

Writing the Pacific Northwest into Canadian and U.S. Catholic History: Geography, Demographics, and Regional Religion

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From its earliest settlement by Europeans three things have been true religiously about the Pacific Northwest (for purposes of this paper Oregon, Washington, Idaho, British Columbia, Alaska): 1) the region is largely unchurched; 2) the region is religiously diverse; and, 3) the region contains substantial numbers of people who express no interest in religion at all.¹ One or more of these characteristics has been true of other regions of the United States and Canada during periods of their history, but the Pacific Northwest is distinctive because these characteristics have remained steady throughout the region's history.² Religious historians have not accounted for why these regional religious characteristics have persisted. Neither have they explored how these three facts have shaped institutional and individual forms of Christianity in the Pacific Northwest. We badly need critical studies of specific denominations in the

¹ This claim refers to those religious bodies most easily recognized, e.g., various denominations and sects of Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism. Native American traditions are not a focus of this paper or the studies on which this claim is based. "Unchurched" refers to persons who do not attend church on any kind of regular basis (two times per month), including those who identify themselves as being a Baptist, or Buddhist, for example. See *Churches and Church Membership in the United States 1990* (Atlanta, GA: Glengarry Research Center, 1992); and Barry A. Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman, *One Nation Under God: Religion in Contemporary American Society* (New York: Harmony Books, 1993).

² See Linda K. Pritchard, "A Comparative Approach to Western Religious History: Texas as a Case Study, 1845-1890," *Western Historical Quarterly* 19 (1988): 416-30.

Pacific Northwest in order to begin to understand how these facts became characteristics of the region and how they have influenced the corporate practice of religion, molded the religious sensibilities of individuals, and obstructed and supported the establishment and survival of Christian denominations in the Pacific Northwest.³

This paper grows out of a critical study of one denomination, the Roman Catholic Church, in its first fifty years in the region. The study involves translating and critically editing the letter press books of Augustin Magliore Alexander Blanchet, first Catholic bishop of Walla Walla and Nesqually.⁴ The paper argues that in order to write the Pacific Northwest more fully into Canadian and U.S. Catholic history, historians must take cognizance of two factors that have contributed to the region's omission from dominant narratives of Catholic history and that help to explain the region's distinct religious character. These factors are geography and demographics.

Three themes characterize U.S. narratives of Roman Catholicism when approached from the perspective of Catholicism in the West, including the Pacific Northwest: 1) absence; 2) a relentless east to west trajectory that is coupled with an entrenched English/U.S. master story; and, 3) in those narratives that do address the Pacific Northwest, a single organizing metaphor – the battle to establish and maintain ecclesiastical presence.⁵

Total absence or cursory mention characterize treatments of the Roman Catholic Church in the Far West and especially the Pacific

³ A host of questions about the nature of regional religiousness in the Pacific Northwest need to be explored through careful case studies of denominations in different locations and time periods in the region. Such questions as: What is the interaction between a denomination and its geographical and cultural region? How do regional factors shape the self-understanding and practice of denominations in a region, or do they? How does a religiously pluralistic, largely unchurched, and religiously disinterested context influence the practice, commitment, rhetoric, style, and structure of religiousness for individuals and groups?

⁴ This paper grows out of a collaborative project between my colleague, Roberta Stringham Brown of the Department of Languages and Literatures at Pacific Lutheran University, and myself that involves translating and publishing a critical edition of the letter press books of A.M.A. Blanchet with an extensive historical introduction. An earlier version of a paper was presented to a joint session of the Canadian Catholic Historical Association and the Canadian Society of Church History on 4 June 1999.

⁵ I was limited largely to U.S. scholarship for this paper because of the difficulty of securing Canadian scholarly publications.

Northwest in secular histories of the United States. This absence has persisted in what is referred to as the “new Western History” represented in the works of scholars such as Patricia Nelson Limerick, Richard White, and Clyde A. Milner.⁶ D. Michael Quinn’s “Religion in the American West” stands out for addressing religion as a topic in its own right and not as an intrusive addition to ethnic or community studies. What Quinn’s essay does not do, (and the task still may be impossible at this point), is offer causal explanations or interpretations of western religiousness.⁷

Catholicism in the Pacific Northwest is absent in religious histories of the United States as well. The single reference to the early history of Catholicism in the Oregon Country that I could locate in any general history of U.S. religion was in Sydney Ahlstrom’s thousand-plus-page *A Religious History of the American People*. Ahlstrom notes: “In 1846, at a time when the Oregon question was still unsettled, a new stage in American hierarchical history was reached. A second metropolitan see was erected with the French-Canadian Francis N. Blanchet as archbishop, his brother as suffragan in Walla Walla, and another French-Canadian as bishop of Vancouver. In both fact and theory this province was at first an extension of the Canadian Church.”⁸

⁶ See Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, eds. *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991).

