FATHER CAMILLE LEFEBVRE 1990-3
APOSTLE OF ACADIA

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FATHER CAMILLE LEFEBVRE, C.S.C.[1]

Father Lefebvre is undoubtedly an outstanding figure among the builders of Holy Cross. He was the first Canadian Holy Cross priest and a great apostle of Acadia.

I. The first Canadian Holy Cross priest.

To better size up our man, a few biographical data. Camille Lefebvre was born at St. Philippe de La Prairie in southern Quebec, on February 14, 1831, a thirteenth child of a rural family of modest means. After some schooling in a nearby school, he pursued his studies at a local college until it closed its doors a couple of years later. By the time, Camille had lost his father, so that, at 17, he had to earn so as to support his mother and himself. He taught in a countryside school. Although he felt a call to the priesthood, he had no means to continue his studies.

In the summer of 1852, he spent his holidays at a Mrs. Paradis, a friendly neighbor who was visiting Camille's ailing mother and took Camille into her home to alleviate the burden of the mother. As she was concerned about the young man's future, she invited him to join her and her son in a pilgrimage to St. Ann's shrine in Varennes, some thirty miles away, on the Saint's feastday. On their way back, Camille came upon a newspaper ad in which the Holy Cross Priests of St. Laurent were offering tuition and board to some young men thinking of the priesthood at the condition of doing some teaching at their college. It was the answer to his prayer. The following September, Camille entered as a postulant at St. Laurent. He professed on All Saints' Day 1854 and was ordained priest on July 29, 1855 as the first Canadian Holy Cross priest.

Camille was then appointed curate at the parish of St. Eustache. It was there he was to meet with Fr. Basil Moreau, in 1857, as the Founder was making his sole regular visit to the Canadian houses. Subsequently Fr. Moreau had him nominated as provincial councillor, having been undoubtedly impressed by the young priest. Three years later i.e. in 1860, Fr. Lefebvre was named teacher of religion at St. Laurent College. His classes to the whole student body became so popular the parishioners asked to be admitted. The next year, he was sent as chaplain to the newly founded College of St. Aimé, in the diocese of St. Hyacinth. He was also helping the local pastor. He soon build up a reputation as a preacher and the bishop called on him for missions in the diocese. Camille had been asked, in early 1864, to preach at Notre Dame Basilica of Notre Dame in Montreal for the feast of St. John the Baptist, the national feast of the French Canadians. It was a great national event to which only famous preachers were invited. But it was not to be as, at the time, Fr. Lefebvre would be in the faraway Acadia as we shall now see.

II. THE APOSTLE OF ACADIA

1. Acadia

Let me first say a word about Acadia as it will be the field of Fr. Lefebvre's zeal from now on. Acadia is the first French settlement in America. It was founded in 1604 by Samuel de Champlain, on the southern Atlantic coast of Canada. It quickly became a flourishing colony that spread throughout the actual Canadian provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. Through the years, it was a prey coveted by England in the course of its wars with France and was often used as a bargaining tool in their various treaties, until it became finally a British colony at the treaty of Utrecht in 1713.

After some years of less than more peaceful coexistence with the English, the Acadians who had remained faithful to their faith and their French traditions, and who also possessed the more prosperous lands, turned out to be an annoying neighbor so they were stripped of their properties and deported in the years of 1755 and 1758. They were scattered along the coasts of New England and in Louisiana, although some succeedded to flee to Quebec and others were exiled overseas. As the years passed many found their way back to their homeland, others to Louisiana, a French colony until it became an American state in 1803, others again to Quebec, especially in the area where Fr. Lefebvre was born.

Those who eventually came back to Acadia were to know years of poverty and hardship. They were deprived of priests and teachers, but for the visit of an occasional missionary and the good will of self-made teachers. Although their ways of life somewhat improved with time, they were still by the mid-eighties with no opportunities of secondary and superior education enabling them build up an elite of professionnal men to promote their interests.

