

Mission of the Good Shepherd

by PattySue Powell

I love a good mystery, and historical ones are my favorite. Looking to solve a puzzle about an old Kewaunee County church, I found myself absorbed in the fascinating, albeit varying, story of Bishop Joseph Rene Vilatte who was born in France, educated in Europe and Canada, and lived in Namur, Belgium, for a time. Considered the father of the Old Catholic Church Movement in America, he came to the United States with his mentor, Father Charles Chinquy, in 1883. There were many in this country who, with the 1870 ruling of "papal infallibility," wished to adhere to the beliefs and practices of the Catholic (universal) Church that had been passed down from generations before.

Until 1885, the largely Belgian, Walloon-speaking settlers in northeast Wisconsin had been quite neglected in this respect. As a result, they were susceptible to swindlers and crooks, some of whom posed as men-of-the-cloth looking to line their own pockets. There are many sad accounts of people being refused last rites and stories of mothers having to bury their own children because they could not pay when no legitimate priest of any faith would expect to be paid for such things. The nearest Catholic churches were in Bay Settlement and Rosiere, both too far to travel by wagon or foot at a time when there were no consistently passable roads. Even then, the mass was in Latin. Between the mistrust and the language barrier, these families were missing a very important part of their lives —

a faith to which they could relate and a priest who could speak to them in their own language.

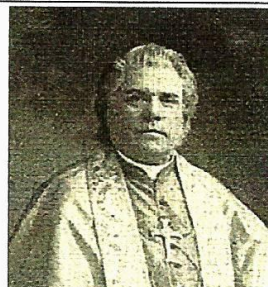
In response to this, Father Chinquy sent Vilatte from Green Bay to Little Sturgeon in 1885. There, the Louis and Melanie Robillard family donated a log cabin to use for a church; he called it, "Mission of the Good Shepherd." The cabin

was described as very poor, indeed. The altar was an old kitchen door supported by some scrap wood and covered with thin white muslin cloth; the other half of the cabin was used for his home, where he slept on hay and pieces of old carpet and lived mostly on bread and cheese through those first few winters. Slowly he began to gain the trust of both the people and Episcopal Bishop Henry Hobart Brown. (The Roman Catholic Norbertine Fathers were not sent to Green Bay until 1893 after hearing of Vilatte's accomplishments.)

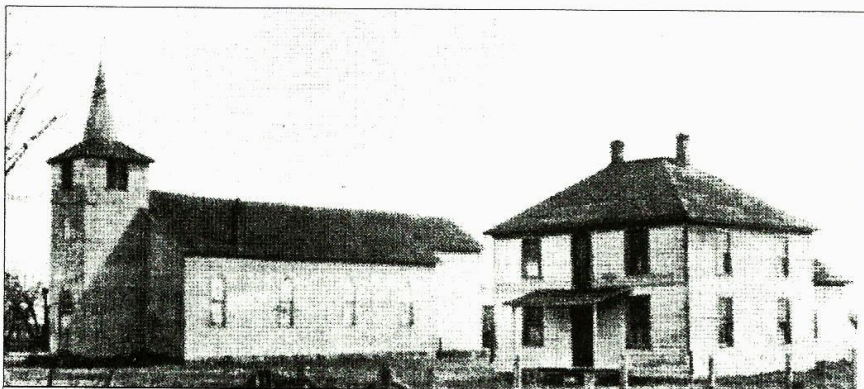
He began traveling to preach in places like Chicago, New York, and Boston to raise money toward building a real church for this congregation. While in New York, a woman named Mrs. Chauncey Waterbury, of Brooklyn, donated land about three miles south of the log cabin church as a memorial for her husband. In 1888, the Church of the Precious Blood was built at the crossroads of County Roads N and C in Gardner Township, Brussels. He used a portion of the money he raised to publish missals and catechism materials in French so the people could read and teach their children the faith of their ancestors.

In 1890, he went on to start St. Mary's (Eglise Ste. Marie) Old Catholic Church in Duvall (where he was

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Bishop Joseph Rene Vilatte (1907). Photo courtesy of Christian Catholic Church of Canada, <http://www.ccrcc.ca>.



Eglise Sainte Marie — Exterior photograph of St. Mary's in Duvall (sometime after 1890). Photo courtesy of Christian Catholic Church of Canada, <http://www.ccrcc.ca>.

elected Bishop) and St. Louis Old Catholic Church in Green Bay. He provided ministry to many families during this time — some 235 at Duvall, 240 at Gardner. Along with surrounding areas and the French-speaking, Menominee Indians, there were more than 700 faithful in this part of northeast Wisconsin appreciative of his presence. He was consecrated Bishop in the Old Catholic Church of America in 1892.

In 1893, he opened St. Joseph Old Catholic Church in Walhain (Luxemburg) which burned down in 1905 and was never rebuilt. Some of the family names of the St. Joseph parish were: John and Leonie (Noel) DeGreve; Peter and Julia (Roberts) DeMoullin; Emil and Eloise (Jeanson) Engebos; Frank and Alicia (DeGreve) Ferron; Alex and Josephine Reince; Jerome and Mathilda (Sampoux) Reince; Adolph and Louise (Thumas) Swille; and John and Adele (Engebos) Tebon. After the fire, these families were served at Duvall where, today, the St. Mary cemetery is all that is left of the parish. Some of these names still exist in the area, perhaps with slight changes in spelling.

Joseph Rene Vilatte continued to serve as both bishop and community organizer of religion until his unexpected death in 1929. Widely conflicting accounts of his life make it difficult to wholly agree with either of the two estimations of his character — some judge him harshly as a church imposter, while others focus on the work he accomplished and the many people whose lives he touched. He is buried at Versailles, France, with the full honor and dignity of a consecrated Bishop of the Old Catholic Church of America.

Today, Church of the Precious Blood in Gardner is the only one of the old Belgian mission churches still standing. It is owned by and remains a missionary outreach of the Episcopal Diocese of Fond-du-Lac, which carefully preserves its Anglo-Catholic heritage. No contractors have been hired



Church of the Precious Blood (2009) — The only old Belgian church still standing, located in Gardner Township, Brussels, Wisconsin. Photo courtesy of Episcopal Diocese of Fond-du-Lac, www.episcopalfonddulac.org.

in its delicate restoration; instead, generous neighbors, friends, and volunteers lovingly care for the building. And although the barn and rectory that once occupied the site are gone, the cemetery is devotedly maintained. Today the parish is served by Father Robert D. Hoppe from St. Agnes-by-the-Lake Episcopal Church in Algoma.



Author's note: Special thanks to Bishop Serge Theriault for his assistance and permission to use these photos. Listed below are some of the resources used in this article.

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- Wisconsin's French Connections. A student project by Leah Kemp. <http://uwgb.edu/wisfrench/library/history/oldcatholic.htm>.
- Old Catholic History, www.oldcatholichistory.org.
- Scribd, www.scribd.com/doc/2447672/Vilatte-Heritage.