⁷ D. Michael Quinn, “Religion in the American West,” in William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, eds. *Under An Open Sky: Rethinking America’s Western Past* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992). While Quinn’s essay draws attention to the presence of religions in the West, he does not succeed in providing a coherent interpretive frame for the religions he describes. In their *The American West: A Twentieth-Century History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1989), Michael Malone and Richard Etulain provide a brief overview of religion as a category of culture (193-205). Ferenc M. Szasz is the western historian who has written most about religion, but his work is not incorporated in any significant way into the thinking of the new western historians. See his “The Clergy and the Myth of the American West,” *Church History* 59 (December 1990): 497-506.

⁸ Sydney Ahlstrom *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), 544. Mark Noll’s *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1992) acknowledges the pluralism of religion in the West from the beginning (325-6) but ends his discussion there. Edwin Scott Gaustad in his *A Religious History of the American People* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990) devotes a four and one-half page section to Catholicism on the frontier without managing to say anything about Catholics in the Oregon country (151-6).

Save for Ahlstrom's brief mention, why the absence? The answer falls into two parts, both implicit in Ahlstrom. First, the region's historical fate was shaped by geography and demographics. Second, because of the region's geography and demographics, it does not fit readily into the standard or consensus narratives used for the religious and social/political history of the United States, including those used for Catholic history.

The Apostolic Vicariate and later Ecclesiastical Province that included the Oregon Country, or Columbia District as it was called by the Hudson's Bay Company, came into being during a fluid time on the North American and world scene. It was carved out of the Ecclesiastical Province of Quebec which covered 3,000,000 square miles, an area larger than all of Europe with a Catholic population of a little over 200,000. Francis Norbert Blanchet and Modeste Demers were sent to the mission of the Columbia in 1837. In December 1843 the mission was made an Apostolic Vicariate that included the area between the Rocky Mountains to the East, the Mexican and later U.S. border to the south, the Pacific Ocean to the West, and the boundary with Russia and Arctic Pole to the north. Due to distance and available technologies for communication, Francis Norbert Blanchet did not find out about the action or that he had been made bishop of the area for a year.⁹ The significance of distance and geographic location becomes clear when one notes that Bishop Signay had contemplated having the Columbia mission placed under the Vicariate of East Oceana.¹⁰

Blanchet's Apostolic Vicariate was raised to the Ecclesiastical Province of Oregon in 1846 with Blanchet appointed to the archiepiscopal see of Oregon City. Modeste Demers was assigned the diocese of Vancouver Island and Francis Norbert's brother, Augustin Magliore Blanchet was assigned to the diocese of Walla Walla. Five other districts, potential dioceses, were named and placed under the three dioceses: Nesqually, Fort Hall, Colville, Princess Charlotte, and New Caledonia. Oregon was the second Ecclesiastical Province established in what is now the United States. All this for an area that, by F.N. Blanchet's own reckoning included only 6,000 Catholics, the majority of whom were

⁹ Blanchet had been appointed bishop, despite the fact that the majority of bishops at the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore had favored a Jesuit from the St. Louis Province. Both the Bishop of Quebec, Joseph Signay, and the Bishop of Baltimore agreed and jointly requested that the mission be made an Apostolic Vicariate. Wilfred P. Schoenberg, *A History of the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest, 1743-1983* (Washington, D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1987), 81.

¹⁰ Schoenberg, 78.

Native Americans.¹¹ While this number of souls was significant for the Blanchets and their compatriots, inspired as they were by an ultramontanist vision of Catholicism tied to their understanding of the role of French-Canadian clergy in the wake of the French Revolution and British conquest of French Canada, it was not so for English and Yankees.¹²

Geographic distance, then, played a crucial role in the early story of the Catholic Church in this region. The Pacific Northwest was sparsely populated, difficult to reach, and without obvious immediate value in relation to population, political, and ecclesial centers in the U.S. and Canada – all of which were far to the east of the Pacific Northwest on the North American continent.¹³ In the inevitable process of selection that historians must enact as they write general histories, the story of the church here has been deemed insignificant in comparison to other political, social, and ecclesial locations and events of the same time.

Demographics, not only in terms of population numbers but also ethnic identities, also played a significant role in the early history of the church in the Oregon Country. Perhaps the most significant act that fated the early history of Catholicism in the region to the margins in general histories of religion was the settlement of the boundary dispute between Great Britain and the United States. The Ecclesiastical Province of Oregon came into existence coterminously with this settlement, partly as a result of Francis Norbert Blanchet's arguing the need for bishops close by on the ground so that the church in the Oregon Country would not suffer the fate the church in California suffered when Mexico took over from Spain and later the U.S. from Mexico.¹⁴ The Treaty of Washington,

¹¹ See Schoenberg, 77-97; and Edwin Vincent O'Hara, *A Pioneer Catholic History of Oregon* (Portland, Oregon, 1911), 97-100. See also Vincent J. McNally, "Victoria: An American Diocese in Canada," *CCHA Historical Studies*, 57 (1990): 8-9.

