

PRIESTS THAT I HAVE KNOWN

I

Bishop Fulton J. Sheen

A lot has been written about this great man, and he himself has written extensively; not about himself but still his work helps us to understand him. Since 1940, when I first heard him on the radio, I listened to him on T.V. Tread him and listened to him on tape. It is hard to exaggerate the influence he had on the world in his life. Outstanding is an understatement in my opinion. I would call him intellectually gifted, a first class apostle. He makes me think of St. Bernard for his zeal and St. Thomas Aquinas for his brilliant mind. Among his fine virtues, he had a great love of our Divine Lord and Mother Mary. His zeal was extraordinary to say the least. What good would he do if he was still active in the church today when we are praying and searching for guidance in a world so upset and confused.

II

Father Antoine Comeau

He is the priest who baptized me. He was an Acadian from around Chatham, N.B. Times were tough when he was pastor of St. Hilaire, a few miles west of Petit Sault (Edmundston, NB.). He was up to the situation, a saintly priest, he won the trust of his people. He fought alcoholism among his lumberjacks and won. He directed many young men toward the priesthood who have made their mark. Father Thomas Albert, who wrote a history of Madawaska, was one of them.

My brother, Emile, had died of diphtheria and I was fighting for my life. He came to our place and my dear mother recommended me to his prayers. "I am going home," he said, "and I will read the first page of the Gospel of St. John for him. If the Good Lord wants to do something with him, he will not die." I recovered and became a priest and I wish I would be as good as he was.

My mother suffered from phlebitis and could not walk without crutches. She had quite a few children and more coming. She asked his help. "Throw away those crutches," he said. She did and never had to use them after. She died at 77 years of age.

At the beginning of this century I doubt that 50% of the people in the St. John Valley could read or write. There were no doctors or lawyers in his parish. He was the man his people looked up to and he was up to the situation. They owed him their success and progress. He directed many of the best young women toward education and those gave us the three R's, the Christian principles that made priests and sisters and good citizens out of their students. Around the beginning of the First World War, he was succeeded in St. Hilaire by **Father Zoel Lambert**.

He was born and brought up at St. Ferdinand d' Halifax, not far from Sherbrooke in southwestern Quebec. He was a six footer, a handsome man and an outstanding preacher. Very well liked by his parishioners, he directed many young men like myself to colleges and the priesthood. Surprisingly enough for a man his size his health was not the best. So he went for the out of doors. He was a crack shot with a rifle and an outstanding fly fisherman. Dad was the best canoeman in his parish and they had quite a few trips together on the Restigouche and the Miramichi. They always came home with a good catch. Always, except once when there were plenty of salmon (Atlantic) but they would not bite, period. One evening Dad sneaked out of camp with the hook they used to pull those giants ashore. (Many of them weighed over 20 pounds). He lay down near a pool and drove the hook in the side of a good one ... he lost the hook; the fish was pulling him in the river. Dad weighed 180 pounds.

They fished East Lake near the Maine-Quebec border west of Estcourt and came home canoeing the outlet of the Lake, Chementicook Stream and the St. John River. Dad was not too familiar with the upper St. John River those days and he was worried about the Big Rapids above Dickey. That rapid is nearly three miles long and the river comes down a hill 80 feet high. It is still a challenge to a canoeman but it was more so then because since they have blasted most of the big rocks in it. They had an Old Town canvas canoe, 20 ft. long, but they were two big men with baggage. They made it and the priest said a prayer of thanksgiving at the end of it even if they had shipped nearly a barrelful of water. That trip was not their best. They had caught fish in the lake but they had to drag their canoe practically all the way to the St. John River because the stream is too wide and shallow to float a canoe except in early spring.

To visit his parish which was over ten miles long and six miles wide, he bought a horse that had been a disqualified race horse but was still the fastest horse in the valley. I doubt that he let it go as fast as it could because our country roads were not good enough for him to take such a risk. When the roads improved and the automobile came around, he bought one and got rid of this little horse. As I said, he was an outstanding preacher but he was good at teaching catechism to children, too.

III

In 1924, at 15 years of age, I went to St. Anne de la Pocatiere, at college to begin my preparation to the priesthood. I studied there six beautiful years. The man in charge of discipline there was **Fr. Arthur Beaudoin**. A six-footer, dark in complexion, he practically never smiled except when he caught us in mischief. He loved us, though, and in the years I have been under his authority, I don't remember one instance when he would have been too strict with even one of the 600 boys under his authority. He has helped quite a few including me and I pray the Good Lord reward him well.

Fr. Alexandre Jean was our teacher in French Literature. A graduate from Sorbonne, his course was never dull, and he was well liked by all his students. Gifted extensively, he loved motors and understood them well. He made himself a grandfather's clock carved out of wood and in perfect operating condition.

During my last year at college, we had for professor, a man outstanding among the 40 priests teaching there. He was **Msgr. Willfrid Lebon**. A graduate from Rome, he was well learned and a professor of Social Sciences at Laval University in Quebec City. His course was extremely interesting. He wrote a history of the College and also a booklet of priceless songs for us students. He was one of those priests who would have been a very good Bishop but was never chosen.

