

Marian Devotion in the Diocese of Antigonish, Nova Scotia

by

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Seeing that the portion of Nova Scotia now known as the Diocese of Antigonish juts farther into the Atlantic Ocean than any other part of Canada exclusive of Newfoundland, it is reasonable to assume that most of the early explorers landed on it. Since all of these were Catholics, every one of them carried with him his devotion to the Mother of God. It is quite within the sphere of possibility that St. Brendan was here, and Marian devotion was certainly practised by his group. It seems practically certain that the Scandinavian explorers, who had but recently received the faith, were in eastern Nova Scotia, and in their time devotion to Our Lady had become an important feature of Christian worship. Regardless of whether the Irish or the Scandinavians actually were in Cape Breton, a strong case can be made in favour of a visit from the Cabots. I have found no explicit mention of the nightly singing of the *Salve Regina* on the Cabot ship as had been the custom a few years earlier among the men who accompanied that other Genoese explorer, Christopher Columbus, but it is certain, at least, that their religious observances included Marian devotions. The same thing is true of the fishermen who soon began to come to the eastern shores from France, Spain, Portugal, the Basque country, and England.

During the years 1713 to 1758 while Cape Breton was a French colony, devotion to Our Lady flourished in every settlement. That remarkable pioneer Nicholas Denys established business enterprises at St. Peters, at Guysborough, and at St. Ann's, and each of these established its own Marian tradition. Not far from St. Peters is Isle Madame which Denys calls "l'Isle de Sainte Marie" – Holy Mary's Island, the name it bears in the maps of the period, and may it not be that this had something to do with the origin of the name that was adopted later? St. Mary's River was known as such in Guysborough of that time, and one municipality of the region is still known as St. Mary's. There can be no doubt but that Our Lady was devoutly recognized at St. Ann's, named in 1629 for her mother; and certainly, devotion to the Queen of Heaven was to the fore during the season when St. Anthony Daniel was a resident of the place.

In the eighteenth century, after the mainland of Nova Scotia had definitely become a British possession, Louisbourg, with a population of about 8,000, was the most important French center in the territory under

discussion. After the capitulation of 1758 no doubt the refugees took some of their effects with them to France, but otherwise the destruction of the City and Citadel and their contents was practically complete, and it is only in our own day that efforts for their restoration have been made. Indications are that the religious life of the place was well organized, and this leaves no doubt that Marian devotion was prominent in public and private worship. Mary's first Canadian religious community, the Congregation of Notre Dame, furnished the first teachers who worked in the present Diocese of Antigonish. In 1727 a nun from Montreal, with the assistance of two laywomen, began at Louisbourg the work of teaching the girls of Cape Breton. In the autumn of 1733 the convent was officially established with Sister St. Joseph (Marguerite Trottier) as first superior. The community underwent incredible hardships, including the horrors of both sieges, and three voyages across the Atlantic Ocean. In all, Louisbourg was served by nine nuns and two lay sisters; and of these, four returned to the Motherhouse in Montreal chiefly because of illness; two died at sea; and the remaining five died in France.

The museum erected by the Government of Canada during 1935-1936 near the site of the Louisbourg convent contains as souvenirs of the nuns dug up on their premises a silver cross, a medal of St. Joseph, and a thimble, and the convent grounds are covered with a profusion of daisies, whose French name (*marguerite*) recalls the Christian name of the saintly woman (Blessed Marguerite Bourgeoys) who founded the Congregation of Notre Dame in Montreal in 1657. On the tenth of August, 1939, two monuments were erected on the site of the old French fortress to commemorate the bravery and self-sacrifice of the nuns and of the brothers who laboured within its walls two centuries ago.

There can be no doubt that Our Lady then as now was featured in the daily program of these religious. The Blessed Virgin had figured prominently in the life of the blessed foundress and love of the heavenly Mother was a heritage that she inevitably handed down to her spiritual daughters. A great change had taken place in the life of Blessed Marguerite Bourgeoys on an occasion when she was convinced that a statue of Our Blessed Lady had appeared alive and had given her a look of inexpressable kindness, and the vision that further determined her to give her life to God was accorded to her on the feast of the Assumption. She had been under the influence of two cloistered religious organizations consecrated to our Blessed Mother – the Congregation of Notre Dame and the Carmelite nuns. Eventually the resolution took definite form in her to found a community that would perpetuate the missionary life of the Mother of God, and when she finally entered on her life work proper, it was in Villemarie (Mary's City), and under the auspices of the Company of Notre Dame. Certainly the daughters of Marguerite Bourgeoys take second place in Marian devotion to no other group.

