Most Reverend Raymond J. Boland, DD

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For the purposes of this talk I am going to anchor my comments around two dates which should be of special interest to members of the John Carroll Society.

The first of these is 1634 when the Calvert-sponsored plantation of Maryland began with the arrival of the ARK and the DOVE in what is now Chesapeake Bay. As you know the Jesuit Father Andrew White celebrated a Mass of Thanksgiving for their safe voyage on St. Clement's Island in the Potomac River on the Feast of the Annunciation, March 25, 1634. Although he was by birth an Englishman, Father White's pastoral activities had been mostly spent as a seminary professor in France.

A later generation of the Calvert family would bring a Catholic Carroll from Ireland to be the Attorney General of the Colony. From these Carroll roots we were gifted with your patron, the first Bishop and later Archbishop of Baltimore who became a victim of the suppression of the Jesuits in France in 1773 and he took one of the few options available to him in returning to his mother's home in Rock Creek - sometimes referred to as Forest Glen - in what was still the Colony of Maryland.

Between the Calvert date of 1634 and the Carrolls' return date of 1774 one can position those major events which constituted the contributions of French Catholicism to the Church of North America.

Let's take a peek into the history of France during the period under discussion. In the early 1600s King Henry IV was assassinated but he had brought an end to the Wars of Religion which had plagued France for 30 years. The next hundred years are dominated by Louis XIII and Louis XIV along with Cardinals Mazarin and Richelieu. During this century which was relatively peaceful, France enjoyed an era of great growth and exceptional influence. The arts prospered and Catholicism gained strength and prestige because of its close alliance with a powerful state. Versailles was built and King Louis XIV, a firm believer in "the divine right of Kings", the "sun King," *nec paribus impar* (none his equal) ruled as a virtual dictator. It was an age which produced Moliere (1622-73), Racine (1639-99), Decartes, (1596-1650), the foundation of the French Academy (1634) and France's first newspaper, *LaGazette* (1631). With the support of a large royal army and economic self-sufficiency the country had many reasons to flex its muscles and seek overseas colonies just like a number of the other European powers, especially the English, the Spanish and the Dutch. The French were already in the New World - Quebec was founded in 1608 - but the wealth to be derived from overseas territories was a temptation not to be denied. At this time France was more or less the same size as it is today. There was still one tiny enclave in the southeast of the country known as Avignon, still associated with the Papal States but now of little political importance since the Popes, after a 70 year

stay, had returned to Rome in 1378.

Louis XIV did not believe in religious toleration. For political reasons he was not shy about persecuting all manifestations of Protestantism including the Huguenots. He had little time for the Jansenists but don't let this lead you into thinking that he was a zealous middle-of-the-road Roman Catholic. He supported Gallicanism which, in broad strokes, held that the Church in France should be under French control, not that of Rome. (Keep in mind that Rome at that time was not just the Vatican City State we know today: the Papal States were a major player in the power struggles of Europe.)

Despite all these Church-State entanglements the Church generally prospered. It was the age of St. Vincent de Paul (1580-1660), St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622), Jean Jacques Olier (1608-57), founder of the Society of Saint-Sulpice. In 1630 there were 15,000 active monasteries in France and colonial expansion overseas provided them with adequate opportunities to respond to their missionary mandates. The Jesuits and the Capuchins were particularly zealous in this regard. Whatever we may think of the State religion concept, which is so alien to our American experience, it had one great advantage at this time. Every expedition which left the coast of France carried priest missionaries dedicated to converting the "savages", the word they used, of the New World. The establishment of a mission in every colonial settlement was in every way a secular policy as well as an apostolic desire to further God's kingdom. We cannot overlook the fact that some of the expedition leaders felt that an evangelized native American might be more peaceful than an unevangelized one! We are going to discover that one particular tribe, the Iroquois, did not take too kindly to either the French or to evangelization with tragic results for both the Church and the dreams of France.

