

HOLY CROSS IN ACADIA 1994-3

by

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HOLY CROSS IN ACADIA

A paper on Holy Cross in Acadia seems to be quite relevant during this year 1994 that marks the 390th. year of the foundation of Acadia and the 130th year of Holy Cross mission there.

The saga of Holy Cross in Acadia got started when, On September 3rd, 1863, Father Basile Moreau wrote to Fr. Camille Lefebvre¹, a Canadian priest, 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. It 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 loving and devoted in J.M.J. Moreau

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

I am at your disposal, he wrote, for the new foundation you wish to make in Acadia. Divine Providence, through your proposal, has filled my most cherished wish, because since a long time I was looking for the opportunity to fly to the assistance of the remains of the Acadian people so cruelly tried both as a nation and as Catholic and nevertheless has remained so admirably faithful to their faith, to their institutions as well to the religious traditions of their Fathers... I remain, V.R.Fr., yours totally devoted in Jesus Christ, C. Lefebvre, S.S.C.²

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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

I. Lefebvre Era (1864-1895)

1. Acadia & Acadians.

To better grasp the situation that confronted Fr. Lefebvre and his fellow religious : Priests and Brothers, on their coming to Acadia, and also to better evaluate the impact of this Holy Cross mission with the Acadians a brief historical retrospective is in order.

Acadia is the site of the first French settlement in America, in 1604, by Samuel de Champlain and Sieur de Monts. It was situated on the South-West coast of the actual province of Nova Scotia and named Port Royal in honor of the ~~king~~ of France, Henri IV. It soon became a flourishing colony that extended to the territory of the now maritime provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island.

Because of its strategic site as an outpost on the Atlantic and of its rich farmlands, it was a prey coveted by the nearby British settlers and at stake depending on outcome of the frequent Anglo-French conflicts of the times, and that until the ultimate cession of Acadia to England by the Treaty of Utrecht on April 11, 1713.

The Acadians proved to be an annoying neighbor, on account of their Catholic faith and their French allegiance; so that, between 1755 to 1760, their population that could be rounded up, some 14,000 to 16,000, were deported or dispersed. The tragedy was immortalized by the American poet, Henry W. Longfellow, in his famous poem: Evangeline (1847)

2. Memramcook, N. B.

The treaty of Paris (February 10, 1763) ended the Anglo-French hostilities and it allowed the exiled Acadians to return to their homeland, at the condition though of scattering themselves in the deserted lands of northern area or on the eastern coasts of New Brunswick. So it was that some 450 families ~~had~~ settled in the Valley of Memramcook, near the Nova Scotia border. A first Acadian parish was founded there in 1780 with a resident pastor, Rev. François-Thomas LeRoux, who dedicated the new parish to his patron saint, the apostle Thomas.

In 1852, Rev. François-Xavier Lafrance⁶ (1814-1867) was appointed twelfth pastor of St. Thomas Parish and two years after he attempted the foundation of a minor seminary to promote priestly vocations; but the lack of personnel and funds forced him to close his seminary in 1862. The Rev. Lafrance bequeathed his properties: the buildings and some 300 acres of land, to Bp. John Sweeney (1820-1901), bishop of St. John, N.B., with the explicit stipulation that he finds a religious congregation to reopen ~~the~~ seminary and manage it. He would also relinquish his parish if a clerical community was involved. So it was that the bishop contacted Holy Cross to pursue the work of ~~the~~ seminary.

