

The Rt. Rev. James Rogers, D.D.

First Bishop of Chatham, N.B.,

by

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In his absorbing autobiography called *The Bishop Jots It Down*, the late Most Rev. Francis Kelley of Oklahoma wrote, "Never before nor since, have I met a man that Bishop of Chatham." The life led by this unusual churchman, the first Bishop of Chatham, is indeed worth looking into.

James Rogers was born in Ireland, at Mount Charles, County Donegal, on July 11th 1826, the son of John Rogers and Mary Britten. Before he was five years old his parents migrated with him to Nova Scotia. After living at Wallace in Cumberland County for a few months they moved to Halifax.

After his fifth birthday little James began his schooling. At the age of ten he received his first Holy Communion. Even at that early age James Rogers knew quite definitely what he wanted in life and the best means of attaining it. A passing incident at this period illustrates the reality of big vision and the staunchness of his purpose. Daily mass and a visit to the Blessed Sacrament were part and parcel of young James' life. Naturally such consistent piety was a matter of public notice and in some instances of well-intentioned curiosity. One day a woman of the parish ventured to ask the boy why he went to church so frequently. "I go," he replied, "to visit the Blessed Sacrament and to pray for my parents." On being pressed as to his future, intentions he answered, "A priest, ma'am, with God's will and help."

One incident at this period of his life, has something in it of prophetic quality. One evening when James was eleven, he was praying in the church and was so absorbed that he did not notice the sexton locking the church for the night. The boy, having finished his devotions, found to his surprise that he was locked in. Having tried in vain to find an exit, he entered the sanctuary to be nearer the Blessed Sacrament. Bishop Walsh, then co-adjutor, had visited the church the previous evening and on leaving had forgotten his cloak on an armchair chair in the sanctuary. Little James, drowsy and looking for a place to rest, perceived the chair and the cloak, wrapped himself up as best he could, and was soon fast asleep. Father Connolly (afterwards Archbishop and Bishop Roger's closest friend) came into the sanctuary at 6 o'clock the following morning in search of the Bishop's cloak. In the dim light he noticed the bundle in the chair and, gathering it up, he started to leave with the result that he deposited the boy

rather unceremoniously upon the floor. The surprise was mutual, but Father Connolly, seeing who it was, told James to run to the presbytery, wash his face, straighten his clothes, and hurry to serve the Bishop's mass. When the incident was told to His Lordship after the mass, he said, "Whoever lives to see that boy a man will live to see him wear a mitre."

While James Rogers was still in his teens his father died and the young man became the protégé of Father Thomas Connolly, later Bishop of Saint John and afterwards Archbishop of Halifax. It was under the direction of this scholarly priest that Rogers went through the greater part of his theological studies.

Ordained sub-deacon by Archbishop Walsh, August 21st 1850, he was sent to the Grand Seminary of Montreal to complete his theology. The following year, on June 14th 1851, he was raised to the diaconate by Bishop Bourget at the pro-cathedral in Montreal, and on July 2nd of the same year he was ordained priest by Archbishop Walsh at Halifax.

After his ordination Father Rogers was named assistant to Canon Dennis Geary at Clare on St. Mary's Bay. Canon Geary had charge of the entire west coast of Nova Scotia, and it became Father Rogers's duty to look after the most distant of the missions.

The clerical appointments of Father Rogers suffer in the telling, for they reveal only the ordinary, leaving it to the eye of God alone to evaluate how extraordinary were the lives led by him and other pioneer priests. They had to cover vast distances, over rough roads or trails, while poverty kept them from enjoying what rude facilities there were. Carriages were for the rich only, and even the relative ease of horseback was often too dear. Usually it was on foot that they made their way. Father Rogers would often strap on his back the necessaries for the Holy Sacrifice, set out for a day's journey through the forest, and arrive footsore and weary – only to be obliged to enter the confessional to relieve the spiritual distress of persons who had come perhaps farther than he.