2. Memramcook, N.B.

An important agglomeration of Acadians had settled in the region of Memramcook in Southern New Brunswick. It was there that the first Acadian parish was founded in 1780. The church had just been built and the next year its first pastor arrived, Abbé François-Thomas Leroux. He dedicated the church to St. Thomas in honor of his namesake. In 1852, the Rev. François-Xavier Lafrance (1814-1867)[2] was named pastor. Two years later, he opened a minor seminary which he operated with limited means both in personnel and finance until 1862, when he had to close it. L'Abbé Lafrance then bequeated his properties: the abandoned college and 300 acres of land to the local bishop, Mgr. John Sweeney (1820-1901), bishop of St. John, N.B., with the explicit stipulation that he finds a religious community who would reopen his seminary and manage it. So it was that the Bishop, having learned that Fr. Charles Moreau, the Founder's nephew, was making the regular visit of Holy Cross houses in Canada and that he was presently in Montreal, wrote to him, on March 21, 1863, about the project and got him to visit Memramcook in early June of the same year.

3. Fr. Lefebvre in Acadia

On September 3, 1863, Fr. Basil Moreau wrote to Fr. Lefebvre as follows:

> My dear friend, I would like to know if I could rely on your religious dedication for a parish in Acadia next Spring which would be the beginning of an important foundation. Please think it over and let me know how you feel about it. You would give great pleasure to your affectionate and devoted in J.M.J. Moreau

A month later, on October 5, Fr. Lefebvre wrote to the Founder of his acceptance:

> I am at your disposal for the new foundation you wish to make in Acadia. Divine Providence, through your proposal, has filled my most cherished wishes, because since a long time I was looking for an opportunity to fly to the assistance of the remains of the Acadian people so cruelly tried both as a nation and as Catholics, and nevertheless have remained so admirably faithful to their faith, to their institutions as well as to the religious traditions of their Fathers. Camille Lefebvre.

This spontaneous response of Fr. Lefebvre is all the more understandable by the fact that, since his early childhood, he had heard from the Acadians themselves who were quite numerous in his neighborhood the tales of their misfortune. Some years later, in 1867, he confided to a traveling companion, Pascal Poirier, his future biographer:

> There is a destiny willed and prepared by the Providence. I was born near L'Acadie - a town founded by exiled Acadians near his home - . In my childhood, I have often heard talks of the mishaps of the exiles of the great Acadia. I began then to love them and wish them well. Now that I know them better, I love them more and I will gladly give them all the days of my life.[3]

And so he did. Fr. Lefebvre espoused their cause and gave himself heartily to the foundation entrusted to his care, foundation that was to launch their revival by education and pastoral ministry.

Bishop Sweeney notified of his appointment went to meet Fr. Lefebvre in Montreal and returned with him on May 26, 1864. He finally reached Memramcook on June 7, where he was greeted, the following sunday, by the retiring pastor, Abbé Lafrance, as "the new Moses who has been chosen to guide the Acadians to the promised land of their survival!" He was immediately installed as the new pastor of the parish of St. Thomas with the task of restoring the late minor seminary.

4. The College of St. Joseph[4]

Fr. Lefebvre readily went to work, after confiding himself to saint Joseph to whom he dedicated the new college under the appellation of College of St. Joseph, and appointed him steward of the project. He wrote about it himself in the Chronicles of the house:

> In the trying circumstances, I consecrated the college to Saint Joseph, begging him to be its protector and preside over its development.

By September, he had gotten the help of three priests: J.-B. Bazoge, Frs Robert and O'Brien; and three Brothers: Dieudonné, Alphonse and Elzéar. Two local ladies: Marie and Marguerite Bourgeois graciously offered their help for the kitchen. So the restored seminary of Fr. Lafrance was ready for the academic year on October 10 and its enrollment was of 31 students of whom 19 were boarders. The number reached 62 by the year's end. The institution, although mainly intended for the Acadian youth, was also available to English speaking Catholics at the request of the Bishop. Its curriculum was bilingual.

