

## HISTORY

# MONDAY, APRIL 7, 1958

Easter Monday on the Ucayali

By Bertrand Roy, p.m.é.

Years go by rapidly. Only yesterday, they were travelling by cart on the roads of Manchuria. They shivered under their heavy coats because of the cold wind or the robber bandits. Today, Easter Monday 1958, they are sailing on the Ucayali River in the humid heat of the Peruvian jungle.

Gustave Prévost and Arthème Leblanc are travelling companions since their studies at the Seminary of Pont-Viau by the years end of 1930. From the beginning of their first steps in the missions, their itinerary took an unexpected turn: four years of internment in Szepingkai, in Manchuria, during the Pacific War (1941-1945). That missionary initiation that they will never forget went on during the years of civil war leading to the Maoist revolution in China.

Back in Canada, they split in 1948 when Arthème is sent to Cuba. In that Caribbean island, around a dozen priests of the Society are working at reviving parochial life and promoting education in rural areas. As for Gustave, he takes the road again back to China where awaits him the ordeal of the prison under the communist regime (1951-1954). On May 1, 1954, when he is expelled from China «forever» according to the verdict of his judges, he is the last member of the Society to leave that country.



On « your boat » (From l to r.) **Bishop Gustave Prévost**, 44 years old, St-Eustache, Saint-Jérôme; **Arthème Leblanc**, 44 years old, Sainte-Clotilde-de-Horton, Nicolet. « Last Easter Monday, in the company of Mr. Arthème Leblanc, the superior of our missionaries, I left in our boat that is «your boat» and it glides along smoothly. We are going to Masisea, seven hours above Pucallpa, to choose there the spot for a new parish » (Letter of Bishop Prévost, Missions Étrangères, September 1958, p. 579). PHOTO Archives SMÉ

Since the first missionary sending off in 1925, 75 members of the Society have worked in that mission of Manchuria. While some still hope for an unlikely return, many have joined the groups of the Philippines, Japan and Cuba or became pioneers in new commitments. That is where our two travellers meet again.

In 1956, the Foreign Mission Society actually receives the responsibility of a new mission territory in Peru and Gustave prepares himself to take over its leadership. While visiting the mission of Cuba to recruit experienced collaborators, he meets again with his former companion in Manchuria. No doubt, he succeeds to interest him since, not long after, Arthème is appointed to the new mission of Peru where he reports in September 1956 with Hubert Laurin, a young Montrealer ordained to the priesthood a few months earlier.



The port of Pucallpa at the end of the 1950s. PHOTO Archives SMÉ

### **Towards Pucallpa in the Selva**

The presence of the Society in Peru begins in a very poor area of Lima where Arthème takes the pastoral charge of a sector served by Spanish Jesuits. Having established that pied-à-terre of the Society in the capital, Arthème then leaves for the selva as is called the Peruvian jungle. At the beginning of February 1957, he flies over the Andes towards Pucallpa. That small town of about 20 000 inhabitants, in reality a cluster of villages along the Ucayali River, is the centre of the new mission territory entrusted to the Society.

The apostolic vicariate of Pucallpa was established one year earlier on March 2, 1956. It is a subdivision of the large apostolic vicariate of the



Ucayali where the Spanish Franciscans have been working for generations. The arrival of the Canadian missionaries to whom Rome entrusts that new vicariate is in line within the context of the rapid development of the selva, demographically as well as socio-economically. Moreover, it is hoped for, they will know how to answer in an adapted way to the challenge of an American Protestant presence more and more important, especially in the region of Pucallpa.



### **PADRE ARTEMIO**

Arthème Leblanc is truly a pioneer of our mission in Peru. It was important for him to know the whole population. He visited systematically the caseríos, those villages of farmers along the road, and also the Indigenous communities shipibos. He possessed an extraordinary strength, physical as well as spiritual. How many times have we seen him arriving and departing with his backpack which contained what was necessary for his ministry and also canned food and biscuits, in case fish or chicken would be lacking. (Lévis Veillette, p.m.é., Figure, 2014.) PHOTO Archives SMÉ

A few days before the arrival of Arthème in Pucallpa, an important event for the future of the new mission takes place in the church of Notre-Dame of Montreal. On January 6, 1957, feast of the Epiphany, Gustave is consecrated bishop as the first apostolic vicar of Pucallpa. On that day, Peru is on everyone's lips, because Gustave makes the headlines like the following day of his liberation from the Maoist jails. As for them, the first to arrive in the selva get involved in parish and school work where they are, preparing as such the arrival of the new bishop. On June 8, 1957, all the students of Pucallpa are at the airport to meet him.

### **A Major Turning Point**

By going to Peru, the Society takes one step more in its commitment in Latin America. The work of the Canadian priests in Cuba since 1942 in abandoned rural communities as well as in the field of education of the youth is appreciated and raises interest. Requests for help make its way up to the office of the Superior general, especially since Pius XII has invited the American and European Churches to share its care for Latin America.

For some, the crisis that the Churches of Latin America live through is related to the cold war. It is identified to the progress of communism and, in a counter-offensive, to the growing influence of the American Protestant missions. Some, like the bishops Helder Camara from Brazil and Manuel Larraín from Chile, maintain that the real problem is rather the extreme poverty and the social inequalities. For others, including the American and Canadian bishops, the lack of apostolic personnel is a critical factor, hence the urgency of sending priests and religious and also to open seminaries. Priests from Quebec are ready to answer the call of Pius XII and diocesan initiatives take form. Is not the Society offering an interesting venue?



At the time to answer a request for help from the archbishop of Tegucigalpa in Honduras, a question is raised by the Roman Congregation for the Propagation of the faith under which falls the Society of the Foreign Missions that was not founded to work in a country with a Christian tradition. Should it not orientate itself towards the countries of Asia or Africa where the Church is not yet established? The turning point taken in the Philippines in 1937, and then in Cuba in 1942, bringing to be at the service of local Churches to build and rebuild is confirmed with the beginning of the mission of Choluteca in Honduras. In June 1955, three missionaries of Cuba open the way and already discover the mountains of the south of Honduras.



Somewhere in the south of Honduras. PHOTO Archives SMÉ

The growing number of seminarians in Pont-Viau during the 1950s and the annual ordinations of new members of the Society (14 ordinations in 1955 and 22 in 1956) suggest that an important movement of personnel is to take place in the direction of Latin America. Pucallpa will become a familiar name for many members of the Society. Arthème and Gustave are busy setting the table while slowly navigating on the Ucayali.



**Procession of religious groups** -Manifestation of popular religion in the streets of Pucallpa at the end of the 1950s. PHOTO Archives SMÉ