

Charles French, Pioneer Missionary

by
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Facing the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Lawrence, Mass., is the Catholic grave-yard wherein rest the mortal remains of its faithful departed. On the highest spot in this cemetery, there stands a large stone in memory of its earliest priests. Relating to the first of these, the words inscribed thereon read as follows:

REV. CHARLES DANIEL FRENCH¹

FIRST RESIDENT PASTOR OF LAWRENCE

DIED 1851.

Over one hundred years ago, the following announcement appeared in the newspaper of the day:

“Rev. Charles D. French died in this city on Sunday morning, Jan. 5th, 1851, age 77.”²

Both quotations, simple as they read, tell us little. Yet in rolling back the past on Lawrence’s first pastor, there is much to be said about him. Behind the tomb-stone, and behind the news item too, there is a story, for this man was not just another priest. Neither was he sensational. Yet he did much to advance the spiritual and material frontiers of the Church in America, leaving behind him an enviable record. Although this paper is primarily concerned with his activities in the New World, a few observations on his early background might well be in order.

Charles French was born about 1773 in Galway, Ireland, of Protestant parents.³ He was reared in an atmosphere of religion, his father being an Episcopalian minister.⁴ The family enjoyed as well, a touch of nobility since a peerage was held by a younger brother,⁵ of whom historians make mention in

¹ Note: The name French is sometimes spelled Ffrench.

² *The Lawrence Courier*, January 8th, 1851.

³ *The Boston Pilot* (Centenary Edition), March 8th, 1930, p. 100, col. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

their works. It must be this same Lord French to whom the father's inheritance had fallen since, according to British laws, the other two sons were disqualified for the reason given in the paragraph to follow.

The advantages of a liberal education were open to young French, and he gladly availed himself of them. Even as a boy, he must have been very precocious; ever eager to broaden his learning. This intellectual inclination coupled with a marked penchant for truth, undoubtedly led him to examine the claims of the Catholic Church while still in his youth, culminating in his submission to Rome. While it is not certain that his conversion took place while in residence at the University, the conjecture lies strongly in that direction. His action was later imitated by a younger brother, Edmund. This same Edmund was to make a name for himself in later years when the Holy See saw fit to elevate him to the ranks of the Irish hierarchy.⁶ The boys however, did not enter upon their studies for the priesthood until after the death of their parents.

Most converts experiencing true happiness in their new faith, feel strongly impelled to impart their new joys to those still outside the fold, and to strengthen the faith of their weaker brethren within. Charles French must have been similarly affected, but how best to serve this purpose? He found his answer in the priesthood and naturally, the philosophical bent of his mind directed his steps towards the novitiate in Dublin. He would become a friar in the Dominican Order. Final studies, as was the custom in his day, were made abroad on the Continent. For Charles, it was in the Spanish Peninsula, either at Salamanca or at Lisbon, the exact location is not clear.⁷ His ordination eventually took place on Dec. 21st, 1799,⁸ Charles being then in the twenty-seventh year of his age. But Father French was not destined to spend his entire ministry in Ireland. His zeal called for larger fields. The spirit of restlessness that overcame him was finally settled when he came to the decision of dedicating himself to the far-off missions in America. Having received his Exeat from his Provincial, Father French set out for his future home, and the more probable opinion is that he landed at Quebec. Since the War of 1812-1814 between the United States and Great Britain was then under way,⁹ the American ports were closed to British shipping.

Assuming then that Father French disembarked at Quebec, his first step upon arrival was to make contact with a bishop who would accept his services. There was, of course, but one bishop in all British America Msgr. Plessis of Quebec, who had a co-adjutor at Montreal in the person of Msgr. Panet. Apprised that His Lordship was, at that very moment, conducting a canonical visitation of the Maritimes, the reverend applicant set his course in that direction.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Archives, Boston archdiocese.

⁸ Archives, Quebec archdiocese.

⁹ R.P. Philéas F. Bourgeois, C.S.C., *L'histoire du Canada*, p. 213.

He would meet the renowned prelate perhaps, on the return trip, which explains his presence at Madawaska during late August and early September, as the guest of the parish priest, the Rev. Jean-Baptiste Kelly. Father Kelly attended to a very large territory, including all the missions strewn along the River St. John clear to its mouth.