After eighteen months as assistant to Canon Geary, Father Rogers was made rector of all missions in Cumberland County, with his residence at Minudie. Here he exercised the sacred ministry for four years.

In 1856 James Rogers was called upon to take up the cross of a more arduous ministry. Bermuda, part of the archdiocese of Halifax, had been beset by an epidemic. Among the victims of the fever were the two priests who had dedicated themselves, one after the other, to the care of the convicts in the penal colony and of the inhabitants. Now a third devoted follower of Christ was sought, one prepared to face what seemed to be almost certain death from fever. He was found in the person of Father Rogers.

Father Rogers made what well might be his last confession, attended to his few possessions, took leave of his beloved mother and sister, and sailed in May 1856.

His work in Bermuda consisted almost entirely of bringing consolation to the stricken inhabitants; there was little opportunity for exercising the organizational ability that he showed later. He managed however, to build the first parish church on the island. It is worth noting that when he wrote to the Archbishop for permission to build, he offered to give his year's salary toward the project.

After two years in Bermuda he was recalled and appointed pastor at Church Point in Nova Scotia, but soon he was summoned to Halifax. Archbishop Walsh having died, Bishop Connolly of Saint John was appointed to the See of Halifax, and immediately sent for Father Rogers to be his secretary.

This post was of short duration, for Father Rogers had been back in Nova Scotia one year only when notification arrived of the formation of a new diocese, through the division of the Diocese of New Brunswick into those of Saint John and Chatham. By Pontifical Bull, dated May 8th, 1860, James Rogers was named first Bishop of Chatham.

Nova Scotia had been erected into an apostolic vicariate in 1818, but New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island remained, under the care of the See of Quebec until 1830, when a bishop was appointed for those two provinces. Twelve years later New Brunswick had become a separate diocese. When the Rt. Rev. Thomas Connolly was promoted to the archbishopric of Halifax, advantage was taken, of the vacancy at Saint John to form a much-needed new diocese in New Brunswick.

The consecration of Bishop Rogers took place at Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, on August 15th, 1860. Archbishop, Connolly officiated and was assisted by the Bishop of Saint John and the Bishop of Harbour Grace, Newfoundland. The solemn installation of the new bishop was held in Chatham on August 22nd.,

Ceaseless and unsparing might well describe the work of Bishop Rogers. As he himself declared, his was not an episcopacy of dignity, for his diocese was a missionary diocese with all that such entails. An early incident illustrates this phase of his work.

In 1842, about twenty years before, the dispute concerning the boundaries of the State of Maine had become acute. The commissioners appointed – Lord Ashburton representing Britain and Daniel Webster the United States – had agreed that 7,000 of the disputed 12,000 square miles be ceded to Maine. The question of ecclesiastical jurisdiction awaited satisfactory settlement, and Bishop Rogers was now commissioned to report the desires of the people and to recommend whether the territory remain in

the Diocese of Saint John or else be transferred either to Chatham or to Portland, Maine. To fulfill this mission the Bishop travelled by road to Fredericton, by water to Woodstock, and by carriage some hundreds of miles into Madawaska and Maine. He soon made the long trip back to Chatham, but was again in Madawaska ten days later! The decision was that this part of Maine be kept under Saint John, N.B.

To be all things to all men fashioned Bishop Rogers' thoughts and moulded his actions. In one of his letters to the Propagation of the Faith, Paris, we find his brooding concern over the Indians entrusted to his care. He refers to his anxiety over the physical and social decline of the Indians due to the English and French wars. He recounts with solicitude his visits, administration of the sacraments, and attendance at the celebrations of his Indian charges, especially at their reservations at Burnt Church and on the Tobique.

His paternal interest in the Acadians of French origin in his diocese is best illustrated from one of his letters: "While it becomes a matter of material interest for the Acadians to acquire a knowledge of English for their success in all business and political intercourse with their English fellow subjects, their familiar personal relations with friends and compatriots make it both desirable and necessary to continue and preserve the use of the French language, not only in their homes and families but in school and in church."

