

CHAPTER III: Fr. Ance's Mission

From October of 1835 until October of 1841, there are no separate Church records of the French Canadians in Burlington, who at this time were part of St. Mary Parish. The marriage notations in these baptismal records show couples active in St. Joseph Parish after 1850. Records during Fr. O'Callaghan's time were entered without names of parents, however, making identification with origins in Canada difficult.

The next French Canadian records noted in the early registers are of October 1841 when Bishop Forbin-Janson of Nancy, France, preached a mission for the French Canadians. He was on a prolonged visit to Canada and the United States, accompanied to Burlington by a missionary priest, Fr. Guillaume Labbe, and a priest from St. Laurent Parish in Montreal, Abbe Jean-Baptiste St. Germain. On October 2, 5, 6 and 8, there is recorded a total of 34 "rehabilitations of marriages" and 24 baptisms.³² These rehabilitations demonstrate that the French Canadians wanted to be in good standing in the Church and to practice their faith.

The future parishioners of St. Joseph Church took a liking to Fr. Labbe and took steps to retain him. Count Charles-Auguste-Marie-Joseph de Forbin-Janson, Bishop of Nancy and Toule, was about to return to France and take Fr. Labbe with him. They sent a petition, dated November 7, 1841, to Bishop Forbin-Janson, requesting that *Fr. Guillaume Labbe* be allowed to remain as their pastor or as a missionary priest. The petition was signed by over 250 heads of families and drafted by R.S.M. Bouchette.³³

The Canadians had a meeting at which they adopted regulations relating to the building of a church for their use. Bishop Fenwick gave approval to their plans and said he would write the Bishop of Montreal requesting a French-speaking priest for Burlington. Bishop Fenwick's letter of November 5, 1841, to the Bishop of Montreal stated in part:

"The erection of the new Catholic Church at Burlington, the admirable discourses of the worthy and excellent Bishop of Nancy . . . have had a surprising effect on them (the Catholic Canadians). They have put new life into them . . . they (the Catholic Canadians) are determined to have a church in Burlington:"

Bishop Fenwick asked the-Bishop of Montreal for an active and zealous priest for Burlington. As a postscript, he men-

tioned that he appointed Rev. William Ivers to take charge of St. Albans because he spoke French fluently. He also emphasized that Burlington and environs had no French-speaking priest.

The efforts of the French Canadians to keep Fr. Labbe did not succeed. However, their attempt did culminate in Bishop Fenwick's appointment as their priest, the Rev. Francois Ance, who was ordained on September 19, 1829 in Illaire, France. On April 18, 1841, he had embarked at Le Havre to join Bishop Forbin-Janson in America. He reached New York on June 13 and then travelled to Montreal to await the bishop and accompany him on a mission. We assume that this mission occurred. Subsequently, we find that Fr. Ance must have travelled to Boston because it is noted in Bishop Fenwick's journal dated February 14, 1842 that *"Fr. Francois Ance leaves Boston by way of Springfield in the cars for his mission among the Canadians in Vermont:"*

Fr. Ance's mission was spiritually rewarding to the great majority of his congregation in Burlington and environs. He reportedly accomplished "a vast amount of good for the Canadians themselves and the society at large. Under his direction and through his efforts a commodious chapel and rooms for a school have been erected, and he has labored unceasingly to introduce order and quiet among a people, who, in too many instances, have been acted upon by all the evil influences which are inseparable from their situation in our midst. The change effected by him for the better is perceptible by all. The good which he has done has not been confined to Burlington, but has extended to other places which have enjoyed the benefits of his ministry."³⁴

Unfortunately for Fr. Ance, certain events took place in Burlington that would contribute to his unhappiness and to his future disturbed state which became a problem for the rest of his life. There are incomplete records in the Archives of the Archdiocese of Montreal and none in those of the Archdiocese of Boston concerning these incidents. We are able, however, from a number of items of correspondence, to reach a reasonable understanding of what occurred and led to his abrupt departure from Burlington at the end of October or early part of November, 1843.

An early problem during his mission was mentioned in an 1853 letter³⁵ from a friend of Fr. Ance's family in France

32: St. Joseph Church Register of Marriages, (1841), pp. 9-11. St. Joseph Church Register, of Baptisms, (1841), p. 23.

33. Archives, Archdiocese of Montreal, 195.13F, 841-1A.

34. *Pieces Justificatives*, H.B. Stacy, Printer, Nov. 7, 1843, "Remarks;" p. 23.

35. Archives, Archdiocese of Montreal, 451.95, 853-1.

to Bishop Bourget of Montreal indicating that Fr. Ance had difficulties with the Bishop of Boston over the reimbursement of a sum of money advanced for the construction of a chapel and rectory in Burlington. We do not know the relevance of this matter to other events, as mentioned below.