Having completed his tour of the North Shore and of the Gaspé peninsula, the Bishop re-crossed into New Brunswick to land at Madawaska on Sept. 7th, remaining there two days. Satisfied that Father French was a validly ordained priest, possessing all the necessary faculties, the Bishop divided Father Kelly's territory, giving his new priest jurisdiction over the lower half of the River, and constituting him first *resident priest* at Saint John.¹⁰ He was to control as well, Bartibog and the other Miramichi missions.¹¹ The historian, m. l'abbé Thos. Albert confirms this two-fold assignment in these words:

“Ce Dominicain était un frère du Lord French, et fut le premier missionnaire-résident de Saint-Jean. *Il fit aussi du ministère à Miramichi*, et mourut aux Etats-Unis.”¹²

Briefly inscribed (in the third person) in Bishop Plessis' Day Book at Quebec, follows his acceptance of Father French in brief:

Sept. 9th, 1812: ““Là (St. Basile) se trouvait depuis un mois, un prêtre irlandais, M. Charles French, de l'ordre des frères dominicains, qui se présenta, pour s'agréger au clergé, au diocèse de Québec. L'évêque agréa ses services sous le bon plaisir du gouvernement.”¹³

There, in the Archives also, is to be found a letter from the Dominican Provincial, the Very Rev. Patrick Gibbins, O.P., Dublin, and dated Nov. 27th, 1812. In it, Father French is recommended by his superior. The letter itself had been transmitted to Bishop Plessis by Archbishop Troy, of Dublin.¹⁴

Having received his appointment, Father French left immediately for Saint John. Many months however, were to elapse before he set foot in the Loyalist City, for already the summer of 1813 has begun. His delay can best be explained by the fact that “en route,” every mission had been visited, including the Miramichi. In addition to bringing the people the much-needed spiritual consolation, there was the task of organizing them and counselling them how best to improve their moral and material conditions, and to consolidate all gains

¹⁰ Very Rev. C. J. McLaughlin. *Early Missionary Footprints in Acadie*, 1932, p. 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² M. l'abbé Thos. Albert. *Histoire du Madawaska*, 1920, p. 149.

¹³ Archives, Quebec archdiocese.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

made.

Reaching Saint John, his first act was to obtain permission from Mayor Wm. Campbell, to use the court-room in the old Market Building at the foot of King Street. Here, on the first Sunday after arrival, the first mass was celebrated in the presence of a small group numbering not more than fifty persons.¹⁵ Strangely enough, the Holy Sacrifice had been offered up at almost the identical spot where thirty years earlier the Loyalists had landed from New England.¹⁶ In 1813, the north side of King St. extended farther west than it does today, so that the market structure stood just a little north of the present drinking fountain.

In taking up the duty of acquainting himself with his parishioners, the new pastor seems to have made a favorable impression. According to the accounts of him published in the newspapers of the day, he is described as an interesting character; they report him as a man of learning; that in his manner and deportment he is quite gentlemanly; and is quick to mingle intimately in the social pleasures of the day.¹⁷

A chapel being the prime necessity, a campaign for funds was launched at once, and a committee set up to handle the collections. The pastor personally went out on the road preaching missions throughout most of New Brunswick and penetrated neighboring provinces at some points. Records tell us that even in 1815, he spent a month in distant Newfoundland,¹⁸ for there was still much to be paid off, following the erection of the chapel. The response to the appeal must have been very encouraging, for a year later the church wardens were prompted to thank and acknowledge the donors through the following resolutions:

“Resolved, That the thanks of the Catholics of the City of St. John be returned to the inhabitants, and to Halifax, for their liberal subscriptions towards building a Catholic Church, amounting to nearly Eight Hundred Pounds. And in further testimony of their gratitude, it was Resolved, That the names of the subscribers and donations be alphabetically written on parchment, and framed, and hung in the Church, as justly entitled to the prayers of the congregation while the Church exists.”

(Signed) John Tool,
Bernard Kiernan,
Church Wardens.¹⁹

St. John, N.B., 21st August, 1814.

By the summer of 1815, work on the chapel which was situated at the corner of Sydney and Leinster Streets, was so far advanced that it was opened for

¹⁵ New Freeman (Saint John). *The Story of St. Malachi's*, Sept. 26th, 1942.

¹⁶ W. O. Raymond. *The River Saint John*, p. 253.

¹⁷ *The Saint John Globe*. “Old Times in St. John” by Clarence Ward, June 24th, 1905.

