

Devotion to Our Lady at Cap de la Madeleine

by
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Jacques Cartier may possibly have had a Rosary in his pocket on the evening of October 7th, 1535 when he wrote into his diary the first record of the place that is now known as Cap-de-la-Madeleine. He may even have said that Rosary in much the same way as we say it today. But the chances of this are not great. It is more likely that he said his beads according to one of the diverse forms that were in the span of his lifetime being focussed to unity through the efforts of the Dominican Fathers and their Confraternity of the Rosary. He quite likely prayed or “read” a rosary of 150 mysteries, one for each bead. These mysteries probably took the form of brief considerations added to each bead after the Holy Name, where we now have the second half of the Hail Mary. Or his rosary may have had six decades plus the three extra beads which our Rosary has retained from this old Brigittine form.

For at this particular moment, when the new world was very new indeed, the Rosary was just beginning to take definitive form. And just as the New World was on the threshold of a then unrealized greatness, so was the Rosary taking the first steps towards the paramount position among popular devotions that it holds in the Church today.

Although the Rosary had by this time become a distinctly Marian devotion, it still retained association with its older form as a string of 150 Our Fathers said by non-clerics as a substitute for the 150 psalms of the Office. We find evidence of this in English and German language usage which kept referring to the beads as Paternosters long after they were used to count Hail Marys. Thus a report from the Venetian Embassy in London in 1496 records that the English “all say Mass every day, and say many Paternosters in public, the women carry long strings of beads in their hands” ... And St. Thomas More, who died in the Tower of London just three months before Jacques Cartier first looked upon the shore of Cap-de-la-Madeleine, tells. how the old folks of his day, “walked pit pat upon a pair of pattens, with the staff in one hand and the Rosary (or Pater noster) in the other.”

The Rosary and the New World practically took shape together. In 1568, the second part was officially added to the Hail Mary. By 1571 we have Elizabethan England looking upon possession of a pair of beads as sufficient evidence of Catholicism and something to be forbidden by penal law. One such order in that year said: “No person to wear beads, or pray either in Latin

or in English on beads or knots, or any other superstitious things.” And in 1616, just one year after the first Mass was said in the Trois-Rivières area, there is record of a man named Thomas Atkinson having been convicted and executed at York on no other evidence than that a pair of beads was found in his possession.

So, between Jacques Cartier’s first visit to this area and the arrival of its first missionaries nearly one hundred years later, the Rosary had become a recognized badge of the faith as well as a potent weapon in the battle to spread it throughout the world.

It is no surprise then, that when the missionaries came to civilize and christianize this part of New France they brought with them the Rosary. Their zealous devotion to Our Lady, especially through her rosary, is part of the total picture of the heroic missionary epoch in the history of Canada.

For that reason, I do not want to overstress this early period in a paper which is primarily concerned with the chain of circumstances which have made the little city of Cap-de-la-Madeleine, the Marian heart of Canada and the guardian of Canada’s Shrine to the Queen of the Holy Rosary.

It is perhaps too tempting to dwell upon the glories of our Catholic origins and interpret everything good of the present day in terms of our splendid and fruitful heritage. It is true that we may justifiably and with good conscience yield to this temptation. Because the past does bear fruit in the present. But in the case of the direct line between the present National Canadian Shrine of Our Lady of the Cape and the Marian apostolicity of our first missionaries, we may be guilty of some historical inaccuracy, of failure to place recognition where it is due, and of blindness towards a rather significant fact about the actual origins of the shrine if we allow our eagerness to make the direct connection with pioneer days distract us from another aspect of the story. Not, we must hasten to add, that the connection does not exist or must not be made. It is there and we must pay it due tribute. But the historical record tells us that the shrine had its direct origin specifically in a prolonged and serious lapse from the tradition of Marian devotion, that it owes its existence, under God, and His Mother, to the zeal of a little-known parish priest, and that it stands forty years ahead of time as a Canadian Fatima showing the way for a return to God through Mary by means of devotion to her Rosary.

But let us first pass quickly over the evidence of Marian devotion in the early days of the Cape, and at the same time touch upon the beginnings of the little Church which stands today as Canada’s Shrine to Mary.

We must be careful not to make these early manifestations of Marian piety in this place bear more weight than may justly be given them. Such things as the naming of churches and fiefs in praise of Our Lady, building shrines in her honor and promoting public devotion to her were by no means unique marks of Catholic life in early Cap-de-la-Madeleine. Quebec, after all, is jealous of its historical attachment to the Mother of God; Montreal was

her special city, Ville Marie; and Huronia was dotted with missions bearing her name and proclaiming her virtues. We need only say enough to show that Mary was held in specially high honour in the Cap-de-la-Madeleine of those days.

