

The Parish of St. Columban

BY THE REV. LAWRENCE P. WHELAN

INTRODUCTION

In a corner of the rugged Laurentians, the village of St. Columban today presents itself in a reminiscent mood. It goes back to its primitive state and begins its "once upon a time." No fairytale this, but the stark reality of pioneering with its sufferings and with them the consolations, the roll of wheels to where wheels can no longer roll, the tramp of tired feet to where rest was only a prelude to more intensive labour, the trek of Irish Clans far from Kilkenny, Kildare and Carlow! Montreal left behind and a haven in sight where the courage and faith of Patrick's children were to take rest and build a community of Love and Devotion! A hardy race one hundred years ago wrestled with the soil and the stone, built itself a home and fed its occupants, mopped its tired brow and knelt in the sunlight of its new Chapel; for they brought their God with them. Their first move towards solidarity was the erection of their Chapel: they built the edifice towards which they all converged to feed their souls and satisfy their innate hunger to see their Sogarth Aroon, to hear his consoling words and to know, by his presence, of the blessings of God upon Them.

The sacraments were to twine them together for miles around: a font for the new-born and a cemetery for their dead. A community of mind and heart to make them live the true life; peace on earth and God's Haven hereafter!

FIRST DAYS

In 1817 Father Richards, a member of the Gentlemen of St. Sulpice, noticed many new faces in his congregation at the old Bonsecours Church. He found that they were Irishmen who had but recently arrived in Montreal. From then on they became his special charges and with them he founded what could be termed the first Irish Congregation in Montreal.. Under his spiritual guidance, this community, because of its needs and its nostalgia, centred its heart and mind in the love and intelligence of their father. Their love for their priests in Ireland soon found a haven in this Sulpician and their sense of loss was changed into an ever-present allegiance to him in all matters spiritual or not, important or minor. The welcome mat at the door of his home was all that they desired. Cap in hand and a "God bless you, Father," the Irish lad was perfectly at home, happy even in his poverty, consoled in his sorrows, so long as Father's welcoming hand was there to greet him.

Father Phelan took his place; and in 1830 the concentration of Irish immigrants in the city made him feel that a proportion of them should be settled on the land. What Valcartier was to Quebec City, St. Columban was to Montreal. He grouped many willing members of his flock, obtained a grant from his Superiors and set out with them to found this cradle of hardy Irish stock, to wrestle with the soil and open an era of farm life for his charge. But he could not remain long with his beloved ones. They were then served by the priests from St. Scholastique village – the nearest – until 1836, when Father Stephen Higginson Blythe was appointed to minister to their needs. Among those who came from St. Scholastique, the name of Father Jacques de La Mothe must be mentioned as one of the most zealous who devoted himself to St. Columban's. In January, 1837, the priest's house was destroyed by fire. Father Blythe immediately began its reconstruction, in a very primitive manner, and had it habitable before the Fall. The crude Chapel built in 1831, beloved in its simplicity, was the focal point in their rugged lives. Their pastor was appointed to St. Jerome in 1837, and they keenly felt the void. Father Blythe, however, did not abandon his children, for he served them from St. Jerome, coming in person or sending one of his priests to the mission at St. Columban. Father Dolan was then named Pastor in 1838 and remained there for two years, and was looked upon just as Father La Mothe had been considered in the days prior to its definite establishment. Father Richards, Father La Mothe, Father Blythe and Father Dolan were all dear to the hearts of the new settlers. Their short stay or passage meant a great deal to them and with them they felt secure and contented despite the hardships of pioneering days. But into their lives came another man of God who was to become the highlight in their lives, to build with them a community modelled upon those parishes in Ireland they had left behind, making use of the old to raise the new, and to spend all his life with them, devoting his brain and brawn in the service of his beloved Columbans for forty-five years. His name – Father John Falvey.

FATHER FALVEY

John Falvey was born in Ireland, at Limerick, in 1797, on the 11th of December. He came to Quebec in his youth. Immediately after his ordination to the priesthood, he spent three months in Sorel, and a short time in the district of Valleyfield. In 1840 Bishop Lartigue, desirous of placing a priest of their native land among the settlers of St. Columban, one who would understand them and direct their destinies, both spiritual and temporal, chose Father Falvey as the logical answer to all their needs. Definitely appointed, Father Falvey, seconded by Father La Mothe until 1847, became “the Blessing of God upon us” and built his Irish colony in an area of 40 square miles, a triangle with the North River as its base and the Chapel as its centre.

St. Columban and Montreal were by no means isolated. Their individual interests and cares became mutual subjects of discussion and objects of assistance. The farmer of St. Columban and the worker in Montreal were still brothers and that which affected one touched the other. In 1843 happiness and gloom descended upon them, when Father Phelan was appointed coadjutor of Bishop Gaulin of Kingston. This elevation to the See of Kingston was a signal blessing which brought gladness to their hearts because of the high honor conferred upon their Sogarth Aroon, but the tears of sorrow and gloom soon washed away the lightness of heart – for it meant that he was to leave them. And since a community of interest existed between St. Columban and Montreal, the mourning of the Irish in Montreal soon had its echo in St. Columban. The name of “Father Phelan” today, one hundred years later, is still a byword in St. Columban and that magic name, with Father Falvey’s, brings a smile upon the faces of the few remaining Irish descendants of the years gone by.