¹⁸ Archives, Quebec archdiocese

¹⁹ J. W. Lawrence. *Footprints*, 1883, pp. 85-86.

worship. Bishop Plessis on his second visitation of the Lower Provinces, crossed the Bay of Fundy from St. Mary's in Nova Scotia, late in September, and proceeded up-river. Having paid his respects to Gen. Smyth, the Administrator of the Province, he returned to Saint John. On the morning of October 1st, it was his privilege as ranking cleric in Canada, to dedicate the chapel in honor of St. Malachi, and to say the first mass within its walls. Many few Protestants were attracted to the ceremony by curiosity.²⁰ The prelate likewise contributed a generous sum with which to purchase a cemetery.²¹ An interesting item written into his journal in connection with the St. Malachi project, reads as follows:

“Les Catholiques, tout peu nombreux qu'ils sont en Saint-Jean, se sont mis en devoir de construire une église en charpente, revêtu de planches; car on ne connaît pas ici les édifices en pierre. Par leurs propres contributions et par les soins intrigants du Père Dominique, alias Chas. French, ils se sont mis en état de dépenser sur cette église 1200 à 1400 livres, en moyen de quoi elle est entourée, couverte, à un plancher de bas, et la moitié de ses chassis vitrés, peints et posés. Ils espèrent que, dans la prochaine session de la législature provinciale, il sera voté une somme pour la conduire à sa perfection.” (Visites pastorales de 1815-1816.)²²

The closing words of the above statement mention that the parishioners hope the Provincial government will vote money towards completing the chapel. This aid could not have been forthcoming, for as late as 1820, tenders were let for sheathing the west wall and tower.²³ This delay could only mean that the people of St. Malachi's had been obliged to defray the entire cost without the sought-for legislative grant.

With the advent of summer in 1816, the faithful of St. Malachi's began receiving an occasional visit from the missionary, Father Paul McQuade of Quebec.²⁴ Details concerning the whereabouts of Father French at this time, and for the next few years, are meagre. This must be the period to which Mr. McGuire alludes in his book describing his tour in America, in which he relates how two members of the laity carried on the non-sacramental portions of worship.²⁵ The congregation was led in the recitation of the prayers by Andy Sullivan a tailor from Bandon. Mr. Flanagan, another member of the parish, read the epistle and the gospel of the day, and delivered a brief discourse, probably from a written sermon. Up to this time, the flock was still scanty as to numbers as it is recorded that there were only some 35 men and 30 women on the

²⁰ New Freeman, *loc. cit.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Archives, Quebec archdiocese.

²³ New Freeman, *loc. cit.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ John Francis Maguire. *The Irish in America*, p. 115.

parochial register.²⁶

A resident priest, the Rev. Jos. Morrissette²⁷ succeeded Father McQuade about 1820, and two years later he in turn was followed by the Rev. Michael F X. Carroll²⁸ who was not destined to live long at his new past. Like many others, this priest came at an early age to America and was ordained in New York by Bishop John Carroll.²⁹ His death at the early age of 40, occurred on Nov. 24th, 1824,³⁰ the last sacraments having been administered by the only other Catholic priest in the immediate vicinity – Father French, who had a short time before returned to Saint John.

The re-appearance of Father French in the city must have occasioned much pleasure to his former congregation. His good nature, and his agreeable and engaging manners had already won their esteem. So when the selection of a successor came under consideration, it was not surprising that the wardens and parishioners alike, had him in view to fill the vacancy. Accordingly, when a general meeting was called for Dec. 6th under the chairmanship of Peter McNamara, and with Jas. Sullivan acting as secretary, these five resolutions were unanimously agreed to as follows:

1st. That a committee of 7 be appointed to manage the temporalities of the Congregation for 1 year from this date.

2nd. We return our sincere thanks to Rev. Mr. French for his zealous services to our late pastor, Mr. Carroll.

3rd. We delegate our worthy chairman to wait on Rev. Mr. French and to present him with a copy of these resolutions, requesting him to accept of our unanimous call to be our pastor, which we hope will meet the sanction of our most venerable Bishop. We believe Mr. French to be an able minister of the gospel, and perfectly qualified to superintend the spiritual concerns of this Congregation; no clergyman has so good a claim to this place as Mr. French; he built our chapel; he is known and beloved not only by us but by citizens of every denomination.

4th. We appoint a committee of 3 persons to draw up a memorial to the Lord Bishop of Canada, humbly soliciting His Lordship to sanction our choice, as there is not any other who would be so likely to unite the hearts of our people in the bond of peace and unity of spirit.

5th. That these resolutions be published in the city newspapers.”³¹

These resolutions were handed to Father French to be forwarded to Bishop Plessis, accompanied by a note to the priest himself, which read:

²⁶ George Stewart. *The Story of Saint John Fire*, 1877, p. 75.

