

Father Morriscy of Moody's Point*

by
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A Christmas Greeting, 1885.

Father to the sick and needy, friend alike to rich and poor,
All find cheerful, generous welcome, at your hospitable door;
The gratitude of all the people, truly have you won,
Heaven bless you for the noble work of mercy you have done!
Every heart has known your kindness, well may those you have relieved
Raise their hands on high to bless you for the good they have received. We
may boast your noble Priesthood, we may point with honest pride
In chaste Christian exaltations to our pastor true and tried,
Loving God first, holding His "well done" all other praise above,
Loving those entrusted to their care for His most blessed love.
In sunshine or in storm, in summer's heat or winter's cold,
At all hours, in all seasons, oft through sufferings untold,
Ministering to His children, in and out the Church's fold.

Many are the grateful hearts that fondly for your welfare pray
O, how kindly they salute you on this blessed Christmas Day!
Reverently around your honored name this tribute I entwine,
Receive, dear Reverend Father, this poor offering of mine.
If heart or brain or hand could frame aught worthy, Sir, of you,
Surely should I render honor to whom honor's richly due,
Christmas Greeting Renous sends you! Pray we all that you may see
Years on years of ministration by the noble Miramichi.

(Michael Whalen)

A rustic poet of the Miramichi area penned the above lines in 1885 honoring a priest whose name was praised by every tongue. These lines

* The career of Father William Morrissey, one of the most generally respected and beloved priests in New Brunswick during the later part of the nineteenth century, is a subject which should be investigated further by this Association. Such investigation would involve a close study of the parochial and episcopal records of the region in which he worked. The paper here presented is based in large part on oral reports of a number of persons who still remember Father Morrissey. These are supplemented by some newspaper paragraphs, and the whole is introduced by some verses which, if they do not entitle their author to high rank among our national poets, do bespeak the esteem and affection in which Father Morrissey was held.

express the love, devotion and esteem which the people of the region had for Father William Morriscy, who was revered as a “good priest” and a wonder-worker in healing bodily ills.

The Miramichi valley has contributed many interesting incidents to the ecclesiastical history of Canada. As far back as 1632 there is evidence of the white man in this valley. The vast expanse of water and its beautiful and fruitful shores naturally lured the early explorers to enter. We have stories of the intrepid missionaries travelling between Quebec and settlements in present Nova Scotia. Incidents at Burnt Church and Bois Hebert are in the records of the history of our country. Emigres from Louisburg wintered on its shores and the Denys had trading posts in the area.

Later came the English-speaking settlers. Many of these were Catholics and demanded clergy speaking their language. In these were the beginnings of the English-speaking section of the Bathurst diocese. The growth of this population was great enough by 1860 to require the nomination of a bishop. In that year the parish of Chatham was elevated to an episcopal see and Father Rogers of Halifax was named its first ordinary.

One of the original parishes of the new diocese was that of Sts. Peter and Paul, at Moody’s Point or Bartibogue. This parish is celebrating its first centennial this year. The site of the church is on a headland at the junction of the Miramichi and Bartibogue rivers. It is a beautiful site. The Hotel Dieu Sisters of Chatham, who were very close to Father Morriscy when he was at Bartibogue, today have their summer home on property adjoining the church; property which he bought.

The point is named after a man by the name of Moody who had a farm on that land and who, according to stories, is buried there in a birchbark coffin fashioned by Indians who were his friends. It was in this parish that the subject of this paper labored for thirty years.

William Morriscy was born in Halifax on April 16th, 1841. The spelling of the family name is to be noted. There are many men named after him and invariably they spell the name M-o-r-r-i-s-s-e-y, and that is the way it is written on his tomb-stone, but he was insistent that it be spelled with the “c”. His early life was that of the ordinary Catholic youth. He had ambitions of becoming a medical doctor and it appears he made some preliminary studies toward that end. He recognized that he had a vocation to the holy priesthood and followed the divine call, attaching himself to the lately-appointed Bishop of Chatham, by whom he was ordained on June 29th, 1864, at St. Basil, Madawaska County. His was the first ordination performed by Bishop Rogers.

His first appointment was as curate to Father Paquet at Caraquet, where he remained one year. There was a great lack of medical men in this area. The nearest doctors were in Chatham and Bathurst. The parish priest supplied this need and we find Father Paquet turning over the minor cases

to his new curate. Soon the keen medical sense of the young man was recognized and the care of the sick of the district was placed in his hands. Thus began one of the great stories in the ecclesiastical annals of the diocese.