We now need to do what is almost impossible. We need to get some idea of what North America was like almost four hundred years ago. We tend to rely on statistics for comparative purposes but it is extremely difficult to obtain reliable statistics for the mid 1600s. Let's go backwards with some deliberation. The first census of the new, though small, United States was held in 1790, about 150 years after our period of interest. In 1790 the U.S. population in 16 states and the Ohio territory was almost 4 million people. The most populous state was Virginia; the least populous, Rhode Island. New York City boasted about 33,000 people: Philadelphia 28,000 and Boston just 18,000. These are the first reliable figures we have: every estimate before this time is pure conjecture other than the obvious conclusion that in 1634, Father White's year of arrival with the Calverts, the immigrant population of North American was extremely small. Some of the Native American tribes close to the east coast were probably very large but here again all we have are guesstimates. The best study I have seen indicated that there were only six thousand immigrants in the area under discussion in 1630 but that number increased to 28 thousand in 1640, ten years later. Obviously the colonists were obtaining a foothold along the east coast. Colonization was a risky business. Many of the efforts failed. Those who survived to settle were often wiped out by harsh weather, disease, starvation and the attention of unfriendly Indians. Dogged persistence resulted in the first permanent English settlement in Virginia and by 1634 it numbered about 5000 people. The Dutch settled in New Amsterdam, our present day New York, but their numbers were never very great and eventually they ceded all their possessions in North America. The Swedes came to Delaware but the Dutch captured their small settlement in 1655. The Pilgrims had arrived in 1620 in Plymouth and when their search for religious freedom gained a toehold in Massachusetts a goodly stream of emigrants braved the Atlantic to join them. About 16,000 newcomers joined the infant colony between 1630 and 1640 and they spread out up and down the New England coast. I'm sure we are most interested in the Lord Calvert colonization of Maryland. It was the only

venture with a substantial number of English-speaking Catholics and while it succeeded, despite a war with the Protestants from the Virginia colony, it took 60 years to reach a population of 30,000 people.

When considering the contributions of French Catholicism to the growth of the Church in North America there are two major factors to be kept in mind.

The first of these is that the contributions were primarily on the leadership level - bishops, missionary priests, seminary professors and other educators. One calls to mind Jacques Marquette who was one among many. He was a priest missionary as well as an explorer. On the secular level, but not always exclusively, we had military leaders, skilled administrators, explorers, engineers and architects. These two groups, of necessity frequently working in concert, had an enormous impact on the successful colonization of the continent and evidence of their presence, although more historical than contemporary, is readily available. Other European powers became the beneficiaries of their pioneering work because the French were not able to sustain what they had begun. Over the years they were forced to relinquish their territories, either through war or treaty or sale, so that for the past two hundred years their influence as a political entity has been minimal. The great exception to this generalization is the story of the Province of Quebec where the dream of an autonomous French-speaking independent political entity still exists despite a number of setbacks at the polling booth. The role of the acceptance or non acceptance of a language is just one more component to be studied when pondering what happened to the French in their inability to maintain a more permanent presence on our shores. There is no easy answer because there are several other reasons all woven into a complicated matrix which modern historians are still trying to unravel.

Having said all this, however, let us never forget the assistance the French gave to the embryonic United States when the War of Independence hung in the balance. The names of Lafayette and the appearance of the French fleet at Yorktown will never lose their place in the annals of our republic's beginnings.

The second major factor we should never forget is one which is often overlooked. The French sent enlightened leaders, both secular and Church-connected. They also sent military expeditions with mandates to explore the vast territories and to protect their fledgling commercial enterprises, especially the fur trade, but their people did not come. There was no mass exodus of the French to the New World. As a result there was no societal infrastructure to support the victories of those who dared to explore the frontiers of this vast land. Forts were built in strategic places mostly along the great rivers but they survived in dangerous isolation for far too long. In the course of time they would become the nuclei of great cities but they would not be populated by the French. The French names remained but the settlements were overwhelmed by great waves of immigrants from Britain, Ireland, Germany, Italy, the Baltic countries and Eastern Europe. The statistics will bear this out: in terms of numbers, the French are way down the list.