²⁷ Note: Died in Montreal on July 21st, 1844, at 68. Was V. G.

²⁸ N.B. – Not to be confused with Rev. John Carroll, later pastor.

²⁹ *Saint John Globe*, *loc. cit.*

³⁰ *Saint John Telegraph-Sun*. “History of city churches,” October 29th, 1923.

³¹ *New Brunswick Courier*, Saint John, December 11th, 1824.

“Sir

It is with pleasure that I have the honor to hand you the enclosed resolutions which were passed at our general meeting. With sentiments of the highest respect, Rev. Sir, I am

Your humble servant,
Peter McNamara.”

Dec. 7th, 1824.

The reply came three days later, as follows:

“To Mr. P. McNamara, chairman of the general meeting of the parishioners of St. Malachi’s Chapel.

Sir:

Permit me through you as chairman of the above meeting, to return my sincere and heartfelt gratitude to the parishioners of St. Malachi’s Chapel in this city, for the vote of thanks for my attendance to the late Mr. Carroll. I have done only what duty called upon me to do towards a brother-clergyman, for whom I entertained sentiments of great respect and esteem. The affection which united us was matured by a knowledge of each other, and a mutual intercourse for many years.

With respect to your kind call and invitation to fill the vacancy as your pastor-should the Rt. Rev. Bishop of Quebec sanction your choice by confiding the care of the parish to me – I pledge myself to the utmost to advance your spiritual interests and I trust I will always merit your good opinions which you were so kind to express of me at your general meeting.

Relative to that part of your 3rd resolution, attributing to me, the building of your chapel, allow me to remark that I was only a mere agent. The merit is exclusively to the liberal inhabitants of this city and of the neighboring provinces.

Your Obedient Servant,
Charles French.”³²

Dec. 10th, 1824.

The re-action of the bishop to the petition came early in 1825. Having someone else in view, he was unable to accede to the people's wishes. To fill the vacancy, he despatched Rev. Patrick McMahon to Saint John, a priest who founded old St. Patrick’s in Quebec, and was to die as its pastor.³³ Meanwhile Father French went about erecting a building on or near the northwest corner of Horsefield Street, the frame of which was raised by May 24th.³⁴ In this project he had the assistance-physical and financial of persons of every persuasion, who thereby showed their esteem. The nature of the structure was not clearly known,

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *C.C.H.A. Report, 1947-1948.* St. Patrick’s, Quebec, Rev. J. A. Gallagher, C.S.S.R., p. 72.

³⁴ *New Brunswick Courier*, May 28th, 1825.

but records at Quebec affirm that Father French opened a school in 1825,³⁵ an opinion very probable for there was a large hall on the second floor. It became known as “The Friary,” a name that clung to the place for many years after. It is possible that a small chapel for the personal convenience of Father French could have been located there. By October, 1827, the property had passed out of his hands, as Father French was leaving Saint John and taking up his abode elsewhere. He had been adopted by Bishop Fenwick, for service in the diocese of Boston.

Bishop Fenwick who was making his first tour of Maine in August, 1827, had at that time only three priests in New England.³⁶ While in Maine, he appealed for more men to work in his immense diocese, and his appeal drew the attention of the priest in Saint John. Having accepted Father French, the Bishop immediately assigned him to West Quincy, Mass. where – immigrants following the close of the Napoleonic Wars – were fast increasing in numbers.³⁷ For a year, he said mass there, first in private homes, then in the school-house. Use of this building was later withdrawn under pressure which was brought on by religious intolerance. Strange to say, a Protestant church in near-by East Milton was placed at the bishop’s disposal and put into use. It was at this point that the Bishop promoted Father French to a larger field, giving him jurisdiction over the entire State of Maine, and over neighboring New Hampshire as well.

Maine was one vast field ripe for missionary activity. Here he was to do splendid work, performing the most fruitful part of his ministry. From Eastport where he constructed a church in 1828, he travelled westward to New Hampshire, and penetrated the North as well. Deciding to settle at Portland, he acquired land at the corner of State and Grey Streets.³⁸ Receiving the deed in March, 1830, he proceeded at once to build another church, which was so far completed by November as to permit mass being said. This happy event took place on the feast of All Saints, with some 200 worshippers in the town attending.³⁹ Following Portland’s incorporation as a city in 1832, the church was dedicated the next year on Aug. 7th,⁴⁰ the title given it being St. Dominic. The edifice received several additions later, and was twice re-dedicated.⁴¹

From St. Dominic’s for 11 long years, Father French travelled up, down and across two states. He was the true missionary all over again, experiencing all the obstacles, hardships and privations that only his zealous courage and rugged constitution could surmount. Maine had been spiritually starved when he first

³⁵ La Chancellerie, archevêché de Québec.

