

The Roman Catholic Church in Canada Its historic development

The Roman Catholic Church in Canada (RC) has her own unique character. Her roots are in France. Her traditions are shaped by Rome, pioneer conditions in a new land, absence of religious debate and intellectual stagnation for generations. The Huguenots were among the earliest settlers, but Cardinal Richelieu (1585-1642) was determined that the religious conflicts the mother country had experienced should not be exported to the colonies. So the Protestants were expelled.

Successful colonization and the significant beginning of the RC history dates from the foundation of Quebec in 1608 by Samuel Champlain and Catholic French Settlers. The earliest missionaries were Franciscan Recollects, who arrived in 1615 and 1625, respectively. They worked mainly under the 100,000 Indians – Algonquins and Huron-Iroquios – in the interior and in the Lake Ontario Region. The Sulpician Fathers, who arrived in the late 1640s, had a vital part in the great missionary outreach, which ended about 1700. A famous convert was Kateri Tekakwitha, "Lily of the Mohawks," who was baptized in 1676, died in 1680 and was declared "Blessed" in 1980.

The ecclesiastical organization began with the appointment in 1658 of Francois De Montmorency-Laval, "Father of the Church in Canada," as vicar apostolic of New France. He was the first bishop of Quebec, with jurisdiction over all French claimed territory in North America. Laval was a fervent Ultra-montanist (a strong adherent or supporter of papal authority). In France the RC has a considerable measure of independence from Rome. Over the protest of some French bishops, Laval refused to conform to Gallicanism which favoured independence from Rome. He took his authority directly from Rome.

Quebec's Ultra-montanism led to alienation from France's spiritual leaders. Distance and the pioneer spirit forced the church into isolation. Little of the intellectual debate of France in the 17th and 18th century was transferred to the new world. The pioneers struggled against great odds to make a living and establish communities. They developed practical skills and worked for local improvement. This left little time or energy for cultural experiment. There were few signs of intellectual activity. The believers were devout, austere in morals and docile in mind. The priests were faithful in pastoring their flocks. And they were unquestioning in their submission to the Pope.

The British acquired possession of Canada in virtue of the Treaty of Paris in 1763. At first the pro-British government refused to recognize the titles of church officials, hindered the clergy in their work and tried to introduce a non-Catholic educational system. These conditions soon changed. The British granted concessions to the Catholics. Laws were passed which guaranteed religious liberties.

The French Canadian RC resisted assimilation by the English. They insisted on the supremacy of the Church over State. Religious liberty was meant only for Catholics and not for Protestant heretics. The Ultra-montanist leader Ignace Bourget (1799-1885), Bishop of Montreal and titular archbishop, warned his faithful against books written by non-

Catholics, and forbade them to attend Protestant worship services. St. Anne De Beaupre, a few miles from the city of Quebec, became the "Lourdes of the New World," with the reputed cure of a cripple in 1658. It has now a Romansque Gothic basilica, which houses a shrine, with its centre of attention an eight-foot-high statue and a relic of St. Anne, a portion of her forearm.

As the Canadian RC grew her mission status was removed from the jurisdiction of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in 1908. The apostolic delegation to Canada was set up in 1899. In 1969 official diplomatic relations were established with the Vatican.

Western Canada was penetrated in 1818 by Abbe Provencher. The Oblates of Mary Immaculate, who are called "Missionaries par excellence in Canada," advanced the cause of the church. The work was hard. A RC publication comments: "In the northern and western portions, outside metropolitan centres, there are some of the most difficult parish and mission areas of the world." The Catholic minority felt oppressed. A Catholic scholar, who wrote on "Catholic Problems in Western Canada", believed that public opinion was, generally speaking, one of suspicion, frequently of silent contempt and very often of open hostility. He also charged that the Press was anti-Catholic.

