

Archbishop Seghers Pacific Coast Missionary

by

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Among the great names that shine with particular brilliance in the heroic story of the missionary conquest of the Pacific Coast stands preeminent that of Charles John Seghers, pioneering bishop of the West Coast of Canada, Apostle of Alaska and second Archbishop of Oregon. That one missionary in so brief a span of life, plagued at all times by delicate health could have accomplished so much for God and souls, under the unparalleled conditions that prevailed in his time in the vast area in which he worked, will always remain a source of wonder and admiration to all who read the stirring saga of his missionary activities and successes.

While the scope of a paper such as this, treating as it does in brief outline the many and varied responsibilities of his career as campaigner for Christ and the extension of His Kingdom, does not permit dwelling at any length upon the intimate details of the saintly Archbishop's life, yet a quick summation of the motivating forces behind his tireless and fruitful apostolate is necessary to understand and appreciate the real stature of this great missionary. Archbishop Seghers was a model of all Christian virtues to such a degree that these, in him, through continuous practice, can be truly called heroic. From the earliest days of his priestly life, he must have had ever in his heart and before his eyes the precept of the Apostle to Titus: "In all things, show thyself an example of good works." His reputation for humility, piety, charity and learning followed him wherever he went; the motivating, dynamizing virtues that vivified and shaped his every effort and action were his zeal and his detachment; the one, an all-consuming love for God, His Church and souls; the other, a complete self-effacement and disassociation from worldly attachments. These were the two mainsprings of his spiritual life and of the immense work to which he dedicated himself so tirelessly. They are reflected in the advice he extended to other missionaries preparing to join him in the work of saving souls in a vast, new land. "What you must bring with you," he wrote to Father Jonckau who later joined him in the diocese of Vancouver Island, "is a provision of courage and strength for your entire life – the fire of energy to persevere. Rarely do we find these two things united. Prepare to practice here what is known as the spirit of renunciation and sacrifice; *omnibus omnia factus*; come to put your shoulder to the wheel of religion's chariot, not to effect thousands of conversions. The

Francis Xaviers are not so numerous as they think in Belgium. Come to develop a little what others have begun, or to begin yourself what your successors will continue. And when we have sacrificed our body, our health, and our life in doing good, let us say after all – *Servi Inutiles sumus.*”

Charles John Seghers was born at Ghent, Belgium, on December 26, 1839, the son of Charles Francis and Pauline Seghers. Baptized in the old church of St. Martin at Akkergem, he received first holy Communion and was confirmed eleven years later, May 30, 1850. Deprived at an early age of both father and mother, he was welcomed into the home of his father’s brothers and sisters who lavished every care and affection upon him during his formative years. Graduating from St. Barbara’s College in 1857, he entered the Seminary of Ghent in October, 1858, receiving tonsure in 1859 and minor orders, subdeaconate and deaconate in the following years. On August 9, 1862, the date of his ordination to the diaconate, he left his native city to enter the American College at Louvain and to prepare for the missions. Nine months later, on May 31, 1863, he was ordained to the priesthood by the venerable Archbishop of Mechlin, Cardinal Sterckx. In response to an urgent appeal from Bishop Demers of Vancouver Island for missionaries for his vast diocese, the Rector of the Seminary at Louvain, Mgr. De Neve, asked Father Seghers to consecrate himself to this field of labor. Rejoicing in the fulfillment of his cherished desires to dedicate himself to the missions, the young priest left his native land on September 14, 1863, and two months later, after the long voyage across the Atlantic, through Panama and north on the Pacific, reached Victoria on November 19, of the same year.

From the moment of his arrival in his new home, Father Seghers gave himself with indefatigable zeal and devotion to the many assignments confided to him by Bishop Demers who spoke of him as “a priest according to God’s own heart, active and zealous in His Vineyard, having in view only the glory of God, the honor and triumph of religion.” Assistant at the Cathedral, chaplain of the convent and school, and administrator of the diocese during the many lengthy absences of the Bishop on missionary voyages, the young priest, during the first six years of his ministry, found time to make his first apostolic excursions to the Indian Tribes on the east coast of Vancouver Island. The strain of excessive work and responsibility began to take toll of his delicate health and, just four years after his arrival, he was stricken in December 1867 with a pulmonary disease. He hovered between life and death for months until, partially recovered, he was able to resume some of his duties for a year or more. In mid-year, 1869, Bishop Demers, leaving for Rome to attend the Vatican Council, fearing for the young priest’s health in his absence and hopeful that a restful journey to Europe and his native land would improve his delicate condition, invited Father Seghers to accompany him. The months in Rome were happy and busy ones; Father

Seghers wrote glowing accounts of his experiences, of the singular privilege of an audience with and the blessing of the Holy Father, of his participation, in the capacity of the theologian, in the deliberations of the Council, of the Holy City itself. From Rome he went to Belgium to visit his home and relatives for a few days; then, with renewed health of soul and body, he began the long trip back to Vancouver Island, reaching Victoria on November 2, 1870.

