

Holy Ground

Exploring Catholic history in the Pacific Northwest

PART 5: FATHER DE SMET GOES TO VANCOUVER

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From the time of their arrival in Vancouver at the end of 1838, Father Blanchet and Father Demers had been on their own. They traveled incessantly through their vast territory, settling down at most for a few months at a time to preach, teach, and set up missions. They knew that to establish the Church in the west would require stability—and that meant they needed help. Blanchet appealed to Archbishop Signay of Quebec, who agreed to send a couple of young priests, but found no way to get them there—the Hudson’s Bay Company was not interested in providing transportation for any more Catholic priests, for reasons both practical and political.

In the summer of 1840, word reached the missionaries of a new Jesuit mission in the Rocky Mountains. Father Demers immediately reached out, addressing a letter to the “Catholic Missionaries with the Flatheads”: “Though I have not as yet the pleasure of knowing your names, I eagerly take the opportunity which is presented to send you news of the two poor missionaries of the Columbia... with what joy and contentment have I learned of your arrival among the Flatheads!” Demers’ letter landed in the hands of a Jesuit by the name of Pierre-Jean De Smet, who would become one of the most influential figures in the early history of the Church in the west.

De Smet, a native of Termonde in Flanders (present-day Dendermonde, Belgium), was an impetuous young man of twenty when he heard an appeal by Father Charles Nerinckx for priests to serve in America. Swept away with enthusiasm, De Smet left for America without telling anyone, because, as he later wrote, “to have asked the consent of our parents would have been to court a certain and absolute refusal.” He entered the Jesuits and his preparations for the priesthood were made on the frontier,



Father DeSmet photographed by Matthew Brady. *From Wikimedia Commons.*

in Florissant, Missouri. He struggled with his calling, and even left the Jesuits for a time to serve as a diocesan priest back in Belgium. Ultimately De Smet returned to the Jesuits and to the United States. He found his life’s work among the Native Americans. He was also an extraordinary promoter of the missions, and crisscrossed the Atlantic many times, collecting money and recruiting personnel to help build up the Church in the West.

With his stocky build, DeSmet had been nicknamed “Samson” in his younger days. He was strong, fearless, and romantic—the perfect combination for a missionary. He was also a prolific writer, and

his many books about his experiences in the west were widely read. Unlike Blanchet and Demers, DeSmet embraced the American way of life. He loved his adopted country, although he was clear-eyed with regards to its failures: “Since the discovery of America a system of extermination, of moving the Indians, thrusting them further back, has been pursued and practiced by the whites, little by little at first, more and more as European settlers multiplied and gained strength. At this day this same policy is marching with giant strides.” (Eventually, De Smet would be called upon to intercede with Sitting Bull and was instrumental in convincing him to sign the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868.)

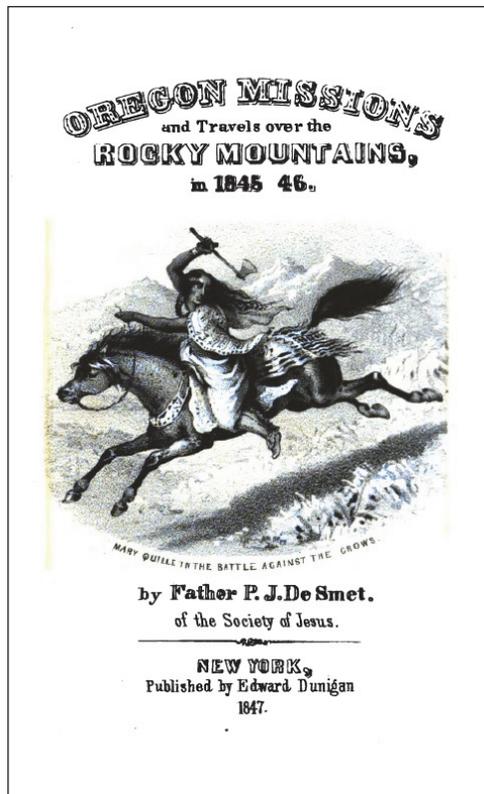
In 1841, De Smet returned to the Rocky Mountains to establish St. Mary’s Mission in what is now Stevensville, Montana. When Blanchet heard that there were no fewer than *three* Jesuit priests stationed there, along with three brothers, he wrote to De Smet and begged him to send some of this abundance of Jesuits to the Willamette valley and establish a school. De Smet agreed to come and confer with Blanchet and Demers. He would also take advantage of the opportunity to purchase some much-needed supplies

for St. Mary's at Fort Vancouver.

The journey down the Columbia was difficult and dangerous. At the Little Dalles outside of Fort Colville, De Smet decided to leave the barge and walk along the banks of the Columbia, a decision that probably saved his life. The barge was caught in the rapids and vanished into the water: "All were gone, and yet upon the river's breast there was not the faintest trace of their melancholy fate. Soon after the whirlpool threw up, in various directions, the oars, poles, the barge capsized, and every lighter article it had contained. Here and there I beheld the unhappy bargemen vainly struggling in the midst of the vortex. Five of them sunk never to rise again."

De Smet finally reached Vancouver on June 8, 1842 and was met by a joyful Father Demers. The two proceeded to St. Paul in Oregon, where they spent eight days with Blanchet, discussing the future of the Church in the Pacific Northwest. De Smet was enthusiastic about the Catholic Ladder, declaring, "That plan will be adopted by the missions of the whole world." Their informal council resulted in significant decisions. Demers headed north to minister to native peoples in New Caledonia (in present-day British Columbia). Blanchet stayed to serve the missions near the Columbia River. And De Smet returned to St. Louis and from there to Europe, to recruit priests, sisters, and funds for the Church in the Pacific Northwest. They all agreed that what the Oregon Country needed was a bishop of its own.

Though their meetings were undoubtedly conducted in French, the encounter of the missionaries was really a meeting of two nations. Blanchet and Demers were



Title page of Father DeSmet's account of his travels. From www.archive.org.

Canadians, who reported to the Archbishop of Quebec. De Smet, on the other hand, was an American citizen whose superiors were in St. Louis, Missouri. The Oregon Country, where they all served, was disputed territory, claimed by Britain and the United States, but American claims were beginning to dominate. Within a few months of the missionaries' council, the Hudson's Bay Company would move their headquarters to Fort Victoria, and the annexation of Oregon Country would be a major theme in the 1844 U. S. presidential election. These changing political realities would come into play in the appointment of the first bishop for Oregon Country.

—Corinna Laughlin,
Director of Liturgy

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MAKE A VISIT



St. Paul Church, Oregon | 20217 Christie St | St Paul, OR 97137

St. Paul's was the first Catholic church in Oregon Country, built by French Canadian trappers in 1836, several years before the arrival of Blanchet and Demers. It was replaced in 1846 with the present building, the first brick church in Oregon.

St. Mary Mission, Montana | <https://www.saintmarysmisson.org/>

St. Mary's Mission in Stevensville, Montana, located about a mile south of Father De Smet's first St. Mary's Mission, is open April 15-October 12. Several historic buildings survive, including the Chapel built and decorated by Father Antonio Ravalli, SJ, one of the priests recruited by De Smet on his European tour in 1843.

