

The Most Reverend Modeste Demers, D.D. First Bishop of Vancouver Island

by

Most Rev. J. M. HILL, D.D.

One hundred and twenty-five years ago, the Pacific North-West, that immense territory stretching from the northern limits of California to Alaska and from the shores of the Pacific to the eastern slopes of the Rockies, was a vast terra incognita into which few white men had as yet penetrated. In this immense stretch of land where hundreds of thousands of Indians, banded together into powerful tribes and living in the most primitive conditions, roamed the land at will, the only white inhabitants of this great North-West were the employees of the Hudson's Bay Company which had gradually extended its lucrative fur-trade across Canada to the Pacific shores. Among the men of this Company were many French Canadians, hardy trappers and sturdy voyageurs who, lured by the love of adventure and the thirst for wealth, had crossed the continent and, finding themselves far from home with little hope of return, had married Indian women and established pioneer settlements on the Pacific Coast.

From one of these distant trading posts in Oregon – that of Fort Vancouver and its thirty Canadian families – came the first requests for Catholic missionaries; in 1834 and 1835 two urgent appeals were directed to the nearest Catholic Bishop, Rt. Rev. J. N. Provencher of Red River (St. Boniface), and through him, to Archbishop J. Signay of Quebec. Three years later, in 1838, in answer to these petitions, the Archbishop of Quebec appointed to this new mission field two young priests, Rev. F. N. Blanchet and Rev. Modeste Demers, who in the half century that followed, through their heroic and indefatigable labors, wrought out of the Pacific wilderness a great new empire for the Church.

It is difficult in a paper such as this, dealing as it does with the conquest of the Pacific North-West for the Church, to disassociate these two great missionary apostles – so closely interwoven and related were their efforts in working, planning, organizing and suffering for the extension of Christ's Kingdom in this vast and arduous field of labor. It is the main purpose of this paper, however, to delineate briefly the life and work of the younger of these two great missionaries, Modeste Demers, First Bishop of Vancouver Island. Coming from a family whose name was already well-known in French Canada for the distinguished sons it had given to the Church, Modeste Demers, the son of Michel Demers and Rosalie Foucher, worthy

representatives of the hardy French-Canadian farmer class, was born in the little village of St. Nicholas on the Chaudiere in the Province of Quebec on the 18th of October, 1809. So weak and frail in infancy that his parents feared that he would not live, the child gradually gained in strength and, as he grew into boyhood, gave early evidences of a delicate conscience and a distinctly religious disposition. After a rudimentary education acquired at home from itinerant teachers, the young boy, who from his earliest years aspired to the service of God, prevailed upon his father to permit him to continue his studies; at the age of sixteen, he was enrolled in the preparatory college, established a short time previously at Quebec by Bishop Plessis for aspirants to the priesthood.

Through his seven years of Petit Seminaire, his great love for God, his solid piety and deep-rooted virtue singled him out as a worthy candidate for the sacerdotal state, and in the fall of 1832 he entered Grand Seminaire, Quebec, to pursue four years of theological studies. His vacations at home during these years were fitting preparation for the great mission that was to be his – the conversion of the Pacific Coast Indians ; most exemplary in piety and conduct, he taught catechism, prepared children for First Communion, conducted classes in liturgical singing and the ceremonies of the Church, and cultivated a taste and love for the proper care of the Altar and the Church in the young people of the parish. It was during these days of vacation that he confided to his pastor on many occasions his greatest desire – mission work among the Indians.

Ordained in February, 1836, by Bishop Signay in the Cathedral of Quebec, Fr. Modeste Demers was appointed assistant to the pastor of Trois Pistoles; after fourteen months here, came the call for which he had been hoping and praying for years; with the encouragement of Bishop Signay, he offered himself and was accepted for the Indian missions of the Red River Settlement in what is now the Province of Manitoba. After a short visit to his home at St. Nicholas, and a difficult journey of 185 miles in early spring, by cart, sleigh, on foot and in row-boat, he reached Lachine; and on April 27, 1837, embarked in one of the big birch-bark canoes of the Hudson's Bay Company Brigade on a five weeks' journey, over 2,100 miles of arduous travel, arriving in early June at Red River Settlement. Accustomed as we are to the speed, comfort and luxury of present day travel, the difficulties, hardships and perils of such a long journey in canoe, following the water course through trackless wildernesses, shooting innumerable rapids, laboring over long portages, all the while braving the treacherous vagaries of changing weather, tax the imagination; it was a challenge to be met only by the strongest and most courageous.