The year 1865-66 was spent in Chatham where he taught rhetoric and penmanship at St. Michael's College, the predecessor of the present St. Thomas College.

For two years he was pastor of West Bathurst (1866-68) which lays claim to the title "The first parish in New Brunswick." In 1868 he founded the mission of Clifton and in the same year he was transferred to Renous where he remained as pastor until 1877. While here he served one of the oldest Catholic settlements on the Miramichi, the Forks or Howards. He organized the mission of Boiestown in 1874 and built the first church there in the same year. Boiestown is now a parish.

His final charge was given to him in 1877 when he was named to Bartibogue where he was to spend thirty fruitful years.

Among my earliest memories are the many stories concerning Father Morrissey. One of his missions as pastor of Bartibogue was Loggieville where I was brought up. My first contacts with our holy liturgy were made in the church which he served and in which were many memorials to his work. In the upstairs of the church, which is now the parish hall, was a furnished room used by him in his visits to the mission. The crucifix and pictures of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, which belonged to this room, can be seen as one enters the vestry of the beautiful new church in Loggieville.

We shall consider our subject in two sections. First we shall look at Father Morrissey's life as a physician and then consider him as a priest.

It has already been stated that Father Morrissey began to practise medicine when he was curate at Caraquet. It was during his pastorate at Bartibogue that his reputation as a healer of bodily ills increased and became continent-wide.

He had an early interest in medical science and must have made a serious study of it. It is told that when he made a voyage to Rome in 1894 he encountered a number of noted medical men on the boat with whom he avidly discussed medical problems. These men marvelled at his knowledge of their science.

Considering his practices one comes to the conclusion that his ability was primarily a keen sense of diagnosis. He would look kindly on his patient and make his judgment which was generally correct. Much of this was done on the street as he walked along. It was a common thing to see him surrounded by patients on the streets of Chatham where he would prescribe for them. Miss Louise Manny of Newcastle, who has done much research into the history of the Miramichi area, in a broadcast on Father Morrissey in 1951 says: "Father Morrissey's skill in diagnosis was uncanny. It was said that he could tell by one look at a man what disease he had – often before

there were any symptoms. He was a great believer in the medicinal properties of common herbs and used them with outstanding success, though he used drugs as well. But I am told that Father Morrissey never prescribed a narcotic drug.”

That his medical work was respected by the doctors in the district is evidenced by the fact that many of them were his friends. When the New Brunswick Medical Act was first passed by the Provincial Legislature, he and a Protestant minister from Boiestown were exempted and permitted to continue practice.

Patients came to him from all parts of Canada and United States. They came by train to Chatham and were then transported to Bartibogue by horse and wagon. Many also came by boat from Prince Edward Island and the Magdalen Islands. A man who conducted a livery stable in Newcastle told me that he took patients from far and near to Bartibogue, charging three dollars a trip. Another man told me that he entered a home in Minnesota and saw Father Morrissey’s picture hanging in a prominent place on a wall. It is said that he treated as many as twenty patients a day.

Certainly he had great success in treating his patients. Many were cured and I have the word of mouth of many of these people. Those he cured are very anxious to tell it and attribute it to the ministrations of Father Morrissey. His healings undoubtedly speak for themselves and are indisputable evidence that he was a great medical man.

Those interested in the history of medical research should be attracted to the stories of his successes with cancer. There were cases where cancer was diagnosed by the doctors of his time. Cures of these were performed by him. A lady, who was his secretary as a young girl, writes: “In cancer cases he was noted and from my nursing experience, which I took up after his death, I would say now almost miraculous.”

His medicines were popular when he lived. He left many of his prescriptions to be used after his death. A company was later formed to distribute these but it had little success. The president of this company was the late Richard O’Leary, brother of the late Archbishop O’Leary of Edmonton and the late Bishop O’Leary of Charlottetown.

It is a commonly accepted tradition that he never accepted any pay for his medical services. It is said that he followed a patient as far as Chatham in order to return a proffered twenty-dollar gold piece. His secretary states “He never accepted money that I knew of for his services, only when given as Mass Offerings.” Gifts to the church were not refused.