3. The College of Saint Joseph

So the stage was set when Bp. Sweeney contacted Holy Cross for a mission in Acadia. Father Lefebvre arrived at Memramcook on June 7, 1964. On the following Sunday the resigning pastor, Rev. Lafrance, greeted Fr. Camille as "the new Moses who had been chosen to guide the Acadians into the promise land of its survival!" Camille was installed as new pastor of St. Thomas with the specific purpose of restoring St. Thomas minor seminary. He lost no time to go at it, after confiding this new challenge to saint Joseph and appointing him patron and steward of the project. He wrote in the house Chronicles:

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

Eventually the college became so well known and identified with the locality, that the latter ~~was~~ officially known as St. Joseph, N.B.⁷

By the end of the summer, three priests and three Brothers came to the rescue of Fr. Lefebvre, while two local ladies: Marie & Marguerite Bourgeois, sisters, offered graciously their help at the kitchen. Finally all was set for the opening of the college on October 10th, with a mass to the Holy Spirit celebrated by the former pastor, Rev. Lafrance. The student body, from 36 comprising 19 boarders went up to 60 by the end of the year. The curriculum was both French and English at the request of Bp. Sweeney, with option for the classical or commercial course.

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Off to a good start, the college, in February 1868. was the prey of a fire that threatened its very existence:

It is impossible, exclaimed Fr. Lefebvre, that our work of education will perish so! No, saint Joseph will not let it be! If he rescues us from the flames... I will consecrate him a chapel at the earliest.

The fire was immediately under control. The same evening, Fr. Lefebvre convened the parishioners and the students at the parish church for the singing of the Te Deum, in thanksgiving to God and saint Joseph, "because, he told them, I appealed to him and he heard me; I prayed to him from the depth of my heart, and he has visibly helped us!"

On the following May 20th., the local council approved the vow of Fr. Lefebvre by voting a resolution ad hoc:

It is resolved that a wooden chapel will be built; as well as an annex to the college, to honor worthily saint Joseph, patron of the institution, in thanksgiving for his protection.

Providentially on March 23, 1868, the legislature of New Brunswick had acknowledged the college as a school of higher learning, authorizing it to award university diplomas and granting it an allowance of 800.00 \$, a substantial amount at the time, that made it possible to ~~find~~ the necessary loan for the restoration and the enlargement of the college, together with a chapel to our blessed father and protector. At about the same time, May 20th, 1868, Fr. Lefebvre established at the parish, the Association of St. Joseph, affiliated with the one at Le Mans (France) that granted spiritual benefits to the associates that prayed and contributed somehow to the works of Holy Cross.

The institution could now accommodate some 90 students and its faculty was enlarged by the arrival from Quebec of the Rev. Guillaume Demers, Louis Geoffrion and Joseph-Octave Lecours, as well as the Brothers Didace, Ladislav and Grégoire.

The academic year of 1872-73 witness the student body increase to 109 students of whom were 71 Acadians and 38 Irishmen. Again an urgent need of enlargement of the building was felt. A subscription was launched to that purpose. Its successful results were so that, by January 17th., 1876, a new college building in stone of 121' x 65' of three stories was inaugurated and it could welcome more than 150 students.

In the Spring of 1885, a new wooden wing was added, thanks to the generous contribution of a former student, Rev. F.-X. Cormier. By the year 1898, the student body had grown to some 200, including 150 boarders. This wooden wing was enlarged and recovered in stone that same year.

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Momentous events

On July 20 & 21, 1881, the first national convention of the Acadians was held 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.¹⁰

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On June 25-26-27, 1889, the college celebrated its Silver Jubilee (1864-1889). The event gave rise to a great tribute to Fr. Camille Lefebvre^{work} in Acadia. The institution had given tuition to some 1500 students and provided some hundred priests to the local Church and an elite of professional 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.¹¹

4. The Little Sisters of the Holy Family

The vital auxiliary services: kitchen, laundry, care of the sick,... of the college and the presbytery had at first been assumed by some dedicated laywomen. But to better stabilize and organize these services, Fr. Lefebvre had hoped to find the necessary help at the Sisters of Holy Cross. As the Sisters were now wholly involved in educational tasks, he finally, with the aid of a sister of Holy Cross, Sr. Marie-Léonie, a well known compatriot, and some pious local women, he laid down the foundations of a new religious community in 1874, the Little Sisters of the Holy Family. The auxiliary services at the college and in other Holy Cross houses in Acadia and elsewhere too were assured with care and know-how from then on.¹²

5. A girls' boarding school

Soon after he had launched the college that was assigned to him as a priority, Fr. Lefebvre as a pastor thought of a boarding school for girls. He at first acquired a small house 18' x 20' and opened a day school with the help of a local teacher, Philomène Belliveau, in the Fall of 1868, and, in 1871, a Miss. Lapierre from Quebec came to assist her.

