

The Reverend Richard Jackson, Missionary to the Sulpicians

BY
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“The Society of Saint-Sulpice has, so to speak, no history.” M. Fournet once wrote those words to indicate the unobtrusive spirit of the gentlemen followers of Father Olier. It seems incongruous to speak of the Sulpicians as being without a history when one considers the work they have accomplished for the Church, for France, and for the New World. A company that has given martyrs in the red turmoil of the French Revolution, that has given savants and saints to mould the civil and religious life of a new frontier, surely contains the elements of history and of drama. But M. Fournet goes on to amplify his statement. . . . “Its members” he says “absorbed in their professional duties, share the lives of seminarians, being solicitous to train them not only in the ecclesiastical sciences, but also in priestly virtues, and this the more by their own daily examples, than by the lessons they teach. . . . That such a life is eminently fruitful is proved by the numerous prelates, distinguished priests, founders of religious orders, missionaries, and religious from Sulpician seminaries, but it can be readily understood that it furnishes few facts of history.”

It is with much the same sentiments that we approach the life of Richard Jackson. Here we find the seeds of romance and drama in the story of the young Protestant minister setting out to convert the Sulpicians of Montreal, and remaining as one of their members to learn where he had once hoped to teach. That story was to develop in its own unspectacular way until it reached its climax on a note of heroic self-sacrifice. And yet, in the brief outline of that life available to us, we see that, fruitful as it was, it furnishes few facts of history.

Richard Jackson was a Virginian. It would appear that he was descended from ordinary middle class stock. These had begun as lesser planters and farmers in the Southern States. As a group they were hard working, intelligent and thrifty men. In Colonial days they had hewed away the wilderness, built modest homes and acquired property. The Jacksons came of a sturdy race, self-reliant, independent in temper and determined to maintain their original liberties.

Young Jackson was born in the city of Alexandria on the 21st of February, 1787. Alexandria, though relatively small, was important as a port on the Potomac river, and could lay claim to some historical interest

inasmuch as it was the site of one of the principal national cemeteries. The population was predominantly Protestant. The Church of England had been transplanted to Virginia with the first settlers, and though the Church in that State had not flourished materially because of unfavorable social and economic conditions, still it was given at least a chance to grow. On the other hand the Catholic Church had been subject to stringent measures as early as 1669, when Catholics were deprived of the right of voting. Gradually toleration in this matter made its way to the fore and in 1776 Virginia declared for religious freedom.

The Jackson family could hardly be expected to know much of the Catholic Church other than the popular calumnies which flourished then as now. They could have but little, if any, contact with Catholic families. Two years before the birth of young Richard we learn from a letter of the Rev. John Carroll, later bishop and archbishop, that at that time there were in Virginia only 200 Catholics, attended four or five times a year by a priest. Education in the Southern States was largely non-Catholic and in private hands, so that Richard grew spiritually and mentally in an environment that was unlikely to give him an accurate view of the Church of Rome.

When he was four years old the first Sulpicians in the United States landed at Baltimore. The Society of Saint-Sulpice in France was threatened with extinction by the Revolution and the impending ruin of the Church in that country. To save the Society, and also to aid in the spiritual development of the United States, Father Emery, the Superior General, had sent four priests to Baltimore. There, with five students from France, they secured a building on the edge of the city and began the institution which was to become known as St. Mary's Seminary.

It is strange that during the next sixteen years Richard Jackson did not come to know more of the Sulpician life. Baltimore was not greatly removed from Alexandria, and the priests of St. Mary's ministered in the city and the missions of the country. Certainly some knowledge of them filtered through, for Richard became interested in the work of the Sulpicians, not near home, but in remote Montreal.

Whatever may have been the early education and environment of Richard Jackson he clearly maintained an open and tolerant mind. Firmly believing that the road to Rome was also the road to perdition, he was able to distinguish between the possibility of men leading good and virtuous lives, and the possibility of these same men living in a state of inculpable ignorance. It is certain that the young Mr. Jackson had heard of the beneficent work of the Sulpicians in Montreal. He may have learned of the early work of M. de Belmont who had been responsible for the construction of the Fort on the Mountain, and of the old Seminary of Notre Dame, and also for the building of the Lachine Canal. He may have heard of M. Normant du Faradon who saved the General Hospital from ruin, and who