On November 9, 1842, Bishop Bourget wrote to Fr. O'Callaghan, Pastor of St. Mary Church, Burlington, thanking him for his interest and explaining that if Bishop Fenwick, Diocese of Boston, has put Fr. Ance's matter into his hands, it is because he (Bishop Bourget) is closer to Burlington and the matter is a French Canadian one. He stated that he hoped, more than anyone, that Fr. Ance would triumph.³⁶



Most Reverend Ignace Bourget, Bishop of Montreal, 1840-1876

Shortly after this, on November 19, 1842, Bishop Fenwick wrote to Fr. Mignault, his Vicar General:

"It appears then from your last just received that Rev. Mr. Ance has been falsely accused! I rejoice exceedingly to hear this and feel greatly obliged to you for having returned to him all the faculties of which I had deprived him :"³⁷

The bishop sent his congratulations to Fr. Ance by Fr. Mignault adding that he would state this in a letter to Fr. Ance.

With restored faculties, Fr. Ance was apparently ministering fully and effectively to his congregation when the first of two deplorable events occurred. During the night of August 26-27, 1843, while Fr. Ance was out of town visiting a mission, his rectory was burglarized. A considerable sum of money and some other property was stolen. Search warrants were issued for the suspects, who happened to be members of his congregation. The hostility of the four accused persons was aroused and, shortly afterwards, the second event took place, namely felonious assault of Fr. Ance in his rectory by one of the accused who tried to strangle the good priest. The assailant was brought into a court of justice but after confessing his guilt was discharged without punishment upon paying the costs to the State as a result of the intercession of Fr. Ance.

It would seem that this would have been the end of the matter. The four miscreants, however, along with two or three other malcontents, continued to seek revenge. They seized upon the opportunity of complaining in person to

Fr. Mignault during his stopover in Burlington en route from New York to Chambly. Indeed, they even went to confession to Fr. Mignault.³⁸

Unfortunately for Fr. Ance and for the well-being of the parishioners in general, Fr. Mignault conveyed their story and complaints to Bishop Fenwick without consulting Fr. Ance or talking to any other parishioners.

The next item in this series of events was the publication in the October 27, 1843 issue of the *Burlington Free Press* of an October 21 letter from the Bishop of Boston to Fr. Ance stating that he could no longer be useful to the cause of religion in Burlington because "*under the circumstances it is quite useless to examine them (i.e., the complaints brought against you) critically, whether true or false:*" The bishop stated further that if Fr. Ance should continue to remain, religion would suffer and requested that he withdraw from the mission.³⁹ (Note: - In the October 21 letter in French received by Fr. Ance, the bishop concluded by stating:

"There are places where you might render service to religion; where you are at present, never. I therefore send you your Exeat."⁴⁰

The copy of this letter appearing in the *Burlington Free Press* was followed by a statement from the "Com" (presumably the Committee of Nine who signed a letter sent to Fr. Mignault on November 7, 1843) remonstrating the bishop's action on this matter. They emphasized that a large majority of Fr. Ance's congregation "*have stood firmly as his friends through all the opposition with which his well-meant endeavors have been assailed:*" They mentioned his forgiving spirit manifested towards those who attempted to injure him as well as the admiration of those who have witnessed his untiring efforts for the good of the flock committed to his charge. They stated that only a few were concerned in the difficulties which had arisen and that he would carry with him "*the warm good wishes and regrets of all who have been favored with his acquaintance, and who are capable of appreciating a high-minded gentleman and accomplished scholar:*"⁴¹

The entire congregation had similarly strong feelings which they expressed in an "*ADDRESS of the FRENCH CATHOLIC CONGREGATION of Burlington, to His Reverence the BISHOP OF BOSTON:*" They were obviously filled with what they considered to be righteous indignation.

38. *Pieces Justificatives*, p. 20.

39. *Burlington Free Press*, October 27, 1843- Vol. XVII, No. 21.

40. *Pieces Justificatives*, p. 14.

41. *Burlington Free Press*, October 27, 1843-Vol. XVII, No. 21.

36. Letter of Bishop Bourget to Fr. O'Callaghan, Nov. 9, 1842.

37. Archives, Archdiocese of Montreal, 195.103,842-1.

tion. They protested to the bishop at his treatment of their beloved pastor. They told him that the Burlington Canadians had been calumniated for too many years and were all being characterized the same as the few real trouble-makers, to the extent that no priest would want to come live among them. They named four guilty persons - Jean Baptiste Maillet, Louis Bourdon, Jean Baptiste Denis and Antoine Lincourt. They told the bishop that Fr. Ance's forgiveness of these men and his obtaining pardon for them, resulted in their trying to get him recalled because his presence shamed them. They said that Fr. Mignault knew these things but judged the whole congregation by the few guilty ones. This document is signed by 316 members of the French Canadian congregation and is part of the "Pieces Justificatives" published by H.B. Stacy Printer, in 1843.⁴²