Four years later, in 1868, a new wing was added to the college and it could accommodate some 90 students. On March 23 of the same year, it had received its civil charter. A new stone building was erected by 1876 to which a new wing was added in 1885. Its enrollment rose to 200 students including 150 boarders.

Meanwhile i.e. in 1872, Fr. Lefebvre had been elected provincial superior of the Canadian Province. It was a wonderful way for him to spend his spare time amidst his responsabilities as pastor of a large parish and as president of a college, although he was permitted to reside at Memramcook. He gave his resignation in 1880.

On july 20 and 21 of the same year, the first national convention of the Acadians convened in Memramcook. For the occasion, Fr. Lefebvre inaugurated the new bell tower of the parish church. On the first ringing of its bells, it was said that , as the bell of the little church of Grand-Pré had given the signal of the deportation of 1755, the bells of Memramcook gave the rallying call to the Acadians. Some 5000 visitors showed up and the sessions took place at the college. Among the resolutions taken was the choice of a national feast, the Assumption of Mary, that was to be the yearly convocation of the Acadians for national and religious celebrations.

In 1889, the college celebrated its silver jubilee. The event gave rise to a tribute to Fr. Lefebvre's work. The institution had given tuition to some 1500 students and provided about a hundred priests to the local Church and an elite of professionnal men in various fields, among them ministers and members of the national and provincial governments. As a newspaper editorialist puts it:

> The College of St. Joseph was the torch of our civilization and the lighthouse of our hopes, a powerful and helping hand. The quarter of its century has sufficed to able us to take our place in the family of happy and hardy peoples. If

we keep the memory of our past misfortune, we look at the present with pride and at the future with confidence.[5]

The following year, April 1890, Fr. Edward Sorin and Fr. John Zahm made a brief visit to Memramcook. The college gots its charter as a university in 1898 and in 1906, it was granted by the University of Oxford the privileges of the colonial universities. Fr. Lefebvre remained at the helm of the college till his death in 1895.

* * *

A few words of the post-Lefebvre era. In 1928, the college became the University of St. Joseph. Completely destroyed by fire on October 20, 1933, it was immediately rebuilt and ready for the academic year of 1934 with accommodations for over 400 students. The university proper developed eventually with the founding of summer sessions for teachers in 1938, of an agricultural school in 1939 and of a school of commerce in 1942. In 1963, The University was transfered to Moncton, N.B. and was officially recognized as the university serving the Acadian population of the Atlantic Provinces under the appellation of University of Moncton. A liberal arts college on campus was named the College of St. Joseph. Its present enrollment is of some 7000 students. It has preserved its bilingual status and is also opened to English-speaking students.

5. Parishes and Missions[6]

Although Fr. Lefebvre's priority on his coming to Acadia was education, he nevertheless carried on a tremendous pastoral career. With his priests, he assumed during 31 years the care of the large parish of Memramcook and of its thirteenth missions. He was also called upon by the local bishops to visit and preach in the various French settlements of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia especially on the occasion of the 1869 Jubilee Year. The priests at the college would help him out on weekends visiting the various missions and other parishes. It is estimated that some forty missions served at one time or another by Holy Cross Priests are now 47 parishes of the three dioceses of New Brunswick.

It is revealing to look at the list of these parishes and missions. The thirteenth missions depending on the parish of St. Thomas of Memramcook, now parishes, were: Dorchester, Pré-d'en-Haut, Lourdes (now parishes that, together with Memramcook, are always under the care of Holy Cross) Beaumont, St. Anselme, Moncton, Albert Co., Melrose, Port Elgin, Louiseville, Sackville, Irishtown and Scoudouc.