In 1934, when I joined the Oblates Fathers, my master of novices was **Fr. Pierre Pepin**. A holy man with a good sense of humor and a beautiful voice, he held that position for 18 years. We had a very good set of rules to help us prepare for a fruitful and priestly life. He was all for it but he watched for exaggerations; that he could not approve. He was not for those who took themselves too seriously. After all, we were still very imperfect even if we had sincere desires for holiness and that would be true for all our life.

One day, we were snowshoeing with him and he stopped and said, "Let's blow our nose, we are coming into town." Mother time, he was talking about the relics of the saints. "The only one we have of St. Joseph is his HAN." One of us asked what that was and he replied: "When the good carpenter was splitting wood, every time he would hit it with his axe, he would say: HAN". The one who had asked was surprised and did not laugh but we all did. One of the priests at the novitiate came out one day with the question: "How come in the cold weather, your feet get cold before the rest of you." Nobody could say why. "Well," he said, "they are always below zero anyway..."

In 1937, I went west to Saskatchewan to complete my studies. Our teachers there were really first class. That school had given three Bishops to the Church. Bishop Piche, Ft. Providence, Northwest Territories; Bishop Dumouchel, Le Pas Manitoba, and Bishop Robidoux in Hudson's Bay. Our professor of Dogma was **Father Joseph Blanchin, O.M.I.** An old soldier from Savoie in southeast France, he was well gifted and posted in many areas for teaching. He knew his theology very well; never used a book in class and gave us the best of St. Thomas and the others, too. He must have been in his sixties when I knew him. He was like most of the old people; he did not sleep much. Early in the morning in June, he would lie in bed and listen to the birds filling the air with music. "Did you notice," he would tell us, "that every bird is singing his songs and not worrying about the others and still there is not a false note in the concert." He was right. He would listen to the chimes of our grandfather's clock and write a song on the music in four voices. Obedience, Authority, For recompense, Eternity, Duty calling, Love inviting, Heaven waiting. Mentioning some of his souvenirs as a soldier, he would remark: "We never had trouble finding our wounded comrades in the dark after a battle, they were calling their mother." Underscoring the fact that, however tough we may be, in big trouble, we return to that first love, to the one who often has done more for us than anybody else.

When I was teaching at the College at Gravelbourg, Sask., the manager there had been principal at the Indian School at Labret. He was big and strong. One day two Sioux Indians who had a drink decided to come see their children in the school. Well, there was a rule that the kids could not be seen during school hours. But the Indians decided to get them out, anyway. They met Father Leonard and when he stood in their way they brought him to the floor. By chance a man working at the school came by and grabbed one of the attackers. Father had no trouble taking care of the other one even if he was a six-footer. Some time after the school burned down. Father told me himself that he does not understand how he did it but he took a 500-pound statue of the Blessed Mother and carried it out of the burning building and put it on the lawn.

Mother strong man that I did not meet but heard a lot about was Father Page. He was a missionary in the district of Qu'Appelle, Sask. He had bought a horse and had been deceived when told that it had been in a stable before. It seems that some of those western ponies are allergic to stables. The seller was at the church at the mission when Father Page came to say Mass on the next Sunday and enjoying his joke in advance. Father unhitched his horse and brought him to the door of the little stable but the horse backed out when his nose came to the door. Father tried again with the same results. So Father took a good hold of the halter,

brought the horse near the door and before the horse gave his jerk backward, Father grabbed a post inside the door and dragged the horse inside. This time the people were not laughing at Father but at the liar.

In those days at the Indian School at Labret, the big boys were giving trouble to the principal. So the Provincial Superior sent Father Page as Principal. He was told about the situation and came prepared. One afternoon when the boys were working as usual he wrote the rules he wanted to enforce and a few minutes before the boys came in after their work, he went down to their quarters and posted them at the usual place and stood back. When the boys came in they noticed the new paper and went to take notice. They were smiling with anticipation until Father stepped forward and said: "Boys, Jam the new boss here. I wrote those rules and I mean them to be obeyed and if any of you do otherwise, I will crush him." As he said that he was standing near a ping-pong table, in one blow he put his fist through the top of the table, brought it up and hit the floor with it, sending it in pieces to the four corners of the room. The boys knew that they had better behave and they did. In those days and places good muscles were handy.

When I came back to Maine in 1950, after a few months of rest with my family, I mentioned to Father A. Palardy that I would like to work as a priest even if I did not feel strong enough to do all the work of a good assistant. My younger brother, Ben, who lived in Presque Isle, Me., presented me to his pastor, Father John Harris, a saintly man who directed me to Father David Surette, pastor of Greenville, Me., who needed help for the summer. Father Surette was not brilliant but he was wise, he was not the smartest but he was one of the best.

For five years I worked in his parish under his guidance. The Most Rev. Bishop could not receive me in his diocese right away but after five years under observation, he incardinated me and took me as one of his priests for the rest of my life.

Bishop Feeney was a brilliant speaker, a very good administrator with much concern for the welfare and salvation of his flock and the sanctification of his clergy. He was the first Maine born Bishop and he was a very good one. He had a good clergy. Men like Msgr. Decarry, Giguere, Martin, Johnson, Heve, Cunneen, Desjardins, F.F. Wilfrid and Rosaire Quелlette, Father Lucien Chabot and his brother, Armand, Father Boucher in Chisholm could be considered among others as the pillars of the diocese. Anyway, it has been said and I agree heartily that the clergy of Maine can be compared favorably with the best anywhere.