The Committee of Nine which included Joseph Gadebois, Augustin Davignon, Jean Bte. Pepin, François Leclere, son, François Lapointe, Pierre Derosier, Antoine Decelles, Louis Gabouri, and François Laventure wrote a bitter letter to Fr. Mignault, the Vicar General, dated November 7, 1843,⁴³ in which they blamed him for Bishop Fenwick's action since he furnished the information to the bishop. They said they had been calumniated and their pastor had been the victim of false reports. Their praise of Fr. Ance was extreme. They claimed that the four "miscreants" went to confession to Fr. Mignault and thereby gained his services to their own ends, thus hiding under false pretenses from their own unrepentant hearts. Fr. Ance had been punished for his utter dedication and endurance of hardship and trouble. They suggested that Fr. Ance's presence could be an obstacle to the thieves in enjoying the stolen money, which could not be used in Canada. They pointed out that persecutors would not love a man whom they had attempted to strangle in his own home. These men had been members of the choir in his church, his friends. These were the men to whom Fr. Mignault had given his attention and to whom he had given the pleasure of misleading him. Then the Committee came to what they termed the ridiculous: In punishment to Fr. Ance, the French Canadians would not be given another priest, as told to Fr. Ance by Fr. Mignault. But to the four guilty men, Fr. Mignault had promised another priest. If he gave them a priest suitable for them, he would be the "eighth wonder of the world." The nine men signed the letter, in which their rage came through all too clearly.

In view of the available documents, it would appear that Fr. Ance was treated unfairly. Certainly, it was a blow to the parishioners to have their efforts thwarted and to be obliged to rejoin St. Mary Parish.

Subsequent correspondence to Bishop Bourget of Montreal from Fr. Ance and from other priests associated with

42. *Pieces Justificatives*, pp. 15-17.

43. *Pieces Justificatives*, pp. 18-21.

him indicate that Fr. Ance brooded over the Burlington situation and became more and more disturbed mentally as time passed. He was bitter about his failure to have a hearing so that justice could prevail. He was given a five-year period of rest. He then wrote to Fr. Mignault, who in turn wrote to his bishop:

*"This poor man, so overwrought (violent) in Burlington, because he had trouble, has become more irritable in misfortune. Perhaps, if a charitable hand were extended to him, he would again become useful to the church."*⁴⁴



Right Reverend John Bernard Fitzpatrick,
Bishop of Boston, 1846-1866

Bishop Bourget wrote to the Bishop of Boston, John Bernard Fitzpatrick, who replied on February 24, 1849:

"Fr. Ance's story is unknown to me in regards to details: That affair took place at a time when I had the pleasure of being ignorant of so much misery, being only a simple priest . . . I am inclined to believe, however, that it was a simple revocation of faculties . . . if, nonetheless, it seems necessary to Your Lordship to remove the censures ad cautelam from Fr. Ance, you already have as much authority as I do myself, or, if another faculty than that of V.G. of Boston is needed, I communicate it from this moment . . ."

Beginning in 1848, Fr. Ance was given assignments at St. Eustache, Petit Seminaire de Ste. Therese, Ste. Julienne and St. Jean de Matha. He retired to Montreal in 1860, at which time he was 56 years old. He died May 18, 1888, after 28 years of retirement. The letter he wrote his bishop on June 5, 1860, is a diatribe which strongly suggests that he was mentally disturbed. He referred to all that was done against him by his enemies, whom he called "calumniators all;" at St. Jean de Matha, Ste. Julienne, Varennes and St. Benoit. He complained of being condemned without a hearing. He bitterly reproached the bishop for lack of fatherly kindness. There were three letters from other priests, in 1849, 1856 and 1858, which amply demonstrate the difficulty of dealing with him. The 1853 letter from his relative in France was written in an effort to learn of his

44. Archives, Diocese of St. Jean, 1A/131.

whereabouts because his family had not heard from him since 1849. Fr. Ance must have been a most unhappy man, always in difficulty, yet always trying to hold himself to the highest ideals of religious perfection.

Although the Church Registers for 1842-43 have disappeared, Hemenway's *Vermont Historical Gazetteer* refers to a church built during this period (1841) as the French Canadian Church built by "Rev. Mr. Anse (sic):"⁴⁵ This could have been the same building referred to, in a footnote by the historian Zadock Thompson.⁴⁶ There are no land records attesting to the existence of Fr. Ance's church any more than there are of Fr. Petithomme's chapel, but there are several references to the existence of both. Fr. Ance was in Burlington only from February 1842 to October 1843, and for part of that time he was suspended from serving. There were, however, the summers of 1842 and 1843 du-

ring which construction could have occurred. To call Fr. Ance's church the first French Canadian church in New England is a misnomer in that it ignores the evidence of Fr. Petithomme's chapel and the strong probability that there was a chapel at Fort Ste. Anne at Isle LaMotte before 1759.

45. Abby Maria Hemenway, *The Vermont Historical Gazetteer* (Miss A.M. Hemenway; Burlington, Vt.; 1868), Vol. I, p. 551.

46. Zadock Thompson, *History of Vermont* (Chauncey Goodrich; Burlington, Vt.; 1842), p. 202. "*Another Roman Catholic church is now in the progress of erection on the site of the one destroyed by the fire in 1838. It is designed for the accommodation of the French population, as St. Mary's is for the Irish!"