During its short span of existence, French Louisbourg was the home of a second religious community. Four brothers Hospitaliers of St. John of God came to the City in 1716 where they conducted a 108-bed hospital, and the census of 1737 indicated that the number of brothers was then five. Two of the group were mortally wounded during the second siege while they were carrying on their mission of mercy. The rule of these good men provides for the daily recitation of the Office of Our Lady.

There was a convent of Franciscan Recollects some miles outside of Louisbourg but even less is known about this community than of the other two. It can be taken for granted, of course, that Marian devotion was a feature of the life of these children of the Poor Man of Assisi.

Mary's name was given to two of the bells of Louisbourg. On February 19, 1724, the superior of the Recollects blessed in their Convent of St. Clare a bell which he christened Marie-Joseph. In 1735 King Louis XV of France donated three bells to the Royal Chapel of St. Louis, located in the citadel building, which served as one of the three parish churches of the City. The bells were blessed on March 31, 1735, and one of them was christened Antoine-Marie. In 1758, after the final fall of the fortress, this bell was taken to Halifax. In 1766 it was bought from the British Government by the German Lutherans of Lunenburg, N.S., and it now hangs in Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church in that town.

When the French withdrew from Nova Scotia they left an imperishable monument behind them in the fruit of the zeal of their missionaries. With amazing sacrifice the Gospel of Christ had been preached to the aborigines; and with amazing devotion has the heavenly message been retained. The Micmacs have not always been accorded an opportunity for practising their religion, but this has not deterred them from adhering to it with astonishing tenacity. A friend who has preached more than one mission to the Indians assures me that in the simple faith that characterizes the citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven the Micmacs put the rest of us to shame despite our spiritual privileges. Of course, devotion to Our Lady is prominent in their life, and the fact that they speak of St. Ann as their grandmother and have retained her as their special patron is but an indication of their love of St. Ann's daughter.

Change in the civil administration of Nova Scotia, including Cape Breton, began with legislation designed to suppress every Catholic practice, but such injustice was destined to wear itself out. Immigrants from the Catholic Highlands of Scotland and from Ireland began to arrive in numbers; soon the Catholic population became a majority in some districts, and an appreciable fraction of the population of the whole Province. Rather successful efforts were made by the Government to restore the balance by sending agents in search of Protestant settlers, but the Catholic body definitely remained one to be reckoned with. The drift in the direction of

democratic ideas was working for a recognition of the rights of minorities, and eventually the unjust laws were repealed. However, that did not mean that the Catholic groups could immediately emerge as fully organized and efficiently directed. The pioneer leaders and their immediate successors took comparatively little pains to preserve their records, and much of the story of Marian devotion has certainly been lost. It may be said, however, that the early population of eastern Nova Scotia consisted of people of singularly strong faith. Religious ministrations came to them but seldom; their rosaries were their permanent source of edification and consolation; their scapulars were their constant reminders of their heavenly Protectress. The Gaels of Scotland and of Ireland, in their native dialects, use a special form of the name Mary exclusively for Our Lady, an indication of their tender love for her.

This much can be reported of the Right Reverend William Fraser, first bishop of the Diocese, that for eight years before his coming to Nova Scotia as a missionary priest (in 1922) he had been rector of the little seminary at Lismore, in the Scottish Highlands, a place whose ancient name means Mary's Garden, and whose memory is perpetuated in the old mission of Lismore, Pictou County, N.S. From 1827 to 1842, Bishop Fraser served as the second Vicar Apostolic of Nova Scotia, and during that period he gave the name of Mary to the magnificent basilica which supplanted the original church of St. Peter in Halifax, and to the little college which has since become the large Catholic university of Nova Scotia's capital.

