

The Catholic Church at St. Paul, Oregon

Etienne Lucier, a French Canadian and former member of the William Price Hunt Overland Expedition, came to Oregon in 1812. He later worked for the Hudson's Bay Company. He moved to the Willamette Valley (two and a half miles west of present day Champoeg) in 1829. He was soon followed by Joseph Gervais and Louis Labonte. This growing settlement of former Astor-Hunt and Hudson's Bay Company employees came to be known as French Prairie.

On July 3, 1834, the French Canadian Catholics living at French Prairie sent a letter to Bishop Joseph Norbert Provencher, vicar general and auxiliary bishop to the Bishop of Quebec, at Red River (now the Archdiocese of Saint Boniface, Manitoba) at the suggestion and with the help of Dr. John McLoughlin, chief factor of the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Vancouver (now Vancouver, Washington), asking for a priest to serve their needs. Receiving no reply, they sent a second letter on February 23, 1835.

On June 6, 1835, Bishop Provencher wrote Dr. John McLoughlin that he had no priests to spare but that he would soon travel to both Canada and Europe to see if he could obtain some priests for the Oregon Country. He also wrote a letter on June 8, 1835, to the "families of the Willamette Valley and beyond the Rockies" that he would send someone to "bring the word of God to them" and the Indian tribes. This became the first pastoral letter in the Oregon Country. On February 28, 1836, at Bishop Provencher's request, the Holy See granted an indult annexing the Oregon Country to the Vicariate Apostolic of Red River. Bishop Provencher also wrote Bishop Joseph Signay of Quebec for priests.

Buoyed by the promise that a priest would soon be sent, the Catholic Canadians constructed a log church in 1836, the first Catholic church in Oregon, four miles from Champoeg. Dr. McLoughlin, finding it not properly located, had it dismantled, log by log, and moved to Saint Paul and rebuilt. It was thirty by seventy feet and had a small room in back of the altar for the priest's residence. Upon reception of the news that the Hudson's Bay Company would provide passage to the Oregon Country for two priests, Bishop Signay of Quebec, on April 17, 1838, appointed Fr. Francis Norbert Blanchet vicar general of Quebec with jurisdiction over the Oregon Country. He also appointed Fr. Modeste Demers assistant to Fr. Blanchet.

Fr. Francis Blanchet joined the Hudson's Bay Company boat brigade on May 5, 1838, after it had departed from Lachine near Montreal two days before. He arrived at Red River on June 5 where he met Bishop Provencher and Dr. John McLoughlin (who was on his way to Montreal and London). Fr. Modeste Demers joined Fr. Blanchet at Red River and they departed for Fort Vancouver on July 10. They arrived at Fort Vancouver on November 24, 1838, delayed several days by a boat mishap at the Dalles of the Dead on the Columbia River (in British Columbia) in which twelve people drowned.

James Douglas, chief factor in the absence of Dr. McLoughlin, and three representatives of the Canadians of the Willamette Valley, Joseph Gervais, Stephen Lucier and Pierre Beleque met the two priests at Fort Vancouver on behalf of the French Prairie settlers who had to return home because of the late arrival of the priests at Fort Vancouver.

On January 3, 1839, Fr. Francis Blanchet left Fort Vancouver with Etienne Lucier and Pierre Beleque in two large canoes taking portage around "Wallamette Fall" on January 4, arriving at "Campement de Sable" (Champoeg) on January 5. The men travelled on horseback the last four miles to the log church.

On January 6, 1839, Fr. Francis Norbert Blanchet offered the first Mass in what is now the State of Oregon. It was the Feast of the Epiphany. He blessed the log church under the patronage of Saint Paul the Apostle. The Mass was attended by the Canadian Catholics, many of whom had taken Indian wives, and their families. Fr. Blanche! recorded 24 marriages and 74 baptisms. He concluded the mission on February 4.