To begin with, Cap-de-la-Madeleine was known as Cap Trois-Rivières and our first records simply regard it as part of the “region of Trois-Rivières.” The first missionaries to this region were Recollets and they did not leave much on record of relevance to this paper. Their departure in 1629 left the place without missionaries and the Indians anxious to have a permanent French ‘habitation’ at the mouth of the St. Maurice River. In 1634, Champlain heeded their request and on July 4th of that year, Monsieur La Violette came to found the future city of Trois-Rivières. With him were two future martyrs, the Jesuits St. John de Brebeuf and St. Anthony Daniel. The next day another boat arrived and with it another Jesuit, Father Davost. In September, the Superior of the Jesuits in Canada, Father LeJeune arrived to establish a mission. Accompanying him was the priest who was to take charge of the new church, Father Jacques Buteux, S.J. They arrived on September 8th, Feast of the Nativity of Our Lady, and consecrated the mission, in accordance with a vow made by the Jesuits the previous year, to her Immaculate Conception.

With the arrival of the Jesuits, we receive the benefit of their detailed *Journals* and *Relations*. Whatever concerns the Three Rivers area in these accounts has been conveniently dug out for us by a solid tradition of historians of this region. Three of them to whom we can readily turn for exact information are with us today at these meetings: Msgr. Albert Tessier, M. Hervé Biron and the young historian of the St. Maurice, Yves Thériault. From their work, it will be sufficient for our purposes to take one or two examples of how quickly and how thoroughly devotion to the Mother of God was spread through this region by her first apostles.

A passage from the Jesuit *Relations* of 1651 does much to sum up the atmosphere of Marian piety which took hold of the region. After telling of Iroquois raids on the Trois-Rivières region, it goes on to say: “we have only been able to carry on by a miracle. Our habitants attribute their preservation to the extraordinary recourse they have had to the Blessed Virgin, to whom they have a little shrine in each house, one being dedicated to Our Lady of Liesse, others to Our Lady of Virtues, of Perpetual Help, of Good News, of Victory, and a number of other titles by which the Blessed Virgin is honoured in various places of Christendom. It is an ordinary devotion of these poor habitants to visit these little shrines on various days of the week, principally on Saturdays when the gatherings are greatest; and in each house, morning and evening, everyone assembles to say the Litany of the Blessed Virgin; it is ordinarily the head of the family who leads the prayers and to whom the others, women, children and servants, respond.” (Thwaites v. 36. n. 166.)

The account of this ‘ordinary devotion’ of the inhabitants of this region is surely extraordinary enough to indicate special devotion to Our Lady. One more incident from the records of those days may be taken as further evidence of the stress laid by this region’s first missionary upon devotion to Our Lady and in particular to her Rosary. It is taken from Father Buteux’s *Journal de Voyage* and is quoted in M. Theriault’s *Apostolat Missionnaire en Mauricie*. Father Buteux has arrived at the camping place of the Attikameki Indians on the hazardous voyage which made him the first white man to penetrate the upper reaches of the St. Maurice river. To his surprise and joy, he discovered that the Captain of the tribe had brought back the instructions he had received on his fur-trading journeys to the mouth of the St. Maurice, and passed them on to the others. He remarks specifically his astonishment on finding on arrival in this place where no missionary and no white man had been before, “that all had their rosaries and knew well their prayers, one having taught them to the others.” (The. 53.)

There is little need to multiply instances to show that devotion to Our Lady and to her rosary was most thoroughly implanted among both whites and Indians in these regions.

But it is with this obviously Marian-minded apostle, Father Buteux, that we may cross the St. Maurice River and start speaking of the Cape as a place of its own. For it was on this tongue of sandy land facing the habitation of Trois-Rivières at the mouth of the river which tumbles down out of the heart of the forest, that the Indians were wont to congregate when they came to barter their furs. And it was there that Father Buteux went to meet them and teach them the Rosary which they carried back to their forest cabins. As early as 1635 we find the Jesuit *Relations* speaking of appeals to Champlain for French workmen to come to the Cape. The missionary offered to pay and feed these men “in proportion to the time they would use them to plough and cultivate with the Indians: if I could have a dozen of them, this would be the best means of winning the Indians.” A few years later these efforts bore fruit and Fr. Buteux had some Montaignais and Abenakis attempting to colonize land on the Cape with the help of a few French. The project had its ups and down until, in 1649, Fr. Buteux finally succeeded in settling the 14 French pioneers of the Cape on land which they were to cultivate through many labours and many trials.

