

A *Canadien* Bishop in the Ecclesiastical Province of Oregon

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Ordained in the Quebec City in 1821, Augustin Magliore Blanchet (1797-1887) served as bishop of Walla Walla (1846-1850) and later of Nesqually (1850-1879), presently the Archdiocese of Seattle, Washington. This article examines how Blanchet's earlier experience as priest in French Canada provided skills for survival during the first years of his episcopacy in the Province of Oregon, and later shaped the way he thought about himself and the role of the church.¹ Primary sources for this examination include Blanchet's extended correspondence with Ignace Bourget, Bishop of Montreal, and the letter-books of Blanchet himself as Bishop of Walla Walla and of Nesqually, preserved in the archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle.

Events in the life of A.M. Blanchet prior to his relocation in the Oregon Country are closely linked to historical events during a critical time in French Canada. Blanchet was born to a modest farming family in St. Pierre de Montmagny, his great-grandfather having left Picardy in 1666 for New France where he married the daughter of an earlier French colonist. In 1809 A.M. Blanchet entered the Petit Séminaire and then completed his studies at the Grand Séminaire of Quebec City. Shortly after ordination, he served as missionary among Acadians at Chéticamp, Nova Scotia and on the Iles de la Madeleine for four years. He was later called upon to take important posts as archpriest in the Montreal region, ministering at Saint-Charles in Saint-Charles-on-the-

¹ This article has arisen from the author's current translation of the letter-books of Bishop A.M. Blanchet. She wishes to acknowledge Georges Aubin, for his assistance in researching Blanchet's years prior to coming to the Oregon country. Blanchet correspondence quoted in English is the author's translation from original documents in French.

Richelieu from 1830 until his imprisonment in 1837 for participation in the local Patriote insurrection against the colonial British government.

Tensions between the government and the habitants of Quebec leading to the Patriote insurrections had been developing for over half a century. The role of the Catholic Church and its clergy during this time of growing discord had been ambiguous. After the British conquest of New France in 1759, the local bishop had won protection for the church in what had become the Province of Quebec in exchange for his compliance with British authority. As a consequence of this arrangement, the colonial government acted not only through the landed French Canadian and British aristocracies who wanted to maintain the seigneurial system, but also through the higher clergy, who were anxious to maintain their privileges. With the Quebec Act of 1774 re-establishing French civil law and officially recognizing the Catholic religion, Catholic clerics enjoyed greater power than they had known even during the time of French rule and were among the elite in a conservative social hierarchy.

Following the advent of parliamentary government in 1791, however, French Canadian representatives in the new Legislative Assembly, espousing recent French and American revolutionary ideals, began to supplant the religious leaders and landed aristocrats as spokesmen for Quebec, then known as Lower Canada.² These spokesmen formed the Parti Patriote, which not only questioned British authority but also embraced the anti-clerical views of the French Enlightenment. They won considerable support from rural farmers and villagers, who comprised a majority of the population of Lower Canada. On the one hand, the rural habitants were loyal to a church that upheld their personal religious beliefs and represented what remained of French nationalism, but on the other hand they resisted it as a privileged social institution that insisted on tithing and a strict moral code. An agricultural crisis and news of the French and American Revolutions fueled their discontent, leading to growth of the Parti Patriote and desire for independence from the British.³

² Gilles Chaussé, “French Canada from the Conquest to 1840,” *A Concise History of the Church in Canada*, ed. Terrence Murphy and Roberto Perin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 86.

³ Fernand Ouellet states that whereas the professional classes who formed the leaders of the Parti Patriote were influenced by democratic and anticlerical ideals of the French Revolution, the farmers absorbed a nationalist ideology. “It would be a mistake to think that there was a popular movement of religious disaffection” among the farmers who in spite of their doubts about the conduct

St-Charles-on-the-Richelieu, where Abbe Blanchet had been exercising his pastoral duties for seven years, was among the Patriote strongholds. Along with other priests of rural Lower Canada, he seems to have been torn between respect for the position of his superiors and feelings of solidarity with the people. In a letter dated 9 November 1837, he in fact warns the governor, Lord Acheson Gosford, that “one could no longer count on the clergy to check the popular movement in the region,” for “the shepherds cannot part company with their flocks.”⁴

When one of the largest gatherings of insurrectionists, the famous Six Counties rally of 23 October 1837, was held in his parish, Blanchet wrote to Ignace Bourget, his former classmate at the Seminaries of Quebec. Bourget had recently been consecrated as coadjutor to Jean-Jacques Lartigue, Bishop of Montreal. In his letter, Blanchet hardly conceals his admiration for the effect produced by a speech given at the rally by Patriote leader Louis-Joseph Papineau, and he warns of the unity of the 3,000 French Canadians in attendance, all prepared to wield arms against the British. Undoubtedly aware of the continuing attachment of rural Catholics for the church, Blanchet admonishes the clerical leaders of Montreal not to intervene, for fear of furthering their growing antagonism:

One must be very careful now when speaking of a man of the people [L.J. Papineau] & I believe that it would be best for the clergy, at the present time, to remain silent so as not to leave themselves open to rejection; I am referring to those who have always been obstinately opposed to the Patriotes. As for those who are regarded as Patriotes, they still have some good to do, for they can enlighten the people who still have their trust, even when they hold some opinion that is opposed to that of the Patriotes.⁵

Heeded or not, this advice came too late, for on 24 October Bishop Lartigue issued a further pastoral letter inspired by the Church’s teaching on the doctrine of the divine right of kings as reiterated in the

of the clergy with respect to the British “remained deeply attached to religion.” (Fernand Ouellet, “The Rebellions of 1837/8 in J. M. Bumsted, *Interpreting Canada’s Past*, vol. 1, [Toronto: Oxford U. Press, 1993], 424.)

⁴ Nive Voisne, “Blanchet, Augustin-Magloire,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, 11:84-5.

⁵ Archives of the Chancellery of Montreal (ACAM), Banchet to Bourget, 25 October 1837. Gilles Chaussé also translates a portion of the above citation and states with regard to Abbé A.M. Blanchet: “Sympathetic to the cause of the Patriotes and aware that they could no longer be considered merely a noisy minority, he appealed to his superior to act with great caution.” 101.