During Holy Week beginning on March 17, 1839, Father Blanchet devised the Catholic Ladder at the Cowlitz mission (near Toledo, Washington) while teaching the Indians from various tribes. He devised a square stick with 40 marks representing the 40 centuries before Christ, 33 points followed by a cross representing Our Lord's Me, 18 marks and 39 points representing the years that followed, giving Father Blanchet the opportunity to

explain the history of salvation. Later, mis information was transferred to a pictorial chart.

Father Blanchet returned to St. Paul in May along with Father Demers. Fr. Demers had to return to Fort Vancouver because of a bad cold. Fr. Blanchet again conducted a thirty-day mission, this time using the Catholic Ladder very effectively since many neophytes could not understand French that well. It was exposed on Sundays and used to give instruction to the congregation. During his visit, Fr. Blanchet blessed the ground for a cemetery at St. Paul. This became the first Catholic cemetery in the Pacific Northwest.

In October 1839, Governor James Douglas informed Father Blanchet that the Hudson's Bay Company had removed its restrictions on the establishment of a permanent Catholic mission south of the Columbia. Father Blanchet took up permanent residence at St. Paul on October 12, 1839, thus making St. Paul the first Catholic parish in the State of Oregon. Dr. John McLoughlin had a lot to do with the Hudson's Bay Company's change of heart in London. He visited St. Paul shortly after Fr. Blanchet's arrival.

The second meeting for the establishment of a Provisional Government for Oregon was held on June 1, 1841, at the Saint Paul Meeting Hall. Father Francis N. Blanchet was chairman of the committee charged with drawing up a code of laws for the Provisional Government.

On June 8, 1842, Fathers Francis Norbert Blanchet, Modeste Demers and Pierre DeSmet SJ met at Fort Vancouver to discuss the work of the missions, the establishment of an ecclesiastical organization in the Oregon Country and the sending of Fr. DeSmet to Europe for reinforcements and supplies.

St. Joseph's College was established at St. Paul, opening on October 17, 1843, the first Catholic boys' school in the Pacific Northwest. Thirty boys registered for the opening day. It closed in June 1849, then served briefly as a hospital during a typhoid epidemic before falling into decay. Father Langlois was placed in charge.

Pope Gregory XVI established the Oregon Country as a vicariate apostolic (church mission territory with a bishop when there is no established hierarchical structure) on December 1, 1843, naming Father Blanchet as vicar apostolic. News of this did not reach Oregon until November 4, 1844.

On August 17, 1844, Fr. DeSmet arrived at St. Paul accompanied by Fr. Blanchet, several St. Paul parishioners and the "reinforcements" from Europe: four Jesuit priests, some lay brothers and six Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, the first Sisters to serve in the Oregon Country. Fr. DeSmet established the first Jesuit mission in Oregon which he dedicated to St. Francis Xavier as a motherhouse and novitiate. It was located not far from St. Paul on a bluff overlooking St. Ignatius Lake (now Connor's Lake).

The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur opened the first academy for girls in Oregon on September 9, 1844, although construction of the new building was not completed until October. It was called "Sainte Marie de Wallamette."

Fr. Louis Vercruysse SJ established a church at St. Louis on the Grand Prairie for Catholic Canadians living there in October, 1844. The log church was built there in the summer of the following year.

Father Francis Norbert Blanche! was consecrated bishop in St. James Cathedral, Montreal, by Bishop Ignatius Bourget on July 25, 1845, for the Vicariate Apostolic of the Oregon Country. Bishop Blanchet left Montreal for Europe on August 12, arriving in Paris on September 8 to begin his work of obtaining funds, supplies and reinforcements for the Oregon Country and to petition Rome, on his own initiative, for the establishment of an ecclesiastical province in the Oregon Country. He was more than successful. Pope Gregory XVI, on July 24, 1846, issued a papal brief establishing the ecclesiastical province of Oregon City with three Sees of Oregon City, Walla Walla and Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Bishop Francis Norbert Blanchet was named Archbishop of Oregon City. The Archdiocese of Oregon City became the second oldest archdiocese in the United States since the United States and Great Britain had just settled their boundary disputes hi the Pacific Northwest the previous month. A new brick church, the first in Oregon, was built in Saint Paul using sixty thousand bricks

fired on the church site. It was dedicated on November 1, 1846.