The Catholic Truth Society, founded in Canada in 1893, with headquarters in Toronto, promoted the Catholic faith in the Western provinces, where priests were few and the flock widely scattered. Through the "apostolate" of the printed word the circulation of Catholic Papers and pamphlets dealing with the needs and problems of Canada, the faithful, who lived far away from large cities, received spiritual help,

Irish Catholics, English speaking as they were, began coming to Canada in the 19th century as a result of the critical conditions prevailing in Ireland. They made matters complicated for the French Catholics. Along with the Irish Catholics came the Protestants. The Irish Protestant immigrants introduced Orangeism. The formal history of Canada's Orange Lodges began in 1830. The militant and sectarian sides of Irish sides of Irish Orangeism were de-emphasized. Instead, fraternal and benevolent functions were developed. Despite all this, Toronto, the "Belfast of Canada", witnessed over 20 riots between Orangemen and Irish Catholics in the last part of the 1800's. The membership of the Orange Lodge was mainly drawn from the working class. What motivated the Toronto workers to maintain their Orange idealism? It had an obvious patriotic and Protestant defender appeal. Many English Canadians had come to believe that vigilance was necessary to ensure that the country would not wake up one morning with the Pope as the head of country instead of the Queen. In the 1880's Ontario Orangemen sang a song, to the tune of "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp," that had a chorus which went like this:

Wake up Britons you are sleeping,
Rouse up for the traitors come,
But beneath the Union Jack,
we will keep the Jesuit back,

And we'll live for freedom here in Britain's home.

Orangeism was a strong force in politics. It was not until the mid 1940's that the mayor of Toronto could be elected without being a member of the Orange Lodge. Only a few pockets of strident anti-Catholicism are left. The disappearance of militant anti-Catholicism is praiseworthy. But is the reason for this development so laudable? Arnold Edinburgh comments: "In the nineteenth century, when people fought each other on matters of religious principle, they at least held some principles. The reason that they do not fight any more in public is that they do not hold the principles in private. Edinburgh is right on the mark!

One RC movement must still be mentioned - the Canadian Knights of Columbus (KC), The KC originated as a fraternal benefit society of Catholic men in the U.S. in 1882. From a small beginning the organization spread into Canada, the Philippines, Cuba, Puerto Rico and Panama. It gives substantial support to the Canadian Catholic Radio programs. It also makes available to its members an insurance and a blood donors program. The KC publication *Columbia* has the greatest circulation (over 1.2 million) of any Catholic monthly in North America. Recent programs undertaken by the Knights include promotions of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, promotion of rosaries, efforts to halt abortion, assistance to the retarded and the disadvantaged people. Since 1914 scholarships have been provided for college education. In World War I the KC devoted its resources and leadership to aid the men in the military services. In 1939 the KC Canadian Army Huts was organized. This organization was placed at the service of the Catholic hierarchy and the Canadian government. It had trained secretaries, hotels and recreation centres for the Canadian armed forces. This work placed the Catholics in the field of "social services" and gave them a good standing in the community. In 1941 the Canadian government allotted the necessary funds for the KC activities in Canada and abroad. During its seven years of existence the Canadian KC program had operations on four continents.

As we traced the broad outlines of the historic development of the Catholic Church in Canada we discovered the reasons for her unique character. A distinct segment of the church never assimilated to the Anglo-Saxon culture of the majority. The non-French Catholic elements were not absorbed by the French as a whole. The Irish, Polish and other Catholic ethnic groups kept their own identity. The different nationalities didn't integrate. As a result no national Roman Catholic Church arose as it did south of the border, where the Church became a melting pot of nations. The French element had become well established before the English came on the scene. The stronghold of Catholicism is still Quebec - with its fervent nationalism.

Quebec – the Catholic Province

No Canadian province has gone through so much upheaval within the last twenty years as Quebec. Until the "Quiet Revolution" of the 1960's it was a model of

conservative Roman Catholicism. The church held unchallenged sway over French Canadian society.

Quebec's culture was derived from pre-revolutionary France. By blocking modern ideas, the clergy ensured conservative stability. In 1974 Bishop Hubert commented: "Profound knowledge of Holy Scriptures, the Church Fathers, Doctrine and Canon Law is as rare here as in any diocese in the world."

Written in stone

The educational system was controlled by the church. French was and still is the language of instruction in the parochial schools. The British North America Act of 1867 left education to the provinces but stipulated that in some areas separate (Roman Catholic) schools could not be controlled by provincial legislation. The school system was responsible to the bishops and not to a ministry of the government responsible to the electors.

In the late 1950's a clamour was raised to greatly reduce or even abolish religious teachings in the schools. In 1963 a new educational bill was introduced by the Quebec government, but it was withdrawn owing to pressure from the Catholic episcopate. Only after many hours and days of secret consultation between the bishops and government representatives, a refashioned education bill was introduced.

Despite the Quiet Revolution, the ministry of education is still dependent on the good will of the Quebec episcopacy. But today a growing number of young people flock to newly founded non-Catholic schools of higher learning, where they are taught sociology, political science, business administration and related subjects in French for the first time in history.