Warmly welcomed by Bishop Provencher at Red River, Fr. Demers immediately gave himself wholeheartedly to the Indian missions of the surrounding area for the next year; then came word of his appointment as

companion to Rev. F. N. Blanchet of Montreal, the newly appointed Vicar. General of the Oregon missionary field on the Pacific Coast. The two missionaries left Red River, July 10, 1838, after placing themselves under the protection of good St. Ann and, once again in a Hudson's Bay Brigade, set out, by water-route, on a perilous journey across western Canada, entailing seventy-nine days of arduous travel from Red River to the Rockies, a five day cavalcade trip over the towering peaks, and a six-day canoe-trip down the Columbia to Fort Vancouver in Oregon – in all, a journey twice as long and many times more treacherous than that already experienced between Lachine and Red River. The two zealous missionaries took advantage of every opportunity that presented itself, during the long journey, to meet the natives, to preach, instruct and baptize them and to offer the Holy Sacrifice as often as conditions would permit. The climax of this epic voyage was reached when on October 10, 1838, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was offered for the first time on the magnificent peaks of the Rockies above Athabaska Pass and this vast sea of mountainous towers and turrets was consecrated to God.

After a tumultuous welcome upon their arrival at Fort Vancouver on November 24, 1838, the two missionaries began their labors immediately, dedicating themselves with tireless energy to the spiritual welfare of the white settlers and the more than one hundred thousand Indians of the territory who were eager for the word of God. Within six weeks, Fr. Demers, gifted with an extraordinary facility for acquiring languages, had gained a sufficient knowledge of the Chinook dialect to preach, to translate prayers and to compose hymns in it. In the five years that followed, Fr. Demers spent himself tirelessly in the missions north of the Columbia river, an area embracing the present State of Washington, the province of B.C. and Alaska; he travelled far and wide in this immense territory, contacting and converting the Indian tribes from the northern boundary of Oregon to Stuart Lake in the northern interior of British Columbia; everywhere his missionary zeal bore rich results, and the Faith was planted deep in the hearts of the western Indian. In March, 1844, Fr. Demers was made pastor of Oregon City; it was during his pastorate here that his many aptitudes manifested themselves; he was architect, surveyor, carpenter, mason, silversmith, printer and editor. Bishop Blanchet gave him credit for his great labors in this tribute: "Columbia owes almost all its churches to Fr. Demers; I have seen him at work again and again with unsurpassed zeal, and with not a penny to meet his expenses; when asked how he was to meet them, he replied: 'I am working for the glory of God; He will see to the payments!' And God never failed him."

On November 4, 1844, the briefs came from Rome detaching the territory known as Oregon from the jurisdiction of Quebec, making it a Vicariate Apostolic and appointing Fr. Blanchet its first Bishop. Consecrated in Montreal on July 25, 1845, Bishop Blanchet left for Europe immediately,

appointing Fr. Demers administrator of the Vicariate in his absence. In his report to Rome at that time, Bishop Blanchet outlines the results of six years of missionary effort in the Pacific North-West and suggests the subdivision of his Vicariate into eight dioceses. On July 24, 1846, Rome raised the Oregon Vicariate to the status of an ecclesiastical province with Archbishop F. N. Blanchet as first Metropolitan of Oregon City and entrusted with the care of all country west of the Cascade Mountains; his suffragans were to be his brother, Magloire, as Bishop of the new Diocese of Walla Walla embracing the territory east of the Cascades, and Fr. Modeste Demers as Bishop of Vancouver Island, a diocese covering all British Columbia, the Queen Charlotte Islands and the Russian possessions in the Arctic.

In the new Diocese of Vancouver Island, a great mission field awaited the new Bishop. Up to this time, the only missionaries who had visited the Island were the Spanish Franciscan Fathers who had labored on its West Coast from 1789 to 1795, and Fr. J. B. Bolduc who in March, 1843, visited the Indians at Victoria for a few days, preaching and instructing them, and preparing the way for those who would follow him.