Archbishop Blanchet arrived in Oregon on August 19, 1847, bringing with him seven more Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, six Jesuits, five diocesan priests and one seminarian. Archbishop Blanchet ordained Fr. J. F. Jayol to the priesthood on September 19, 1847, at St. Paul, the first ordination in Oregon. On October 31, Archbishop Blanchet ordained Fr. B. Delorme, future vicar general of the Oregon City Archdiocese, to the priesthood at Saint Paul. On the feast of Saint Andrew, November 30, 1847, Archbishop F. N. Blanchet consecrated Fr. Modeste Demers Bishop of Vancouver Island at Saint Paul. News of the Whitman Massacre had not yet reached St. Paul.

Archbishop Blanchet opened the First Provincial Council of Oregon in his archiepiscopal residence at Saint Paul on February 28, 1848. It was attended by Bishops Demers and A. M. A. Blanchet and most of the clergy and lasted three days. Archbishop Blanchet transferred his archiepiscopal residence to Oregon City on December 21, 1848.

Sr. Renilde, 30, a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, died at Saint Paul on April 3, 1849, probably of pneumonia. She was the first Religious to die at St. Paul.

On May 19, 1849, a large brigade of Catholic families of Saint Paul, Saint Louis and Vancouver left for the California gold fields. They contracted a fever upon arrival in California and forty died, half of whom were fathers of families.

In March 1852, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur were forced to close their school at Saint Paul because of declining school enrollment due to the California Gold Rush. On December 1, 1852, five Sisters of Providence from Montreal arrived in Oregon City. They went to Saint Paul for two months as guests of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. They later became the pioneer foundation for the Sisters of Charity of Providence in Chile. One of the Sisters, Sr. Bernard Morin, became their Mother General in Chile.

Twelve Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary arrived in Oregon on October 21, 1859. On February 1, 1861, four Sisters of the Holy Names reopened the school at Saint Paul which had been vacated in 1853 by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.

The new Catholic Cemetery was established in 1875. Archbishop Francis N. Blanchet was buried there after his death in 1883. A mortuary chapel for the Sisters and Priests, located in the back of the cemetery overlooking Mission Creek, was razed in 1939. It was replaced by a fence and a granite monument.

Archbishop William H. Gross, CSsR, consecrated St. Paul Church on May 25, 1898, the first church in the Pacific Northwest to be consecrated.

On March 25, 1993, the "Mount Angel Earthquake" seriously damaged the Saint Paul church, although the altars and statues were not harmed nor did the church collapse considering the five-brick thick walls had no cement or mortar holding them together.

When the church was declared unsafe following the earthquake of March 25, 1993, the Parish and the Archdiocese agreed that it would be restored the same as before, due to its historic significance in the Pacific Northwest.

The walls were completely taken down in sections; only the roof and floor remained. The walls were replaced with concrete blocks reinforced with steel and were faced with the original bricks; the remainder of the bricks were sold and the money used in the reconstruction. Restrooms were added in the northwest corner of the church. The steeple was highly reinforced and the rooster atop regilded. A reconciliation room was added and the pews and floor were refinished. The stained glass windows were repaired and re-leaded, and a new sound system was installed, along with a new altar of sacrifice and lecterns. Recently, the area was landscaped and new

blacktop and sidewalks were added.

Sunday Mass was celebrated from 1993-1995 in the Saint Paul Fire Department Hall and weekday Masses were celebrated in the former Key Bank in Saint Paul owned by a parishioner, Don Davidson. The church was re-dedicated on November 5, 1995 after the completion of its restoration.

Without the great response of the people of Saint Paul's Parish and our many friends in Christ, this enormous feat could not have been accomplished.

— *Fr. Gregory Moys*