In 1651, dispute about the land on Cap Trois-Rivières (and about Father Buteux’s use of it to help his Indians) came to an end when the inspiring accounts of the Jesuit *Relations* led a French priest to turn over to the Jesuits a grant of land he had received from the Company of One Hundred Associates. The priest was Father Jacques de la Ferté, of the church of St. Magdalene in Chiteaudun, France. The land was the very ground we are

meeting on this morning,* the original parish of this area. Father Buteux named it for the benefactor's own parish in France, Sainte-Madeleine. The name of the parish became the name of the place. Cap Trois-Rivières became Cap-de-la-Madeleine.

The Jesuits lost no time. The grant was dated March 20th, 1651 and the *Journal des Jésuites* for November 21st of the same year tells us that they "began to live in the Cape on the day of the Presentation." They took formal possession of their seigneurie on May 22nd of the following year. While carrying on their missionary work, they built up the village to provide better protection against raiding Iroquois. They also made various grants of land, one of which went, in 1656, to Pierre Boucher. In 1659, this familiar figure in Canadian history, built on his land, which he had called 'fief de Marie' the Cape's first permanent chapel. It was a wooden building about twenty feet square, situated about a mile east from the present shrine. In 1661, he decided that this little church would be safer from the Iroquois if it were moved inside the palisaded village. The Jesuits readily granted him a plot of land for the purpose and the structure was moved to a site a little north of the present shrine church. This church continued to serve until the Jesuits left Cap-de-la-Madeleine in 1680 and for 34 years afterwards.

During the regime of the Jesuits we learn that an hospital was established at the Cape under the title Our Lady of Pity. We also find much about troubles with the Iroquois and about some little difficulty over the inroads of *eau-de-vie* upon the traditional piety of the mission village. Of this piety we have record in the Jesuit *Relations* of 1663 where Sillery and Cap-de-la-Madeleine are coupled together in very flattering terms. The passage reads: "These 2 colonies are enclosed like 2 monasteries; in them one practices all kinds of exercises of piety and instruction is given at leisure, making the two Forts like two academies of virtue."

In 1665 Trois-Rivières no longer appears as a residence in the Jesuit Catalogue. It is attached to Cap-de-la-Madeleine and served from there. In 1667 we find Father Marquette listed as resident at the Cape in the capacities of missionary and student of the language. From 1676 on, there is only a lone Jesuit priest in residence and in 1680, with the recall of the ageing Fr. Druillettes to Quebec, the Jesuits disappear from the Cap-de-la-Madeleine scene.

In the following years, it would appear that the Cape had returned to the status of a simple mission. This is a rather surprising fact since in 1681 the Cape was larger, from a point of view of population, than Trois-Rivières. It counted 38 homes and 204 inhabitants against 26 homes and 150 souls for its neighbour.

* This paper was being read at a session held at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Cape, Cap-de-la-Madeleine.

In 1685 (or 1694: the records contradict each other) Father Paul Vachon was named parish priest and we have another distinctive Marian contribution towards the history of the Cape. The records tell us that Fr. Vachon was a priest of much merit and an apostle in the Marian tradition of the early missionaries. He proved this by establishing at the Cape one of the oldest Confraternities of the Rosary established in Canada. The document creating this Confraternity is still preserved at the shrine of Our Lady of the Cape as one of its most precious heritages. It was signed by Antonin Cloche, Master General of the Dominican Order, under date of May 11th, 1694. The counter-signature of Bishop de St. Vallier was added three years later, on October 4th, 1697.

The devotion of Father Vachon served to rouse the parish of the Cape at least a little bit from the tepidity it had begun to slide into. But we have the evidence of a letter written by Bishop de St. Vallier on the state of the missions in New France to tell that the once prospering parish was beginning to show signs of at least physical neglect. The letter complains that all the churches he visited on both sides of the river, with the sole exception of Three Rivers were “either ready to fall into ruins or so deprived of the most necessary things that the poverty I saw affected me sensibly.” That was in 1713. The following spring the bishop made another voyage along the same route and took the opportunity of dropping in on Cap-de-laMadeleine and ordering them to build a new church.

This new church is the one that has now become famous as the old shrine of Our Lady of the Cape.

The bishop’s prescriptions and exhortations about the new church are entered in the archives of the Cape under date of May 13th, 1714. But the actual building only took place from 1717 to 1720.