Consecrated on the Feast of St. Andrew, November 30, 1847, in the modest church of Oregon City – a Bishop without priests and with no means at his disposal for the evangelization of the immense area committed to his care – Bishop Demers set out for Eastern Canada and Europe to recruit missionaries and to seek material resources for his new diocese. During the next four years, his travels in quest for help took him to many countries, to France, Belgium, Holland and Italy; in colleges and seminaries, in the pulpits of the great Cathedrals of Europe as well as in the country churches of rural parishes, everywhere and on every occasion afforded him, he preached the propagation of the Faith and the needs of the missions; the response to his appeals was generous and everywhere he was made the recipient of gifts for his distant field of labor. In Paris he ordained the first two European priests for Vancouver Island, Louis Lootens who in later years was to become the first Vicar Apostolic of Idaho, and Pierre La Lanier. Reaching Rome in October 1850, he received the blessing and encouragement of Pius IX before embarking on his return in the Spring of 1851 to United States where for the next year he travelled extensively, making known the needs of his missions and collecting funds for their development.

Bishop Demers arrived in Victoria by canoe from distant Fort Vancouver in Oregon on August 29, 1852, to take possession of his diocese; on that trip, he stopped at Seattle, then a ten-month old community, to offer Holy Mass, the first religious service to be held in the village. His installation on the Sunday following his arrival was witnessed by some forty people and his entire Clergy – three priests and a sub-deacon – in a small house that was for some years to be his combined church-rectory. During Bishop Demers'

absence in Europe, Rev. H. Lempfrit, O.M.I., reached Vancouver Island to do missionary work among the natives and, for three years, from 1849 to 1852, he devoted himself to the spiritual welfare of the Indian tribes in the south-eastern area of the Island. Losing no time in undertaking his arduous duties, Bishop Demers sent his priests to the Indians on the Fraser River and to the tribes of Vancouver Island; he, himself, began his frequent visitations to the natives of the East Coast of the Island to whom, in a very short time, he became so well known and beloved as the "Great Priest with the long hat and the crooked stick, the Man of Prayer." Few were they who could remain insensible to his forceful eloquence and burning zeal, his all-embracing charity and love of souls, his deep-rooted and childlike piety, and his joyous confidence in Divine Providence; soon his visits to the natives took on the nature of triumphal processions in which the tribes would vie with one another in their demonstrations of faith. In 1857, Bishop Demers still in urgent need of assistance for his ever-widening missions again visited Eastern Canada and returned, the following year, with three priests, a seminarian, a lay brother, and four Sisters of St. Ann; of these, only one priest and the sisters remained in the diocese; the others, three of whom were members of the Clercs of St. Viateur, remained only four or five years when they were recalled for service elsewhere. The little group of pioneer Sisters of St. Ann who in 1858 opened the first Catholic School in British Columbia and, in 1876, the first hospital in the diocese, today, after almost a century of heroic and indefatigable service to the Church, numbers 300 Religious with 13 Parish Schools, 11 hospitals and 7 Indian Mission Schools on the Pacific Coast. In 1858, in answer to repeated pleas from Bishop Demers, the Oblate Fathers came to Vancouver Island, transferring their headquarters from Olympia to Victoria, and for seven years, from 1858 until 1865, devoted themselves untiringly to the Indian missions of the Island and the mainland; in 1863, they established the first Catholic school for boys, St. Louis College in Victoria. Bishop Demers completed and dedicated his Cathedral on July 18, 1861; within the next twenty years, it was to be the scene of three consecrations, Bishop Louis d'Herbomez, O.M.L., first Vicar Apostolic of New Westminster, Bishop C. J. Seghers, second Bishop of Victoria and later, Archbishop of Portland, Oregon, and Bishop J. B. Brondel, first Vicar Apostolic of Montana; in later years when the present St. Andrew's Cathedral in Victoria was built, the first Cathedral became and remains today the Chapel of St. Ann's Academy.

