

# Holy Ground

Exploring Catholic history in the Pacific Northwest

PART 9: BISHOP BLANCHET VS. THE OBLATES

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**A**M. A. Blanchet's first year as a bishop was difficult and even perilous. He endured a months-long journey on the Oregon Trail into an unknown territory where he barely spoke the language, only to find himself in a hornet's nest of controversy and danger. After the Whitman massacre, his efforts to bring peace to the situation were largely ineffective, and after just four months, he was forced to abandon his see of Walla Walla and seek safety with his brother in Oregon.

As if that was not enough, trouble was also brewing in another quarter. On December 4, 1847, just a few days after the massacre, Bishop Blanchet accompanied the leader of the Oblate missionaries, Father Pascal Ricard, to a meeting with the Walla Walla nation, among whom Blanchet had asked the Oblates to establish a mission. The chief welcomed them, and assigned Ricard a parcel of land at the mouth of the Yakima River. As Father Ricard wrote to his friend Father Joset, a Jesuit missionary: "Bp. was present at this negotiation and said nothing—but after everything was over, took me aside, and said—I would wish you to give me a written *acte* in which you declare that it is not to you but to the Mission, i.e., to the Bishop that this land has been given. Answered that I saw no necessity. Bp. answered it was to provide for the contingency of our being driven from the country.... I saw what religious could expect. Told Bp. that if we put up churches and residences at our expense, they would belong to us."

The impasse was perhaps unavoidable. The missionaries were expected to be self-sustaining—earning income to support themselves, and build churches, by working the land. Given that the Bishop had no cash whatsoever to put into the project, the Oblates assumed that the land and property thus acquired be theirs to sell to support themselves, if the mission



ABOVE: Bishop A. M. A. Blanchet in a photo about the time of his appointment as Bishop of Walla Walla. Courtesy of the Archives of the Sisters of Providence in Montreal. BELOW: St. Eugene de Mazenod, Bishop of Marseille, France, and founder of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, who were among Bishop Blanchet's first helpers in the Diocese of Walla Walla.

had to be abandoned. What the Bishop saw, on the other hand, was a diocesan mission staffed by Oblate priests. Blanchet's anxiety was further fueled by his awareness that in this new country, the United States, it was common practice for church property to be owned by lay trustees or by priests, which could make it quite difficult for the bishop to exert his authority.

The beginning of 1848 found all the bishops and many of the priests of the Northwest gathered in one place—tiny St. Paul, Oregon. St. Paul was the favored project of Archbishop Blanchet of Oregon City, who saw this as a center for Catholic life in Oregon Territory, and in 1846 had confidently built a grand brick church in this corner of the wilderness. Archbishop Blanchet took advantage of the presence of his brother, and of Bishop Modeste Demers of Vancouver Island, to convoke the First Provincial Council of the region on February 28, 29, and March 1 of 1848. The decrees of this first Council included such benign instructions as fostering devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary. They also included a total ban on any secular clergy entering a religious order—a clear reflection of the Blanchet brothers' mistrust of religious orders.

It was not long before news of these tensions reached the ears of Bishop Eugène de Mazenod in Marseille, France, more than 5,000 miles away. (The founder of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Mazenod would be canonized in 1995.) "I have received news

from Father Ricard in Oregon, where it seems that the Bishop of Walla Walla has allowed himself to be influenced by the extraordinary ideas of his brother on the subject of religious orders," wrote the saintly founder of the Oblates to a friend. "They are two stubborn men before whom all must bend.... It seems to me that Bishops who certainly cannot do everything

by themselves should be happy to have such co-workers, and should manage them better.”

The future saint felt the best way to address the situation was to create a new diocese in the area known as “Nesqually,” and to make a religious order priest—preferably Father Ricard himself—the bishop! In this way, the religious orders would have an advocate in the region, and a way to voice their concerns. He added, “I speak to you in confidence... I know from experience that secrets are not kept in offices... and you can understand that if the Holy Congregation were not to adopt the project I propose, and the Bishops got wind of it, all would be lost.”

Bishop Blanchet, of course, had no idea that any of this was going on—or that the dispute would drag on for several years to come. He was still stuck in St. Paul, trying to negotiate his return to Walla Walla, and casting about for next steps. He sent Father Ricard north in search of a mission on Puget Sound. Ricard located a parcel of land where, he felt sure, a great city would rise one day. He was not entirely wrong—the land he purchased is now part of the city of Olympia, and is known to this day as “Priests Point.”

Blanchet spent his time assisting his brother, the Archbishop, and writing letters asking for funding and support. He wrote to the Propagation of the Faith, begging for the financial support which was so long delayed because of the 1848 uprisings across Europe. “Everything in my diocese remains to be done,” he wrote. “There is neither chapel nor house for the missionaries. Provisions must be transported at great expense over a distance of more than three hundred miles.” He also wrote to James Buchanan, Secretary of State (and later President of the United States), asserting the innocence of the Cayuse chiefs Tawatoé and Camaspelo, and pleading for a peaceful resolution to the ongoing conflict which had succeeded the Whitman massacre: “If peace is made, which cannot be delayed, if the murderers alone are pursued, it is my belief that we will never again lament a misfortune like Waiilatpu.”

By April of 1848, the Bishop had grown tired of doing nothing. “However pleasant I found my stay in St. Paul,” he wrote, “I was impatient to return to my diocese & was prepared to do so with the first opportunity.” He wrote to Territorial Governor Abernethy but got no reply. (Another missionary priest wrote of Abernethy, “our governor is as capable of governing as I would be of doing needlework.”)



St. Paul Church in St. Paul, Oregon, built in 1846, was the site of the first Provincial Council of Catholic bishops in the Northwest, and a witness to the hopes and ambitions of Archbishop F. N. Blanchet. Today, St. Paul's is on the National Register of Historic Places, and is the oldest brick building in the Northwest.

Blanchet took Abernethy's non-response as permission, loaded up a year's worth of supplies at Fort Vancouver, and headed east on a barge. He arrived without any serious mishap, though both his miters got soaked in the waters of the Columbia River!

Blanchet arrived in Waskopam (present-day The Dalles), which was at that time part of his diocese, where he established a new mission, to be named St. Peter. Father Brouillet continued on to Fort Walla Walla, hoping to resume his ministry among the Cayuse.

A few days after his arrival, Blanchet received a notice from the Department of Indian Affairs forbidding all missionary work among the Native Americans east of the Cascades until troops could be established in the region. This

measure was prompted by a genuine concern for the missionaries' safety following the Whitman massacre, but also by anti-Catholic sentiment among provincial leadership—Protestant missionary efforts had been severely disrupted in the region, and they feared Catholics coming in and making significant headway during their absence. Blanchet took it in stride—“as we were not banned... from residing and building there,” he wrote, “we continued to prepare the timber” for a residence and a chapel.

As it turned out, the ban on missionary work was not consistently enforced, and soon Blanchet was using the Catholic Ladder to teach the faith to the Waskos. And his little church dedicated to St. Peter was soon built: “The interior of my chapel is twenty-four by eleven feet... I have not yet officiated as bishop. I will do so once the chapel also has a floor.” Bishop Blanchet's stay at St. Peter's ended up being quite short—but the parish he established there continues to this day.

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