

## **Joseph Mathurin Bourg First Acadian Priest**

by

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On the occasion of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Catholic Historical Association held in Quebec in October 1948, it was my privilege to read a paper entitled "Notes on the Pioneer Missionaries of the Lower Saint John."

In the paper the attention of the members was drawn to the noble work accomplished by the bearers of the cross, who labored so faithfully and well in the districts of the Lower Saint John during the period 1604 to 1731.

As you are well aware, those zealous men who taught the doctrines of our holy religion to the Indian tribes and to the colonists, were born in France. Yet, the day was fast approaching when the Land of Acadia would provide the birthplace of a future missionary who would follow in the footsteps of the pioneers.

It may be recalled that Father Loyard who ministered to souls at Meductic on the Saint John River went to his eternal reward on June 24th, 1731. He was the last named on the list of pioneer missionaries for the 1604-1731 period.

Turning the pages of history we come across the name of Father Joseph Bourg, the first priest born in Acadia. His missionary career proved so notable that, it seems to me, it merits the genuine interest of the student of Canadian history.

Our future missionary, Joseph Mathurin Bourg, was born at River Canard in Nova Scotia, near the immortal village of Grand Pré on the 9th day of June, 1744. His parents were Michael Bourg and Anne Hebert.

When he first saw the light of day Acadia was enjoying a good measure of peace and contentment. The treaty of Utrecht, signed in 1713, had conceded that part of Canada to Great Britain. Yet a small garrison at Annapolis and the emigration of a few English families, was all that marked the supremacy of England. The inhabitants remained on their lands hardly conscious of a change in sovereignty. The Acadian people simply continued living according to the traditions of their fore-fathers. Such was the happy state throughout the land until there occurred that tragic event in the year 1755, known in history as the Expulsion of the Acadians.

The members of the Bourg family, according to reliable data, were sent to Virginia, and the following spring of 1776 were transported to England,

where they were held seven years.

After the signing of the Treaty of Peace between England and France on February 10th, 1763, the Bourg family along with others crossed the English Channel and landed at St. Malo, France. The date of arrival, as given in the records, is May 1st, 1763.

We find that Michael Bourg and his family resided at Saint-Suliac for three years and then went to Saint-Servan. At this latter place the vocation of young Joseph Bourg becomes known to us, through an item appearing in the census list for 1767 to the effect that "Mathurin Bourg, 23 years of age, is permitted to go to Paris to study philosophy."

In due course the seminarist received the clerical Tonsure on May 27th, 1769 in the parish church of Saint-Nicholas du Chardonnet. And the minor orders were conferred upon him in the same church on the 9th of June, 1770.

The following spring Mr. Bourg came to Quebec to prepare himself for the major orders. As the records show he was ordained sub-deacon on June 13th, 1772 and deacon the 29th of the same month.

Finally came the great day of his ordination to the holy priesthood, the 19th of September, 1772. The memorable ceremony was held in the Chapel of Hôtel-Dieu at Montreal with Mgr. J. Briand being the officiating prelate.

Surely the day of his sacerdotal ordination must have been filled with happy thoughts of the good he could accomplish for the Acadian people who had been sorely afflicted.

It may be noted that from the year 1755, missionary fathers were rarely found in Acadia. The veteran missionary the Rev. Father Maillard had passed to his eternal reward two years previously. Father Bonaventure Charpentier continued the work for souls until 1766, when he was compelled by the infirmities of advanced age to present his resignation to the Bishop of Quebec.

The need of priestly ministrations can be readily understood and it is not surprising that the Bishop of Quebec was greatly worried about the lack of missionaries for the members of his flock in Acadia. We have but to read Bishop Briand's pastoral letter dated July 15th, 1766, to realize his fatherly solicitude.

It was in the autumn of 1773 that Father Bourg took charge of the missions in Nova Scotia which at that time included the present New Brunswick as well as the Gaspé. He made his headquarters at Tracadie (now Carleton) which seemed to him a most convenient spot from which he might go to his far-flung missions.

Reference to the new missionary's first visit to districts along the eastern coast of our New Brunswick, may be found in a letter to Bishop Briand bearing date of October 8th, 1773. The names of such well known settlements as Memramcook, Peticodiac and Cocagne are mentioned in the report.

In his reply of November 8th, 1773, Mgr. Briand expresses his great pleasure at the work which Father Bourg had accomplished on his first official tour. Certainly the missionary had begun his ministry well to merit the praise of his bishop.

During the winter of 1773-1774 Father Bourg profited by the nearness of the Restigouche village to study the Micmac language. And by so doing he gave evidence of his ardent desire to help all those confided to his care.

In order to assist the missionary in his indefatigable efforts for souls and at the same time recognize the service so well rendered, Mgr. Briand appointed Father Bourg his vicar-general for Acadia. This singular honor encouraged the zealous priest in his laborious duties for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

The first trip to the Saint John River missions was made in the early part of September, 1774. When we consider that some years had elapsed since a priest had visited that section, we may well understand that the people rejoiced to have him in their midst. The consolation of receiving the sacraments had been long awaited.