Father Falvey faced his difficult task with the courage of his race and the determination of a strong will and a hardy physique. Nature itself offered the heart-rending opposition of soil-ingratitude. Always a stony and rock-bound territory, this section was not the most favorable from a farming point of view. The soil furnished enough to meet the demands of the people themselves, but could never produce enough for outside distribution and sale. Father Falvey, looking up at the tall trees of the forest, dreamed of saw-mills; and his dream soon became a reality – for at its height of prosperity five saw-mills hummed their song.

They built their church and they built their homes; stone houses and wooden houses. Father John, for he was affectionately so-called, had no lock to the door of his Rectory. It was the consulting room of the parish. There he felt the pulse of his beloved flock and there did his paternal care and interest flourish. From that point to the most remote homestead of the forty square miles, his priestly ministrations were felt. He held the heartstrings and kept his people, by those means, as close as possible to the God really present in His Home next door. When Father John rang the Angelus three times each day he was sure that his words, “The Angel of the Lord,” were being repeated throughout his parish. And at night, when the bell rang for the “Beads,” he was also sure that the Blessed Mother of God had her share, for his people were on their knees invoking her: “Hail Mary, full of Grace.” – Indeed, a spiritual solidarity! His rectory became the haven of tired men.

There Bishop Bourget was to find rest and peace, quiet and relaxation from his arduous duties of directing a very busy Diocese. Father Falvey was his teacher – for the beloved Bishop desired to learn the English language in order the better to serve his English-speaking flock. He spent two winters there, mastering the English language under the tutorship of its pastor. There he wrote some of his Pastoral Letters and the silence of the vast region was

an incentive to deep thought. Many a clear-cut decision must have found its root in the poor but comfortable room of the good Bishop while at St. Columban. Mgr. Prince, Vicar-General, was also a visitor and Father Falvey, with his Irish hospitality, made the gracious gentleman feel totally at home. Others came and went, and with them they carried away the memories of restful days and nights.

Father Falvey loved his little ones. He knew them all by their first names, knew their qualities and their defects, if childish escapades may be so called. He built his school and personally directed every move of his teachers. Children to-day complain of long school hours and after-school tasks. May they read this programme – drawn up by one L. G. Gagnier, an ecclesiastic who taught there. This is in 1853.

“ A DAY IN SCHOOL ”

7.00 a.m.–Prayers.

8.00 a.m.–Mass.

8.30 a.m.–Breakfast.

9.00 a.m.–Class.

11.45 a.m.–Spiritual Examen. 12.00–NOON–DINNER.

1.30 p.m.–Study.

2.00 p.m.–Class.

4.00 p.m.–Recreation.

4.30 p.m.–Visit to the Blessed Sacrament, Beads, Prayers.

He had valuable and learned teachers, but his most helpful assistant was Sister St. Patrick. She spent sixty years there, lived and died there. May we introduce this good woman, this saintly soul, to you: Sister Mary St. Patrick of the Congregation of Notre-Dame. She and Father Falvey – the backbone of this Irish Community!

Mary, the daughter of John and Mary Phelan, was born in Kilkenny, Ireland, on August 5, 1828. She arrived in Canada in 1836 and settled with her parents in St. Columban's, just inaugurated. She lived within 100 yards of the Church, in the Phelan homestead, which still stands to-day. At the age of twelve she journeyed to Montreal and entered the Congregation of Notre-Dame as a novice.

It was some years after, when looking forward with pleasure to the time when she would be permitted to pronounce her Holy Vows, that she met with a painful accident within the convent, which resulted in the dislocation of her ankle, an injury which the ablest physicians pronounced absolutely incurable.

Suffering keenly from the pain of the injured member, and the moral pain of disappointment still more keenly, she returned home to her heartbroken parents, resigned and willing to bear her sorrow bravely.

Her illustrious uncle, Bishop Phelan, hearing of the accident and touched

with compassion for his afflicted brother and his family, was moved to pay a visit to St. Columban, and during his stay, be it noted in gratitude to his memory, the dislocated ankle of Sister Mary was restored to its former strength and vigor.

By special privilege granted by her Right Reverend uncle, Sister Mary was permitted to pronounce her vows under her father's roof, and to live a Religious life in her aged parent's household.

For sixty years her life had been an edification to the parish of St. Columban. Apart from the hours of solitude, meditation and prayer in her humble little oratory, she had three special cares. The first was the altar and sanctuary of the church, which gave daily evidence of her presence, her hours of willing labour, her artistic skill, and her ever-growing desire to beautify the House of God. The second was the sick, and perhaps it was her tender care of these which has made her name so hallowed to the grateful people of the parish, for whithersoever sickness or calamity cast a gloom of sorrow, thither came upon its trail, like the first golden beam of the morning sunshine, bursting through the darkness, the stately figure of Sister Mary. Her gentle methods of encouragement and her wise and holy counsel of fortitude and Christian resignation never failed to lighten the hearts of the suffering ones. Her third and dearest care was the religious training of the youth. Her catechism classes were given in the parish church, where every year for sixty years she explained away the childish difficulties of the little minds that were preparing for the reception for the first time of their Divine Master, and many there are who have gone out from her classes upon the world of progress and material advancement, sturdy disciples of Christian morality and integrity.

