

A New Shepherd for Seattle

On December 1, 2010, Archbishop-Elect J. Peter Sartain will be installed as the Ninth Bishop, Fifth Archbishop of Seattle. All are welcome to attend the installation liturgies, Tuesday, November 30 at 7:00pm, and Wednesday, December 1 at 2:00pm. As we prepare for this historic event, we look back at the bishops who have ministered here over the past 160 years.

BISHOPS OF THE WILD, WILD WEST

The Church in the Pacific Northwest is deeply indebted to Francis Xavier Norbert Blanchet. Blanchet, with Father Modeste Demers, both natives of Montreal, was one of the first priests to minister in the Oregon Territory, and staunchly believed in a bright future for the faith here. In 1843, when the Holy See designated the region an apostolic vicariate, F. N. Blanchet became its first bishop. He headed home to St. James Cathedral, Montreal, where he was consecrated bishop, but afterwards he did not return to Oregon. Instead, he went on to Europe to recruit priests and religious for the West. He spent several months in Rome, where, amazingly, he succeeded in convincing the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda to elevate the new apostolic vicariate into an Archdiocese, with two suffragan dioceses. Not only that, but at his recommendation Father Modeste Demers was appointed the first bishop of Vancouver Island, and Blanchet's own brother became the first bishop of Walla Walla—later Nesqually—later Seattle.

A ROUGH BEGINNING

F. X. N. Blanchet's faith in his brother A. M. A. (Augustin Magloire Alexandre) was not ill-founded. Born in 1797, ordained at the young age of 23, he was a gifted priest, appointed to several posts of trust in his home diocese of Montreal. Upon receiving word of his appointment to Walla Walla, he, like his brother before him, was consecrated bishop in Montreal. He began preparations for the journey west. While his brother had traveled by sea, A. M. A. Blanchet decided to take the Oregon Trail. He recruited priests and seminarians, raised funds, and collected supplies, and set out from Montreal on March 23, 1847.

The Oregon Trail was something of a baptism by fire for the well-educated Blanchet, who (just a few weeks short of his 50th birthday) had spent most of his years of ministry in the elegant confines of Montreal's magnificent Cathedral. He was shocked at the liturgical laxness he encountered in the United States (they did not chant Vespers in the cathedral at St. Louis!). American men were always putting their feet on the table ("raising their legs as high as their heads when they are sitting down," wrote the shocked Blanchet). American servants were rude ("we have the opportunity to practice patience and charity," he said). And then there were the hardships of the Oregon Trail. Bishop Blanchet had to abandon many of his supplies along the way, including a plow, because the exhausted and underfed oxen simply couldn't pull



From left to right: A.M.A. Blanchet, F.X.N. Blanchet, and Modeste Demers

them any farther. There were unanticipated expenses that ate up almost all the money Blanchet had collected back home, so that he arrived in Walla Walla with almost empty pockets.

A HOME IN VANCOUVER

In Walla Walla, there was no rest for the weary travelers. No joyful assembly gathered to meet the new bishop, there was no solemn installation in the cathedral—in fact, there was no church at all. Walla Walla was not a city or even a frontier town; it was nothing but a "lonely fur trading post," a "forlorn and uncouth fortress" (Schoenberg).

Just a few months after Blanchet's arrival, the tensions between settlers and native peoples exploded in the Whitman massacre. The new bishop helped negotiate for the release of the captives, and tended the dying, but after visiting his brother the Archbishop in Oregon City in early 1848, he was denied access to Walla Walla upon his return, due to the outbreak of the Cayuse War. And if that wasn't enough, the California Gold Rush had drained the region of resources as settlers and even priests headed south in search of riches.

In 1848, Archbishop Blanchet wrote to the Sacred Congregation again, proposing a new arrangement of his vast territory, moving the seat of the northern diocese from Walla Walla to the safer Nesqually region in the west. Approval came in 1850, and for the first time since his consecration in 1846, Bishop A. M. A. Blanchet had a stable home, and a cathedral: St. James, inside the walls of Fort Vancouver.

—Corinna Laughlin