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Spiritans in Canada ...

The Early Years

Gerald FitzGerald CSSp

“The Spiritans”, a friend of mine remarked, “aren’t you an Irish group of teaching priests?” This friend is a fellow-priest, one of the fourteen who are in retirement with me in the Houses of Providence in Toronto. “No”, I replied, “incorrect on both counts.”

In fact the Spiritans are neither an Irish religious order nor a teaching group. We are an international order of priests, brothers and laypeople,

missionaries were in North America – the Miquelon Islands and New France. Most of the other colonies were in India and the Far East.

Fr Pierre Maillard

Among the first missionaries to come from France to what is now Canada was Fr Pierre Maillard. He arrived in Louisbourg in June 1735. His mission territory was Acadia (Nova Scotia) and

Fr Jean Le Loutre

In 1737, Maillard received help from the Spiritan seminary in Paris in the person of Fr Jean Le Loutre. After a period of nine months spent mastering the native language, the new arrival was sent to Shubenacadie where the Acadians and the Mi’kmaq had been without priestly ministry for nearly fifty years. Unlike Cape Breton, Nova Scotia was under the command of the British. However, Jean quickly gained the respect of his flock and also of the local British authorities.

But this period of peace was short-lived because in 1744 hostilities flared up between the French and British in Nova Scotia. After the fall of Louisbourg, all priests were commanded to report to the authorities. Maillard trusted that they would be treated fairly, but they were all arrested and expelled. Only

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founded in France in 1703 to provide missionaries for the native peoples of the new French colonies.

The founder, Poullart des Places, and his small group started a new Congregation to operate a seminary dedicated to the Holy Spirit. The priests ordained there were sent to French territories overseas. They were referred to as “Spiritans” although they were not officially religious in des Place’s Congregation. It was some years before they were recognized as such.

We are indeed lucky that a scholarly history of the early years of the Spiritan presence in what is now Canada has been researched by Fr Henry Koren CSSp and is included in his books *A History of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost* and *Knaves and Knights* both published by Duquesne University Press.

Fr Koren records that two of the first French colonies to receive Spiritan

included Ile Saint Jean (Prince Edward Island) and Ile Royale (Cape Breton).

Soon after his arrival he began an assiduous study of the Mi’kmaq language. As early as 1738 he began to develop a written language for the Mi’kmaq people. The members of this nation use it to the present time. He wrote their first grammar, dictionary and religious texts that included prayers, hymns, sermons, and the forms for use in baptisms, weddings and funerals.

His linguistic work was largely instrumental in the fact that the Catholic faith was preserved by the Mi’kmaq people and kept alive all through the years when they were deprived of priests after the British expelled these in 1765. Dr Silas Rand, a Baptist pastor in Nova Scotia, remarked that after fifty years without priests “I do not know that a single convert has yet been made.”



The French colony of Louisbourg.

Le Loutre, suspecting a ruse, made his escape through the forests to Quebec along with a band of Mi'kmaq. When the coast was clear he returned to Chebucto (Halifax), but soon after he was arrested and expelled to France.

By now more Spiritans arrived and ministered to the Mi'kmaq in the ensuing years of turbulence and war. In 1755, in the Grand D ménagement, the Acadians, including all their priests, were expelled from the colony.

In Quebec City

Other Spiritans who came to New France at the same time as the group which went to Acadia had a totally different experience. The first of this group, Fr Franois de la Mothe, arrived in Quebec City in 1732. He was quickly followed by a number of his colleagues from the Spiritan Seminary in Paris.

Bishop Pierre Dosquet of Quebec badly needed seminary professors. The Jesuits and the Recollets were working with the native peoples of the region and there were ample local vocations to provide pastors for the parishes. But the situation in the diocesan seminary was a sorry one. Academic and spiritual matters were badly neglected. In 1735 la Mothe became its director and in 1753 the Abbot of Isle Dieu wrote "the majority of the staff of the Quebec

seminary had been furnished by the Holy Ghost Fathers". The next year the Bishop of Quebec wrote, "these are the best priests I have in my diocese."

Into other regions of Quebec and Ontario

As more and more Spiritans arrived, the bishops began to appoint them to the ever-growing network of parishes in the huge diocese of Quebec. Many were appointed to regions where there were large native populations. Fr Visien, who was appointed pastor of Sainte Anne de Beaupr  in 1757, Giles Eudo who survived the fall of Quebec and the destruction of his parish church of the Holy Family in Orleans, Fr Brault, an expelled Acadian, who returned as a Spiritan priest, were typical of this wave of migration from France. Fr Francis Le Guerne led his Acadian flock during the Grand D rangement to a village outside Quebec City where he continued as their pastor until his death in 1789.

These men and many others, along with the Jesuits and the Recollets, were pioneers. They laid the foundations of the Canadian church. Their work was expanded by many groups of religious missionaries, priests, sisters and brothers of whom the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) must take pride of place.

Today our church is a missionary church with newer communities, like the Scarboro Mission and Our Lady's Missionaries, continuing the work of bringing the Good News to places in need of foreign missionaries, as Canada was a mere 250 years ago.

And we must never forget Brebeuf and his companions, Maillard and Le Loutre, Bishop Sheffer and Fr Leduc. They cleared the soil and planted the Good News. We are part of the harvest.

So when Bishop Cody of London invited Irish Spiritans to his diocese in 1954, in a way it was something of a homecoming. They felt they were standing on the shoulders of giants and were much more than "an Irish group of teaching priests." ■

