

# Holy Ground

Exploring Catholic history in the Pacific Northwest

PART 7: HELP FROM THE OBLATES

SEPTEMBER 20, 2020

This series of essays exploring the history of the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest began in September, 2019 but was interrupted when the bulletin was suspended due to the pandemic. It now resumes. You can catch up on the first six essays in the series at <https://www.stjames-cathedral.org/history/holyground/holyground.aspx>

Throughout the summer of 1847, Bishop A. M. A. Blanchet traveled along the Oregon Trail with the wagon train. By the time he reached Fort Hall on the Snake River in present-day Idaho, Blanchet had grown impatient with the slow pace. Eager to see his new diocese and get to work, he completed the journey on horseback. At his side was Father Pascal Ricard, OMI.

The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) are a missionary religious congregation established in 1816 by St. Eugène de Mazenod. Though the community was growing rapidly, it was impossible to keep up with the demand for priests to serve in mission territories around the world. De Mazenod had turned down Archbishop F. N. Blanchet's request for priests for Oregon, but when A. M. A. Blanchet appealed for help for the new Diocese of Walla Walla, the saint was able to send him a small band of missionaries, led by Father Pascal Ricard.

Ricard, like Bishop Blanchet himself, was a seasoned priest, but had almost no "field" experience to prepare him for what he was about to face. In 1847, he was 41 years old and in quite poor health. He had spent his entire priestly ministry in Europe, and his most significant achievement was the founding of the Oblate minor seminary in Switzerland. He was, perhaps, an odd



ABOVE: Bishop A. M. A. Blanchet, first Bishop of Walla Walla, a man of apostolic zeal and uncompromising personality. *Photo from Wikimedia Commons* BELOW: Father Pascal Ricard, OMI, who accompanied Bishop Blanchet on the Oregon Trail and was one of the first priests to minister in what is now Washington State. *Photo from omiworld.org*

choice for such a challenging mission, but the founder trusted him and knew he would represent the Oblates well. On January 8, 1847, St. Eugène de Mazenod wrote to Father Ricard: "You are destined for higher functions...."

Monseigneur Blanchet, bishop of Walla Walla, brother of the Archbishop of Oregon, wishes to confide his interesting mission to our Congregation. He desires that the Fathers of our society collaborate with him in extending the Kingdom of Jesus Christ throughout the regions entrusted to him.... the work of our Congregation will extend from one sea to the other.... The new diocese of Walla Walla is in quite a beautiful country where the harvest of souls will be very abundant.... Respond with joy to this call, be faithful to your vocation and count on the most abundant blessings of God and on a recompense proportionate to the excellence of the great mission you are going to fulfil." De Mazenod added that Father Ricard was to depart on this mission almost immediately: "come to me towards the end of next week to receive my instructions."

In a letter to another Oblate priest, Bishop de Mazenod confessed: "I had good reasons to fear that [Father Ricard] would have repugnance in accepting this mission. Yet on receiving my letter he went down into the lower church of Notre-Dame de Lumières and made the sacrifice of his life to God. After that he took leave of everyone and came to me quite disposed to fulfil his mission."

By the beginning of February, Father Ricard—along with three young Oblates, none of them yet ordained—was sailing from Le Havre to New York. On April 16, 1847, they arrived in St. Louis, where they joined Bishop

Blanchet and together encountered the rigors of the Oregon Trail.

Surprisingly, Father Ricard's delicate health improved. Writing to a missionary priest in Ceylon, St. Eugène de Mazenod reported, "Fr. Ricard who was dying when he started out has recovered his health and he wrote me recently that he had only suffered from a cold for twenty-four hours, in spite of nights spent under the stars, often sleeping in the mud."

The difficulty and danger of the Oregon Trail was not the only challenge faced by the missionaries. There was also the reality of the frictions brought about by close quarters with people who, while they embraced a shared mission, were still strangers to each other.

At about the time the Oblates were joining Bishop Blanchet in St. Louis, Blanchet's friend, Bishop Ignace Bourget of Montréal, wrote to de Mazenod: "I believe that Father Ricard and his confrères might well have been surprised by the cold manner of the Bishop of Walla Walla. But I hope that when they will have lived with him, they will better be able to judge the goodness of his heart. He is naturally serious and his manner is cold and even glacial to anyone approaching him for the first time. Besides you understand that in the sorrow one feels on leaving his fatherland and in the middle of the fatigues of a long and uncomfortable journey, one is not naturally inclined to laugh."

Blanchet's attitude towards religious priests—those belonging to a religious community like the Jesuits or the Oblates—was one of suspicion, an attitude shared by his brother, Archbishop Blanchet of Oregon City, and many other bishops. In his Oregon Trail diary, Blanchet reported that the Bishop of Louisville had warned him against the Jesuits, who had "taken 40 or 50 of his best subjects"—young men who, he claimed, had been lured away to enter the Jesuits instead of the diocesan priesthood!

It was a sensitive situation, to be sure. In mission territories, where there were not yet many diocesan priests, if any, the bishops were dependent on the help of the religious orders. Yet their authority over them was limited. As Bishop, Blanchet was ultimately responsible for all ministry that would happen in the new diocese of Walla Walla, and the Oblates were there at his invitation. But Father Ricard, as Superior of the Oblate community, could alter the missionaries' assignments or move them at will. Not only that, Ricard's responsibility extended across the Pacific Northwest, so he could even reassign the Oblates outside of Blanchet's jurisdiction if he saw fit. Bishop Blanchet started his ministry with only one priest who was under his sole



Fort Walla Walla as it appeared when Bishop Blanchet arrived there in the fall of 1847.

authority—Father Brouillet, his Vicar-General. For everything else, he was dependent on the Oblates. Needless to say, this sharing of authority added to the challenges of missionary life, both for the Oblates and for the Bishop.

On September 5, 1847, Bishop Blanchet and Father Ricard arrived at Fort Walla Walla, and the next day, Blanchet offered Mass for the first time in his new diocese. "How might I relate the experience of saying Mass for the first time in my own diocese after a trek of five and a half months! How might I witness before God all the gratitude we owe Him for the many favors He granted us during our voyage!"

The long journey was finally over. But life was soon to get much more complicated, and challenges would come both from outside the Church, and from within.

—Corinna Laughlin, *Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy*

#### *Works Consulted:*

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