¹² On the ultramontanist and French-Catholic vision of A.M.A. Blanchet and his brother, see Roberta Brown, "A *Canadien* Bishop in the Ecclesiastical Province of Oregon," in this issue.

¹³ Lieutenant Charles Wilkes saw the potential value of Puget Sound for the United States and so urged the 49th parallel as the dividing line between Great Britain and the United States in the Treaty of Washington. See James R. Gibson's, *The Lifeline of the Oregon Country: The Fraser-Columbia Brigade System, 1811-1847* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), 152-3.

¹⁴ See Carl Landholm, ed. *Notes and Voyages of the Famed Quebec Missions to the Pacific Northwest* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society, Champoeg Press, Reed College, 1956), 212ff, for Blanchet's argument.

signed 15 June 1846 (ratified by the U.S. Senate and the British Parliament in July 1846) established the boundary between the U.S. and Great Britain at the 49th parallel. After the settlement Blanchet had his Roman Catholic ecclesiastical province with three bishops to maintain and expand the Roman Catholic Church in the region, but those bishops were French-Canadian, as was the church. The Catholic Church lost economic and political support as well as population when the Hudson's Bay Company carried through on its decision of the previous year and moved its headquarters to Vancouver Island from Fort Vancouver. The Company's decision had lessened significantly England's motivation for pressing its claim to the Columbia District between the Columbia River and the 49th parallel during the negotiations on the Oregon Country.¹⁵

The boundary settlement created difficulties for the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest, a church primarily Native American, French-Canadian, Métis, and missionary in character. For one thing, the Ecclesiastical Province of Oregon crossed international boundaries and so had to contend with different relationships between church and state. For another, the bishops now had to deal with the Oregon Provisional Government, adamantly Yankee Protestant and rabidly anti-Catholic in orientation. This body, which governed Oregon from 1843-1848, gladly conspired with increasing numbers of U.S. immigrants coming over the Oregon Trail to push aside the French-Canadian, Métis, and Indian populations and to violate their land claims and their rights. Third, independence as an ecclesiastical province, coupled with political separation as a result of the Treaty of Washington, complicated even further the Pacific Northwest Catholic Church's relationship to its mother church in Quebec, a relationship in which geographic distance and population scarcity had played a role from the beginning, as had a vision of French Catholic piety and culture that kept the early bishops and missionaries active in the Oregon Country despite multiple obstacles and setbacks.¹⁶ Finally, the new ecclesiastical province now had to

¹⁵ See Gibson; also W.Kaye Lamb's "Introduction" in E.E. Rich, ed. *The Letters of John McLoughlin From Fort Vancouver to the Governor and the Committee, Third Series, 1844-1846* (Publications of the Hudson's Bay Record Society) (London: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1944) provides an excellent introduction to the fortunes and fate of the Hudson's Bay Society during this period.

¹⁶ As noted previously, in the early days of the Columbia mission, Bishop Signay of Quebec had wanted the Columbia mission attached to the Apostolic Vicariate of East Oceana. See Schoenberg, 78.

negotiate a relationship and identity with the Catholic Church in the rest of the United States, again far east of the Pacific Northwest.¹⁷

Other geographic and demographic issues and events in Europe and North America during this time also overshadowed the story of the Church's development in the Pacific Northwest. England was contending with problems generated by the potato famine in Ireland. As well, English Prime Minister Robert Peel was concerned to push through domestic reforms, notably the repeal of the Corn Laws, in order to place England on the side of free trade. On the North American continent, Great Britain also was contending with the need to establish stable government in the United Provinces of Canada, an issue that crossed linguistic lines and saw the forging of the "Great Ministry" between Robert Baldwin and Louis Lafontaine.¹⁸

Continuing with a North American lens, the United States sacrificed the territory between the 49th parallel and President Polk's original claim to a boundary of fifty-four forty for the greater prize of northern Mexico, territory it took through the Mexican-American War of 1846-1847.¹⁹ Even Polk did not want wars with Great Britain and Mexico at the same time. The massive internal migration of people from the eastern U.S. to the West over the Oregon Trail, paled before the United States and Canada having to contend with the arrival of millions of Irish and hundreds of thousands of Germans. Ecclesiastically in the United States, the difficulties of Catholics in the Oregon Territory counted for little against the drastic implications of incorporating Northern Mexico into the United States and providing services to the millions of Irish and hundreds of thousands of Germans arriving in the United States during this period.

On an international scene, the Revolutions of 1848 in Europe, the Irish Potato Famine, and the emigration of Irish, Germans, and others to the United States deeply concerned and put severe strain on the Roman Catholic Church. The Revolutions of 1848 also had a direct influence on the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest, among other ways through

¹⁷ I am aware that I am omitting the story of the Jesuit missionaries who worked in the Oregon Country. Even before the boundary settlement, U.S. bishops such as Joseph Rosati in St. Louis gladly would have had the entire West cared for by Jesuit missionaries, viewing them as financially able to meet the task in ways that dioceses were not.

¹⁸ See J.S. Careless, *The Union of the Canadas*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967).

