

REVIEWS

Dr. Robert M. Puckett

Msgr. René Vilatte; Community Organizer of Religion, 1854-1929, by Serge A. Theriault, Apocryphile Press, Berkeley CA, 2006, paperback 306 pp.

This book is written by one of our own, Bishop Serge A Theriault, general Superintendent for Canada, International Council of Community Churches. It tells the story of Msgr. René Vilatte, one of the founders of the early Community Church in the 19th Century in the United States and Canada, and of the Old Catholic Church in Canada which remains affiliated with the International Council. It is a part of our history with which many of us are unfamiliar.

On September 6, 1989, the Canadian Chapter of the ICCC was created by our Board of Trustees while The Rev. Dr. Ralph Shotwell was Executive Director of the Council. Ralph has written the foreword of the book in which he says of the Community Church Movement: "Since the early 1980's the churches of this movement have had in their membership persons of various Christian traditions. Free to fashion its own worship forms, most often a church in this Movement has utilized Protestant practices. However, when a church's membership has been comprised of persons with Orthodox or Catholic backgrounds, it has preserved one of these worship traditions."

Msgr. Vilatte was born in Paris, France in 1854, entered the order of the Christian Brothers in 1877 and did his novitiate in Namur, Belgium. He moved to Canada in 1878 where he was greatly influenced by Fr. Charles Chiniquy, a leader of an Independent Catholic body which became the **Christian Catholic Church** recorded in Kankakee County District Court, Illinois.

Vilatte served as a missionary in Fall River, Massachusetts with a French Congregational Church in 1882 and moved to Green Bay, Wisconsin as a missionary to French Canadians in Wisconsin. He later established churches in Wisconsin, Michigan, New York, and other regions in the United States. The 19th Century was a period in which floods of European immigrants came to this country and the churches established by Msgr. Vilatte were primarily foreign language churches serving immigrants from France, Poland, Belgium, Switzerland,

Holland, Germany, etc. All of these churches were supporters of the separation of Church and State having experienced persecution for their faith in the countries from which they came.

Some of the Canadian churches currently related to the Council have an historic relationship with the Gallican Catholic Churches in France which are also connected to the International Council. One of the churches Vilatte helped to establish was the present day Polish National Cathedral in Buffalo which Carl Burke says is still going strong and was very active in the Buffalo Council of Churches which he served as head.

These churches consider themselves Catholics of Christ rather than Catholics of Rome. Father Chiniquy embraced an ecumenical spirit, He is quoted as having said, "After having accepted Christ Jesus as our only Savior, and the Gospel as the sole rule of faith, we have broken with Rome and call ourselves **Christian Catholics**. ...I would like to unite myself with all (denominations); to embrace all and clasp them to my heart. Beloved in Jesus Christ, if I join one denomina-

tion the others will be strangers to me. Is the door Christ opens to us too narrow to allow to pass through it all those who love Him and believe in the efficacy of his blood shed for our salvation. Why, dear brothers, are you not united? When will we see the day when Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Lutherans, Baptists...will forget their difference at the foot of the Cross of Jesus our Savior? Then the world, by an irresistible power, will acknowledge the Lamb whose blood purifies from sin. (P. 54)

Msgr. Vilatte saw the church making its unity under the power of Divine Love. He said, "When all will love each other and work together for the social well-being, spiritually united to Christ, under the bond of love (Luke 14:23), God Reigning in their consciences, then union on disputed points will be achieved." (p.105) As far back as the late 19th Century and early 20th Century he gave voice to the Spirit that unites us in the International Council of Community Churches!