With Jesuit zeal

Nationalism has always been a strong force in Quebec. Until the Quiet Revolution the Catholic clergy were seen as the best guarantee for continuity of French Canadian culture. French Canadian nationalism was closely identified with clerical power. The Catholics of the 19th century supported Pius IX and his *Syllabus of Errors* and his insistence on the supremacy of the Church over the State. Because the clergy never developed a responsible Catholic laity, an attack on the clergy tended to be viewed as a direct attack on French Canada.

The union of Church and State reached its zenith under the late Premier Maurice Duplessis (1890-1959). Laws were passed banning the publication and distribution of anything that questioned Catholic teachings through speech, printed page or radio. Duplessis loved to call his province the "Catholic Province." Less than a generation ago it was practically impossible for the average French Canadian to obtain a copy of the Bible in his own language.

French evangelical pastors were repeatedly imprisoned for preaching the Gospel in French, on the street corners. In Northern Ontario, I met French Canadian evangelicals who could no longer endure the social and even physical persecution experienced in Quebec. Jehovah's Witnesses were hauled before courts for distributing their literature. Countless are the stories told by families who fled the province because of religious intolerance.

Closed shop

Quebec's trade unionism was also a powerful force for Quebec nationalism. In the early 1900's Monseigneur Begin, Archbishop of Quebec, boosted Catholic unionism. Under his guidance the unions changed their constitution and its rules to conform to social directions laid down in the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) of Pope Leo XIII. Unions consented to have a chaplain appointed by a religious authority, with the right to participate in their counsels and assist whenever necessary.

Through the Catholic Federation the Church maintained a tight control over labour. Catholic unions sought to practice not only the church's teachings on labour, they were also motivated by the desire to maintain the historic traditions of French Canada. International labour unions were seen as un-Catholic and un-patriotic, destructive of the French language.

For their part, international labour leaders looked forward to the day when Catholic workers would confine their attention purely to spiritual matters and leave labour organizations to run their own affairs. During the Quiet Revolution Catholic trade unions broke with the Catholic members of their ranks.

Of Jean Marchand, later a member of the Trudeau cabinet, McLean's of Jan. 22, 1966 wrote: "Though a leftist, he was at least a real one – a tough pragmatic labour leader. He, more than any other individual, transformed the so called 'national' French-Canadian unions from docile, Church-centred company unions into militant organizations that bargained hard, raised wage levels, and from time to time, called and won strikes. "The entrance of powerful leftist unions hastened the disintegration process of Catholic hegemony.

Full retreat

Growing indifference to the institutional church and traditional Christianity came later to Quebec than to other provinces, but its impact was more sudden and dramatic. Youth, frequently agnostic, were fired with new idealism. For many, the new secular nationalism took the place of traditional adherence to the Church.

In 1969, the Rev. Marcel Dubois wrote: "The vast majority of the 19-25 age group are alienated from the Church; faith in Quebec is their new religion." The priesthood dwindled in numbers: those entering the priesthood dropped from two thousand in 1946 to just over a hundred in 1970!

Grapes of wrath

Besides secularization, theological liberalism also stirred the Church. A new catechism appeared that shocked the conservative population. Many familiar and traditional teachings had simply vanished. By 1965 statues began to disappear from churches and Latin masses became rare. Church attendance declined as more and more abandoned the faith of their fathers. The dramatic events of the recent past have left Quebec in a state of turmoil. Many of the faithful, resenting innovation in worship and the new ideas permitted by Vatican II, long for the traditional ways. Others, by contrast, are impatient. Reforms in doctrines and lifestyle, they argue, have not been rapid and radical enough.

From darkness to dawn

Current political and religious upheavals in Quebec present a golden opportunity for missions and evangelism. Bibles are not available in both Protestant and Catholic versions. Evangelical Baptists preach the Gospel via press, radio, TV, and literature. Young French Protestants take the lead in evangelizing their own people. Our own Back to God Hour French radio program is well received. A few years ago the "Institut Farel" was founded, supported by the Christian Reformed Churches, the Presbyterian Church of America and a large number of Canadian Presbyterian churches. It provides training for French Canadian lay people.

Though the Catholic Church has been dealt many blows, it continues to have significant influence in politics and elsewhere. Wrote Dr. W.S. Whitcombe in *The Evangelical Baptist* of 1971: "Francophone evangelists in Quebec are reaching out in one of the neediest and most difficult mission fields in the world today."

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