¹⁹ Robert Hine, *The American West: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Little Brown, 1973), 94-5.

disruption of financial support from the Paris and Lyons councils of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith.

During the short five-year span, then, between 1843, when the Apostolic Vicariate was erected, and 1848, when the land below the 49th parallel officially became the Oregon Territory of the United States, massive change and disruption characterized not only the Oregon Country but all of North America and Europe. Isolated from centers of power, population, and secular and ecclesial politics, geographic distance, sparse population, and the absorption of an ultramontanist, French-Canadian ecclesiastical province into the Catholic Church in the United States all contributed to the historical eclipse of Roman Catholic story in the Oregon Country, and especially the French-Canadian story.

A second reason for the absence of the Catholic story of the Pacific Northwest in history rests with U.S. Catholic historiography.²⁰ The dominant narrative thread in U.S. Catholic historiography until very recently shared the relentless east to west trajectory and entrenched English/U.S. master story that is part of secular and religious history in the United States. While the focus on east to west movement is understandable – that was how most immigrants came to the United States – that focus was complicated by the ecclesial agenda of constructing an “American” Roman Catholicism. Catholic historians appropriated the English/U.S. master story in constructing their “American” Catholicism. For reasons of ecclesiastical survival and ministerial effectiveness, both the majority of bishops in the United States and Catholic historians have constructed a story of a genuinely American (hear U.S.) Catholicism understood as rooted in the English Genteel, Maryland Catholic tradition and appropriated by all right thinking immigrants to the U.S. Thomas T. McAvoy’s *A History of the Catholic Church in the United States* is explicitly structured in this way and omits the Roman Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest.²¹ James Hennessey’s *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* stands out from recent histories of Catholicism in the U.S. for its nearly two-page treatment of the French-Canadian Catholic presence in the Pacific

²⁰ I was limited primarily to U.S. sources in writing this paper because of difficulties securing Canadian scholarly sources. The chance to present this work at a joint session of the Canadian Catholic Historical Association and the Canadian Society of Church History in June, 1999, also provided the opportunity to acquire Canadian sources. The historiography of Canadian Catholic Church history deserves separate attention.

²¹ Thomas T. McAvoy’s *A History of the Catholic Church in the United States* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1969).

Northwest, in which he briefly alludes to the political and ecclesiastical complexities that accompanied the formation of the Archdiocese of Oregon.²²

A second dominant narrative thread that has become more important in U.S. Catholic historiography since the 1970s focuses on ethnic communities. While this thread is helpful for understanding the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest, geography and demographics complicate it. First, this second narrative structure has, as a result of sheer numbers, focused primarily on immigrants coming from Europe to the eastern and mid-western United States. More recently the immigrant narrative has acknowledged Catholics coming into the United States from Mexico. Still, this narrative structure primarily is eastern, midwestern, and urban in orientation. It also lacks attention to Canadian immigration. It focuses on immigrants coming from Europe to the United States and only then moving further west. In addition, this second narrative structure has tended to focus on immigrant groups with sufficient population density to establish relatively stable ethnic Catholic communities.²³ Again, geography and demographics complicate this dimension of the ethnic narrative of U.S. Catholic history in the Pacific Northwest. The geography and economic realities of the region have made mobility a primary factor of life in the region. Mobility, coupled with sparse populations, created a situation where it was virtually impossible to establish stable ethnic Catholic communities of any size in the region.²⁴ Further, many Catholics who came to the Pacific Northwest, whether

²²James Hennessey, *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 133-4.

²³ See Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History From Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985); and Patrick W. Carey, *The Roman Catholics in America* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996).

²⁴ The significance of mobility for pastoral life comes through clearly in a report on Catholics in Southern Oregon from Fr. James Croke, first Roman Catholic pastor in Portland, Oregon. Southern Oregon was part of his parish. "A permanent missionary post with at least two priests should be established in some central position from which all the countries could be conveniently and regularly visited. A flying mission is useless, or at least the good resulting from it is but partial and by no means abiding. The Catholics here are so few and in general so lukewarm that it requires some time for a priest to hunt them out, and even then it is not in one day that he can inspire them with the proper dispositions. A priest, in order to do good amongst them, must become personally acquainted with them, must follow their motions from place to place, particularly here at the mines where the population is so uncertain and so floating." Croke to Bishop F.N. Blanchet, 20 September 1853. Quoted in O'Hara, 167.

they came from Europe and the United States via Asia, Latin America, Canada, or the eastern United States, did not value their ethnic identity, or link it to religious identity in the way that greater numbers of Catholic immigrants to the eastern and midwestern United States did. And, without demographic concentrations of ethnic groups, (and intermarriage among ethnic groups was the norm in the region until after the railroads made it a possible destination point in the late 1880s), maintaining ethnic/religious identity is made a more complicated task.²⁵

When histories of Catholicism address the West, generally it is Pierre DeSmet who receives attention and later Archbishop Lamy of Santa Fe. Pierre DeSmet published prolifically about his missionary trips through the Intermountain West and the Pacific Northwest and gained fame as a negotiator with Native Americans.²⁶ Lamy moved from the East to lead a diocese largely Mexican in population that needed to be brought into the U.S. Catholic orbit.

