

Chapter II - The Pioneering Period

In 1884 Reverend Father E. Gravel, Rector of the Cathedral of St. Hyacinthe, P.Q., Canada, visited the Marist superiors at St. Genis Laval, France, in order to interest them in the teaching apostolate in Canada. The superiors were impressed, but hesitated to open a new mission territory.

A short time later, Bishop Louis Z. Moresu, of the Diocese of St. Hyacinthe, invited the brothers to staff a school in Iberville and another at Sorel in his diocese. Canon St. Georges, Pastor of St. Athanase Parish and President of the Iberville School Commission also made a formal request for brothers for his parish school. Reverend Brother Stratonique, Assistant General for the Notre Dame de l'Hermitage Province, in France, requested the General Council of the Institute to sponsor the mission territory of Canada. The Council granted his wish on condition that the Notre Dame de l'Hermitage Province supply the personnel and money needed. St. Athanase in Iberville then was selected as the first Marist school in Canada.(1.)

Brother Cesidius, a teacher at the Notre Dame de l'Hermitage scholasticate was chosen as the superior of the first mission band of six brothers.(2.) Leaving Le Havre, France on August 15, 1885, he arrived in New York City nine days later.(3.) The next day, August 25th, Canon St. Geor and two other diocesan officials from St. Hyacinthe, accompanied the brothers to the small town of Iberville.

Until the arrival of the brothers, St. Athanase School had been conducted by three priests and two lay teachers. They had met the school needs of the town of four thousand souls, but pressed by the demands of their calling, the priests were happy to torn the three story school over to the brothers.

The first scholastic year proved to be a very successful one. On September 2nd one hundred and eighty students were grouped into five classes. In November the Bishop visited the school, gave his blessing to teachers and pupils and renewed his promise of cooperation. Because of an increased enrollment, two additional brothers arrived from France in January 1886. The very fine rapport between the brothers and the students, between school authorities and parents, led to plans to expand facilities. This rapport was due mainly to the French background of both teachers and pupils and to the excellent work done at the school. It was not long before contributions from various local sources enabled the brothers to buy four small properties in 1886-1887, d to construct a building which was to serve as residence and Novitiate.(4.)

Such an encouraging development spurred Brother Stratonique to greater efforts in expanding Marist influence in Canada. On July 26, 1886 Bishop Moreau wrote a pastoral letter to encourage young men in his diocese to join the Marist Brothers. In appreciation of this Interest, the Assistant General sent thirteen more brothers to Canada. In September 1886, another group of nineteen brothers arrived; of these six were assigned to teach at Academie St. Pierre in Montreal, and four at St. Peter's School in Lewiston, Maine. In the latter, a Canadian born youth, Pierre Gagnon, was the first Marist vocation from the States.

The news of the work of the brothers in these three schools soon spread to the local townships, so that other pastors and school commissioners requested brothers for their respective schools. Brother Cesidius forwarded these requests to the Assistant General. As a result, in 1867 the latter visited this new mission with Brother Theophane, Superior General.

After visiting the Marist communities and the pastors who had requested the services of the brothers, the Superior General agreed to send help to three schools in the Province of Quebec: Ste. Martine, Chateauguay; College Saint Joseph, Roxton Falls; axed St. Ephrem, Upton. Twenty-two additional brothers arrived from France for that purpose.(5.) The Superior General also presided at the first investiture ceremony in the New World. Pierre Gagnon, who had been trained by Brother Cesidius at the Novitiate in Iberville was the first and only postulant to be received on that occasion into the Institute. The young man was given the name of Brother Marie Theophane.(6.) One of the most important results of this visitation was the incorporation of the Congregation in the Dominion of Canada.

The Superiors returned to France delighted with what they had seen and strongly optimistic about the future possibilities in this new mission territory. At the time of their visit six schools and a novitiate were being successfully conducted by forty-one brothers.

From France soon came the news that Brother Cesidius had been appointed provincial visitor by the Superior General. As such he was authorized to govern the Canadian mission district, subject however to approval of the Assistant General in all matters of policy and appointments.(7.) As the first superior of the North American mission, he continued to play an important role, that was to last sixty years, in the progress of Marist activity in his adopted country, Canada. This becomes evident in the following pages.