His restored health, however, was soon to be put to the severest test. Within a month of his return, Bishop Demers was stricken with a serious illness, and the full burden of the diocese fell upon the fragile shoulders of the young priest who, again, fell so seriously ill that his life was despaired of. A touching appeal from the heart and pen of the great missionary, Bishop Demers, to the Holy Father, imploring a special blessing and the prayers of the Holy Father for his assistant that he might be spared for the diocese was one of the last acts of his indefatigable apostle of the West Coast. Bishop Demers died on July 28, 1871. Within two months, a dispatch from Rome brought the assurance that the Holy Father, on August 27, had bestowed “with all his heart” the Apostolic Blessing on Rev. Father Charles Seghers. From that date, the health of the young missionary improved so rapidly that he was soon able to take on the burden of administering the diocese, a task confided to him under the terms of the will of Bishop Demers and ably carried out, with zeal, vigor and prudence, for two years until March 23, 1873, when Pius IX appointed him second Bishop of the diocese of Vancouver Island.

Consecrated on June 29 of the same year, Bishop Seghers began immediately to plan a thorough visitation of his far-flung diocese. In his sure judgment, his firm will and his boundless zeal for souls, he realized the immense work committed to his charge; he saw the vast territory confided to his care now ripe for harvesting – his own Vancouver Island with its missions for whites to sustain and its Indian missions to establish and consolidate, the west coast of the Island where he alone among white men for a few short hours had set foot, and far-away Alaska amid polar ice beckoning with its harvest of souls. All this immense territory, demanded instant, heroic enterprise in the cause of Christ – a challenge he zealously embraced with the dedication on his lips and in his heart: “We go, ready for everything, even for martyrdom.”

His first care was Alaska. A month after his consecration, he left Victoria, in July 1873, travelling by boat to this northern peninsula, touching at Sitka, then at Kodiak, a distance of 1120 miles, and on to Unalaska, one of the Aleutian Islands. On this mission he remained two months, instructing the natives. Six months after his return to Victoria, he was again on the march, this time to the west coast of Vancouver Island where an Indian nation of 4,000 souls, divided into twenty tribes, with a fearful reputation for cruelty, awaited the first visit of a priest. Every effort to dissuade him from so dangerous an undertaking having failed, he left Victoria, accompanied by Father Brabant, on April 12, 1874, on

his courageous mission. The innumerable hardships of that apostolic journey made in a little schooner on the broad breast of the Pacific throughout thirty-three days of harrowing suffering were forgotten in the deferential reception accorded by the Indians. In all, 884 children were baptized and hundreds of natives instructed during this missionary tour in the spring of 1874. The zealous Bishop made a second trip to the same area in the fall of the same year when he was welcomed with open arms by the natives and had the consolation of seeing the first fruits of his earlier visit in the attachment and fidelity of these simple people to the faith that he had instilled. On this occasion, he founded the first mission at Hesquiat, the pioneer of the many flourishing missions of the west coast of today.

The next two years, 1875 and 1876, record ceaseless activities in organizing and founding , missionary posts on the east coast of Vancouver Island, visiting every Indian tribe, going from one camp to another, sleeping under the stars and braving the cruellest of hardships to plant the Cross in every native settlement.