may be called co-founder of the “Grey Nuns” along with Venerable Mère d’Youville. The work accomplished by the Sulpician Fathers in Montreal was sufficient to impress the ardent spirit of the young Virginian, who even then was labouring in preparation for the Methodist Ministry. Possibly he had heard something of the creation and organization in the vicinity of Montreal of the six parishes which the Sulpicians had brought about as early as the end of the 17th century. Their zeal in administering these parishes as well as their work, of supplying them with churches, presbyteries and schools was of the stuff to fire the apostolic ardor of a generous soul. The young divinity student was capable of appreciating the loyalty of the Canadian clergy which influenced the Canadian people to remain out of the Revolutionary War of 1776. He could admire a clergy to whom the Canadian Catholic colonists owed the preservation of their Faith, and also in a great measure the recovery of their political rights. To the Sulpicians Montreal owed its prosperity, the settlement of the surrounding districts, and its flourishing college. These were the men Richard Jackson could understand and appreciate. But there was one thing he could not understand, and that was their adherence to Rome.

On August 29th, 1807, Richard Jackson was ordained to the Protestant Ministry. Now he was a minister of the Gospel, duly constituted to save souls.. The Frenchmen to the north who were heroic and zealous, but pitifully deluded, would now be the, object of the Rev. Mr. Jackson’s apostolic mission. These Sulpicians of Montreal would be the first brands he would save from the burning. He was only twenty years old at the time. Being very young, he was also very sure of him-self. We may accuse him of a certain naivety, but of his sincerity and this zeal there could be no doubt. The first act of his ministry was to set out for Montreal.

It was still the month of August when he presented himself at the Seminary of St. Sulpice on Notre Dame street. He asked to see the Reverend Superior, and was ushered into a small and meticulously arranged parlour to await the great man’s arrival. The Superior of the Seminary at that time was the Reverend Jean-Auguste Roux, who was, Father Bayle tells us, one of the ablest men ever to govern St. Sulpice in Canada. He was gracious in his greeting of the young minister. The Rev. Mr. Jackson spoke simply of the purpose of his visit to Montreal. He explained that “having heard of the Sulpicians of Montreal and the good they were doing and had been doing since the commencement of the colony, he considered it deplorable that such zealous and self-sacrificing men should be on the road to perdition. He had therefore decided to make a bold attempt to win them from the ‘errors of Romanism.’

A good measure of patience and understanding and tolerant good humor was needed for the elderly priest to sit opposite the brash young minister and listen to this earnest proposal for his own salvation. Father Roux listened

attentively and kindly to all that the Rev. Mr. Jackson had to say. The arguments were hardly new to the Sulpician, but he listened in all humility. And as he listened he was shrewdly summing up the character of the would-be apostle. Here was sincerity and good faith. Here was zeal for souls directly welling from a keen love for God and a desire for His Glory. Here was a misguided soul, but a soul whose kinship with the true Church was exceedingly close.

Now there was silence in the parlour of St. Sulpice. The Rev. Richard Jaskson had completed his argument. There remained only to see if his word had fallen on barren ground. Father Roux sat wordless for a moment, and then he began his rebuttal. In turn each argument was examined, the flaws in the reasoning displayed, distinctions were drawn and corrections made. For the first time in his life, Richard Jackson was hearing the true defense of the Catholic Church. With such a philosophy and theology for motivation he could understand the incredible devotion of the Sulpicians. With that dawning understanding there was to come the first insistent pull of attraction to the Church of Rome. He was very thoughtful as the interview came to a close. Admitting the force and the reasonableness of Father Roux's arguments, young Mr. Jackson was compelled by his innate honesty to track down the truth to its very source. Before he left the Seminary of St. Sulpice that day in August he had resolved to study seriously the Catholic Doctrine. If it were false or unconvincing, there was little more to do than to return to his home in Virginia and seek other fields for his missionary zeal. But if the Catholic Faith *were* true. . . his former life would become an impossibility.

The gift of Faith was given quickly to Richard Jackson. He pursued his studies in Catholic Doctrine under the guidance of the man he had come to convert. Three months after his ordination as a Protestant minister, he became a Roman Catholic. On October 31st, 1807, he made his abjuration from Protestantism and was received into the Catholic Faith by Father Roux. The next step in the realization of his new ambition could not be taken so quickly. He was now a Catholic, but he could not be content to remain a layman. His mission in life was to save souls. How better could he do this than by seeking a share in the priesthood of Christ? Six years passed before he could attain his goal; six years that were to be broken only by his gradual ascent to the Altar. By the authority of the Bishop of Baltimore, whose subject he remained, he received the tonsure on the 8th of September, 1809, and on July 25th, the Feast of St. James the Greater, in the year 1813 Richard Jackson was ordained priest.

