

HISTORY

Monday, August 5, 1929

By Bertrand Roy, p.m.é.

It has been a rainy week-end. This Monday morning, the sky is cloudless and it is cool weather for a beginning of August. The sun plays over the waves of the Des Prairies River and its rays are reflected on the windows of the new wing of the seminary. The heavy work will soon be finished and the superior of the house is relieved.

For more than one year, Canon Roch has kept a close watch on the construction of the new wing of the seminary. This new wing includes classrooms, a kitchen, rooms and also a large chapel. Today, Monday, August 5, there is still some finishing work to be done, but it will be possible to lodge suitably the 31 seminarians who will arrive in September. Moreover, a great feast is planned for September 26. Cardinal Rouleau of Québec and other guests are expected to celebrate that extension of the seminary for the missions founded by the bishops of French-speaking Canada eight years ago.

That was in 1921. Joseph-Avila Roch was then the parish priest of the cathedral of Joliette and his bishop was the secretary of the episcopal committee in charge of that new foundation. Being a born teacher, Canon Roch had showed interest to teach in the new seminary. When the bishops asked him to take its direction, he did not know what was in store for him. Before teaching, he would have to find collaborators, buy a piece of land to build the seminary, seek benefactors to raise the necessary funding, visit colleges and seminaries of the province to promote the missionary vocation. He will remember for a long period all those concerns, at times costly for him, and he will often say: « Qui bâtit, pâtit! »

Canon Roch



Born on June 20, 1875, in Saint-Norbert-de-Berthier, Joseph-Avila Roch is the eldest of a family of twelve children. Ordained priest on June 1, 1901, he is sent to Rome where he will obtain a doctorate in theology (1904) and canon law (1905). Back in Canada, he becomes teacher at the Seminary of Joliette. In 1918, « Canon » Roch, the only ecclesiastical title he will accept, becomes parish priest of the cathedral of Joliette. In 1921, he is named the first superior and organizer of the seminary of the missions that has just been founded by the bishops of French-speaking Canada. He then dedicates himself to the development of that foundation, leading the formation of the Society of the Foreign Missions of the province of Quebec. Elected first Superior general in

1932, he visits the mission of Manchuria in 1935. In 1938, his poor health forces the general Chapter to elect a new Superior general. He dies on December 21, 1940.

His successor, Edgar Larochelle, will say about that man of duty: « Canon Roch worked himself to death at the service of our Society. He is the one who did it what it is and who gave it what it has ».

A fast and enthusiastic beginning

The project of the Seminary of Pont-Viau developed rapidly. It raised enthusiasm and inspired generosity as proven by the new buildings that will be blessed before long. At the beginning of August 1929, Canon Roch rejoices due to another result of his work, less visible but essential for the future. The good news that he awaited has finally arrived.

Two years ago, in the fall of 1927, he had gone to Rome to present to the competent authorities the project of the Constitutions of the Society of the Foreign Missions of the Province of Quebec. It was important to give a stable legal framework to the life and to the work of the priests of the Seminary of Pont-Viau and of their confreres in the missions. He

remembers with emotion his personal meeting with pope Pius XI who had congratulated him for the work accomplished and wishing him full success in the formation of his missionaries.

And so, the good news has just arrived. The Constitutions of the Society were approved for seven years last July 25. This is another reason to celebrate in September, not to mention the joy of sending three new priests to Manchuria. It will be the Society's fifth missionary sending off since the famous September 11, 1925. Nobody has forgotten the violent storm that hit Montreal on the day of the departure of Louis Lapierre, Eugène Bérichon and Léo Lomme (see the previous issue, p. 23).

Since then, thirteen other missionaries have joined them in Manchuria. Among them, Edgar Larochelle, a young priest from the diocese of Quebec. In 1925, he had come to Pont-Viau to teach Holy Scriptures in the new seminary. One year later, at the request of Canon Roch, he had accepted to join the second group sent into the missions. At 33 years old, he looked like the elder because of his experience of four years as assistant parish priest in Beauport, and also as propagandist for the newspaper *L'Action catholique* in Québec. What a beautiful preparation to live out the mission...in Manchuria!

Overnight, Edgar and his companions found themselves right at the heart of the action: the study of the Chinese language, first contacts with the local population, long outings by horse or by wagon to visit the scattered Christians over a vast territory, initiation to the ways of working of the French and Belgian missionaries in the field since a long time.



For Canon Roch, the heart of the action was rather passing through his office: a talk with a seminarian, administrative work about the questions of land or construction, preparation of a talk, welcoming of a guest. Above all, he has to bring up to date his correspondence with his people in Manchuria. With the arrival of the three new ones, they will be 19 missionaries in that country and he tries to keep contact with all of them, even though letters take weeks to reach them. Today August 5, he answers the last letter of Edgar.