In 1842 the Vicariate of Nova Scotia was raised to the status of a diocese and Bishop Fraser became the first bishop of Halifax. Two years later the diocese was divided and Bishop Fraser was given his choice of sees. He chose Arichat as the seat of the eastern division because that seaport village was then the most accessible center in its territory and also because its church, dedicated to Our Lady, was the finest in his new diocese. Indeed, the great Bishop Plessis of Quebec, during his 1812 visitation, had repeatedly deplored the lack of churches and equipment and the inadequacy of the existing facilities, but he wrote regarding Arichat, "At this harbour is situated Notre Dame Church, with an elegant presbytery and a vast cemetery near by. Although this church has already been enlarged it is again too small for the number of the parishioners. Nevertheless, it is furnished with vestments, a steeple, and two bells, a rare thing in these parts."

The first native bishop, the Right Reverend Colin Francis MacKinnon, was consecrated in 1852, and in the pastoral letter published by him on the same day he announced, "We place ourselves and our Diocese under the patronage of the Mother of God, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Help of Christians, and Refuge of Sinners." Reporting to Rome in 1860 he could state that there were twenty-four resident pastors serving sixty-seven churches; and we find that nine of the sixty-seven were dedicated to the

Blessed Mother. The same prelate, writing at about the same time to the author of a book on Marian devotion, speaks of the immigrants who refused to abandon their faith and therefore chose “expatriation, exile, and perpetual banishment from their hills and glens. Under the protection of the Queen of Heaven and with filial invocation of the sacred name of Mary, they committed themselves to the wild ocean.” The bishop also stated that thousands of his people were members of the Confraternity of the Scapular, and of Our Lady's Rosary, and of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary.

Another correspondent, writing to the same author, speaks of the venerable lady Mary Campbell MacLeod, grandmother of Bishop MacKinnon, who had aroused the Catholics of the place in which she had settled to abandon the stake they had already established because the consolations of religion were not available, and to transplant themselves nearly one hundred and fifty miles through the forest to where there was a resident priest. She herself had previously gone on foot over the same distance carrying her infant grandson in her arms so that he might be baptized. And she expressed her faith that under the patronage of the Mother of God there would rise those who would be the spiritual leaders of her people. Little wonder then that the very infant she carried and his brother were eventually admitted to holy orders; and that the number of the descendants of this valiant woman who have worn the livery of Christ has now reached about a score.

Tradition has it that it was a custom of the time to recite one thousand Hail Marys on Christmas Eve to commemorate the thousands of steps made by Our Lady when there was no room in the inn.

Under the succeeding bishops, Cameron, and Morrison whose name signifies Son of the Servant of Mary, and MacDonald, Marian devotion has kept pace with increasing population and improved facilities. It is interesting to note that without having adverted to the dedication made by his early predecessor, one of the first directives given by the present bishop of Antigonish was that a commemoration of the Blessed Virgin Mary Help of Christians for a serious reason be added to the collects in Masses said daily in the Diocese.

At present, thirty-two out of one hundred and thirty parish and mission churches are dedicated to Our Lady under a variety of titles. Nine out of thirty-nine convents have a similar patronage, along with two out of nine other institutions conducted by religious women. Three out of four retreat houses acknowledge Our Blessed Lady; and there are eleven shrines set up in her honour. The first bell to go into the tower of St. Francis Xavier University was christened *Stella Maris*.

Of place names in the territory, Maryvale, Marydale, and Mary Joseph may be noted in addition to those already mentioned.

There are many accounts in circulation regarding favours obtained through the intercession of the Mother of God, but many of them are

commonplace, and few can be substantiated with precision. Here are two which I regard as striking.

A certain diocesan priest had undergone a serious surgical operation for a malignant internal growth. The surgeon in the case expressed his opinion that if his efforts were successful, which seemed very doubtful, the expected prolongation of life would not exceed two years. The prayers for the dying were being recited by the group that surrounded the hospital bed when the patient took a sudden turn for the better; and then he made a remarkable recovery so that he was able to devote many years to his priestly labours. A small marble tablet in a shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes testifies to his conviction that his cure had been effected through the intercession of Our Lady and of St. Joseph.

A certain workman was stricken with multiple sclerosis. After procuring such medical treatment as was available in his city he proceeded to one of the most famous clinics in America where he was told that he was destined to be a wheelchair patient in a few months. This man of faith was confident that Our Lady would assist him to the point of enabling him to continue earning his living. He has now been able to do that for several years.

And thus ends the sketchy story of the honour paid to the Mother of God in the Diocese of Antigonish. It probably differs but little from what is told throughout the breadth of Canada; but I consider it fair to say that the people of the eastern territory, at least maintain a good average in their love of Our Lord's own dear Mother.