The organization of his diocese suffered nothing from either lack of zeal or lack of effort. Only briefly, without regard for detail, may we mention his accomplishments in this respect.

He housed his Seminarians at his residence where he himself taught them theology. In 1863, the parish of Bathurst being vacant by reason of illness, he attended to the spiritual wants of the parish and during this period built the convent conducted by the Sisters of Charity (Halifax). Likewise in 1864, he built the school for the Sisters at Newcastle and in 1865 erected the church and the convent at Madawaska, which was later conducted by the Sisters of Charity. In 1860 Saint Michael's college at Chatham was opened under diocesan direction. Later it was taken over by the Christian Brothers who directed it until it was destroyed by fire in 1880.

Bishop Rogers made overtures to the Eudist Fathers to open a college for French-speaking students, for as the Bishop himself stated, "To give full satisfaction ... the course of instruction should be given in the respective language of the pupils." It was not until the régime of his successor Bishop Barry that this was realized when the college was opened at Caraquet. In 1873 an academy for girls was started at St. Louis, Kent County, under the direction of the Sisters of Notre Dame and an academy for boys was opened the same year.

No account of Bishop Rogers' life would be even partially complete if his solicitude for the lepers were left unmentioned. A Government leprosarium was being operated at Tracadie. A newspaper article appearing in 1883 under the caption "The horrors of that dreadful pest-house will never be known" described the inhuman conditions existing at that time.

Due to the utter hopelessness of effecting a cure, together with the dread fear of contamination, help was practically unavailable with the result that the institution was pitiably understaffed. The food was disgustingly prepared and medical attention was only occasional; the inmates lived in hunger, squalor, and despair.

On the occasion of his first visit to Tracadie, the deplorable state of the lepers touched the heart of Bishop Rogers. He immediately petitioned the Provincial Government for permission to bring a community of religious to care for the lepers. This offer was accepted.

Before arrangements could be made Bishop Rogers was obliged to make his *Ad Limina* visit to Rome but Father Paquet, his administrator, was authorized to act in his stead.

The Religious Hospitalers of St. Joseph of the Hôtel Dieu, Montreal, were approached. The saintly Mother Mance, with a view of ascertaining if sufficient volunteers were available, asked that a box be placed where those who were willing to make the sacrifice' might place their names. When the box was opened the name of every member of the congregation was there and the first name to be drawn was that of the Superior herself. I

The conditions of their accepting were that they be allowed, by the Province, complete freedom to follow their religious life and that provision be made for their material support. After some time these guarantees were granted and thus it was that the cross of the leper was lightened by the love of those who saw in him the likeness of Christ.

In 1868, at the request of the Bishop, these good nuns opened an academy and hospital at the episcopal seat of Chatham.

It might be mentioned that Bishop Rogers was a strong proponent of confederation and publicly made known his views on the matter.

On his *Ad Limina* visit to Rome, he was made an assistant at the Pontifical Throne. He also visited Belgium and collected the sum of eight thousand pounds for the furtherance of work in his diocese. (He also attended the historic Malienes Conference.)

With reference to the Vatican Council, which he attended, he did not register his name against the definition of the Dogma of Infallibility; rather his attitude was that the time was not propitious for such a definition.

Towards the end of his life, in 1897, the Right Reverend Thomas Barry was named co-adjutor.

When the diocese was erected in 1860 there were seven priests and three sisters. On his retirement in 1902, he left, in the diocese about sixty secular and religious priests and sixty churches; nine academies for young women, two religious orders of men, three of women; four hospitals and two orphan asylums.

Human judgments can at best only approximate that of the Divine, but it is not too much to say that when, in 1903, James Rogers, Bishop of Chatham, was called to the eternal accounting, it was the prayerful wish and founded hope of those who knew him that the verdict would be “well done.”

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