However, Fr. Lefebvre's intent was to have some Sisters of Holy Cross to open a boarding school. With that in mind, he had a convent built in 1871; but the local bishop, Bp. Sweeney, would not hear of another congregation of women in his diocese other than the Sisters of Charity who had among them some Acadian members. So Fr. Lefebvre had to resign himself to the coming of four of their Acadian subjects that took over the management of a combined convent-school on October 15, 1873. The institution made rapid progress as it was urgently needed in the region

The Acadian Sisters of the said Sisters of Charity of St. John, , swarmed from their former community to become a new congregation under the name of les Soeurs de Notre-Dame du Sacré-Coeur, in 1924, with their motherhouse in Memramcook in a much enlarged convent. In 1943, a complete liberal arts course was set up. The Sisters opened a women' college in Moncton on September 8, 1949. The college was eventually incorporated to the liberal arts faculty of the University of Moncton in 1965.¹³

6. Parishes and Missions

As the pastor of St. Thomas, Fr. Lefebvre had to find lodging for his religious personnel. To this end, he had to build a new stone rectory in 1866-67.

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 three dioceses of New Brunswick and of the actual diocese of Portland, Maine (6).

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, Lewisville, Sackville, Irishtown and Scoudouc, and *Ste Thérèse*.

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 (this parish and its penitentiary were under the care of C.S.C. from 1906 to 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, now 5 parishes)
- Ste Thérèse (1884-1888)
- Van Buren, Maine (1868-1870)¹⁵

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The end of an era

Fr. Lefebvre's tremendous career as leader of Holy Cross' mission in Acadia, came to a sudden end when he was found dead on the morning of January 28, 1896. It was the end of an era.

On a celebration in his honor, on June 20th. of the previous year, when a statue of him was unveiled, he spoke thus:

The greatest humiliation of my life is mine today. I am questioning myself what is the meaning of this pedestal... If I have spent my life for God and for my neighbor, I have done but my duty. You are wrong to attribute me ~~the~~ merit that does not belong to me. I am of those of whom the Lord said: When you have done all what you had to do, tell yourself that you are but a useless servant (Lc. 17, 10),

If I can say to God, my judge, on my last hour: "Lord, I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith; from now on, the crown of righteousness awaits me (2 Tm. 4, 7-8), there is my only ambition. 16

These words give us the spiritual stature of the man of God. Other testimonies gave a well deserved tribute to the man. A local paper, l'Évangéline of Feb. 7, 1895 wrote:

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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A first biography of Rev. Camille Lefebvre was published by a student of the first promotion of St. Joseph College, Senator Pascal Poirier, on April 1, 1898: Le Père Lefebvre et l'Acadie. In recent years, a more exhaustive work was published by the Canon Etienne Catta: Le R.P. Camille Lefebvre et la renaissance acadienne, 1983, 1448p.¹²

II. AND AFTERWARD. . .

It was Father Alfred-Valère Roy, c.s.c. (1850-1934), the once right-arm man of Fr. Lefebvre during a previous stay in New Brunswick, from 1875 to 1892, who was appointed as his successor as pastor of St. Thomas Parish (1895-1918) and president of the College (1895-1904)

1. The University of St. Joseph

In 1906, the Collège Saint-Joseph was granted, by the University of Oxford, the statute of British colonial universities with the recognition of its grades and degrees throughout the whole British Empire. In 1928, the college became the University of St. Joseph and had already given to the Church and country some two hundred priests among whom three Archbishops, three bishops and an elite of professional men in various fields.¹³

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In 1932, a new wing was added at the rear of the main building to shelter a new chapel with quarters for library and museums. But on October 2nd. of the next year, a fire burned down the college, leaving but this new wing scarred at that.