From the Saint John River our missionary made his way to Peticodiac, then to Annapolis, Nova Scotia, where the records show him to have been on October 9th, 1774. A few days later, on October 14th, we find him at Saint Mary's Bay. Here, he ministered to a group who had returned from Massachusetts, where they had been deported in 1775. While in this vicinity the good father chose a site for a church at Grosses Coques, "drew the plan and surveyed the work." According to Father P. M. Dagnaud, Superior of St. Anne's College, Church Point, NS., the initial Grosses Coques chapel had "less than a hundred feet of space inside. It was covered with boards badly jointed and over these were long strips of birch bark. There were only two openings near the door to admit light."

At the site of this very humble place of worship a cross of stone was dedicated in the year 1933.

After returning to his headquarters in January, 1775, the missionary father must have decided to remain in the vicinity of Bay Chaleur throughout the year, for the records do not mention any visits made to the distant missions.

In looking over documents and records of the year 1776, we find Father Bourg appearing in a new role, that of peacemaker. An uprising among the Indian tribes along the Saint John caused such grave concern to the English Administration, that the resident Governor at Quebec appealed to the Catholic bishop for assistance. A request was made by the English that the bishop send Father Bourg as quickly as possible to restore order among the tribes.

None was better qualified to carry out the delicate and difficult assignment than our zealous missionary. For he knew the language of the Indians

and was very well acquainted with their customs.

At Fort Howe (Saint John, N.B.) he met the assembled chiefs of different tribes and was very successful in his appeal to them to lay down their arms and not be influenced by American agents. Besides this meeting, two others were held, one in June, 1780 and the other in November, 1781, which contributed greatly to consolidating peace and to keeping the Indians loyal to the Crown.

In recognition of his valuable services the British Government gratefully granted our priest certain parcels of land near Carleton on Bay Chaleur.

The year 1781 marked the return of Father Bourg to St. Mary's Bay district in Nova Scotia. Here he found it advisable to have a new church constructed at a spot now known as Church Point. Apparently there was much work to be done in this far away mission if we would judge by the fact that visits were made regularly to 1786.

Another group of the flock now claimed attention. At Halifax a considerable number of English-speaking Catholics had settled and were in need of a resident priest to protect their interests in the new land. With a genuine spirit of charity Father Bourg made determined efforts to have the British authorities remove certain restrictions which prevented the Irish Catholics of Halifax the free exercise of their religion.

We note that the unjust Statutes regarding the "holding of land" and "public worship" were repealed by the General Assembly of Nova Scotia on December 2nd, 1783, after concerted action had been taken by the Irish Catholics. This new law was ratified and sanctioned by the King on July 2nd, 1784.

With the removal of restrictions to the practice of their religion the Catholics of Halifax petitioned Mgr. Talbot of London to send them a priest. The prelate reminded them that Halifax was not under his jurisdiction and that their request should be made to the Bishop of Quebec.

When the matter came to the attention of Mgr. Briand of Quebec, he appointed Father Bourg as pastor of the new parish. And the records tell us he took charge on the first day of August, 1785.

Father Bourg had only been in his parish a few weeks when Father James Jones, a Capuchin, landed at Halifax direct from Cork, Ireland. According to data at hand, we find that Father Jones was well endowed with fine qualities of heart and mind, causing him to be mentioned in official letters as being "a very good priest, a learned man, and a gifted preacher."

After some months Father Bourg decided it would be in the best interests of souls if the parish were given to the Capuchin Father and that he himself would return to Bay Chaleur. Such an arrangement was made with the Bishop so that Father Bourg was permitted to return to his former residence.

Facing the future with high hopes and with courage Father Bourg returned to Carleton to continue his apostolic labors. The rapid increase in

the population and the marked development of commerce seemed to point to a good measure of happiness in the days to come.

A church much larger and having a lovely interior was considered the need of the time, so the good priest set about making plans to that effect. The choice of a site for the proposed edifice was opposed by certain groups among the parishioners. Due to Father Bourg's exercise of tact the church was eventually built on the site he had chosen.

All was not pleasant for our missionary during his later days because a discontented element of his parishioners continued giving him a great deal of trouble. It seemed to him that the discordant group were most ungrateful. Besides, his condition of health now began to show the effects of his intrepid zeal. The labor of many years was exacting its toll.

His bishop decided a change was in order for the faithful missionary of Acadia so he appointed him pastor of the important parish of St. Laurent near Montreal. The date of the appointment is not given in the historical papers consulted but it is likely that the autumn of 1795 would be fairly correct. The first official act signed by Father Bourg in the parish register of St. Laurent bears the date October 9th, 1795.

The good priest's days of activity were practically over. Gradually the man who had endured so much during his long missionary career became feeble. Then, on the 20th of August, 1797, Father Joseph Mathurin Bourg went piously to his eternal reward fortified by the sacraments of holy church administered to him by Father Rioux, vicar-general of Montreal.

Relatively short though his career had been he nevertheless accomplished much for the church in Acadia. Even a vivid imagination can scarcely picture the fatigues endured and the difficulties encountered, as he went from one place to another intent on bringing spiritual help to needy souls. Great indeed was his self-denial!

It is not claiming too much to state that Father Joseph Mathurin Bourg by his intelligence, his devotion and his self-sacrifice merits a unique place among the early missionaries of Acadia.

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