There is no evidence to indicate when he began to be called Father Richards, nor why the name of Jackson should have been dropped. The people who were to become his spiritual charges knew him only as Father Richards. Indeed the archives of the old Seminary list his name merely as. . . Richard, Jackson John. There, too, one may read a letter written in

French, and scrawled in fading black ink, to which he signed the name of J. Richards. It is mainly on the testimony of the late Father Bayle, who was a former Superior of the Seminary and who had lived for many years with the American priest, that we rely for the name of Jackson.

After his ordination, Father Jackson entered upon a period of comparative obscurity. He became immersed in his priestly work which, in true Sulpician fashion, was fruitful without being spectacular. We find on February 17th, 1817, he became a Sulpician, and throughout the ensuing years he filled the positions of Professor at Montreal College, Librarian, and manager of domestic arrangements for the Seminary.

For the English-speaking people of Montreal, that year of 1817 is of particular interest. It was at that date that Father Jackson heard of the presence of a group of English-speaking Catholics in the city. For the most part they were poor immigrants from Ireland who had sought a more promising life in the New World. They were the ideal material for the apostolic aims of Father Jackson. The French Sulpicians had brought spiritual consolation and prosperity to the original settlers of Montreal. He, Richard Jackson, an English-speaking Sulpician, would devote himself likewise to the service of the lonely Irish Catholics.

He sent word that he would address these people in their own language if they would assemble in the Church of Our Lady of Bonsecours on a particular Sunday. The first meeting was certainly not overcrowded. Whether or not Father Jackson's message had failed to reach all the people, the fact remained that when he arrived at the church he found only a handful of worshippers. We are told that the number was so small that "they would have hardly covered a good-sized parlour carpet." Because of the small attendance, it was considered more convenient to withdraw to the sacristy. There Father Jackson delivered the first instruction to the group that was to grow and swell to the imposing proportions of St. Patrick's, the Mother-Parish of English-speaking Montreal. His work among the "Irish Congregation" continued for the next nine years. It was interrupted briefly when he was sent to France and Rome in 1826. On his return he resumed the work which ultimately was to result in his death.

The first scene of the tragedy that was to be enacted later along the shores of the St. Lawrence was laid in Wexford, Ireland, in the year 1845. The shadow of famine lay black across the country. The potato blight had first appeared in Wexford, whence it spread with terrifying rapidity over the whole land, poisoning the potato fields as it passed. Stocks withered and dried. The potatoes beneath the soil became putrid and even the precaution of the potato pit was rendered useless by the invasion of the strange rot.

The inhabitants of Ireland were beyond 8,000,000, many of them living in abject poverty with the potato crop as their only food. In spite of relief-measures the sufferings of the people were terrible. The number of

deaths from famine and famine-fever was appalling. Thousands tried to live for weeks on a little cabbage and seaweed and turnips. In their desperation they turned to the devouring of diseased horse flesh. Men died from cold as well as from hunger. They died in the fields, on the roads, at the doors of the relief offices. They died in their homes surrounded by the dying and in some cases by those already dead. Their only hope of life seemed to be in flying from their native land. The stronger and more fortunate succeeded in reaching Liverpool and Glasgow, where many of them died in hospital. They died on board the sailing vessels to America and thousands who crossed the ocean reached America only to die.

The year of 1847 is known as “Black ‘47” in the history of Montreal. Father Jackson had continued his work as spiritual guide and father to the Irish Congregation. Now that congregation was swollen by the arrival of the famine-stricken immigrants. Weakened by prolonged hunger and insanitary conditions their constitutions could offer little resistance to the ravages of the dread ship fever. As the sick and dying immigrants reached Montreal they were taken to the sheds in Point St. Charles. There they were nursed and cared for, and there literally thousands of them died. Father Jackson was sixty years old at the time, but no thought of self-protection was allowed to keep him from his stricken charges. He took his place with the younger priests from the Seminary to administer the Last Sacraments to the dying.

The contagion was too virulent. It devastated the ranks of the young as well as the old. Three of the priests who were assisting Father Jackson in caring for the sick contracted Typhus. They were Father Carof, Father Pierre Richard and Father Morgan, the cousin of Father Dowd. It was inevitable that to their death-notices that of Father Jackson should be added. He succumbed to the fever on July 21st, leaving behind him a heritage of love and veneration.