One rather interesting development came out of the indigence of the parishioners of Cap-de-la-Madeleine. Since poverty prevented them from building the church themselves, it was built by contributions which came from practically all of New France. From Quebec, the Bishop gave the first donation, Three Rivers followed and then Montreal made a substantial contribution. So with these three centres and the parishes on the south shore of the St. Lawrence joining together, virtually the whole of Catholic Canada of that day participated in raising the little church which is now Canada’s shrine to Mary.

The detailed entries made in the parish records about the building of this old shrine church provide us with one more interesting historical fact. The beams from the original wooden structure were used in the new stone building. Later investigation has verified the presence of these ancient beams in the structure which stands today. So we have in the present shrine some timbers from the church built by Pierre Boucher on his Fief Sainte-Marie in 1659 and moved to what are now the shrine grounds in 1661.

Although Father Vachon has gone into the history of the Cape as the

builder of the Shrine church and as a man of outstanding strength and piety, there is little record of any increase in Marian devotion at the Cape during his régime.

His death in 1729 marks the beginning of a period of obscurity and decline which saw Cap-de-la-Madeleine fall all but completely from the grace of its early years. From that year until 1844, Cap-de-la-Madeleine had no resident pastor. The spiritual results were devastating. The Cape was plunged into a darkness of faith rather shockingly symbolized by the very extinction of the sanctuary lamp. We learn of this in a letter from the Bishop of Quebec, dated June 30th, 1840, granting the renewal of a sad permission to the once proud parish: "We have continued the permission already given not to keep the sanctuary lamp lit because of the lack of means of the church and the difficulty of having anyone capable of looking after the care of the said lamp..."

At the time this permission was granted, the Cape was being served by the last of a series of missionaries working out from the neighbouring parishes of Trois-Rivières and Champlain. He was Father Thomas Cooke who in 1852 became the first bishop of Trois-Rivières and who never lost his interest in the troubled little parish.

From 1844, when a resident priest was finally appointed, until 1864, a succession of pastors tried vainly to restore the fervor of old St. Madeleine. There were some indications of progress and renewed effort on the parts of the one or two families who remained active and faithful. Two incidents in particular have bearing on the future shrine though they do not seem to have had any great effect on the parish at the time.

In 1845, the first of the new line of pastors, Father L. Tourigny, obtained from the Bishop of Quebec a renewal of indulgences for the Confraternity and a new privilege for the Rosary altar. The Bishop's statement as recorded in the parish records of his pastoral visit on July 5th, 1845 says: "In virtue of an indult of the Holy See dated March 6th, 1842 we grant the said Confraternity, inasmuch as it has need, all the indulgences. We further wish that the sacred stone at present used in the main altar... be imbedded in the table of the altar of the Rosary chapel so that Holy Mass can be said there."

Then in 1854, when Father N. Kéroak was pastor, the statue which has since become world famous as the 'miraculous' statue of Our Lady of the Cape was donated for the Rosary Altar by a parishioner, M. Zepherin Dorval.

The statue appears to have replaced an older statue which is mentioned in the parish records as "The Golden Virgin" and which seems to have disappeared without trace. The new donation was a statue of the Immaculate Conception showing Our Lady as she appeared to Catherine Labouré at Paris in 1830 in the apparition of the Miraculous Medal. It is worth noting here the coincidence of dates which brought the future miraculous statue to Cap-de-la-Madeleine in the very year of the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

However, there was no appreciable change in the parish until the year 1864 when Bishop Thomas Cooke appointed his private secretary, the young, brilliant and devout Father Lue Desilets to the difficult pastorate. Even then, it was only after three years of beating his head against the hard-hearted stubbornness of his parishioners that an unusual incident, coming at a moment of particular failure, inspired Father Desilets with the answer to his problem — the same answer Our Lady was later to give the world at Fatima — bring the people back to God through Mary by means of her Rosary. And in that moment devotion to Our Lady at Cap-de-la-Madeleine, as it is known today throughout the Christian world, was truly born.

The contrast of two quotations will give us a sharp idea of the circumstances which brought the shrine of Our Lady of the Cape into existence. One of them is from the archives of the shrine. It is a journal entry by Father Duguay who later became Father Desilets' curate and was a participant in the events which made Cap-de-la-Madeleine a shrine. He is quoting Father Desilets about his first years at the Cape and he writes: "He used to tell me often about the difficulties he met with at the beginning of his ministry. No more than ten people in the parish would listen to him. The others had been completely won over by the liberals of Trois-Rivières; and it sometime happened that after the sermon a certain influential person, the secretary of the municipality, spoke at the Church door against the priest."