Pope's 1832 encyclical against the Polish revolution. Angered along with other parish priests at having to read the Bishop's letter at mass, Blanchet wrote a week later to Bourget, "My heart bleeds in telling you that I had no sooner announced reading it than more than half the men left the church. ... You cannot imagine how many sins were committed as a result of this Mandate, by the words expressed against ecclesiastical authority and priests in general."⁶

Neither the bishop's pastoral letters nor appeals for calm issued by moderate Patriotes and clerics (including Blanchet himself), prevented the violence that broke out in the Montreal region. Poorly armed and abandoned by their leaders, including Papineau, the Patriotes of the Richelieu Valley faced bloody and hopeless confrontation. Blanchet's own account evokes the brutal nature of the suppression that ensued. He reports that following the battle of Saint-Charles on 25 November, British soldiers took up lodgings in the church and the few neighboring houses that had not been burned. They held prisoners in the sacristy, which also served as privy and kitchen, and seized or destroyed everything there as well as in the presbytery, including vestments and relics. Blanchet made his way by foot to neighboring Saint-Denis.⁷

In the ensuing weeks, the British sought to punish anyone involved in the insurrections. Although he had repeatedly preached against violence, Blanchet had taken the opportunity on the morning of the battle of Saint-Charles to bless the armed Patriotes, most of whom were his parishioners, and to have them say prayers. As a consequence of this action, he was found guilty of high treason, for which hanging was the recognized punishment.⁸ The British imprisoned him in Montreal along

⁶ ACAM, Bourget to Turgeon, 1 January 1838. The letter containing the original quote is lost; all that remains is this extract that was cited by Bourget.

⁷ The original letter from Blanchet to Bourget, dated 26 November 1837 is lost, but it was copied by Abbé Demers and inserted in a letter addressed to Bourget of 13 December 1837. (Archives de l'Evêché de Saint-Hyacinthe, AESH); the letter is also cited in Isidore Desnoyers, *Histoire de Saint-Charles*: 153-4 (AESH).

⁸ ACAM, Blanchet to Bourget, 7 December 1837. In his work, *The Patriots and the People, The Rebellion of 1837 in Rural Lower Canada*, (Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1993), Allan Greer suggests that Blanchet was not the only priest caught in such a dilemma: "Rather ambivalent, most parish priests were "opposed to strife and bloodshed, yet convinced that Britain was not dealing justly with the Canadians. It was one thing for Bishop Lartigue to condemn revolution from his Episcopal throne in Montreal, but parish priests had more complicated loyalties. Besides being faithful members of the ecclesiastical corporation, most rural curés were also integrated to some degree with the

with 500 other French Canadians. Anxious not to compromise the clergy, the Catholic bishops interceded on his behalf with the highest authorities. Blanchet defended himself in writing against numerous accusations, including his appearance in the camp of insurgents. He claimed that prior to the uprising he had been isolated by the surrounding insurgents and his life threatened by an anonymous Patriote,⁹ and so he had been forced to house from 100 to 150 Patriotes in the presbytery during the final days before the battle. He offered this explanation for the British discovery of Patriote medals in his presbytery, which they were using as evidence for his political leanings.¹⁰

By the time of his release from prison late in February 1838, church leaders were actively seeking reconciliation with the estranged Patriotes. The two formerly hostile groups joined together in an unsuccessful political campaign against the projected union of Upper and Lower Canada. To a people that had suffered the defeat of their revolutionary aspirations, the church now came to offer an alternative vision for national identity if not independence; religion (as well as the French language) stood as a vehicle of distinctiveness. The Catholic Church again assumed a comfortable position of dominance in Great Britain's French Canadian province of Great Britain. In the ensuing years, a devotional revolution took place, inspired by Ultramontane fervor favoring the universal authority and power of the papacy. This movement opposed Gallicanism, which advocated ecclesial administrative independence from papal control in each nation, and was the only tenable position for a Catholic population living under an Anglican government whose ministers were advocating conversion as a means of assimilation. Characteristics of Ultramontane devotion included an emphasis on elaborate liturgies and the sacraments, the veneration of relics, and reverence for Mary and other members of the Holy Family. A growing number of temperance societies, parish retreats initiated by an extraordinary orator, Charles de Forbin-Janson (French Bishop of Nancy and of Toul), the proliferation of pilgrimage sites, and a stunning increase in the number of women religious, also distinguished this revolution in French Canada. Consecrated as bishop of Montreal in 1840, Ignace

communities where they served. When the troops moved into the Richelieu in late November, several curés compromised themselves with the authorities by blessing the patriot militiamen as they went off to fight the British. . . ,” 236-237.

⁹ Bishop Lartigue had also received an anonymous letter announcing this threat, and writes to warn Blanchet. (ACAM, R. L. 8:406)

¹⁰ ACAM. Blanchet to Bourget, 7 December 1837.

Bourget was a prime motivator. Largely as a result of this revolution and of Bourget's leadership, the church again achieved the position it had enjoyed before the establishment of parliamentary government in 1791.¹¹

Ultramontanism also shaped the devotion of Abbe Augustin Blanchet. From 1838 to 1842, he served as parish priest of Saint-Joseph, les Cèdres, a rendez-vous on the Saint-Lawrence River for the voyageurs of the fur trade. His brother, Francis Norbert, had also served there. Among his other activities during this period, he welcomed Bishop Forbin-Janson in person for the dedication of a new convent (October 1841).¹² Along with over 2,200 adherents in the city of Montreal, he also joined the Archconfraternity of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, a pious association dedicated to the conversion of sinners.¹³ In November 1841, Bishop Bourget summoned Blanchet back to Montreal, inviting him to oversee management of cathedral temporal affairs and to join the newly established cathedral chapter of Saint Jacques. This transfer took place in 1842.¹⁴ Canon Blanchet's various duties during the ensuing years in Montreal included serving as cathedral cantor, chaplain to the newly founded Sisters of Providence, and as catechism teacher for the orphans in the care of the Sisters of Providence.