Throughout the four years that had elapsed since his first visit to Alaska, in 1873, Bishop Seghers had thought constantly of the plight of that vast country so much in need of help, and had sought ceaselessly for an opportunity to return. That occasion was realized in June, 1877, when, with the financial assistance of the Indian Bureau at Washington, and accompanied by the Rev. Joseph Mandart, he set out once again for Alaska, a journey that was to last for sixteen months and take him into almost unknown country. Completing the first part of the trip by boat from Port Townsend, Washington, to St. Michael's Island, a distance of 2380 miles, the Bishop decided to push on, up the Yukon River, on foot and by canoe, to the eastern boundary of Alaska, another 1800 miles. After many days of travelling and hardship, and completely worn out, the two missionaries reached Nulato, an old Russian fortress and the site of two Indian camps which he made his headquarters. From there, during the winter of 1877-78, travelling on snow-shoes and by dog-sleigh, the Bishop visited the Indian tribes within a radius of hundreds of miles. One excursion took him to within eight leagues of the Arctic Circle, and another necessitated a hazardous and harrowing journey of four hundred miles in mid-winter. How this man of God, always in delicate health, could travel the whole day long, on snow-shoes, over great distances, how he could withstand the rigors of an Arctic winter, camping in the snow, journeying day after day, amid the greatest hardships, from settlement to settlement along the Yukon and its tributaries, passes understanding. With amazing facility in the acquisition of languages, he quickly mastered a number of the dialects of the country, an invaluable aid in his missionary efforts. Throughout the long winter the drift-wood of the Yukon served as fuel, and melted ice supplied drinking water in this region near the Polar Circle. On one of his trips, the mercury of his thermometer froze and his features became so disfigured through exposure to the cold, that on his return to Nulato he could

scarcely be recognized.

Throughout the winter, spring and summer of 1878, the Bishop remained at his arduous and exacting task, visiting and evangelizing over 30,000 Indians. At the end of the summer he began his long trek back to civilization, returning to Victoria, via San Francisco, on Sept. 20, 1878. For sixteen months he had been cut off from the civilized world. He had not heard of the death of Pope Pius IX nor of the election of Pope Leo XIII. Replying to Bishop Seghers' rather belated message of congratulation, the Holy Father sent him a gratifying reply, part of which read:

'The fact that you were long in learning of the vicissitudes of the See of Peter redounds to your credit, since at the time you were with far-distant Indians to whom, as a good shepherd, you were bringing the consolations of religion seeking to lead to the fold of Christ those still astray. This it is which makes your congratulatory words particularly pleasing ... So while we express our appreciation of them, we at the same time wish you still more success, and more abundant fruits of your pastoral solicitude and the zeal of your missionaries.' The only loss suffered by the Bishop during his sojourn in Alaska was the amethyst of his episcopal ring given to him by his priests at his consecration. "My ring has lost its beautiful ornament," he wrote, "but the link which binds me to my priests will always remain unbroken." How prophetic these words were! In the designs of Divine Providence, that link, released for a time, would be welded more strongly, and the bond of affection and attachment, more firmly, during the last years of his life.

Scarcely had the Bishop reached home when the news of his appointment as Coadjutor to the Archiepiscopal See of Portland came from Rome. Before setting out for Oregon, the Bishop asked leave to arrange the affairs of his diocese and to establish missions in Alaska. A visit of two months was made to the west coast missions to strengthen and consolidate the work so laboriously begun and now promising such rich fruit. A third voyage was made to Alaska in the month of May, 1879, to ensure a continuance of missionary effort and to establish a mission post at Wrangel.

The arrival of Archbishop Seghers at Portland on July 1, 1879, was hailed by the aging Metropolitan of Oregon, Archbishop Blanchet, as 'the happiest day of my life.' Less than a week later, impatient of delay, the new Coadjutor, despite the fatigue of two years of unbroken travel and toil – through Alaska, along the west coast of Vancouver Island, then again to Alaska on two separate occasions – undertook a tour of inspection of the vast archdiocese of Oregon, as well as the Apostolic Vicariate of Idaho, at that time under the same jurisdiction. For months on end, he travelled continuously, enduring extreme hardships and privations of daily occurrence, visiting places where Mass had never been said before, and meeting natives who saw a missionary of Christ for the first time. Archbishop Seghers tells of this trip in the following record: "My tour lasted

sixteen months; altogether I travelled about 5,000 miles; I confirmed 800 people; I travelled by steamboat, railway, coach, cart, sled, foot and handcar ... I spent many a night on the bare ground ... I have visited sections of the country where a Bishop has never set foot; I have been with savage Indians ... I have travelled forty-five miles without finding water ... and, here I am, as full of life as ever.”