By the Spring of 1934, the rebuilding of a new college in beige bricks was under way and the institution could reopen on the ~~next~~ Fall.

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Summer sessions (1938)

Under the auspices of the Acadian Association of Education, summer courses were organized on behalf of Acadian teachers by Brother Léopold Taillon, c.s.c. It assembled ~~up to~~ 130 teachers. This course was eventually recognized by the Province's Teachers College of the University of New Brunswick and given the deserved credits. These summer courses were incorporated to the Faculty of Education of the future University of Moncton.¹⁷

Course in agronomy

In 1939, a course of agronomy was inaugurated at St. Joseph's in collaboration with the Provincial Department of Agriculture and the Federal Department of Labour. The farm of the institution was used as an experimental field for the students.

School of Commerce

From the first days of the college, a commercial course was given by the Brothers of Holy Cross; but, in the Fall of 1942, a faculty of Commerce was formally set up at the university level. It was incorporated to the University of Moncton eventually.²⁰

Institute of Memramcook

With the transfer of the University of St. Joseph to the nearby city of Moncton and its conversion in the new University of Moncton, the collège Saint-Joseph became the Liberal Arts faculty on its campus. The evacuated buildings at Memramcook were turned over to the Provincial Government as a center of permanent education linked with the Department of External Affairs of the University of Moncton under the name of Institut de Memramcook. The said institute also lodged the secretaries of Public Relations and of the Association of Former Students of the University. The Monument Lefebvre was turned into a center of Acadian activities and of history of Acadia.²¹

2. The University of Moncton²²

At the request of the Most Rev. Archbishop of Moncton, Norbert Robichaud and the Rev. Albert Leménager, pastor of the Cathedral, addressed to the major authorities of Holy Cross, on December 12, 1946, urging Holy Cross to found a university proper as a center of superior studies and of ~~promotion~~ of professional men and women among the Acadian population of the Maritime Provinces.

The Congregation welcomed the project and named the Rev. Clément Cormier, president of the then Université of Saint-Joseph, to study, with the help of resourceful persons, the feasibility of the project, the financial and ~~other~~ implications involved. As early as 1953, the resources at Memramcook of university level were transferred to Moncton under the care of the same Fr. Cormier and post-graduate courses in commerce, sciences and, from 1957, of engineering were given to some 60 students. Both the spiritual and the political leaders, especially Acadian, intervened to the New Brunswick Legislature and, by 1961, a royal commission on superior ~~studies~~ was named, the Deutsch Commission in fact, and it tended its report in the summer of 1962 (Fredericton, June 1962, 122p.)

The Deutsch report favored the founding of a francophone university in Moncton to privilege higher education among the Acadian population of the Maritimes. Thus it was that the Université Saint-Joseph transferred all of its assets in Moncton and that, on June 19, 1963, the Université de Moncton was officially founded, with the Collège Saint-Joseph as Liberal Arts Faculty on campus, that could welcome its 615 students.

The University charter was revised following the Duff and Berdack Commission report on the Canadian Universities, March 19, 1967. A board of governors comprising Holy Cross members and laymen becomes the sole administrative body of the institution with its executive committee.