Several letters that Blanchet wrote during these years are addressed to Charles Félix Cazeau, Secretary of the Archdiocese of Quebec. Their primary focus is the Colombia Mission in the Oregon Country, where

¹¹ For a more detailed description of this movement, see Roberto Perin, pp. 196 - 223, as well, among other works, as Louis Rousseau and Frank W. Remiggi, *Atlas Historique des Pratiques Religieuses, Le Sud-Ouest du Québec au XIX^e siècle* (Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 1998).

¹² "La dite maison a été bénite par le Comte de Forbin-Janson, évêque de Toul, Primat de Lorraine, le 21 octobre [1841] à 2h. après-midi." Note on deliberations of the fabric, signed by M. Blanchet, priest. (Archives de la Chancellerie de l'Evêché de Valleyfield [ACEV]).

¹³ Founded in 1836 by Abbé Desgenettes of Notre-Dame-des-Victoires in Paris, Pope Gregory XVI elevated the society to an archconfraternity and enriched it with indulgences, permitting its members to obtain plenary indulgences forty times a year. In February 1841, Bishop Bourget erected a chapter in Montreal. (L. Rousseau and F.W. Remiggi, 183) During his visit to Paris later that year, Bourget found consolation for the spiritual paralysis and sense of inadequacy he was experiencing through conversations with Abbe Desgenettes, a grace he attributed to the Virgin Mary. (Léon Pouliot, S.J. *Monseigneur Bourget et son temps*, vol. 2, [Montreal: Editions Beauchemin, 1956], 45, 61.)

¹⁴ ACEV, Blanchet to Bourget, 15 November 1841.

Augustin's brother, Francis Norbert, was serving as one of two Catholic missionaries. Topics in these letters include the shipping of books and printing of catechisms for his brother, and payments for a mission mill in the Willamette Valley. Blanchet also suggests that his superiors seek funding for the mission through the Societies for the Propagation of Faith in France, contributions from the local Societies being insufficient. And he explains that it would be more economic if mission expenses charged to the Hudson's Bay Company were paid directly to London rather than to the local HBC offices.¹⁵ Finally, he expresses satisfaction with news from Bourget of Rome's plan eventually to name a titular bishop to the Columbia District, and he hints of his own willingness to join his brother in the distant mission.¹⁶ This correspondence, addressed to the archbishopric, suggests that the canon may have played a role behind the scenes, not only in the temporal affairs of the Columbia Mission, but also in Pope Gregory XVI's elevation of the Columbia District to an apostolic vicariate on 1 December 1843, naming Francis Norbert Blanchet as vicar apostolic.

Shifting momentarily to Francis Norbert, we find that upon hearing of his elevation, he traveled back to Montreal to be consecrated on 25 July 1844. Thereupon, he embarked for Europe to seek priests and make collections for the new vicariate. While there, he also wrote a *Memoriale* to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, requesting the elevation of the newly established vicariate to the status of an ecclesiastical province. This request was granted 24 July 1846, creating the archiepiscopal see of Oregon City and the dioceses of Walla Walla and Vancouver Island, together with five districts: Nesqually, Fort Hall, Colville, Princess Charlotte, and New Caledonia. The bulls named Francis Norbert to Oregon City; Augustin Magloire to Walla Walla, together with administration of Fort Hall and Colville; and a fellow

¹⁵ Archives of the Archdiocese of Quebec (AAQ), Blanchet to Cazeau, 30 October 1842, 1 November 1842, 13 November 1842.

¹⁶ "...je découvre que Monseigneur de Montréal écrit l'an dernier, de Rome, à Monseigneur de Québec, pour lui faire connaître les intentions de la Cour de Rome, relativement à cette mission, & je suis saisi d'apprendre que l'on doit y nommer un Evêque en titre, aussitôt que le nombre des Catholiques y sera un peu plus considérable, & je pourrais dire même aussitôt que la Cour de Rome sera informée de l'état actuel de la Mission, puisqu'elle paraît prospérer étonnamment. (AAQ, Blanchet to Cazeau, 13 November 1842) "...vous informer que vous pourriez trouver ici quelqu'un disposé à s'engager, dans le cas où vous seriez en peine." (AAQ, Blanchet to Cazeau, 29 December 1842)

missionary in the Columbia District, Modeste Demers, to Vancouver Island together with administration of Princess Charlotte and New Caledonia.

The elevation of the distant Columbia Mission, sparsely populated by whites, to the independent ecclesiastical Province of Oregon – the third such province in English North America after Baltimore and Quebec – in retrospect appears to some historians to have been a mistake occasioned by exaggerations in F.N. Blanchet’s *Memoriale*.¹⁷ Other factors, both ideological and practical, may have contributed as well. First among these is the belief that salvation comes only through the church, a factor that made the conversion of entire groups of Native Americans on the North American Continent particularly important. Unlike Canadian Protestants and wayward white Catholics who required the remission of their sins and heresies before conversion could begin its work, Native Americans, from a Eurocentric perspective, were fertile ground, prone only to the errors of nature. Visions of the many thousands of First Nations people living in the Red River and Columbia missions of the vast ecclesial Province of Quebec lent to a sense of obligation on the part of the prelates.

Another, equally ideological justification for this elevation concerned the French Canadians themselves. Though vanquished politically, many still entertained the lingering dream of a French America that was to be gloriously heroic, Edenic, and catholic in the larger, universal sense.¹⁸ In the minds of French Canadian ecclesial figures, in whose hands the remaining French speaking population had fallen, this dream had in fact become the reality of maintaining Catholicism and fidelity to the land. For them, the survival of the civilizing Catholic mission, once inherited by France but abandoned as a consequence of her Revolution, now depended on the French Canadians. Thus it was all the more important that they remain faithful to their religion, their language, and – having no more state – to their native soil. In short, the great French mission on earth had fallen into the hands of the Catholic clergy of Canada. The resulting agrarian and Romanist stance gave rise to a collective negative attitude toward the United States – the clergy

¹⁷ See in particular, Vincent J. McNally, “Fighting for a Foundation: Oblate Beginnings in Far Western Canada 1847-1864,” *Western Oblate Studies* 4, (1996), 47-69, and Wilfred P. Schoenberg, S.J., *A History of the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest, 1743-1983* (Washington, DC: The Pastoral Press, 1987), 94.