Acting upon the representations of Bishop Demers who found it very difficult to care for his extensive territory, Rome on December 14, 1865, erected the Vicariate Apostolic of New Westminster, thus detaching the mainland of British Columbia from the jurisdiction of Vancouver Island, with Bishop Louis d'Herbomez, O.M.I., as its first Vicar Apostolic. The Oblate Fathers, who for seven years had dedicated themselves so tirelessly

to the sacred ministry on Vancouver Island, from this time on, continued their zealous apostolate among the Indian tribes on the mainland of British Columbia. A few years earlier, Bishop Demers, in deep distress over the urgent need of more missionaries for his far-flung diocese, appealed for assistance to the American College of Louvain which had just been founded (1857) for the specific purpose of preparing young men for the sacred ministry in the missions of America; from this source began to flow a steady stream of saintly young priests, eager, earnest and zealous, to the most difficult mission fields in the New World; the contribution of Louvain College to the Diocese of Vancouver Island is an imposing one – two archbishops and two bishops, and sixteen priests, each of whom has written a glorious record of missionary zeal, self-sacrifice and humble heroism in the annals of the young diocese. Outstanding among these learned and saintly missionaries was Fr. Charles J. Seghers who was destined to become the second Bishop of Vancouver Island, the second Archbishop of Portland, Oregon, and to return, at his own request, to his first See to sacrifice his life, at the hands of an assassin, in the missions of Alaska. It was to Fr. Seghers to whom Bishop Demers entrusted the administration of the diocese during his absence on the missions in 1864, and again in 1866 when he visited Mexico and Guatemala soliciting aid for his diocese, attended the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore and went on to Europe to plead the need for more priests for the diocese. Returning to Victoria in April, 1869, Bishop Demers set out six months later, with Fr. Seghers as companion, to attend the Oecumenical Council at the Vatican; travelling through France in early February, 1870, he met with a serious accident from which he never fully recovered; when in a final audience with Pius IX on July 21, 1870, following the Vatican Council, he requested the Holy Father's blessing for a happy death, the aged Pontiff replied: "If you get to Heaven first, reach out a helping hand to me." The return trip from Rome to Victoria so taxed the Bishop's failing strength that he suffered a severe stroke of paralysis shortly after his arrival home and, although he rallied for a short time, his condition was beyond recovery; after five months of patient suffering, borne with a resignation that was deeply edifying, he breathed his soul to His Creator, July 28, 1871.

When the news of his passing was announced, universal sorrow across America and in Europe reflected the high esteem in which the great Apostle of British Columbia was held everywhere; among the glowing tributes offered to his memory, one from a non-Catholic source may be quoted in part: "Only those who came to this coast in the early days can form anything like an adequate idea of what Bishop Demers had to suffer and endure. In perils by sea, in perils by land, in perils by savage tribes, in perils among wild beasts, in perils among his own countrymen, he did not count his life dear in promoting the great work to which he had devoted himself.. There

is scarcely a rood of ground which he has not trod; there is not an Indian village which he has not visited; there is not a white settlement in which he has not provided the ordinances of the Church. The late Bishop was not only a devoted and successful missionary... he was the most lovable of men... his humility never forsook him, as his zeal never flagged.”

Today the remains of Bishop Demers, intrepid apostle of the great Pacific North-West and first Bishop of Vancouver Island, lie enshrined in the Memorial Chapel of St. Andrew’s Cathedral Crypt, Victoria, beside those of two zealous and devoted missionaries who served with him – Archbishop J. C. Seghers and Father J. J. Jonkau. The seed of Christ’s truth which he sowed so zealously throughout the vast wilderness of the Pacific North-West took root, continues to grow, blossom and bear rich fruit, reflected in the vigorous vitality, expansion and development of the Church on the Pacific Coast. Within the farreaching boundaries of the diocese to which he came in 1846, flourish today the Archdiocese of Vancouver, the parent diocese now called Victoria, the diocese of Nelson, Kamloops and Juneau, and the Vicariates Apostolic of Prince Rupert, Whitehorse and Alaska. In the hearts of all who today, in this vast area, enjoy the blessings of the Faith, is cherished with prayerful gratitude the revered memory of the apostle of these Western regions, Modeste Demers, First Bishop of Vancouver Island.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Herald of Christ the King, Sr. Mary THEODORE, S.S.A., 1939.

B. C. Orphan’s Friend, Historical Number, December, 1913.

History of Northern Interior of British Columbia, Rev. A. G. Morice, O.M.I.

Historical Sketches of the Catholic Church in Oregon, Archbishop F. N. BLANCHET.

Catholic Church in Oregon, Most Rev. E. V. O’HARA, D.D.