Like Father Falvey, she, too, spent her whole life in St. Columban's. She, too, devoted her mind and her heart, her talents and her energy, to the cause of her beloved Columbans, until her death, January 27th, 1905.

The early days of pioneering and building over, the parish settled down comfortably to an existence of real community life. Bound together by the ties of suffering and hardship, the families of St. Columban's became one for all and all for one. No event in one family that did not have its reaction in the rest of the parish. A birth, a marriage, a death, sickness, calamity, a devastation, such as the locust plague in 1854, all tended to make the joys or the sorrows of one family the consideration of the others.

It is quite interesting to note that Father Falvey "lined up" all his men, and on such great feasts of the Church as Christmas, Easter, All Souls', the Immaculate Conception, he had them with him at the altar rail and gave them their spiritual food. Parochial processions to the cemetery, where a huge cross had been erected in its centre! The young women of the sodality in their white veils, on the 8th of December, dedicating themselves to Our Blessed Mother! The children enrolled in the "Holy Childhood"! Two hundred members were enrolled in the confraternity of the Scapular. Father Falvey, without flourish

of oratory, standing at the Gospel side of the altar, expounding the doctrines of the Church in a manner quite familiar, yet highly doctrinal, taught his people, young and old, the whole gamut of religious belief in a planned course of instruction. In this remote region, for it must be kept in mind that no railroad communication connected this town with other centres, this priest established a public library in his home, where his people could come and bring away with them religious as well as profane books, all carefully selected and meticulously distributed by their learned friend. In his report to Bishop Bourget in 1857, Father Falvey carefully exposed the condition of his parish, a report which certainly must have pleased his superior immensely: 983 souls in the parish of whom 697 were communicants.

If one could only go back to those pleasant scenes of Sunday morning after Mass and mingle with the throng at the Church door. Those days have been crowded out by modern civilization and all its inventions, by urbanization and by the hustle and bustle of our age. St. Columban was a model of Christian familiarity and neighbourliness. The men grouped together discussing, discoursing upon all and any subject: politics, the farm, their families, airing their grievances, showing their approval or disapproval, prophesying, calculating, theorizing. But eventually the words "Here comes Father, let us ask him" would be uttered, and Father Falvey became their counsellor, their adviser. The women gathered too and discussed their own problems, their children, their work, even the fashions, news of which had come from Montreal.

Montreal was fast becoming a large and important centre in commerce and business. Its advancing prosperity and the lure of work caused many families in St. Columba's to leave their farms and settle in that city whence their fathers had come. Father Falvey, growing old, saw his children leave him and their farms. He had seen the parish grow, he saw it at its apex in 1857. And now each year his parishioners diminished in number and the farms were abandoned or sold one by one. Montreal received them, gave them opportunities they had not in St. Columban. Father Falvey remained, old and broken, unable to perform his duties as he would desire; he retired in June, 1879, and lived with the new pastor at St. Columban until his death in 1885, February 22nd. He might have left, but he wished to die where he had laboured, he wished to remain until God called him from the parish he loved so much. Eighty-eight years old, he breathed his last, after having unstintedly devoted forty-five years of his life to his children in St. Columban.

Their devoted father gone to his rest, the parishioners seemed to lose heart and one family after another left their homes. Some of the older folk remained, but their children, feeling that Montreal offered opportunities which they would never have in St. Columban, soon settled in that large city whence their ancestors came in 1830. New pastors were appointed one after the other to cater and minister to the diminishing flock. Fathers Pierre

Poissant 1885-89, Charles Cadot 1889-91, Isidore Forget 1891-1905, Charles Desearries 1905-09, Ludger Desjardins 1909-35. New settlers came, many of the sturdy French-Canadian stock, and kept alive this community. With the influx of old-world immigration, mid-European nations were represented among the new comers also, farmers who knew all the secrets of tilling the land, fervent Catholics to whom the Church, old now, meant the rallying point as it did in the old world.

In 1935, a young man, strong, pious, zealous, was sent there by the Archbishop of Montreal. He faced a task that might have discouraged a mighty man. With all the ardor and energy he could muster, he rapidly transformed this parish and set it on its course to greater activity. From early morning until late at night, he labored incessantly. He called upon all his people, rallied them around him, became not only a carpenter of souls but a carpenter in wood. He was not only a supervisor of work, – he toiled with his own hands, built, repaired, farmed. When his Archbishop visited him, he noticed feverish activity everywhere. St. Columban was coming back. Father Bruno Pressault, a modern Father Falvey, trained as a curate in the Church of Sacré-Coeur of Montreal, today sees the fruit of his zeal. But he is only in the first stages of parochial rejuvenation. He faces the future with all the hopes of youth and his people with him enter into a new era, as the second century dawns.