« Yes, dear confrere, he writes, I understand how painful it must be to always live in contact with people who have a mentality so different from ours and who do not understand us. As for me, that must be the greatest difficulty in the missions and it is at the same time a great credit for those who know how to take advantage of the situation. »

To understand and to be understood

Canon Roch remembers his experience as teacher and parish priest in Joliette. He learned what attitude to adopt to understand and be understood. « I am convinced that the missionary who is full of mistrust towards the people whom he wants to evangelize will not do well. What is needed, and I believe it deeply, are trust and love towards the people like a teacher or like a parish priest towards his students or his parishioners. And also unlimited trust in God's grace ».

In writing to Edgar, he thinks about these thirty young men for whom he is responsible as superior of the seminary. One day, they will join up with Edgar and will face the same difficulties of adaptation. « During the last ordination retreat preached to our seminarians, I insisted a lot on the absolute necessity of a solid temperament, of a firm character, of a deep humility and of a supernatural life always more and more total. Your remarks as well as those of the confreres have helped me greatly. Our young confreres are very touched by your words ».



Enough of lecturing and let us return to business. « As for the budget, we were very happy to vote it in your favor. Our construction is coming to an end...I can't wait! We would like to occupy it at the beginning of the year. I can assure you that the old man is busy. Let us pray a lot one for another. After all, it is the good Lord who does everything with our cooperation ».

At work and put to the test

If the *old man* is busy in Canada, the others are not out of work on the other side of the planet in Manchuria. As soon as they were able to manage in Chinese, they began visiting the Catholics in the areas where they were now taking over from the French and Belgian missionaries. Very rapidly, they were confronted with the poverty and the insecurity of their faithful. These are in a minority in an environment that is hostile to them, because the Christian religion is associated here with a threatening intrusion of foreign colonial powers.

Their pastoral strategy is simple. From a center where they establish their residence, they work to reunite and revive the small Catholic communities, often neglected for many years. A lot of energy and many resources are dedicated to constructions. A residence has to be built here while a chapel has to be restored or built elsewhere, a school must be found for the religious instruction of the children, a clinic must be open in a far-away village.

When it comes to purchase some land for the buildings of the Catholic «mission», it is never simple however. The procedures are complicated, if not clandestine. You have to pass through go-betweens and take the risk to make business with someone more clever than you. Talking about buying a piece of land, is it not also the problem that have to face the Catholic immigrants who like many others are fleeing from famine in the South of China and are looking for a better future in Manchuria? To help them to settle down, Eugène Berger and some others have put money together to purchase some lots and begin a Christian village that was called «Sacred Heart village». The creation of another village, this time under the patronage of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, was tried without success because of the bandits who frightened away the first residents.

Our own territory

Those missionaries who begin their apostolate in Manchuria were answering the invitation of the apostolic vicar of Moukden, Bishop Jean-Marie Blois of the Paris Foreign Missions. He was preparing the future when he gave them the charge of five districts of his

vicariate, under the supervision of Louis Lapierre, the dean of the group. Since more than one year, Canon Roch is taking all the necessary steps so that a mission territory be entrusted to the Society, namely the territory including that part of the vicariate of Moukden and a part of the adjoining vicariate of Jehol. Today, he can announce the good news to Edgar. It is done. On August 2, the Roman authority has just established a new apostolic prefecture and entrusted its responsibility to the priests of the Seminary of Pont-Viau.

The city of Szepingkai (today called Siping) was chosen as the center of that mission territory because of its strategic position for the railways. In that locality, the Catholic mission is still in its early stages and there will be, without doubt, a lot to build. Besides, Louis Lapierre has just built a church there that will be blessed at the end of the month. The installation is a modest one just like the bell-tower made up of two posts planted in the church courtyard.

Some day, when the prefecture of Szepingkai will be an apostolic vicariate under the leadership of a bishop, we will build a real cathedral with real bell-towers like those of Saint-Hermas, the parish where Louis Lapierre was born. Until then, Canon Roch tells himself while ending his letter before going to lunch, let us hope that the builder will not « suffer » too much!

Apostolic prefectures and vicariates

In 1929, the Catholic missions gave rise to a real geography that was illustrated in the missionary atlases. The « non-Christian » world in Asia, in Africa, in Oceania and in some regions of the Americas was divided into different mission territories according to the development of the ecclesial life: first, apostolic prefectures headed by a priest, then apostolic vicariates under the leadership of a bishop.

Those Churches in gestation depended directly on the Roman center that entrusted them to missionary institutes. These institutes were responsible for providing the necessary staff and resources to build the local Church in the territories for which they received the exclusive responsibility. When the prefecture of Szepingkai was entrusted to the priests of the Seminary of Pont-Viau, we counted in China more than 80 prefectures and apostolic vicariates under the responsibility of around twenty institutes, the largest number (14) entrusted to the Paris Foreign Missions, like the apostolic vicariate of Moukden in Manchuria.