¹⁸ Guildo Rousseau, *L’image des Etats-Unis dans la littérature québécoise (1775-1930)* (Sherbrooke, Québec, Canada: Editions Naaman, 1981) 11.

still looking upon the Oregon Country itself as a home for French Canadians.¹⁹

A letter from Bishop Bourget speaks to this second justification. In December of 1846, he writes elatedly from Europe, where he has just met with the founders of the Société d’Océanie, which helped support missionary endeavors in the Sandwich Islands and other areas of the Pacific. The first idea that struck him in meeting with these potential benefactors, he tells Blanchet, was that of colonizing the Columbia “with the thousands of *Canadiens* who are going to lose themselves to the United States all the while making the fortunes of the Americans, because they have good arms for being good mercenaries; and they don’t have enough education to arrange things to their advantage.” Bourget goes on to write, “I thus suggested ... favoring the emigration of all the good Canadian families who would like to inhabit the immense territory of Oregon, by paying a part of the cost of the voyage, and in providing a means of procuring the land and survival for these newly-arrived families. ... Who knows if God will not so arrange things to provide a place for our poor and good *Canadiens* for whom Canada will no longer be their patrimony?”²⁰ These comments suggest that, at least in the reveries of Bishop Bourget, the Oregon Country represented a final outpost for the preservation of the great French mission.

Thus, during this great missionary age, the very lack of white settlement may have helped sustain belief in the future importance of the Columbia Mission, both in terms of populating the celestial realm with baptized Native Americans and of providing a utopian land for French Canadian settlement. Added to and in some ways contradicting such idealistic arguments, however, were pragmatic justifications. Already in 1841, the bishop of Quebec, Joseph Signay, had opposed the dependency of the Columbia Mission on the diocese of Quebec, and had assigned Bourget the task of finding others to whom this responsibility might be confided during his trip to Rome that year.²¹

¹⁹ G. Rousseau. See in particular Chapter VIII, “La lutte contre l’emprise économique,” for a description of the anti-American sentiment of many nineteenth-century French Canadians.

²⁰ ACAMI, Bourget to Blanchet, [n.d.] December 1846. The term *Canadien* originally referred to inhabitants of French descent in New France. After the conquest by Great Britain, all French Canadians were identified as *Canadiens*, and the term took on connotations of ethnic distinction in relation to British immigrants. This term has been maintained in translations.

²¹ Pouliot, vol. 2, 54.

News of Blanchet's own elevation reached him in July 1846. The name Alexandre was added to his name, perhaps mistakenly, and Blanchet would use this third given name while bishop of Walla Walla. Bishop Bourget consecrated him in the Cathedral of Montreal in September. Thereafter, the bishop of Walla Walla spent several months seeking clerics to join him and scouring the countryside for funds. Having gathered what he considered would be enough for the voyage and for the subsistence of the clergy during the first year on the frontier, he departed 23 March 1847. His party of fourteen included secular priest, Father Jean Baptiste Brouillet, as well as scholastics Louis P. G. Rousseau and Guillaume Leclaire, and two nieces that, "were going to Oregon to teach the *sauvages* crafts specific to their gender."²² Just prior to departure, he also received news from Bishop Eugene de Mazenod in France that four Oblates of Mary Immaculate and a lay brother had departed and would join their bishop en route. This new order of the OMI had been founded by de Mazenod to help restore Catholicism in post-Revolutionary France and for missionary work outside of France as well. Blanchet was thrilled with the news of the Oblate's plans to join him, yet this was three more Oblates than he had requested for the short term, given his financial limitations.²³

The waters of the St. Lawrence had not yet thawed, and the French Canadian group had to work its way down the icy roads of New England before embarking on inland water ways to the head of the Oregon Trail at Westport, near St. Louis. The account of his voyage in Blanchet's journal, and in a series of subsequent letters addressed to a friend from former seminary days, Reverend Célestin Gavreau, are testimony to the bishop's anti-U.S. sentiments. He does not spare words in describing the squalor of Albany, the soot of Pittsburgh, or the habit of men to lift their feet almost to their heads. "Wherever they are seated," he relates, "they find something on which to prop them. This seems an epidemic malady."²⁴ Blanchet was no less critical of the inability of the U.S. Catholic Church to provide support for its members. In Pittsburgh, the travel party had trouble even finding the church or its pastor; in Cincinnati, the bishop had become overly indebted in building his cathedral; in Louisville there was not a single choirboy. As for the priests, they generally did not find it appropriate to wear their cassock in the streets. The citizens themselves were ashamed of being Catholic because there

²² Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle (AAS), Blanchet to Célestin Gavreau, 20 November 1848.

²³ AAQ, Blanchet to Turgeon, 24 February 1847

²⁴ AAS, Blanchet to Gavreau, 27 November 1847.

were too few priests to serve their spiritual needs, a factor that Blanchet describes as lending to the general decline in the U.S. of the Catholic population.²⁵ In spite of these observations, Blanchet went out of his way to meet other Catholic bishops along his route, including Bishops Michael O'Connor and Peter R. Kenrick, whose acquaintance would serve him in times of difficulty during his later years. It was not until he reached the open prairies, the Rockies, and the plains beyond, that the bishop's awe before the beauty of the land suggests his excitement about the potential Eden that lay ahead.

Upon his arrival in the new see of Walla Walla, near where the Snake River flows into the Columbia, Blanchet was as prepared as any individual might expect to be for the overwhelming series of setbacks he immediately encountered. In fact, the political and social contexts may well have evoked a sense of *déjà vu* for the French Canadian. Having just become a U.S. possession – in contradiction to earlier assumptions of Bourget and himself about Canadian sovereignty – the Oregon Country was loosely governed by a free-standing provisional government, comprised primarily of anti-Catholic American Protestants eager to rid themselves of any black robes and to wrestle choice lands from resident French Canadian settlers at a pittance. For a cleric already accustomed to defending his church against attempts by a Protestant government to undermine Catholicism, this was an unsettling state of affairs. Added to this political situation were financial woes, a continual shortage of priests, and disagreements with the superior of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Before any attempt could be made to further his Ultramontane or utopian visions, the bishop had to face these painful issues, as well as dramatic events that would call forth the depths of his experience in French Canada.