This east to west trajectory, while accurate for a large portion of the U.S. Catholic population, does two things to the story of Catholicism in the West. First, it remakes Catholics in the West into Anglos from the United States. At worst this renders invisible Native American, French, Métis, and Hispanic Catholics, at best it makes them problem populations or merely ancillary to the narrative. Secondly, the east to west trajectory, coupled with the English/U.S. master story, renders invisible Catholic immigrants from other parts of the world who arrived from the north, from the west, and from the south. By the time A.M.A. Blanchet arrived in Walla Walla in 1847, the population of his diocese and the larger Oregon Province included not only Native Americans, French-Canadian, Métis, and Anglo-Americans, but people from Hawaii, Samoa, the Philippines, and various European and Asian countries.

A central element in the English master story is its Protestant character. While Catholic bishops and historians worked to explain why European Catholic immigrants should be allowed into the English master story without becoming Protestant, for Protestants the English master story in the nineteenth-century justified intense anti-Catholicism. Such sentiment certainly contributed to A.M.A. Blanchet being blamed for the

²⁵ See Patricia O’Connell Killen and Christine Taylor, “The Irish in Washington State,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Irish in America*, edited by Michael Glazier, (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 161-6.

²⁶ See Robert C. Carriker, *Father Peter John De Smet: Jesuit in the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995) and Paul Horgan, *Lamy of Santa Fe: His Life and Times* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).

massacre of Marcus and Narcissa Whitman at their ABCFM Waiilatpu mission in November of 1847, less than three months after Blanchet's arrival in Walla Walla.²⁷

The east-to-west trajectory and Anglo-U.S. master story, then, serve to minimize attention to the history of the Catholic Church in the Oregon Country. The effort of explicitly Catholic historiographers to fit the story of U.S. Catholicism into this consensus history further minimizes attention to people and events that do not fit that mold.²⁸

Turning to the three historical monographs that do focus on Catholicism in the Pacific Northwest – Edwin Vincent O'Hara, Alfred P. Schoenberg, and Jeffrey Burns²⁹ – it is clear that they are influenced by the dominant narratives for U.S. Catholic history. Because of this they miss the full significance of the fact that A.M.A. Blanchet, first bishop of Walla Walla and later Nesqually (1847-1879) was French-speaking. They do not discuss the implications of the fact that A.M.A. Blanchet, as well as his brother, Francis Norbert, and fellow bishop Modeste Demers, went to Europe, Mexico, Quebec, and countries of South America seeking funds for support, not to the Catholic Church in the United States. In other words, these narratives are neither conceived or structured in ways that can interpret adequately a church whose self-conception is first French-Canadian, then international, and only recently, and belatedly, U.S. Hence, they omit the French-Canadian, ultramontanist vision that motivated A.M.A. Blanchet's work among Native Americans and immigrants. They do not explore the effect that this alternative vision had on bishops who did not work out of a robust or modified Americanist Manifest Destiny that informs the dominant historical narratives with their east to west trajectory.

These three texts also share a “brick and mortar” approach to church history, though Burns' is modified by focusing on parish as much as

²⁷ The best recent treatment of the Whitman Mission and Massacre is Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Converting the West: A Biography of Narcissa Whitman* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

²⁸ See Thomas A. Tweed's “Introduction: Narrating U.S. Religious History” in Thomas A. Tweed, ed. *Retelling U.S. Religious History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1-23.

²⁹ Edwin Vincent O'Hara, *Pioneer Catholic History of Oregon* (Portland, 1911); Wilfred P. Schoenberg, S.J., *A History of the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest, 1743-1983*; and, Jeffrey M. Burns, “Building the Best: A History of Catholic Parish Life in the Pacific States,” in Jay P. Dolan, ed. *The American Catholic Parish; A History from 1850 to the Present* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

diocesan structure. All three present their stories primarily as a battle to establish ecclesiastical institutions against great odds, which is true. But in focusing on ecclesiastical structures they also miss the regional influence on religiousness. Burns' title aptly conveys his organizing metaphor. His monograph *Building the Best* presents heroic clergy working at, as Burns puts it, "the difficult task of inspiring an indifferent people to devotion" (15). If Burns is correct, there is something about the region that tends to leach religiousness, at least institutional religiousness, out of people. Bishop A.M.A. Blanchet saw this. In an 1862 letter of instructions to Fr. Aegidius Junger, newly missionary of Walla Walla, he wrote: "You will have much to do with regard to several families of *Canadiens* settled on the Walla Walla River, a few who live nine miles from town. ... You will find several *Canadiens* in a state of deplorable degradation, weakened in faith. Through ardent zeal, I believe you will bring them back to the path of salvation. Finally, after having planted and watered, you will patiently wait for God to make things grow at the proper time, and I am certain that He will."³⁰ The perspective of religious institutional leaders that the region is problematic for people's religiousness is not that of historians or Catholics alone. In 1881 the Episcopalian bishop of British Columbia wrote to England noting the "constitutional religious apathy" that he believed characterized "the people of the whole Pacific slope."³¹ I want to suggest that the conjunction of geography and demographics – sheer space and mobility combined with sparse populations of any given ethnic group – contribute to the dynamic of the region leaching religiousness out of people. Without a social mirror – sufficient concentrations of people like oneself to be able to see oneself socially and to be surrounded by one's values and institutions – maintaining religious identity becomes problematic, as does maintaining social institutions, including churches.³²