Other parishes where Holy Cross Priests served at times:

Aboujagane (1867-1895)
Barachois (1866-1917)
Bouctouche and its missions (1867-1868)
Cap-Pelé (1897-1917)

Cocagne (1876-1885)
Dorchester (A parish from 1906 under C.S.C. care: 1906-1980)
Edmundston (1872-1875)
Grande-Digue (1873-1896)
Johnville (1874-1876)
Petit-Rocher (1866-1884)
Quaco (1880-1897)
Shediac (1873-1884)
St. Basile (1869-1880, now a territory of 7 parishes)
St. François & St. Hilaire (1873-1876)
St. Thérèse (1884-1888)
Van Buren, Maine (1868-1870)

* * *

Among other accomplishments of Fr. Lefebvre in the parish itself are the building of a new stone rectory in 1866, a bell tower inaugurated in 1880. He also founded a boarding school for girls. In fact having just launched his college, he opened a girls' school as early as 1868. Having bought a house for the purpose, he opened the school with the help of local laywomen, with the intent of having eventually Holy Cross Sisters take over. To this end, he had a large convent built in 1871. But as the Bishop was reluctant to have a new congregation of Sisters in his diocese i.e. besides the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of St. John, Fr. Lefebvre had to comply and obtained four of the Acadian Sisters among them. The boarding school for girls was thus opened on October 15, 1873. The convent that had been enlarged by then became, in 1924, the motherhouse of the Acadian Sisters that had separated from the Sisters of St. John to found the new congregation of Notre-Dame du Sacré-Coeur.

Concerning the Holy Cross Priests working in Acadia, They were united in a vice-province in 1944, then a province in 1959 with 68 members at the time. A number greatly reduced today with the shortage of vocations.

6. The Little Sisters of the Holy Family.[7]

A noteworthy achievement of Fr. Lefebvre was the foundation of the Little Sisters of the Holy Family, with the help of Mother Marie-Léonie (1840-1912). At first the domestic services at the College of St. Joseph had been performed by laywomen, but Fr. Lefebvre wanted to find Sisters to take over their management so as to assure greater stability and better organization of these services. While attending a General Chapter at Notre Dame in the summer of 1872, he witnessed the fine work some Sisters of the Holy Cross were doing at the University, so he talked to Fr. Sorin into sending him Sisters for his college. This came about two years later as four American novices were sent to Memramcook arriving in early September 1874. In a letter to Fr. Sorin, Fr. Lefebvre thanked him , but told him of the drawback in the fact that none of the Sisters could speak French. Fr. Sorin answered him

shortly after saying: "I am sending you two new Sisters, one of whom is well known to you!" In fact one of the Sisters was Sr. Marie-Léonie.[8]

Sr. Marie-Léonie, born Elodie Paradis, was the daughter of the Mrs. Emilie Paradis who had befriended the Lefebvre and taken young Camille to a pilgrimage to St. Ann that brought about his vocatio On a visit to his home for the funerals of his mother in January 1874, he visited the Paradis family and, in the course of the conversation, he mentioned the Sisters of Holy Cross being at St. Laurent. Elodie, an attentive listener, exclaimed : "I want to be a Sister of Holy Cross!" It was no sooner said than done. A few weeks later, Elodie not yet fifteen entered the Sisters at St. Laurent where she was greeted by Mother Mary of the Seven Dolors who was superior of the convent at the time. On February 19, 1855, Elodie took the religious habit and the name of Marie-Léonie. She made her religious profession at the hands of Fr. Basil Moreau who was visiting the Canadian houses at the time, on August 22,1857 After some years of teaching, she was sent to St. Vincent Orphanage in 1862 and eventually joined the Sisters at Notre Dame in 1871. New York, So it came to be that she was sent to Memramcook where she arrived on October 1, 1874 as superior of the budding community with its eight postulants among whom were the laborers of the first hour, the Misses Bourgeois. The Sisters occupied the old rectory of the parish. A first taking of habit took place on March 19, 1875.