Walla Walla had been selected as a site for the episcopal seat because it was thought that it would be a center of population growth in the region north of the Columbia River and east of the Cascades. As with most other seats in the ecclesiastical province, it was also the location of a Hudson's Bay post. William McBean, an affable, kind-hearted and francophone compatriot, headed this post. Along with his Métis wife and children, he was a devoted Catholic and welcomed the new bishop warmly.²⁶ This auspicious beginning was short-lived, how

²⁵ AAS, Blanchet to Gavreau, 27 November 1847, 1 December 1847

²⁶ AAS, Blanchet to Gavreau, 20 January 1848. Originally from Montreal, William McBean (1790-1872) had served as secretary to former HBC Chief Factor Dr. John McLaughlin and had been chief of the Walla Walla post for two years when Blanchet arrived; after the HBC pulled out of U.S. territory, McBean

ever. The cost of the voyage having been double his estimate, Blanchet had no funds left from the subscriptions he had gathered in Quebec and Montreal, and so he was dependent on the Councils of the Paris and Lyons Societies for the Propagation of the Faith. Already familiar with scrambling for funds, Blanchet had written personally to the Societies, requesting that funds be deposited through the HBC in London and credited to him through the main HBC post in Vancouver.²⁷ This funding had not arrived, however, probably due to the 1848 Revolution taking place in France.

Further funds Blanchet had expected through collections in Quebec and particularly through the efforts of Bishop Bourget also were not forthcoming. Bourget's dreams for the Oregon Province seem to have been eclipsed by his personal encounter with typhus and by the many ecclesial problems in Montreal at that time. Interestingly, even during the latter years of his episcopacy, Blanchet never appealed to American clergy for funding, even though his diocese fell within the political boundaries of the U.S. Instead, in a state of desperation at one point, he allowed his trusted vicar general, J.B.A. Brouillet, to voyage to California in search of gold. This financial mission met some success. And the bishop himself traveled to Mexico in 1852, for purposes of seeking funds and investing in mines.

Local support was equally difficult to obtain. In a letter to Bourget dated February 1848, Blanchet writes of a snub he received from the closest white missionaries: "Since my arrival in Walla Walla, on every occasion, Dr. Whitman has proven himself to be entirely opposed to the missionaries. He has carried his fanaticism to the point of refusing to sell me provisions, saying that he would do so only if we were in utter misery (in starvation)."²⁸ And, as it turned out, an officer of the Hudson's Bay Company post in Vancouver was Peter Skene Ogden, coincidentally brother of the Attorney General at the time of the Patriote uprisings who had summoned Blanchet for imprisonment, Charles-Richard Ogden.²⁹ In spite of the officer's civility during their first

served as schoolmaster in the French Canadian settlement in Walla Walla.

²⁷ AAS, Bourget to Messieurs Truteau and Paré [n.d.].

²⁸ "Depuis mon arrivée à Walla Walla, dans toutes les occasions, le Dtr Whitman s'était montré tout à fait opposé aux Missionnaires. Il avait poussé le fanatisme assez loin pour refuser de me vendre des provisions de bouche, en disant qu'il le ferait seulement s'il nous voyait réduits à la dernière misère (in starvation)." AAS, Blanchet to Bourget, 22 February 1848.

²⁹ ACEV, Blanchet to Bourget, 30 March 1838; see also Letter from Blanchet to Archdeacon Truteau of Montreal, 24 February 1848 (ACAM).

encounters, the relationship between the two men would become increasingly strained.

This financial state of affairs that would plague Blanchet throughout his episcopacy, however, was not the only challenge he would face. Just three months after his arrival at Walla Walla and four days after settling in his log cabin cathedral among the Cayuse, Blanchet became a central player in the Whitman Massacre. On 29 November 1847, Doctor Whitman, his wife, and eight other adults living at the neighboring ABCFM mission of Waiilatpu (American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions) were killed by a small band of Cayuse Indians. Anger against the Whitmans had been developing for a number of years, due in part to what appears to have been their well-intended but patronizing attitude toward the Native Americans and desire to have them abandon their customs in order to become farmers. American immigrants arriving in record numbers and the recent deaths of Cayuse and Walla Walla from dysentery and measles had exacerbated this antagonism. The doctor had also been accused of poisoning them as a means of acquiring more of their land; and “in keeping with Indian custom, medicine men that failed to cure their patients, were themselves doomed.”³⁰ For some time, Whitman had in fact been ignoring Cayuse threats to his life as well as appeals from friends in the Willamette Valley to abandon the Waiilatpu mission.

Responding to an earlier request to baptize some dying Cayuse children and adults, Reverend Brouillet learned of this brutal attack that tribal members from another camp had made the day before. He rode to Waiilatpu as soon as possible, and in the presence of the still threatening murderers, helped a Frenchman whose life had been spared, in washing and burying the ten victims. He also wrought assurance for the safety of the survivors, mostly women and orphans, and hastened to head off another Protestant missionary en route for Waiilatpu and for his own inevitable death. Upon hearing of the tragedy and wary of the American settlers’ revenge upon all the Cayuse, Blanchet summoned an assembly of Cayuse chiefs to his mission on the Umatilla. There, the chiefs signed a petition he had addressed to George Abernathy, governor of the Provisional Government, requesting a peace conference in exchange for the survivors whom the Cayuse were by then holding as hostages.³¹ Immediately thereafter, Peter Skene Ogden arrived from his post in Vancouver and summoned the same chiefs and Blanchet to a

³⁰ Schoenberg, 107.

³¹ AAS, Blanchet to Abernathy, 21 December 1847.

Council at Fort Walla Walla. Ogden paid ransom for the hostages, who along with Blanchet and Oblate Superior Ricard traveled down the Columbia to Fort Vancouver.