One of the major obstacles to establishing ecclesiastical institutions that all the narratives recognize is geography – space, mountains, weather, people spread far apart. A.M.A. Blanchet noticed the problems of geography early in his episcopate. In a letter to Jesuit Fr. Joset in the

³⁰ Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle [AAS], Register, Series A, Volume 5, pp. 214-6, 6 November 1862.

³¹ *Reports (1882-1883)*, 18-20, quoted in McNally, 24.

³² The work my colleague Roberta Brown and I are doing on the A.M.A. Blanchet episcopal correspondence provides the opportunity to assess the bishop's perspective on the leaching process and, by indirection, to see whether the leaching out of religiousness occurs in the same ways for all populations in the region, e.g. for French-Canadian and Métis in the same way as for those who come from the east in the United States and Canada.

eastern reaches of the area under his care (western Montana), Blanchet attempts to set a date for a pastoral visit but notes that “impassible roads necessitate late summer” which is problematic because it “keeps neophytes from hunting.” Blanchet goes on to say that he will request a new bishop, selected from among the Jesuits, who can remain in the vicinity of the missions, making confirmation more convenient for the Native Americans.³³

A second major problem all three authors identify is lack of resources, something that led to intense conflict between religious orders and bishops that continued well into the twentieth century. Blanchet’s correspondence is replete with references to staffing, supplies, and money. In a letter of 16 August 1863, to Fr. John Baptiste Abraham Brouillet, Blanchet’s Vicar General and at the time missionary of Walla Walla, he charges the priest to “1... engage the *Canadiens* in building a chapel on the Walla Walla River, ... 2. ... engage the Catholics of the town of Walla Walla in obtaining land for a church ... 3. Check again to see if they will secure land for the Sisters. 4. Collect the money due from Mr. Smith. 5. Celebrate mass alternatively in the town and among the *Canadiens*. 6. Stay in Walla Walla until Rev. Junger returns from Vancouver. ..7. Have collections made on Sundays and feast days.”³⁴

Blanchet was deeply concerned that his priests not appear too concerned with wealth, at the same time that he constantly sought financial resources to keep his diocese going and to build schools and hospitals.³⁵ In a letter to Fr. Charles Vary, stationed in Steilacoom, Blanchet tells him to use collections

to buy objects necessary for the cult. ... Nevertheless you can take the proceeds of these collections for your subsistence after having provided for the normal expenses of the cult, if you do not receive enough from elsewhere. In addition, as long as you are alone, all that you receive from the faithful beyond subsistence remains for your own use.

On this subject, I inform you with reluctance that on the Sound and elsewhere, very unfavorable remarks have been made about missionaries who have given the impression of having too great a desire to amass money. You will need to erase this bad impression through a perfect and saintly disinterest, once a reasonable amount has been contributed for your subsistence. When the faithful suspect that a priest is working for the salvation of souls in order to enrich himself,

³³ AAS, Register, Series A, Volume. 2, p. 103, 9 March 1849.

³⁴ AAS, Register, Series A, Volume 5, p. 253.

³⁵ AAS, Register, Series A, Volume 5, pp. 214-5, 6 November 1862.

the success of his mission is very much limited, if not completely nullified.³⁶

Fr. Peter Hylebos, pastor of St. Leo Parish, Tacoma, Washington, wrote to Bishop Edward O'Dea, third Bishop of Nesqually, shortly after the turn of the century that he could not provide his annual diocesan assessment because the Franciscan Sisters were begging on the streets for funds for their hospital and he had been unsuccessful canvassing the same people.³⁷ Lack of resources not only created stress for bishops, clergy, and religious. It also made apparent to them and to lay people the fragility of the institutional church in the region.

While O'Hara, Burns, and Schoenberg address paucity of resources, none considers how this might shape the religiousness of the people. In fact, long stretches of separation from locations where Catholic ritual life was readily available shaped the laity. Their spirituality became more episodic. Life-cycle sacraments carried increasing weight. Indeed, it seems to have been a desire to have these sacraments, especially those for the dying, that prompted the original request of former Hudson's Bay employees in the Willamette Valley for priests.³⁸ Until after the railroads brought a sufficient population of Catholic immigrants to construct pockets of Catholic communities in the region, laity exercised a marked independence from clerical influence and control. A.M.A. Blanchet betrays some sense of this lay independence in his letters to clergy when he discusses bringing marriages into conformity with canon law. In another letter to Fr. Charles Vary he notes that everything should be done to handle marriage cases, especially if there is the danger that a Protestant marriage might be sought.³⁹ The circumstances in the region, then, shaped the religiousness of Catholics. Many laity renegotiated their relationship to their religious denominations; reconstructed their moral and religious worlds to better fit the circumstances of the frontier.