The Sisters became with the years an autonomous congregation with its own habit and rule and spread to the other Holy Cross houses in Canada. During a session of the General Chapter held at Neuilly, France, on April 18, 1880, the institute was approved under the name of the Little Sisters of the Holy Family. It had by then 55 members. On May 31, Fr. Lefebvre having returned from the Chapter drew up a statement of the capitular approbation which is considered as the charter of the community and its date, the date of their foundation. It reads:

> I, the undersigned, by these presents, testify that, on the explanations given by myself to the General Chapter of the Congregation of Holy Cross held on April 18, 1880, at the College of Neuilly, France, near Paris, the said Chapter authorized the existence of a congregation of women known as the Little Sisters dedicated to the domestic service of the houses of Holy Cross in the province of Canada. Provided nevertheless that the above mentioned Little Sisters, in the event of a legal separation, commit themselves to require but the dowry they brought in entering the community of the Little Sisters. In return, for the services rendered to the said Religious of Holy Cross in the province of Canada, the Corporation of the College of St. Joseph of Memramcook commits itself to provide to their personal needs throughout their life and to take care of them in sickness and also to provide them in their spiritual need in a spirit of charity. The said Little Sisters who will have as patron the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, will be submitted to a religious rule constituing them in a lay religious body, to the obedience to which they will submit, such rule while specifying their duties will direct them more surely in the way of christian and religious perfection.
>
> C. Lefebvre, c.s.c.
>
> Memramcook, May 31, 1880.

As the Bishop of St. John, N.B. was refusing his approbation to the Institute, the Little Sisters readily accepted the offer of Bp. Paul Larocque of Sherbrooke, Quebec. The Bishop had visited them in Memramcook to request some Sisters for his major seminary. Informed of their dilemma concerning the canonical approval of their constitutions, he offered them such approval if they would move their motherhouse in his diocese. This was on October 3, 1895. By the year's end the transfer was made and, on the feast of the Holy Family of 1896, a year after Fr. Lefebvre had celebrated his last mass in their chapel on the same feast, Bishop Larocque approved their constitutions i.e. on January 26. They subsequently received the apostolic approbation on March 2, 1937 and Mother Marie-Léonie was beatified by Pope John Paul II, on September 11, 1984, on his visit to Canada.

FINAL WORD

Fr. Lefebvre's career came to a sudden stop as he was found dead in his bed on the morning of January 28, 1896. On June 20 of the previous year, at a celebration in his honor, he had said:

> If I have spent my life for God and my neighbor, I have done but my duty. You are wrong to attribute me a merit that does not belong to me. I am of those of whom the Lord says: <u>When you have done what you had to do, tell yourself that you are but a useless servant</u>.

This portrays the greatness of the man. Let me conclude with a couple of testimonies rendered him at the time. The chief editor of the national Acadian newspaper, L'Evangéline, wrote on February 7, 1895:

> This religious man has built the happiness of a nation. Some will call him the apostle, others the preacher or give him some other glorious titles, but none is more proper to sum up his work, his life, himself than that of the educator. He renewed Acadia, remade it. He forced her to take confidence in herself, to rise, to speak, to command. An apostle, a preacher, an educator as Father Lefebvre is met but once and will have no equal among us.

His first biographer, Pascal Poirier, a student of the first group in 1864 who became the first Acadian senator in Ottawa, wrote to a friend on February 5:

> We have made a national loss and all Acadia is in great mourning: Father Lefebvre has passed away. The man more than any other is our benefactor. He was the Moses who liberated us from the slavery of ignorance. He was a saint.

To honor the memory of this great apostle of Acadia, the former students launched a subscription to build a memorial in his honor, the Monument Lefebvre, a two-story stone building that housed an auditorium and science laboratories. It was inaugurated on June 16, 1896. On the celebration of the golden jubilee of the College

of St. Joseph in 1914, a life-size bronze statue of Fr. Lefebvre was unveiled. Both monuments are always there to recall his memory to the Acadians he dedicated his life to.

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