In the ensuing confusion of the Cayuse Wars, Brouillet's heroic burial of the victims and Blanchet's level-headed negotiations for peace were ignored; instead, both Catholic clerics were blamed by the American Protestant settlers, and particularly by Reverend Henry Spalding – the Protestant missionary whose very life Brouillet had spared – for having incited the massacre. In a sense, Blanchet was replaying his days as Pastor of Saint-Charles-on-the-Richelieu, again finding himself in the compromising situation of helping the losers – this time the Native Americans – and for this reason, becoming scapegoat for the anti-Catholic fervor of the winners, as well, in this case, for the winner's prejudice against Native Americans. This time, however – perhaps modeling himself on French Canadian clerical deference to their British authorities – he remained uncritical. This approach would eventually earn him the respect of new and more tolerant government officials.

Discord with the superior of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate who had joined Blanchet in Saint Louis constituted yet another tribulation during these initial years. Lending to disagreements between the superior and the ordinary were ambiguously divided areas of jurisdiction between the two, obstinate personalities on the part of both, and an absence of funding from the Societies for the Propagation of the Faith resulting in financial dependence of the Oblates on their bishop. The general superior of the Order, Eugène de Mazenod, had placed the Oregon Oblates “under the jurisdiction of the Most Reverend Ordinary,” but upon their arrival, the local Oblate superior, Reverend Father Pascal Ricard, submitted for Blanchet's approval a series of proposals concerning jurisdiction to which Blanchet had assented orally. Later, desiring a written contract concerning jurisdiction, Ricard sent a further list that included the following: “Oblates were not to be parish pastors except temporarily; if a mission became a parish (a church for white people), the bishop was to pay for land, construction, and maintenance; all mission income (collections, donations) belonged to the Oblates; the OMI had complete mobility and some power in the dispersal of priests.”³² In his response, Blanchet listed eleven points that he had already agreed upon with de Mazenod and that included nearly all of

³² David Nicandri, *Olympia's Forgotten Pioneers: The Oblates of Mary Immaculate* (Olympia, Washington: State Capitol Historical Association, 1976), 39.

those Ricard had demanded, stating that a further contract was therefore not necessary. In refusing to sign the contract, Blanchet also noted his concern about Ricard's further claim that the Oblates were free to use any funds they received from the Propaganda as they pleased.³³

This was not Father Ricard's only request. Having left the Walla Walla region with Blanchet and the hostages following the Whitman massacre, he began a motherhouse on the shores of Puget Sound, west of the Cascades. Choice of the motherhouse location separated Ricard from two Oblates, Fathers Pandosy and Chirouse, who remained east of the Cascades. The new location also placed the superior under the jurisdiction of Archbishop Francis Norbert Blanchet. As a result, Ricard sent a further contract to the three ordinaries of the Province, demanding that Oblate mission and parish expenses be assumed by the prelates, and stating that any Propagation money eventually received by the Oblates could be designated only for their personal living expenses.³⁴ The bishops' refusal to sign such a contract created hostility between all three ordinaries and the OMI superior. These differences eventually reached the ears of Bishop de Mazenod, the Council of Baltimore, and even Rome. In retrospect, it seems that neither side was without fault, and financial straits had exasperated their differences.

Frontier missionary work was known to be difficult, and A.M.A. Blanchet dealt with more than his share of problems during these initial years in the ecclesiastical Province of Oregon. Had he not been an experienced missionary who had faced similar situations in his homeland, had he not been persistent, even rigid, yet willing to compromise when all else failed, the fate of the Catholic Church in this borderland diocese during the years 1847 to 1850 might have been different. The very character traits that served as Blanchet's strength in times of chaos, however, also lent to frequently difficult relations with fellow clerics and religious.

Turning now to the second, more constructive phase, in his episcopacy, beginning during the decade of the 1850s, the bishop's French-Canadian Ultramontane visions become more apparent. Three areas of activity are of particular note: uniformity with the ritual and calendar of the Holy See; insertion of the church within civil society by providing schools and institutions for social intervention; and Native American conversions.

³³ AAS, Blanchet to Ricard, 18 February 1848.

³⁴ AAS, Ricard to F. N. Blanchet, A.M.A. Blanchet, and M. Demers, 3 February 1848. The letter is also cited and discussed by Nicandri, p. 40.

In his defense of a mission whose very existence had been threatened on many fronts, the itinerant bishop's spiritual visions for the diocese had of necessity remained offstage. In 1850, however, the three bishops of the Oregon Province had succeeded in having A.M.A. Blanchet transferred to the diocese of Nesqually, one of the eight districts identified in F.N. Blanchet's *Memoriale* to the Propaganda. Nesqually included the lands north of the Columbia, south of the 49th parallel, and west of the Cascades. To it was attached the district of Colville, the diocese thus comprising geographically the State of Washington today plus northern Idaho and western Montana. The diocese of Walla Walla and the district of Fort Hall were simultaneously attached to the Archdiocese of Oregon City. The new see was located on the Hudson's Bay Post of Vancouver, in Columbia City (present day Vancouver, WA), a settlement not too distant across the Columbia River from the seat of the Archdiocese of Oregon City and the growing town of Portland. For the first time since his arrival, the bishop had a fixed location for his cathedral, a small log chapel that had been built on the post in 1837 and dedicated to St-James, most likely in honor of then acting Chief Factor of the Hudson's Bay Company, James Douglas, who had donated the land and lumber for the church.³⁵

Elated by this stability, the bishop of Nesqually was finally able to establish a tabernacle for preservation of the Eucharist. On 23 January 1851, he notes in his journal: "The Blessed Sacrament is placed in the tabernacle for the first time since the foundation of the Mission at Vancouver. The tabernacle is lined only with white cotton while we wait to get some silk. The church, dedicated to St. James is then, at this moment truly, the House of God and the Gate of Heaven. We can say now: 'The Lord has sanctified this house which was built to establish His name here, and His eyes and his heart will always be here.'"³⁶ One cannot help but wonder if Blanchet did not experience a certain elation as well in sharing a patron with Montreal's own Cathedral of St James,

³⁵ Schoenberg, 39.