On the thirtieth anniversary of the University in 1993, the president, Mr. Jean-Bernard Robichaud, in an interview, declared that "the 8000 students of the University were the greatest proof of a promising future for the Acadian people. Of the 25,000 graduates during this 30-years period, 88% are from New Brunswick and 85% made career in the province. This university is the greatest

victory against ignorance and illiteracy that was the lot of the Acadians some years past. It has given the Acadians the possibility to accelerate their process of integration and modernity. (Le Devoir, 16 août 1993, p. 9)

3. Holy Cross in Acadia Today

In a letter to his Superior general, Fr. Edouard Sorin, on November 1891, Fr. Lefebvre requested him that the Religious of Holy Cross working in Acadia be grouped into a distinct province, because of the difficulty of communication with the rest of Canada and ~~their~~ special problems and this especially in view of recruiting Acadian members. ²³ This somewhat prematured project was to materialize in 1944 when the religious in Acadia were set up in a vice-province apart. Fr. Hector Léger was elected its first titular. In 1949, an apostolic school was opened to accommodate the Acadian candidates to Holy Cross. It is estimated that from 1944 to 1954, the vice-province trained some 117 priestly vocation, of whom 65 diocesan priests, 40 for Holy Cross and 10 12 for other religious congregations.

On April 1958, the Acadian vice-province was promoted to the status of a regular province with its 68 members at the time. A novitiate was built at Pré-d'en-Haut, N.B. It did survive until 1972, when a general shortage of religious and priestly vocations occurred. The novitiate then became a center of spiritual revival for the diocese.

In the Fall of 1992, the Acadian province having been reduced to 25 members: 21 priests and 4 brothers, was made into a district affiliated to the Canadian province of Montreal, Qué.

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The District of Acadia in 1994.

25 members: 21 priests and 4 Brothers
average age : 65.76

in New Brunswick: Archdioc. of Moncton)

Moncton: Kendra Residence: 7 PP.
3 Bros. (3 P.S.S.F.)

Memramcook:

Pré-d'en-Haut: { Parish 1 P
Spiritual center 1 P., 1 Bro.
Solitudes: 1 P. (2 R.S.C.)

Lourdes: Parish 1 P.

St. Joseph: Parish: 2 PP. (3 P.S.S.F.)

St. Charles: 1 P.

Bathurst (dioc. of) : 1 Bp.

in Nova Scotia (Dioc. of Yarmouth)

St. Anne-du-Ruisseau 1 P.

Wedgeport 1 P.

West Pubnico 1 P.

in Québec: Montréal 2 PP.

in Brazil: São Paulo 1 P.

N.B. P.S.S.F.: Petites Soeurs de ls Ste-Famille 6 (cf I-3)

R.S.C.: Religieuses de Ste-Groix 2 (cf. I, 3 & 4)

* The Brothers of Holy Cross have shared the work with the Priests from the very beginning of St. Joseph's and that until its transfer to Moncton. At about that time, some 3 to four Brothers taught at a central school in Bouctouche i.e. from 1964 to 1975.

- * * The Sisters of Holy Cross, ²⁴ 5 to 6 Sisters, have
taught in a central school
[at Acadieville, from 1961 to 1968; and 3 Srs.
from 1968 to 1972
at Richibouctou, 2 Srs. from 1968-72
one kept on till 1974.

One Sister of Holy Cross remained in Moncton in 1971 to work at the Centre d'études acadiennes of Université de Moncton, while helping some handicapped women with the movement "Foi et Partage". She founded in 1974 the house Le Doré for handicapped women and managed it until 1978.

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A final word

We can well say that the golden age of Holy Cross in Acadia is gone by. Nowadays, our religious minister on a regular basis in seven parishes, in a center of spiritual resourcement for the diocese of Moncton and two priests still teaching at the University of Moncton. But the 130 years of pastoral and educational activities in Acadia have been a main factor in the building up of a professional elite and a political leadership for the Acadian people.

To celebrate the 390th anniversary of Acadia and to some extent the 130th year of Holy Cross' work in the country, a first world-wide congress of the Acadians will be held from August 12th to 22nd. under the co-presidency of Jean-Bernard Robichaud, president of the University of Moncton, and the well known Acadian author, Antonine Maillet, ~~a former~~ chancellor of the same University that will host many of the activities of this great gathering as in 1881, the College of Saint Joseph host the first national convention of the Acadians.

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