Father Morrissey was first and always a priest. If he has left a name as a great healer of bodies he has also been remembered as a man of God. The first person I asked for information regarding him began describing him as a priest. She painted a picture of his arrival in one of his missions, his hearing confessions, catechizing the youth, ministering to the sick. He never

neglected any care demanded as a pastor of souls. That which left the deepest impression on this woman was his practice of preparing his people for Mass by reciting with them the Acts of Faith, Hope, Charity and Contrition and other devotional prayers. To him the Mass was the center of worship.

Among his missions at Bartibogue was Burnt Church, an Indian Reservation. This was situated fifteen miles from his home and necessitated many difficult drives at all hours especially in winter when roads had to be opened by the people. The priest who cared for the Indians received a yearly salary of one hundred dollars.

In caring for his missions he had an interesting practice. In Burnt Church, Grand Dunes, Upper Bartibogue (at John Connell's home), and at Millbank (at Lyon's) where he built the present church, he was accustomed to spend three or four days twice a year conducting a mission for his flock. When he acquired Loggieville he went there every second Sunday.

He took a very special interest in the Indians and he was loved intensely by them. He liked good music and appreciated the interest of the Indians in singing and always encouraged them.

Many of the Catholics of Bartibogue today are descended from non-Catholics who were converted to the Church by Father Morriscy. He was indeed responsible for interesting many in the true Faith. Bartibogue is a small rural parish but in proportion to the other parishes of the English speaking section of the diocese it has more young people interested in higher education. The number of those receiving academic degrees is striking.

Despite all the demands made upon his time by people seeking help from bodily ills, Father Morriscy had time to open up missions, to build churches and to plan such undertakings for the future. I remember a pile of stone in front of the church in Loggieville which he had put there with the intention of building a larger edifice. That stone has been used in building the present church which is one of most beautiful small churches in the diocese. The old church in which he labored is a very convenient parish hall. The parishes of Boiestown, Renous and the missions of Burnt Church, Grand Dunes, and Millbank have living memorials of the priestly zeal of this holy man.

The lady mentioned above also stressed the fact that he was humble and charitable. Humility is the cornerstone of the life of perfection. Father Morriscy was a shining example of this virtue. His slow progress through the streets of Chatham is evidence of this. He never disdained to speak to anyone, rich or poor, Indian or White, those differing in religion and nationality. He had the same smile for all. He was the servant of the Prince of Peace and always conducted himself as such. When the Sister noticed that he was dying she mentioned the fact to him and suggested she call the priest. He replied, "As you wish, Sister."

Sacerdotal charity was personified in him. All who knew him recall

evidence of that. All were children of God and were served by him as such. In aiding God's children no phase of their lives was forgotten. He fed the hungry, clothed the naked, taught the ignorant, paying for the education of the youth, and performed the works of mercy in a high degree.

The estimation of his fellow priests is summed up in the words of an address read to him by the priests of the diocese on the occasion of his recovery from a serious illness in 1899: "No wonder, then, that your grave illness caused us painful apprehensions equalled in intensity only by our joy today as in unison we congratulate you warmly on your recovery, and give expression to the prayer that you may for many years to come continue in our midst to honor the sacerdotal calling by your spirit of self-sacrifice, your zeal in the cause of religion, and your unwearied charity toward the poor and suffering."

Miss Manny in her broadcast on his life makes this summary "In these places and, in fact, all over northern New Brunswick, his reputation still lives. His parishioners and patients had the feeling they came in contact with a rare and unusual personality. He was a truly great man and undoubtedly would have made his mark in a larger world than the country parishes he lived in." In another statement she says "The friend of all, the servant of humanity."

A note might be added regarding his physical appearance. Photos show him to be a handsome man whose appearance was indicative of the greatness that was his. One thing that must have been very striking was his blue eyes. I asked a person who knew him: "What do you remember about Father Morrissey?" Her reply was, "He had blue eyes."

Some of the stories told about him concern his handwriting. Some of these state that although he taught that subject he did not put the principles into practice. It is said that a patient presenting a prescription of his to a druggist in Saint John was asked to wait until the clerk who could read Father Morrissey's prescriptions came in. I do not believe that because I have seen many of his parish records and they are very legible and neat.

His final illness came in 1908. He remained some time at Bartibogue but was finally prevailed upon to go to the hospital in Chatham, where he died on March 30th of that year. On his final trip to the hospital he was accompanied by the late Bishop Louis O'Leary and Mgr. W. J. Conway, at present parish priest and Vicar General of Edmundston, N.B.