Now let us put against that the passage already cited from the *Jesuit Relations* of 1663. You will remember that it spoke of Sillery and Cap-de-la-Madeleine as follows: "These two colonies are enclosed like two monasteries; in them one practices all kinds of exercises of piety and instruction is given at leisure, making the two forts like two academies of virtue."

If we consider what has happened between these two statements, we will see that the little town of Cap-de-la-Madeleine at this period in the middle of the Nineteenth Century affords a microcosmic view of what was taking place—and is still taking place throughout Western Civilization. It gives a briefcapsuled picture of the breakdown of Christendom. A Christian people not only fallen away from the faith but actually turned against it in Voltarian cynicism and under a dominant materialism.

This is, in the small compass of a little French Canadian village, the same situation as we had in Portugal before the Fatima apparitions of 1917. And the answer Fr. Desilets found was the answer Our Lady gave Portugal and the world when she appeared to the three young children.

The incident which set in motion the chain of events which made Cap-de-la-Madeleine an internationally known shrine took place on the eve of the Feast of the Ascension in 1867. Fr. Desilets had waited for hours in the sacristy for his parishioners to come to confession. Not a single soul came. The discouraged pastor made his way into the little chapel to pour out his heart before the tabernacle. As he entered the darkening church, he heard a scuffling sound and looked through the gloom towards it. What he saw made

him start with dismay. In front of the Rosary altar which held the statue donated by Zepherin Dorval, a pig tossed its head up and down, gnashing through its teeth a rosary that had been lying on the floor.

The priest was overcome at the desecration. Like the saintly man he was, he knelt before God and blamed himself for the depths to which the little church had fallen. He saw in the incident a reprimand to himself and a message. The way to return the people to God was to lead them to Mary by means of her rosary.

He started at Mass the next morning. Holding up the mangled rosary, he told them the story. "The people drop the rosary," he said, "and the pigs pick it up."

Like a good apostle, Father Desilets began to fulfil his resolve of increasing devotion to Our Lady by working on himself. He gave himself to study and meditation on the Mother of God and the Rosary. The immediate results were so rewarding that on November 5th of the same year, in thanksgiving for the results already obtained, he consecrated himself to Our Lady of the Rosary and took a solemn promise to work with all his strength for the propagation of devotion to her. It is perhaps possible to say that in that vow, taken just 85 years ago, lies the origin of the Shrine of Our Lady of the Cape.

From that year on, we can read in the Register of the Confraternity of the Holy Rosary, the record of Father Desilets' success in winning souls to the regular recitation of the rosary. During the next ten years, page after page of names testify to the fidelity with which he kept his promise, not only within the boundaries of the parish, but outside of it as far as he could reach.

It was only six years after Father Desilets' momentous resolution that the parish church, the church that had been abandoned, the church in which even the sanctuary lamp had been extinguished, the church at whose door anti-clericals came to mock the priest and the faith, this same church had become much too small for its fervent parishioners, parishioners who were the same people who before the restoration of devotion to the rosary had left it empty and neglected.

A new and much larger church was necessary. Bishop Lafière of Trois-Rivières gave the necessary order for the erection of the large parish church which stands opposite the little shrine chapel today.

It was 1877 before work could be started. Then the problem of getting stone had to be faced. The Cape is a sandy and marshy promontory. The nearest source of stone was on the other side of the river. It was decided that the old church would be torn down and its stone used for the new one. The remaining stone would be quarried on the south shore of the St. Lawrence and brought across the ice in the winter.

The next two years saw the work of quarrying and preparing the stone going on near St. Angele on the other side of the river. By the end of November 1878, the stone was ready and Father Desilets started the parishioners praying for the freezing of the river so that it could be brought across

and the building started. Each Sunday after High Mass, the curate, Father Duguay, took his place at the side altar of the Confraternity of the Rosary before the statue of Our Lady and led the congregation in the rosary for this intention.

Since the river at this point is more than a mile wide and the current very rapid, a solid covering of ice does not form on it readily. The winter passed on through January and February without the least sign of the river freezing over.

Father Desilets never lost his confidence in Our Lady's intercession. After applying to the Bishop for permission, he made a vow that if the river froze sufficiently to bring the stone across, he would preserve the old church and dedicate it as a shrine of the Holy Rosary.

But the river opposite the Cape remained open right up till the middle of March. Break-up time had arrived. The weather had softened, ice-floes from farther up the river were sailing out to sea, and all human hope of the river freezing solidly across from shore to shore was gone. But Father Desilets continued to pray.