Why did this happen? Allow me to suggest that the reason is a rather simple one: the French had no great desire to leave their homeland. During the long reign of King Louis XIV there was a certain political stability in France. It was by no means an Utopia but most of the people had enough to eat and they cared little about the affairs of state. Their deprivations were not enough to drive them to emigrate. They left that to the adventurers and the missionaries. The last recorded famine took place in France in 1709 and the country did not experience the grinding religious persecutions, the crushing economic failures and certainly not the impact of

Ireland's Great Famine which filled the emigrant ships from Europe during the 1700s and the 1800s. For the French it was not a matter of life and death; for the others, it frequently was.

In his many studies of Catholic colonization in the Americas the late Father John Tracy Ellis (he died in 1992), one of our finest church historians and in his later years a priest of the Archdiocese of Washington, tended to examine the contributions of the French Church in five distinct, but not always unconnected, areas. Because of the vastness of the geographical area to be covered this was a very necessary device to make his material more manageable but it could draw our attention away from the whole picture.

The five areas he identified were Louisiana, the Illinois country, the Great Lakes region, New York and Maine. The United States-Canada border was not a factor in the 1600s and most of the 1700s so we should banish that demarcation from our thinking.

The Louisiana settlement under the political control of the French only lasted 70 years before the Spanish took over. Nevertheless, anyone who visits New Orleans and its environs realizes very quickly that the French were there and their heritage was preserved in a unique Catholic culture. The United States acquired control of millions of acres around New Orleans in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Control of New Orleans was important because it granted access to the Mississippi River and an entry into the very heart of America. It enabled the French to traverse this great river and its important tributaries to their sources so that their fortifications up and down the river linked their interests from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. In effect this could have posed a major problem for the British colonies to the east of the Appalachians now getting anxious to expand westward. The confrontation never took place because the French never had the resources, human and material, and some would add, the will, to sustain a potential battle line along the Mississippi. So the French departed but not before a litany of cities with beautiful French names were spawned during their sojourn in the Midwest - Baton Rouge, St. Louis, Louisville, Vincennes, Cape Girardeau, Terre Haute, Lafayette and a host of others. They planted Catholicism in these settlements and, to the credit of their missionaries, when the soldiers marched away the faith remained.

Because of the pilgrimage itinerary we are following on this trip I want to zero in on the role the French played in New England and the Province of Ottawa, much of which was once called New France.

The Martyrs of New France

We spend so much time studying the eight martyrs of New France that there is a tendency to forget that many other Jesuits (or as they were popularly called by the native Americans, black-robos) came to North America during the 1600s. Many of them were wonderful evangelists, tireless workers and they quickly acquired knowledge of the languages and the customs of the tribes to whom they brought the teachings of Christ.

Let me tell you the story of one, an outstanding example certainly because his spirit was indicative of many who were smitten by the missionary call including those who met martyrdom among the hostile tribes. When the fur trade along the St. Lawrence River went into decline the French started to push further west following the rivers especially the Ottawa. All along the way they found friends among the Huron and Ottawa Indians but the Iroquois stalked their every move. One of the Jesuits who welcomed the opportunity to push further inland was Father Claude Jean Allonez. He arrived in Sault Sainte Marie in 1665 and for the next 24 years he

traveled up and down Lake Superior establishing missions all over present day Wisconsin. He is often compared to Saint Francis Xavier because of the effectiveness of his missionary zeal. It is said that he instructed over 100,000 people and baptized over 10,000 catechumens. We must keep these success stories in mind especially if we subscribe to the adage "that the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians." Maybe Father Claude's apostolate was blessed because of the example and the sacrifices of his confreres who preceded him.

Who were the martyrs of New France?

There were eight martyrs; six of them were Jesuit priests and two were laymen working alongside the missionaries.

All of them died in the seven year span between 1642 and 1649. With the exception of Jean de Brebeuf, who was seven years old at the turn of the century, all the others were born in the 1600s so they were relatively young men when they died.