A short account of his funeral is given to us in a letter of Bishop Barry to his Vicar General, Mgr. Dugal, on April 3rd. He says, "Poor Father Morrissey was buried yesterday. The Cathedral could not contain the multitude. Governor Tweedie was present. Fredericton government was represented at Mr. Hazen's request. There were twenty-seven priests. Mgr. Varrily preached at the Pontifical Mass."

Mgr. Varrily leaves us a beautiful picture in words of the life of this holy

priest.

“He was beloved of man for his natural virtues and of God for his Christian virtues. His time, all he could spare from his duties, was absorbed by applicants for medical attention. He didn’t get regular meals, his hours of sleep were broken in upon, and hundreds who came from a distance to consult him were entertained at his house. His name was indeed a benediction to thousands whom he aided and comforted and to the communities in which he lived. Monuments were erected to millionaires, who gave of their superfluity to charity or the church, but Father Morrissey needed no monument of brass or stone to perpetuate his name. If such a monument were erected his epitaph could be written in two words “Transiit benefaciendo” – “He passed his life doing good.” His people had not realized that he was dangerously ill. They thought it was impossible that he should be taken from them so soon. They could not believe at first that Father Morrissey was dead. He had, like the Apostle, spent his life in the service of the Master and great would be his reward. A reward was promised to him who would give a cup of cold water to a sufferer, but how many cups of cold water had been given by Father Morrissey! How many little ones had he started on the way to heaven! How many afflicted persons had he relieved! How many sorrowing hearts had he comforted! Surely a beautiful crown in Heaven would be his. He who showed so much charity to his fellowmen should have received it from them and should be aided by their prayers. Even in his beautiful character, as seen in the sunlight of God, there were defects, just as a beam of sunlight reveals dust in the apparently pure atmosphere and these defects might retard his coming to his crown. Let us hope, if he is not already enjoying his reward that his time of probation will be short. Pray for him. He may be calling to you in the words of Job, ‘Have pity on me, have pity on me, at least ye my friends.’”

Another appreciation should be added, namely, that of the editor of the *Chatham World*, who wielded a mighty pen and whose editorials were ranked among the best in his day. This man was not a Catholic and considered himself a Freethinker. In an editorial on the occasion of Father Morrissey’s death he has the following to say:

“One man has departed this life who will be missed. One man whose place there is no one worthy to fill. There is none like him.

“Father Morrissey was a saintly man. He lived with only one thought and purpose – to do good and promote the happiness of his fellows. He was everybody’s friend, everybody’s servant. His time, talents, and goods were at the disposal of anyone who wanted them. White man or Indian, male or female, Christian or heathen, Catholic or Protestant – all were welcome to his services at all times.

“Goodness was not a religion with Father Morrissey – it was as George Eliot says “a sweet habit of the blood” in his case. It bubbled up in his

heart, sparkled in his eye, shone from his face, and fell from his lips in kindly counsel to all who sought his advice.

“He was as much respected and beloved by those of other communions and no communion as by his own, and seemed to love all men alike. He was often known to pray at the bedside of dying friends who were not of his faith, and his medical services were given as freely to one class as another. “A great physician was lost to the profession when Mr. Morrissey “took orders.” Ignorant or thoughtless persons speak of the “marvelous” cures but there was nothing marvelous about his success as a physician. He used the same medicines as regular physicians and succeeded by the same methods. His great strength lay in his power of diagnosis. He had the eye of the born physician, and a look or gesture would often be a revelation to him in regard to the physical ailment of a patient. This is why he had succeeded where many regular physicians had failed. If he had given all his time and talents to the profession he would have been the most famous practitioner in the land. And if he had sought election to Parliament, who could have successfully opposed him?

“Broadminded, tender-hearted, sympathetic, sweetly courteous, divinely charitable, loving mankind and loving God, Father Morrissey has lain down to rest after a life of unrelenting industry for the promotion of the physical and spiritual good of his fellow-men.

“He was the one and only man we ever knew who undoubtedly loved his neighbor as himself. The Beatitudes blessed such as he. He has gone to his reward.”

Father Morrissey’s mortal remains lie buried in the plot reserved for priests in St. Michael’s Cemetery, Chatham, close to those of the Bishop who ordained him and the other he served so well in the twilight of his priestly life. A stone marks the place and on it is inscribed the few words: “In memory of Father Morrissey. Born, April 16, 1841. Died, March 30, 1908. He passed his life doing good.”