³⁶ A.M.A. Blanchet, *Journal of a Catholic Bishop on the Oregon Trail*, trans. and edited by Edward J. Kowrach (Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1978), 116. The Mission at Vancouver had been founded in 1836 by Francis Norbert and Modeste Demers. Due to the volatile situation among the Cayuse in 1847, and to his itinerant state after the Whitman massacre – staying only a short while at a provisional see in the Dalles – A.M. Blanchet had apparently not felt that conditions prior to this time were appropriate for preservation of the Eucharist.

where Bishop Bourget presided, and where Blanchet had once served as canon and later been consecrated as bishop.

One of the causes for this relative stability, however, had been passage late in 1848 of an act constituting the Oregon Country as U.S. Territory and the appointment of General Joseph Lane as first governor. Sympathetic to the missionary endeavor, Governor Lane had set out gradually and with mixed success to end the prejudicial treatment the Catholic clergy had received under the Oregon Provisional Government. Anglophone white Americans continued to immigrate in record numbers after the California gold rush of the early 1850s. The bishop had to request copies of the Baltimore catechism for the few Catholics among them and to find priests who knew at least some English. In spite of these political shifts, unanticipated only a few years earlier, Blanchet continued to maintain his own French Canadian identity and language (speaking and writing English only very poorly) and to model diocesan veneration and discipline after that of Quebec. Letters of the period indicate that Blanchet gave great attention to sacramental ritual, that he was conscious of the importance of having proper vestments and church ornaments shipped from France, and that he communicated primarily with Bourget, not with American bishops, concerning affairs in Rome, discipline, and proper celebration of holy days.

Continued veneration of the Immaculate Heart of Mary added to this focus. A few weeks before leaving Montreal in 1847, Blanchet had written to the pastor of Notre Dame des Victoires in Paris, founder of the Archconfraternity to which he belonged, to request that the names of the secular clerics and OMI's who accompanied him be placed along with his name in a heart "... as a memorial that will continually tell Mary that she has in Oregon, as in Canada and in Europe, children devoted to her service, propagators of her religion. ... In becoming Christian, the Indians will be children of Mary. They will sing her praises. They will offer themselves to the Heart of Mary so as to be guided by her to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, unending source of all that is good."³⁷ Not only were the Hearts of the Holy Mother and her Son central in the Bishop's veneration after 1850, as indicated in letters, but important missions, both regular and secular, Native American and white, continued to be named after members of the Holy Family, as was the case in many Catholic dioceses of the time. Thus, in conformity with the spiritual thrust of Ultramontanism, the bishop envisioned this borderland diocese as an instantiation for the life of the universal church,

³⁷ AAS, Blanchet to Desgenettes, 26 February 1847.

making available to all the grace made possible through the Incarnation of Jesus. Increasingly surrounded by anti-Catholic settlers, hampered by insufficient personnel, and financially strapped, the diocese's devotional life constituted a visible link for Blanchet with the French Canadian homeland, an embodiment of ethnic as well as Roman Catholic identity.

A second dimension in this more constructive phase of his episcopacy was to establish the presence of the church within civil society. Such an endeavor was also tied to the Ultramontane ideals of Bishop Bourget, who at the same time was seeking to create a model Christian society in French Canada. The French Canadian Sisters of Providence (Institut des Soeurs de la Charité de la Providence) were playing a leading role in this enterprise in French Canada, and would do so in the Diocese of Nesqually as well. The foundation dated back to 1827, when widowed Emilie Gamelin had initiated an independent Canadian congregation to provide hospice for elderly and disabled women of Montreal. In March of 1843, Ignace Bourget had officially established the growing congregation as a religious institute on the model of Saint Vincent de Paul's Sisters of Charity in France. As a part of her novitiate, Madame Gamelin had traveled to New York and Boston to study the spirit and functioning of charitable institutions. While there, she had borrowed a 1672 version of the Rules of the Sisters of Charity.³⁸ An official copy of this manuscript was copied and signed November 1843 by A.M. Blanchet.³⁹ The fact that he made an official copy of all 87 pages of the rule suggests that Blanchet, who also served as institute chaplain, knew its spirit and functioning. He was also acquainted with the founding sisters.

It is thus not surprising that Bishop Blanchet would turn to the Sisters of Providence once his new diocese was on sufficiently firm ground to support works of social intervention. In 1856, Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart Pariseau and four other sisters finally established their American province in Vancouver, next to the cathedral. Within the next few years, under the leadership of Mother Joseph, the sisters founded an orphanage, a boarding and day school, as well as a home for the mentally disabled in Vancouver. Blanchet reports in his correspondence of 1867 that there were convents of two or more sisters in Walla

³⁸ Pouliot, vol. 2, 99.

³⁹ *Règles communes des filles de la charité, Servantes des pauvres malades*. "vieux manuscrit de 1672," "Copié par M. Blanchet Ptre de l'Evêché de Montréal, 18 novembre 1843." (Archives des Soeurs de la Providence, Montreal).

Walla, close to a French Canadian settlement, and in Steilacoom, a town of twenty-five white families. In anticipation of their arrival, convents were being built for the sisters in Tulalip (among the Lummi and Snohomish Indians) and at St. Francis-Xavier Mission on the Cowlitz River, where a number of the original French Canadian and Métis families, former Hudson's Bay engagés, still resided. Requests for convents also had arrived from the new town of Seattle and from the Colville region in the most northeastern corner of the diocese, where there was a Jesuit mission, composed mostly of French Canadians and Métis. The sisters in these locations were to be primarily responsible for the education of girls and women, both Euro-American and Native American. Endeavors such as these were facilitated by a small portion of funding for Native American education that Vicar General Brouillet was wresting from the American government.⁴⁰

In his efforts to establish a model Catholic society, Blanchet repeatedly called upon Montreal for additional recruits. The martyr-like service of the women who came lent to educational and social organization of the region. To this day, the Sisters of Providence remain an important group of women religious in the region and are involved in health care, education, and other social services.