The prayer was answered on the night of March 14th, 1879. A violent storm dislodged large ice-floes from the banks of the river and from further upstream and caused them to swing out into the river in front of Cap-de-la-Madeleine. Sudden cold and snow provided a thin coating on the surface of the water which so joined the blocks of ice immediately in front of the chapel that they formed a bridge from one side to the other. On the 15th, a Saturday, the parishioners of the Cape were greeted by the totally unexpected sight of the river frozen solidly across. We have the detailed account of the curate Father Duguay of how he and a group of men went out that evening after Vespers and made a fearful crossing of the river. He records that in some places they had to hasten over what was no more than a surface of frozen snow. A stick could be poked through into the water. In places, the lead man, groping his way back on hands and knees in the dark plunged his hand into the naked St. Lawrence. Between 50 and 80 men worked till eleven that night and started again at three in the morning flooding water over the precarious route they had found to make it more solid. As they worked they could see a light in one of the presbytery windows. "There's no need to fear," Father Duguay records their words, "the pastor is saying his rosary. It is his Hail Marys that are holding us up." That was when the roadway of ice was given its name, The Bridge of Rosaries.

The flooding continued, according to Father Duguay's account, till March 18th when a sufficiently solid roadway had been obtained from bank to bank.

A contemporary newspaper account from *Le Journal des Trois-Rivières*, April 7th, 1879, describes the corvée: "On the 19th all the faithful gathered at High Mass and begged the powerful intercession of St. Joseph, for the successful transportation of the stone for the church. Having piously heard

Mass, and recited the Rosary, they were off, in their workingmen's attire, to the south shore. A hundred sleighs carried the men across, the farmers as drivers, and other volunteers armed with pick-axes and shovels. The weather was ideal and favored the triumph of prayer and love for the House of God... The ice-bound river was dotted with slow-moving sleighs, heavily laden with stone... and this lasted for eight full days, without the least hitch or halt... Hardly had the last load reached the land on the Cape shore, than the ice broke loose and was swept swiftly down the river."

From the historian's point of view there is abundant testimony to this remarkable bridge of ice. In addition to the detailed account written down by Father Duguay who participated in the event, and preserved in the Shrine archives, we have contemporary newspaper reports as quoted above and the eyewitness accounts of men of the Cape, some of them still alive, who participated in the work. In 1949 Father Hermann Morin, O.M.I., gathered the testimony of ten of these who were still vigorous in mind and body and still came to visit the shrine. Their testimony, which is on record in the shrine archives, corroborates the account of Father Duguay and unanimously witnesses to the belief of the people that the bridge was of supernatural origin, a direct and humanly impossible answer to the Rosaries of Father Desilets.

It goes without saying that this wonder attracted much attention to Cap-de-la-Madeleine. During the eight days the phenomenon lasted, the river bank was crowded with spectators from Three Rivers and the surrounding territory. Word soon spread and, long before the old chapel was formally dedicated as a shrine, spontaneous popular devotion brought pilgrims to pray the Rosary at the foot of Our Lady's statue on the altar of the Confraternity.

The new church rose rapidly and it was dedicated on October 3rd, 1880, the feast of the Holy Rosary. On May 7th, 1883, five years before the dedication of the Shrine as a place of pilgrimage, the first organized pilgrimage recorded in the Shrine archives came to the Cape. It came from Trois-Rivières and made the four mile journey on foot. Another coincidence of Marian dates has this beginning of pilgrimages to the Shrine taking place in the same year that Pope Leo XIII issued the first of his Rosary encyclicals, thus inaugurating his world-wide Rosary campaign.

On June 22nd, 1888, came the official dedication of the Shrine and a further prodigy by which Our Lady seems to have set her seal upon the work of Father Desilets and manifested her approval of her new-born shrine.

As he celebrated the High Mass, Father Desilets looked up at the statue, now enthroned over the main altar, thanking the Blessed Virgin for this fulfilment of the vow he had made years ago. The sermon was preached by the Franciscan, Father Frederic Jansoone, who had first come to the Cape in 1881 and immediately become Father Desilets colleague in zeal for the promotion of devotion to Our Lady of the Cape. That sermon, preached in a

little church then little known outside the region between Three Rivers and Quebec, has a note of prophecy in it. Father Frederic said:

“In years to come, this will be the Shrine of Mary; pilgrims will come here from all the families of the parish, from all the parishes of the diocese, and from all the dioceses of Canada. Yes, this little House of God will be too small to contain the crowds that will come to invoke the power and kindness of the sweet Virgin of the Most Holy Rosary.”

On the evening of that day, towards seven o’clock, occurred the event known as the Prodigy of the Eyes. A cripple named Pierre Lacroix had come to implore Our Lady of the Cape’s aid in her newly-dedicated shrine. He was brought to the chapel in his wheel chair by Father Desilets and Father Frederic.

