



ROCH, JOSEPH-AVILA, Catholic priest, teacher, organizer and first Superior general of the Society of the Foreign Missions of the province of Québec, was born on June 20, 1875, in Saint-Norbert-de-Berthier, son of Clément Roch, farmer, and of Marie Délia Laporte; he died on December 21, 1940, in Montréal.

Joseph-Avila Roch is the eldest son of a family of twelve children. After his classical studies at the Joliette College where he distinguished himself with his oratory gifts and his leadership, he entered the Major Seminary of Montréal in 1897. Then he went back to the Joliette College in 1899 as a teacher and a monitor while going on with his theological studies. Ordained priest in Montréal on June 1, 1901, by

Mons. Paul Bruchési, he is assigned as assistant priest in Berthier in the region that would shortly become the diocese of Joliette. In October 1902, he is sent to the Pontifical College of the Propaganda in Rome where he acquires a doctorate in theology (1904) and a doctorate in canon law (1905).

In 1905, J.-A. Roch becomes a professor of philosophy and of theology in the Seminary of Joliette. Testimonies agree to recognize that he was a well appreciated educator for his clear and methodical teaching. His familial and clerical education with its respect for authority and also with the familiarity of human rapports had developed in him a sense of duty and of loyalty which restrained his rather impetuous character. Among the functions that he would carry out, that of professor would always remain his preference. And so, it is out of a sense of duty that, in 1918, he answers the call of his bishop, Mons. Guillaume Forbes, and becomes the parish priest of the cathedral of Joliette. «Canon» Roch, i.e. the only ecclesiastical title that he would ever accept, dedicates himself to the work of reconciliation in his parish and to its spiritual renewal through closed retreats. His concern for the poor and the sick rapidly attached him to his parishioners, but his stay will be short.

On February 2, 1921, the bishops of the civil province of Québec make the decision of founding a Seminary of the Foreign Missions and of establishing it in Montréal. The realization of that decision is entrusted to an episcopal commission presided by Mons. Paul-Eugène Roy, archbishop-coadjutor of Québec. Bishop Forbes of Joliette acts as secretary. Dreaming of going back to teaching, Canon Roch then offers his services to his bishop as professor of theology in the new seminary.

What is asked from him rather changes drastically his plans. On May 11, 1921, the bishops of Québec named him as organizer and first superior of the undertaking they have just

begun, and this means some work of material organization for which he is not very interested. Very often, he will say that « who builds suffers », but his sense of duty will carry the day and also the conviction of serving a priority of the French-Canadian Church.



The First Outremont Trio (1921-1924): (From left to right) Joseph-Avila Roch, Clovis Rondeau and Louis-Adelmar Lapierre.

Under the authority of the episcopal commission, Canon Roch gets down to work by taking two priests on as partners: Louis-Adémar Lapierre from Montréal and Clovis Rondeau from Joliette. In the fall of 1921, the trio moves into the former rectory of Outremont offered by the Clercs of St-Viateur. The first winter is dedicated to promotion work in the parishes and colleges of the province, to collecting funds among the clergy and looking for a parcel of land for a building. On April 27, a piece of land is purchased in Pont-Viau (Laval) along the Rivière des Prairies. The construction work, executed and paid on a « daily basis » under the supervision of Canon Roch last more than one year. He takes over the building on the 27th of February 1924 and, in September, the new seminary welcomes seven priests and fifteen seminarians.

Besides being superior, procurator and teacher of Holy Scriptures, Canon Roch works at the organisation of the Society of the Foreign Missions as an institute of diocesan priests for the missions. Having obtained the canonical recognition of the archbishop of Montréal (1925), he goes to Rome in 1927 to present the Constitutions of the new Institute to the Roman Congregation of the Propaganda that will approve them in 1929. After choosing a first missionary territory in Mandchuria, missionary send-offs take place since 1925.

Staying behind in the country, Canon Roch carries the burden of the people whom he sends abroad (sicknesses, accidents, deaths), of their first endeavours in the missions and of their material needs relying on small resources, especially during the economical crisis of the thirties. Besides participating in the beginnings of the Missionary Union of the Clergy and of assuming the national direction of the works of the Holy Childhood, he builds a web of benefactors so as to support the Institute for which he is responsible.

In 1932, the first General Chapter of the Society of the Foreign Missions confirms his leadership by electing him as Superior general. In October of 1935, he goes to Mandchuria to visit all the outposts of the Vicariate of Szepingkai where the missionaries are at work. In 1937, a second missionary territory is accepted in the Philippines. Nevertheless, the weight of sickness begins to show (faintings, partial paralysis). In 1938, his health is becoming a problem and this situation brings the second General Chapter to elect a new Superior general in the person of Edgar Larochelle to replace him at the head of the Society.

After two years of sickness and self-effacement, he dies on December 21, 1940. His successor had this to say about that man of duty who was always close to the hundred missionaries whom he had brought together and organised in less than 20 years: « Canon Roch killed himself at the service of our Society. He is the one who made it what is and who gave to it what it has. We will never be able to appreciate the true value the sacrifices that he imposed on himself for us. » (Edgar Larochelle, p.m.é.)

References:

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Bertrand Roy