Archbishop Blanchet resigned on Dec. 17, 1880, entrusting the full burden of the administration of the vast Archdiocese to his Coadjutor who received the Pallium, Aug. 15, 1881. His first concern was to convoke a diocesan synod in August, 1881 – a preparation for the Provincial Council held shortly afterwards, and attended by the Bishops of Nesqually, Vancouver Island and Iborra, and their theologians. The decisions of this Council, the most important of which dealt with the Christian education of youth and the sanctity of marriage, were submitted to the supreme authority of the Holy Father. During the next two years, from 1881 to 1883, he continued his indefatigable labors, making numerous pastoral tours to the remote sections of the diocese. Archbishop Blanchet died on June 18, 1883, just as Archbishop Seghers was getting ready to answer the Holy Father’s summons to Rome where the American Archbishops would launch the preparatory work for the Third Council of Baltimore under the eyes of the Vicar of Christ himself. A few days after his arrival in Rome in November, 1883, he learned that Bishop Brondel of Victoria had been appointed Bishop of the new diocese of Montana, leaving the See of Vancouver Island vacant. Father Jonckau of Victoria, because of illhealth, felt unable to accept the proffered mitre, and Rome sought the advice of the Archbishop Seghers of Portland in the matter. He himself pleaded to be relieved of the See of Portland and to be returned to his dear diocese of Vancouver Island where he could continue the work he had begun. His wish was granted by Pope Leo XIII who was profoundly touched by such heroic zeal and abnegation.

After spending some time in Rome and Belgium, he returned to America in time to assist at the Council of Baltimore in November, 1884. The council closed on Dec. 1st., and Archbishop Seghers set out to tour the Eastern States, lecturing everywhere on his beloved missions and collecting necessary funds for their advancement. He returned to Portland in March, 1885, bade adieu to the See of Oregon, and took possession of his former see, as Archbishop-Bishop of Vancouver Island, on April 2, 1885.

After an enthusiastic reception accorded him at Victoria, the Archbishop immediately set to work to implement his plans, both spiritual and temporal. A visitation of the missions of the east coast of the Island claimed his first attention. He then returned to Victoria to arrange for the building of a new residence and a pro-Cathedral, both sorely needed. When these projects were well under way, he set out on his fourth visit to Alaska, spending four months there, in the southern area of the peninsula, visiting all the natives and establishing two

mission-posts, one at Sitka, the other at Juneau. At the end of 1885, he returned to Victoria, and, a few weeks later, on February 11, 1886, left in a small sailing boat for a visit to the west coast missions. After six weeks spent in going from tribe to tribe and village to village, he completed his tour of this section of his diocese on March 11, 1886. Thus, within one year of his return to Vancouver Island, he had visited all the missions on the Island and had established two new stations in Alaska.

A fifth journey to Alaska was planned for early April but was postponed when the news came from Rome that the Holy Father, in token of his particular esteem for the Archbishop, wished him to receive again the Pallium which he had relinquished on leaving the See of Oregon. Archbishop Gross, his successor in Portland, conferred this honor upon Archbishop Seghers in the Cathedral of Victoria, on May 30, 1886. On July 13 the Archbishop set sail from Victoria on the steamer *Ancon* for Northern Alaska, accompanied by two Jesuit priests, Fathers Tosi and Robaut. A third companion, a layman, Francis Fuller, was accepted as helper. The party touched at Juneau and proceeded to the head waters of the Yukon. Descending a chain of lakes and streams, continuing on through canyons and rapids, traversing hundreds of miles of absolute wilderness, they finally reached the mouth of the Stewart River. Leaving the two Fathers here, the Archbishop pushed on, accompanied by Fuller and two Indians, hoping to reach Nulato before the river closed. Worn out by privation, cold and fatigue, they succeeded in reaching Nukloroyit, when they were forced to abandon further travel until the water highway was frozen over. During the six weeks of waiting and inactivity, from Oct. 4th to November 19th, a dangerous situation began to develop, boding ill for the Archbishop. Manifestly under sinister influence, Fuller became more and more suspicious, morose, ill-tempered and violent in speech and disposition. On one occasion he threatened the prelate with a rifle, but was thwarted in his murderous attempt by the serene courage of the Archbishop. After weeks of fruitless effort to continue his trip, the Archbishop finally succeeded in securing the assistance of two Indian guides, with whom he pushed on towards Nulato, Fuller accompanying the three travellers. But tragedy was stalking the little party. Friday evening, November 26th, almost within sight of their destination, they encamped at the base of a lofty point now known as Bishop Mountain. The next morning Fuller awoke early and taking his rifle roused the Archbishop and roughly ordered him to get up. As the missionary rose from his couch, fully aware to the danger that threatened him and serenely resigned to the Will of God, the assassin fired the fatal shot. The bullet entered the heart and death was instantaneous. Leaving the body where it fell, Fuller accompanied the terrified guides to Nulato. The Indians, hearing the tragic news, hastened to take the remains of their murdered apostle and friend to St. Michael where they lay until the following year when they were taken to Victoria on the

U.S. *Thetis*. Today they rest in the Memorial Chapel of St. Andrew's Cathedral crypt, beside those of Bishop Demers and Father Jonckau.