³⁶ *Diamond Jubilee of Portland Diocese* (booklet), May 20th-21st, 1930, p. 18.

³⁷ *Boston Pilot*, *op. cit.*, p. 98, c. 4.

³⁸ *Diamond Jubilee of Portland Diocese* (booklet), *loc. cit.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

entered upon the scene; mass and the sacraments being all too infrequent and the people practically churchless. Leaving Portland, as he did in 1839, he left his people rich in the Faith, and many chapels now dotted his section of the diocese, the more prominent ones being at Eastport and Portland in Maine and at Dover, N.H.⁴² One source credits Father French with having completed 21 churches, and leaving 12 more well advanced towards completion.⁴³ Now advanced in years, fatigued and worn out by his labours, this worthy servant went into retirement, returning to his native Galway.⁴⁴ After a few years however, the old spirit of restlessness re-asserted itself. It seemed that Father French still had energy to burn; he would return to America, and die in harness. Return he did! The population of Massachusetts was ever growing; new centres given impetus by giant industrial enterprises, were springing up everywhere. Lawrence, carved out from portions of Andover and Methuen in 1845,⁴⁵ was one of these boom-towns, and as elsewhere Catholics were arriving in large numbers. As the pastor at Lowell could no longer attend to their spiritual needs efficiently, Bishop Fenwick deemed it wise to create a separate unit. To Father French just returned to Boston, he confided the care of the infant parish.⁴⁶ The bishop's action in this instance was a true testimonial of great confidence. Having said the first mass in April of 1846 in a private home, Father French had a church erected within a few months, on Chestnut Street.⁴⁷ There, for the last five years of his life, the elderly priest labored until called to his reward on Jan. 5th, 1851.

The coat-of-arms of the Friars Preachers portrays St. Dominic as a black and white hound running about, and carrying in his mouth a lighted torch, symbolizing God's Word.⁴⁸ In his own way, the priest – Father Dominic – for over fifty years carried his torch, and while information concerning some phases of his life are lacking, the over-all picture of his career bespeaks a fine contribution to Holy Mother the Church.

One significant fact—a unique one perhaps—stands out in appraising the subject of this paper. It so happens that two distinct dioceses stem, from the labors of Father French. Portland, Maine, has good reason to hold his name forever in benediction. He had settled there and built St. Dominic's which was to become in 1853, a pro-Cathedral for the first bishop.⁴⁹ Similarly in Saint John, St. Malachi's was due to become the seat of another bishop, until a suitable cathedral was erected there. Bishop Dollard had moved from Fredericton late in

⁴² Chancery Office, Portland, Me.

⁴³ New Freeman, *loc. cit.*

⁴⁴ Chancery Office, Portland, Me.

⁴⁵ *The Boston Pilot*, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Katherine A. O'Keefe. *Catholicity in Lawrence*, p. 7.

⁴⁸ Marie S. Ellerker. *The Story of St. Dominic*, p. 20.

⁴⁹ *Diamond Jubilee of Portland Diocese* (booklet), *op. cit.*, p. 21.

1848.⁵⁰ At one point in its 110-year history, the whole province came under Saint John's jurisdiction for a 12-year period. In years to come, three more dioceses were to be detached from the parent body, while to this day Portland remains the sole episcopal see in Maine.

In taking leave of this pioneer priest, missionary, organizer of parishes and builder of churches, it is fitting to note that there is now actually rising on the site of old St. Malachi's a modern high school for boys, retaining the old title. In maintaining this unbroken association with the past, the school perpetuates the memory of Saint John's first resident priest. Returning to the priests' lot in the Lawrence cemetery, the last line chiselled into the stone reads: "Requiescant in pace." The unseen legions may well join in our prayerful response, "*Be it so!*"

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Acknowledgements due also to the Chancery Offices of Quebec, Boston and Portland, Me.; to Rt. Rev. Msgr. R. H. Lord and the Augustinian Fathers of Boston, and to the archivist of St. Joseph's University in New Brunswick (Rev. R. Beaudry, 'C.S.C.).

⁵⁰ Rt. Rev. F. L. Carney, D.P. *Appendix to St. John Diocesan Marian Congress*, 1931, p. 109.