This city (Quebec) was founded in 1608 by Samuel de Champlain, one of France's outstanding explorers and colonists. He followed a colonizing pattern which was initiated by many other expedition leaders, namely, make friends with some of the tribes and thus secure protection from those which were considered more hostile. I need not stress the fact that the natives naturally resented the incursions of the invaders who were depriving them of their ancestral lands and destroying their way of life. Hindsight, it is said, is always 20-20, and maybe the fate of the martyrs was sealed even before they arrived in the New World. Champlain had the misfortune or the bad judgment to kill an Iroquois chieftain in 1609. This act was probably the most costly mistake the French ever made as it guaranteed the unending enmity of one of the most warlike tribes in the area. The Iroquois used every opportunity to harass the colonists, including their missionaries, and those tribes, especially the Hurons who had shown a considerable interest in becoming Christian. The bloodletting rarely stopped. This was the reality when the first Jesuits arrived in 1625.

As you will hear a great deal about the eight martyrs of New France on this pilgrimage, I will just give you a capsulized biography of each one.

René Goupil was the first to die in 1642 at the age of 34. Deafness and poor health prevented him from becoming a Jesuit but he associated himself with the Society as a lay apostle. He arrived in Quebec in 1640 and for two years devoted himself to the most menial of tasks. He discovered that he had a natural gift for surgery and as the Hurons badly needed such services he was assigned to join the priests on that mission. Taken prisoner in an Iroquois ambush, René, after enduring many tortures, was tomahawked to death on September 29, the Feast of St. Michael. His story was written by Isaac Jogues who survived this captivity but not the next.

Isaac Jogues was a native of Orleans, the city associated with St. John of Arc. Ordained a Jesuit at the age of 29, within a year he was in Quebec. His story is remarkable insofar as one can say he was martyred twice. Captured in the same ambush as René Goupil and a witness of the latter's death, Isaac was brutally beaten more than once. The Iroquois hacked off his left thumb and he was slated for death. However, at the eleventh hour, with the aid of a kindly Dutchman and, no doubt, in the providence of God, he escaped and was able to return to France. He was lionized in his native country and dubbed "the living martyr." For his part he only wished to return to the missions and he did so in 1644. On a peace mission, along with

John LaLande, both were waylaid, tortured and tomahawked, this time by the Mohawks. Isaac suffered two martyrdoms in a single lifetime. One of his admirers put it this way, "Our Lord prolonged his life that he might come and present it to him another time, as a burnt offering, at the place where he had already begun the sacrifice." (Lalemant)

John LaLande died with Isaac Jogues at a site near present day Auriesville, New York. LaLande was the second lay missionary to die and he endured all the sufferings and eventually the same kind of death as his priest friend and traveling companion. A rogue group of the Mohawks known as the Bear Clan was held responsible for their deaths but their fortitude was so admired by the other clans that almost immediately they were honored among the Indians as saints. The Church did not act as quickly!

Antoine Daniel was the only martyr to die in 1648. He was a Jesuit priest and 47 years old when he died. He spent 14 years evangelizing the Hurons with considerable success. He established two village missions, one dedicated to St. John the Baptist, the other called St. Joseph. The Iroquois attacked the St. Joseph mission and he died walking into the arrows of the attackers as he tried to buy time for his Huron converts to escape. His superior summed up his life with the observation, "his death was sudden, but did not find him unprepared; for he had always lived that he was ever ready for death." (Thwaites, XXXIII, 265)

John de Brébeuf (1593-1649) was one of the first five Jesuits to come to New France in 1625. He was also the oldest of the eight martyrs. His long experience among the Hurons enabled him to become a teacher and a mentor for those who came after him. After many years of successful evangelization 1648 saw the total destruction of many of the more established Huron settlements by the increasingly warlike and barbaric Iroquois. At dawn on March 16, 1649, 1200 well-armed Iroquois attacked and overwhelmed the mission villages of St. Ignatius and St. Louis. All the inhabitants, most of whom were Christians, were captured including Brébeuf and his fellow missionary Gabriel Lalemant. After being subjected to indescribable tortures Brébeuf died the same day as the raid and Lalemant joined him in martyrdom the following day.

Gabriel Lalemant (1610-1649) had two Jesuit uncles who came to the missions in New France a number of years before his arrival in 1646. Three years later he was dead, a victim of the same merciless savagery of the Iroquois which claimed the life of Brébeuf. Lalemant, a frail man always afflicted with poor health, almost refused to die to the amazement of his captors. Finally, he was slain by a hatchet blow to the head and, what his tormentors might regard as a compliment, they ripped his heart from his body and ate it in the belief that by so doing they would inherit his courage!