When the news of his tragic death became known, a wave of sorrow swept across the country. Throughout America the press extolled his life and sacrifice while Europe joined in the chorus of universal sorrow and praise, as glowing tributes and homage were everywhere offered to his memory. Among these latter, an editorial in the *Victoria Colonist* merits particular mention, reflecting as it does the universal affection and esteem in which he was held. It reads in part: "His Grace Archbishop Seghers, the beloved of his people, of all the people of Vancouver Island, has been killed in Alaska! With true apostolic fervor and a burning desire to serve the cause of the Master, he took his life in his hands, and went out into the farthest limits of the 'land of the midnight sun' to christianize the heathen, and to teach them the knowledge of Him to whom his life was consecrated ... He died at the post of duty, carrying out the injunction given to the Apostles: 'Go and teach all nations.' And we may well believe that He was with him as long ago promised. In the face of such marvelous self-sacrifice as this, our practical nineteenth century takes on a nobler hue, telling us as it does, that the days of Christian heroism are not yet dead. Archbishop Seghers was a most lovable man; his heart was as that of a little child, and his soul as pure as the unstained snow. He had a mighty intellect, too; there are few men in Canada at least who could measure swords with him as a classical scholar, while as a linguist he was truly remarkable. He knew all the various dialects of the Western Coast and the Alaska Indians, could sing their songs and narrate their traditions. Many a choice snatch of their minstrelsy has he set to rhyme, and very musical they seemed as he gave them utterance, in that fine resonant voice which was music itself."

"With all his great gifts, mental and physical, he was humility itself, while his life was consecrated to that Divine Charity which is one of God's most glorious gifts. He toiled early and late in this diocese, which he loved with such an intense love that he gave up the rich See of Oregon, with its title of Archbishop, to accept the comparatively poor one of Vancouver Island with a lesser dignity ... If we could only have been present as he lay dying in that terrible land we should have seen upon his face the bright shadow of that celestial joy which was soon to wrap him about, as with a mantle. There should be no sorrow, nor sadness, nor grief over such a death as this. Like the early martyrs he fought the good fight, we may well believe that he bore the pangs of agony with Christian fortitude, and then as the last glimpse of the cold earth left his vision, he stood bathed in the sunlight of God's love, glorifying forever and ever Him Whose Benediction had cast a halo over the days of his earthly life."

Bishop Brondel whose transfer from the diocese of Vancouver Island to Montana had occasioned the return of Archbishop Seghers from Portland to

Victoria, announced the sad news to a people who knew and loved the great missionary: “We have lost him who visited many missions in Montana, who was successful in obtaining from the Holy See the erection of this Territory into a Diocese, and who brought us to you. We have lost the Apostle of Alaska, sent by Leo from Rome to bring the Catholic Faith to the utmost limits of the earth. We have lost the saint who, imitating St. Livinus who stepped from the Episcopal See of Dublin to bring the faith to the savages of Flanders, in our own day stepped down from the Archiepiscopal See of Oregon to wade as a travelling missionary through the snows of the Yukon and bring the faith to the Eskimos. We have lost a most learned theologian, a wise administrator, a model Bishop; we have lost a lifelong friend who, in the last act of his life, has taught us to die manfully in the service of God. His memory is held in Benediction and without anticipating the voice of authority, we cherish the thought that he died a martyr's death.”

Today in Alaska on the slope of Bishop Mountain, overshadowing the remnant of tableland at its base where the eroding waves roll past, may be seen a tall white iron cross, the gift of the Coeur d'Alene Indians of Idaho, as a memorial to the holy heroic Archbishop. A former cross of wood, planted in 1892, by the Jesuit Fathers, on the very spot of the Archbishop's death, was carried away by an ice floe in the spring of 1894 and was reverently saluted with the tolling of the church bell by the people of Nulato as it passed, standing erect amid the blocks of floating ice, seeming to bless them on its way down the mighty current.

Charles John Seghers had gone to the tribes of Northern Alaska to give them Christian truth. To that truth he added the last full measure of sacrifice, the generous gift of his lifeblood. Out of that blood, as from a *fons aquae salientis* in *vitam aeternam*, æ sprang the limpid stream of faith that inundated the land and brought forth a glorious harvest of souls unto life eternal.

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