We have sound historical testimony for what followed. Father Duguay, who had his information from the three participants has written an account preserved in the Shrine archives. The same archives preserve the sworn and notarized statement of Pierre Lacroix. Recent research made by Father Onesime, O.F.M., in the Franciscan archives at Trois-Rivières in preparation for the introduction of Father Frederic’s cause at Rome have determined that Father Frederic himself is the author of a front page article which appeared in the Montreal *La Presse* on May 22nd, 1897, giving a detailed account of the event.

Here is how the incident is described by Raphael F. Brown, of the United States Library of Congress, one of the leading authorities on the life of Fr. Frederic and on the history of the Shrine of Our Lady of the Cape, in *Our Lady of the Cape* magazine, June 1947:

“After a few moments of prayer with closed eyes, Pierre Lacroix looked up at the lovely features of Our Lady’s statue, which the two priests were already contemplating. Suddenly all three were struck with breath-taking amazement; *the face of the statue was becoming visibly animated with life and feeling!* In speechless astonishment they clearly perceived that its normally lowered eyelids were now opening, revealing two remarkably beautiful dark eyes which looked directly ahead toward the open door and the setting sun beyond. They seemed to be gazing fixedly at some invisible sight to the west, in the direction of Trois-Rivières, Montreal, and the rest of Canada.

“Not daring to move or say a word, Pierre Lacroix just stared. But soon the impulsive pastor of the Cape could not control his excitement any longer. Getting to his feet, Father Desilets went over to Good Father Frederic, who was on Lacroix’s left, and exclaimed in an awed whisper:

‘Do you see it?’

‘‘Yes,’ replied the friar slowly. ‘The statue has opened its eyes, hasn’t it?’

‘Well, yes... But has it really?’

At this point Pierre Lacroix summoned up enough courage to murmur: 'I have been seeing it too for several minutes.'

"But the two prudent priests were not yet ready to accept the phenomenon objectively. They moved around before the altar to make perfectly sure that they were not being deceived by an unusual but natural optical illusion. However they soon had to admit that no mistake was possible. They were indeed witnessing a truly supernatural marvel. The face of the statue, with its open eyes, had taken on an entirely new appearance as it gazed out over North America. Our Lady's features were now both stern and sad, full of majestic gravity and dignity, as befits a heavenly queen on a historic feast-day of lasting significance for the spiritual welfare of a whole people..."

It seems as though this day was for Father Desilets the completion of something that had started in this same place 22 years ago on the evening he found a pig chewing an abandoned rosary before a forgotten statue in an empty and long neglected chapel. The work he had set himself that evening, bringing his people back to God through Mary by means of her rosary, was well under way. His part of it was finished. Just nine weeks later, on August 30th, 1888, he died suddenly in his brother's home at Trois-Rivières. At the actual moment of his death, Father Frederic who had then no knowledge of that event and no reason to expect it, was kneeling before the statue of Our Lady of the Cape in the old chapel. As he looked up he saw tears run down its cheeks. When told one hour later of his friend's sudden death, his own tears flowed too. Years later, when questioned about this, the good Father Frederic would answer, "The Blessed Virgin suffered in seeing one of her good servants die."

Father Duguay became Father Desilets successor and he found an indefatigable apostle in the work of promoting devotion to Our Lady of the Cape in the good Father Frederic. It would require a separate paper to do justice to Father Frederic's part in building up the shrine as a place of pilgrimage.

It was due to his promotional work among the Franciscan Tertiaries that the English-speaking Catholics of Montreal, members of the Third Order under the direction of Father Ambrose, O.F.M., started coming to the Shrine in 1896. And it is to them we owe the shamrock crown which is now worn by Canada's Madonna and the golden heart she bears on her breast.

The crown and the heart were the gift of Irish Catholic ladies, Franciscan Tertiaries of Montreal, who donated the gold and jewels from their personal ornaments with the promise not to replace them. Two pilgrimages, on June 4th and August 15th, 1898, made formal presentation of the heart and crown respectively.

Several documents in the archives of the Franciscan Commissary of the Holy Land, at Trois-Rivières, preserve the record of the donation and the names of some of the donors.