Charles Garnier (1606-1649) was the third of the four Jesuits who were martyred in 1649. A native of Paris, he came from a family with considerable political connections some of whom, especially his father, did not want him to go on the missions. He persisted and eventually arrived in Quebec in mid 1636. The Hurons gave him the nickname of "Ouracha" which we believe can be translated as "rain bringer" or "rain cloud," probably a reference to the fact that they assigned to the efficacy of his prayers the ending of a drought which was a source of severe hardships. He worked among the Petun Indians until, once again, the Iroquois attacked the settlement and set it on fire. Tending to the dying, he was shot twice and silenced forever with two hatchet blows to the head. Here was a priest who desired martyrdom as the ultimate test of his love for God. What he had foreseen and expected came to pass.

Noël Chabanel (1613-1649) was the youngest and the last of the martyrs. As a seminarian he

was captivated by the "*Jesuit Relations*," basically written reports from the missions and to this day still regarded as "one of the world's most famous records of adventure, history and heroic sanctity, unique because they were history written on the spot in the hour of its making." (Martyrs of New France, p 60) He arrived in New France in 1642, the year of the first martyrdom, little knowing that seven years later he would be the last. He was assigned to a number of the Huron missions and every journey revealed new dangers. He barely escaped capture on at least two occasions but when martyrdom did come it was at the hands of a Huron apostate who demonstrated his hatred for the faith by slaying Chabanel and throwing his body into the Nottowassaga River. Old tribal superstitions died hard despite the Hurons' acceptance of the teaching of Christ and the blackrobes were often blamed for the misfortunes of both tribes and families. Herein lies one possible explanation for Chabanel's martyrdom.

Church recognition of the heroic sanctity of the eight martyrs of New France was accorded them during the 1900s. Appropriately, on June 29, 1930, the feast of the martyred SS. Peter and Paul, Pope Pius XI canonized the eight missionaries and ten years later another Pope, Pius XII, named them patrons of the Church in Canada.

For many the concept of martyrdom is an enigma. For the unbeliever it never makes sense.

For the unbeliever Christ's life ended with the crucifixion, an execution denoting failure. For the believer it was the prelude to the resurrection. Believers know that the blood of martyrs enriches the Church but such total giving can only be understood in terms of the sacrifice of Christ. Ironically, the Jesuit mission in Huronia was abandoned one year after Chabanel died and the secular observer will only see failure. But God's ways are not limited by human logic and, who knows, maybe the harvest of faith now resides in the Church here in Canada and may even yet await its full flowering.

French-born bishops were prominent leaders in the Catholic Church in the United States following in the footsteps of John Carroll, the First Archbishop of Baltimore. John Carroll became a Metropolitan when the new dioceses of New York, Philadelphia, Boston and Bardstown (later Louisville) were erected by the Holy See in 1808. Of the first 50 bishops in the United States 12 were born in France and 2 others were born in French Canada. (See appendix) Many of these were the founder bishops of dioceses, for example, Boston, Bardstown, Mobile, Vincennes, Dubuque and Galveston. Two of the twelve had an unusual episcopal history. Jean Louis de Cheverus, the first bishop of Boston, returned to France where he became the Archbishop of Bordeaux. The Coadjutor Bishop of Bardstown, Guy Ignatius Chabrat, also returned to France even before he succeeded to the see for which he was destined. The percentage of French-born prelates declined substantially after the 1850's as they were replaced by native born bishops predominantly of Irish, German and Italian ancestry, products of the great waves of immigration to which the French did not contribute in substantial numbers. Nevertheless, through the bishops already mentioned and especially through their staffing of seminaries and the arrival of large numbers of women religious from all over France, the Catholic Church in the United States was provided with a secure foundation which it still relies on to this day. Here in Canada the story of the French contribution to the growth of the faith is even more spectacular. Those who died for their faith through the shedding of their blood and those who devoted long lives of great dedication to their adopted countries were giants in their time and we are fortunate to be their beneficiaries.