A third dimension of the bishop's activities post 1850 involved defense of the rights of Native Americans. Tragic displacement, violation of property rights, death from malnutrition, alcohol and disease: concern for these issues had expanded the role of the Catholic missionaries to defending the Native American temporal condition. It was not an accident that Blanchet's defense of Native American rights overlapped with difficulties of the Catholic Church itself, particularly with regard to land claims disputes. Thus, a brief inquiry into these thorny issues, as they affected the missionaries, is of interest. During their initial voyage across the country, Blanchet, fellow clerics, and the Oblates had taken out American citizenship in anticipation of helping support themselves through cultivation of land they would eventually own. After over ten years of endless disputes, however, the church lands were smaller in size than Blanchet had planned in order to provide sites for churches and institutions, as well as for rental income; a few Oblates had won claims primarily as private citizens to mission lands where they had served. At the same time, American immigrants easily acquired claims and established cattle ranches and farms that in some cases overlapped with Native American lands and Catholic missions.

⁴⁰ ACAM, Blanchet to Bourget, 10 October 1867.

Particularly nettlesome for the bishop was the land in Vancouver where the cathedral was located and where the Sisters of Providence resided, providing a hospital, orphanage, and home for the mentally disabled. There, Blanchet was pitted against three opponents: the American government, the American military establishment, and the Hudson's Bay Company. In desperation, he consented to having Vicar General Brouillet travel in person to Washington D.C. in order to attempt to resolve the Vancouver claim. Although the claim itself was only finally resolved during the episcopacy of Blanchet's successor, Brouillet became increasingly concerned with similar dilemmas experienced by other Native American tribes and Catholic missions in the American West. A consequence of this concern, shared by the bishop, was the establishment of the American Catholic Bureau of Indian Affairs, for which Brouillet became director, a post he maintained until his death in 1884. A primary function of the bureau was to investigate lands claims disputes for Catholic Native Americans.

Grievances in temporal matters shared by Native Americans and Catholic settlers were an inevitable result of their living in a newly founded, largely Protestant and anglophone country. Yet, if anglophone Protestants won political victories in North America, Catholics – largely French-speaking – were more successful in attracting the religious following of Native Americans. After the Whitman massacre, the few Protestant missions along the Columbia were abandoned. Belgian and French Jesuits continued their work in the Rocky Mountain Missions east of the Cascades, which remained in the diocese until the Apostolic Vicariate of Idaho was formed. In 1860, the Oblate's transferred their motherhouse to the see of Vancouver Island, where their relations with the ordinary would be no more successful. As a result, thereafter, Superior General de Mazenod sent Oblate's only on missions where one of the missionaries also served as ordinary. Fortunately, however, Fathers Chirouse and Beaudre, both gifted missionaries, remained in Tulalip, a mission located in the northern reaches of the Puget Sound area where the Snohomish and the Lummi lived. Following a pastoral visit that included Tulalip in October 1867, Blanchet reported to Bourget:

On my way there, I encountered several canoes headed toward the priest's residence in Tulalip for the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. They turned and followed me; by the time I arrived at their mission no less than eight canoes were sailing within a short distance from mine. I stayed there a few days and administered the sacrament of Confirmation to some, along with Rev. Fr. Beaudre, OMI, who had prepared them. The ardent faith they showed

when coming up for the tribunal of Penance and to the Holy Table was truly enlightening.

This missionary success story, intended to persuade Bourget to send out still more sisters, also contains the following statistics: “In 1864, an agent believed that there were still 10,000 [Native Americans] in the Puget Sound area and along the Pacific shore; a greater number were counted in the mountains to the east of Washington Territory. The Oblate Fathers alone have baptized more than 3,000 in the Bay. Other missionaries have baptized several thousand more.”⁴¹

These seemingly impressive numbers must be compared, however, to the populations that once lived in the area. In the same letter, Blanchet reports that there were just 600 souls remaining among the Lummi and Snohomish whom he visited. He also relates that “the number of Indians is continually diminishing,” and that “the majority of infant Indians die before they reach the age of reason.” Given this observation of the actual state of affairs, only a cleric imbued with Ultramontane visions of populating the heavens could see a ray of hope. This letter closes with the following reflection: “whence it might be said that our missionaries have populated the celestial region with legions of blessed ones.”⁴² Such words of success amid tragedy are evidence that, in spite of the many temporal setbacks he experienced, the bishop of Nesqually never lost faith in the vision of populating Heaven with the souls of baptized Native Americans.

Providing for the tangible presence of Christ and the Holy Mother and baptizing Native Americans: these two missionary goals had met a degree of success. And although the dream of providing a final outpost for French Canadian immigrants had all but vanished, Blanchet had managed to bring out the French Canadian Sisters of Providence, and these were providing limited if essential social and educational support for remaining Native Americans and for Americans who continued to pour into the region. A sense of fulfillment and relief founded upon these accomplishments of missionaries and sisters in the diocese find expression in the bishop’s final letters.

⁴¹ ACAM, Blanchet to Bourget, 10 October 1867.

⁴² ACAM, Blanchet to Bourget, 10 October 1867.

The lifelong itinerary of this Canadian clergyman tells a story of ethnic French Canadians whose very survival was continually threatened by victorious anglophone populations: the Acadians of Nova Scotia; the Patriote inhabitants of Lower Canada; and finally, the French Canadians and Métis descendants and the Native Americans of the Oregon Country. Perhaps it is no wonder that this man known for his pragmatism, thrift, and ability to win some battles, was also marked by an increasingly dour and austere character, making it difficult at times to maintain clergy in the diocese. In 1887, Blanchet passed his bishopric on to the person of his choice, Aegidius Junger, a priest from the American College in Belgium, who had served in the diocese since 1862. He was proud to have left no debt for the new bishop to assume. In 1889 Blanchet died peacefully in the first of several hospitals the Sisters of Providence would establish, a speaker of French to his very end. In 1907 the see of Nesqually was moved to Seattle, and in 1911 the diocese was renamed Seattle. In 1951, Seattle was elevated to an archdiocese. A.M. Blanchet is remembered today as its first bishop. The borderland nature of the original diocese, and the French Canadian background of its first bishop remains to be recognized.