If we begin the story of the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest with local sources, in the case of our current project the letter press books of A.M.A. Blanchet, a number of themes emerge that require the history of Catholicism in the United States, at least in this region of the U.S., to be written differently. If we start the story with the Blanchet correspondence, eight significant points emerge that should more significantly shape or be incorporated into the narrative.

³⁶ AAS, Register, Series A, Volume 5, pp. 137-9, 18 February 1854.

³⁷ AAS, St. Leo Parish, Tacoma, Washington, Correspondence.

³⁸ See Schoenberg, 16-18, 25.

³⁹ AAS, Register, Series A, Volume 5, p. 137, 12 October 1860.

1. The Catholic Church in the United States can be fully understood only when a comparative approach is used that looks at the church in terms of the distinctiveness of its multiple regional contexts. The two dominant narratives – the master story of incorporating Catholics into the expansion of the English Maryland, Genteel Catholic tradition and the master story of establishing ethnic, Catholic enclaves, while accurate and helpful on a very broad scale, miss too much. Geography and demographics need more attention in these narratives.⁴⁰

2. The Church was from the beginning multi-cultural in character. A French-Canadian bishop in the wilderness, A.M.A. Blanchet had to negotiate Native American, French-Canadian, Métis, Asian, European, and Yankee Protestant cultures. A look at the patient ledger of the Providence Sisters Hospital in Vancouver for one day of 1856 shows among others, patients who were Native American, Armenian, Polish, German, Irish, and who hailed from numerous states in the U.S.⁴¹ The population was scarce and scattered enough in total and by group (excluding Native Americans), that Catholics lacked a social mirror – sufficient population density to support individual religious identity and social institutions. Where Catholics did support missionaries, and later parishes with priests, sisters, and schools, they chose to do so. The geographic and demographic context of the region contributed to a setting where laity invested heavily in their churches, if they invested at all, and maintained a deep commitment precisely because it was chosen.

3. Clergy entered a religious world already constructed. In the eastern part of A.M.A. Blanchet's diocese initial evangelization had been done by Canadian Iroquois who had settled among the Salish peoples in Western Montana. The French-Canadian and Métis employees of the Hudson's Bay Company who upon settling built a church and requested priests from Quebec had, during their years in the fur trade and marrying into Indian tribes, organized their own moral and religious worlds before the priests arrived.⁴² This included, for some, having the Methodist and

⁴⁰ Very helpful here is William Westfall, "Voices from the Attic: The Canadian Border and the Writing of American Religious History" in Thomas A. Tweed, *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, 181-99. See also Herbert Bolton's 1933 classic "The Epic of Greater America" in John Francis Bannon, ed. *Bolton and the Spanish Borderlands*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), 301-32.

⁴¹ AAS, Patient Ledger, Providence Hospital, Vancouver, Washington.

⁴² See Laurie Maffley-Kipp's, "The Moral World of a Mining Camp," in her *Religion and Society in Frontier California* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 110-47.

Anglican ministers who preceded the arrival of Catholic priests bless their unions with indigenous women, something that distressed both Blanchets and other early bishops. Indeed, one of the major preoccupations continuing throughout A.M.A. Blanchet's correspondence is regularizing marriages, especially between French-Canadian and Métis men and their Indian wives.

4. Attending to the Blanchet correspondence highlights the significance of explicit chronological phases in the history of the church in the Pacific Northwest and any region. A distinctly French-Canadian, Métis, Indian phase of the Catholic Church in the region ended by 1865, brought down by the massive immigration from the U.S., the California Gold Rush, Indian treaties, and a flu epidemic. It was superseded by a mainly Irish and German Catholic population, spurred by U.S. cavalry soldiers mustering out from Fort Vancouver and Fort Steilacoom, and later by mixed European immigrations that came via the railroad.

5. The single overarching and overwhelming task for A.M.A. Blanchet and all Catholics in the Pacific Northwest was making religion real to themselves and to their surrounding society. From obtaining the equipment necessary for the ritual of Catholic cultic life to making a Catholic statement to the public through the establishment of orphanages, schools, and hospitals, Blanchet's letters are about constructing and maintaining a church in a highly fluid context. Ritual life and social services both contributed to maintaining Catholic psychological and social presence in the region.⁴³