These archives contain a copy of the notarial act made before “Mtre William Henry Cox, Public Notary for the Province of Quebec, residing and practising at the City of Montreal” and “Executed under the Number Seven hundred and Fourteen of the deeds of record in the office of the undersigned Notary,” by the crown and the heart were deeded to the “Œuvre et Fabrique of the Parish of Sainte Marie Magdaline du Cap de la Magdeline,” subject to the conditions set forth. The three conditions stated were to the effect that the heart and crown be kept on the statue as intended by the donors or else returned to the trustees or their successors. Father Duguay, as pastor, signed for the donee and Sarah Warren, Marianne Barry, M. J. Gethin and Catherine Mundy for the donors under date of June 14th, 1898.

It is interesting to notice in passing that by this private coronation of Our Lady of the Cape, the Montreal Irish Catholics anticipated by six years the papal permission for coronation of a Madonna which is only granted after certain rigid requirements have been satisfied.

From the first pilgrimage in 1883 down to the present day, the history of the shrine has been one of steady growth and an annually increasing number of pilgrims.

By 1898, the work of attending to the pilgrims had become too much for Father Duguay, even with the zealous help of Father Frederic. The religious orders were called upon for aid and Jesuits, Dominicans, Franciscans and Oblates took turns in serving the shrine.

Finally, the appeals of Father Duguay and Father Frederic that the perpetual care of the shrine should be assured by assigning it to the guardianship of a religious order was heard by Bishop Cloutier of Three Rivers. In 1902 the Bishop issued a pastoral letter (M.E.T.R. Vol. VII, p. 404) welcoming the Oblates of Mary Immaculate as Guardians of the Shrine of Our Lady of the Cape. A mere two years later, speaking at the shrine on the occasion of the formal coronation of the statue by order of His Holiness Pope Pius X, the bishop was able to praise the new guardians in the following terms: “Two years have barely passed, and yet what changes have already been accomplished both in the temporal and in the spiritual domain! The church has been completed, the Shrine enlarged and restored, a splendid monastery has replaced the old presbytery. Pilgrimages have become from day to day more numerous and more beautiful, devotion to Mary has greatly increased in our midst, thanks to the preaching of the Fathers... Here certainly are accomplishments which bear eloquent witness to the labours and the zeal of these good workers of the Lord.”

The occasion on which His Excellency spoke was one of the most glorious in the history of the Cape. Rome had decided favourably on the question of whether or not the Shrine at Cap-de-la-Madeleine possessed the three main requirements for the privilege of coronation of its Madonna: antiquity of devotion to the Virgin; supernatural favours obtained through her intercession; the concourse of the faithful in sufficient numbers. So on

that day, October 12th, 1904, in the presence of the Apostolic Delegate to Canada, fifteen archbishops and bishops, many hundreds of priests and a crowd estimated at 15,000, Bishop Cloutier, acting in the name of Pope Pius X, solemnly placed upon the head of Our Lady of the Cape the golden crown which the Irish of Montreal had donated to her six years previously.

The next important step in recognition of the Shrine came in 1909 when the Fathers of the First Plenary Council of Quebec speaking officially for the Church in Canada made a statement on the shrine which has generally been interpreted since as establishing it as a national place of pilgrimage to Our Lady for all Canadians. They said (Official Acts No. 575):

“It is desirable that the faithful of Canada go in pious pilgrimage to Cap-de-la-Madeleine where a confraternity of the Holy Rosary has been in existence for more than 200 years and where a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, crowned by Pius X, is the object of solemn manifestations of faith and piety.”

A few statistics will convey a rapid idea of the growth of the shrine in the past fifty years. During the twenty years from the first pilgrimage in 1883 until 1903 it is estimated that 500,000 pilgrims visited the shrine. This year, 1952, there were 200,000 participating in the ceremonies for the Feast of August 15th alone and the total for the single year will be well over 800,000. On the eve of the feast of the Assumption more than one hundred priests were hearing confessions on the shrine grounds and more than 40,000 people by actual count of Hosts distributed received Holy Communion between midnight and noon.

It is such spiritual miracles rather than the hundreds of reports of temporal favours which come to the shrine each month that are the chief glory of this great Marian devotion built in the little city of Cap-de-la-Madeleine from the humble beginnings made by a little known secular priest.

The Cap-de-la-Madeleine which Father Desilets found in almost complete abandonment of its ancient fervour is now a veritable City of Mary. In 1921 it incorporated into its official crest the Monogram of Our Lady surrounded by her 12 stars and in 1929 the entire city was consecrated to Our Lady of the Cape.

The still continuing story of devotion to Our Lady at Cap-de-la-Madeleine is an historically factual Canadian demonstration of what could happen to the whole world if someone like Father Desilets could lead it to return to God through Mary by means of devotion to her Rosary. Cap-de-la-Madeleine today is a living proof of the validity of the promise of Fatima.