⁴³ On the importance of appropriate equipment for Catholic ritual life, a comment from Blanchet's first journal is telling: "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." Edward J. Kowrach, ed., *Journal of a Catholic Bishop on the Oregon Train: The Overland Crossing of the Rt. Rev. A.M.A. Blanchet, Bishop of Walla Walla, from Montreal to Oregon Territory, March 23, 1847 to January 23, 1851* (Fairfield, Washington: Ye Galleon Press, 1978). Blanchet's desire for Catholic social institutions followed the pattern for Catholic revival and power that his friend and mentor Bishop Ignace Bourget was using in Montreal. Among Blanchet's many letters to Bourget asking for more sisters: "The holy caravan arrived on July 24th, following a successful voyage. The Sisters offered me their obedience. It goes without saying that they were most welcome. I regretted, however, that there were not a greater number; but I consoled myself in learning that others were being prepared who would *come later*. May this later be quite soon, for the little reinforcement that has just arrived will suffice only for our work here and for a post among the *Sauvages* of Puget Sound. As I had the honor of writing Your Lordship in May, there are two establishments waiting to be

Blanchet knew the cost of his effort to establish the church in his diocese and attached districts. What it cost him personally comes through in a few letters where he expresses discouragement. For example, he wrote to his friend and mentor, Bishop Ignace Bourget of Montreal, on 6 February 1850: “As for me, what am I doing here? Alas! Here it has been almost two years since I arrived, and I hardly see a thing that I can present to the Lord, if it is not perhaps the desire to do his will, should He let me know what it is.”⁴⁴ Written from the Dalles, as close as Blanchet could get to Walla Walla because of the Cayuse War, the letter goes on to compare the seemingly overwhelming failures of his missions with those of the much better funded and staffed Jesuits who work in the far eastern portion of the land under his charge.

6. Blanchet’s disputes with the Oregon provisional and later territorial governments over land claims were unresolved during his lifetime. Church-state conflict is a significant part of the story of Catholicism in the Pacific Northwest, a story that does not end with the settlement of the land claims but goes on to the infamous Oregon School Law aimed against Catholics that made attendance at public schools compulsory. Only recently has this story been incorporated into U.S. Catholic historiography in a significant way.⁴⁵

7. The ministry of A.M.A. Blanchet in the Pacific Northwest was one of constant adaptation to a changing context. Blanchet adapted to the geographic, demographic, and political realities of his new context, drawing resourcefully on his own experiences in Quebec and on the advice of a few bishops in the United States whom he had met and seemed to trust, to ensure the survival of the church. In the journal of his trip to Walla Walla, Blanchet made critical comments about the church in the United States.⁴⁶ A careful comparison of these comments on Catholicism in the U.S. with comments made in letters during the closing years of his episcopate suggests that while Blanchet never came to like the U.S. church any better, he did come to understand and appreciate its challenges more deeply.

started, one in the town of Walla-Walla, and the other in the town of Steilacoom, in Puget Bay, for which the care is confided to the good and zealous Rev. Vary.” AAS, Register, Series A., Volume 5, p. 245, 2 August 1863.

⁴⁴AAS, Register, Series A, Volume 3, p. 83, 6 February 1850.

⁴⁵ See Carey; also Thomas J. Shelley, “The Oregon School Case and the National Catholic Welfare Conference,” *Catholic Historical Review* 75 (July 1989), 439-57.

⁴⁶ See Brown.

8. A.M.A. Blanchet's correspondence provides an outsider's perspective to our understanding of the development of the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest and the United States. He viewed the social, political, and cultural dynamics of the Oregon Country – from Indian Wars to wagon trains to the deceit of the Provisional Government – through French-Canadian, clerical eyes driven by a vision of a true French Catholic society, to exist in the Oregon Country if nowhere else. Blanchet's conquest of the West was not for Yankee Manifest destiny. He did not share the vision of the *Louispoli* (the Indian referent for people from the United States). He was not interested in turning Indians into middle-class Yankee Protestants as were Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, Jason Lee, and the other Protestant missionaries who came and went during the years Blanchet served the church in the Pacific Northwest. Hence A.M.A. Blanchet's letter press books give us a distinctive and alternative perspective from which to view the tumultuous events that shaped the Oregon Country. His was an ultramontanist French-Canadian Catholic vision concerned with establishing and maintaining the church as a means to salvation for all the people. One might well say that Blanchet's vision was stronger than the geographic and demographic challenges that he faced and so the Roman Catholic Church was established and grew in the Pacific Northwest.

The letter press books of A.M.A. Blanchet complicate the history of Catholicism in the United States. Written by an outsider – Catholic and French-Canadian – the letters operate from different assumptions than do the writings of U.S.-born clergy or clergy of Irish descent. Blanchet's letters tell the story of a Pacific Rim church, international and multi-cultural in character, a church that survived despite anti-Catholic prejudice, the vagaries of a predominantly extractive economy that made migration a way of life for the vast majority of people in the region, and the arrival of waves of immigrants from the eastern United States that literally swamped the Native American, early French-Canadian and Métis, and Pacific Island/Asian populations. Taking a closer look at the construction of the Catholic Church in this borderland region reveals significant subcurrents in a complex U.S. and Canadian Catholic history. As well, it contributes to our understanding of the distinctive regional character of Roman Catholicism in the Pacific Northwest.