THE ROAD TO SEATTLE

The Jesuits' entry into the Pacific Northwest was precipitated by one of the most remarkable incidents in the Society's history when four Salish braves from the unexplored interior of Montana arrived in St. Louis in the fall of 1831 — begging for "Black Robes" to minister to their people.

The Society’s reputation had preceded it into the Northwest wilderness thanks to the exaggerated legends of Jesuit powers spread by the converted Iroquois who migrated with French Canadian fur trappers into the region. But there were no Jesuits to greet the delegation of Flatheads, as Europeans called the Salish, in St. Louis in 1831. It took two more expeditions and the lives of nine men before the Salish summons was finally delivered into Jesuit hands in the person of Father Peter DeSmet, SJ.

Although Belgian by birth, DeSmet was an American citizen and an enthusiastic advocate of the natives, whom he often captivated by playing his clarinet. A robust adventurer accustomed to the rigors of the frontier, DeSmet chomped at the bit to establish a Jesuit mission to serve the Flatheads and other tribes of the Rockies and beyond.

His superiors were not immediately convinced. While Pope Gregory XVI had entrusted the Society of Jesus with responsibility for missions to the native tribes of the United States in 1833, only two dozen Jesuit priests were currently available for the entire region west of the Ohio. However, the unique situation of "savages so fervent in religion" (DeSmet’s phrase) actually trekking out of the wilderness to request Jesuit priests proved irresistible. DeSmet finally won permission to set out on April 30, 1840, for his first rendezvous with the eager Catholics-to-be waiting in the wilds of Montana.

He did not need his clarinet. When DeSmet arrived at the base of the Rockies the following July, he found over 1,600 Flatheads, Nez Perce and other tribesmen massed to greet him. Traveling back to St. Louis, DeSmet knew that final approval of a new Jesuit “Rocky Mountain Mission” was now just a matter of logistics, not politics.

DeSmet returned to Montana the following year, accompanied by five more Black Robes who led the first wagons into the Montana Rockies. After months of hard travel, they came to a halt along the Bitterroot River, south of Hell’s Gate near present-day Missoula. There, on September 24, 1841, DeSmet and his companions established the Northwest’s first Jesuit outpost and named it St. Mary’s Mission.

By this time, two other pioneering priests, Fathers Francis Norbert Blanchet and Modeste Demers, had also arrived in the Northwest. Invited by the Hudson’s Bay Company to tend to its many Catholic trappers, Blanchet and Demers trekked for seven months across Canada and down the Columbia River to reach Fort Vancouver in November 1838. There, under the protective aegis of Company factor John McLoughlin, they set about establishing a diocese for the growing community of settlers centered at the confluence of the Columbia and Willamette Rivers.

Meanwhile, St. Mary’s had become one of the Jesuits’ most famous settlements since the Paraguay Reductions, thanks in no small part to DeSmet’s tireless promotion of it. First he traveled west to Fort Vancouver to consult with Blanchet — such was their mutual respect that on their first meeting each man prostrated himself before the other — and then east, across the United States, the Atlantic, Europe and finally to Rome, raising funds and recruiting priests and nuns to return with him to the Northwest.

At first, St. Mary’s flourished and Jesuits fanned out through the interior of Montana, Idaho and Eastern Washington. To the west, Blanchet was named the Archbishop of Oregon City in 1846. His brother, Augustin Magliore Blanchet, traveled from Canada to take his post as Bishop of Walla
Walla, while Demers was named Bishop of Vancouver Island to assist in the administration of the vast territory from the Oregon border to lower British Columbia and from the Montana Rockies to the Pacific. The region’s scattered residents included perhaps a thousand confirmed Catholics, served by four Oblate Fathers, 13 Diocesan priests, 13 Sisters, and 14 Jesuits.

These last soon fell on bad times. Although spared the mounting wrath of the natives, who massacred Dr. Whitman and his party of Presbyterians in late 1847, the Jesuits suffered chiefly from being over extended. DeSmet had been reassigned to St. Louis, and was succeeded at St. Mary’s by Father Joseph Joeset, SJ. Joeset had too few priests to maintain his far-flung missions, let alone meet the Archbishop’s increasingly impatient requests for Jesuit assistance in the white parishes. Joeset had to make hard choices; hardest of all, St. Mary’s was abandoned on November 9, 1850.

By this time the British had ceded their claims below the 49th parallel to the United States, and the benign government of the Hudson’s Bay Company gave way to the more rigid civil administration of the new Oregon Territory. The latter, along with U.S. military authorities, proved less generously disposed towards the cause of the original inhabitants and their Catholic champions.

The California Gold Rush, begun in 1848, added a new complication by diverting newcomers from the less glamorous business of settling the Northwest. Even Jesuits were not immune to the yellow metal’s lure. The Jesuit’s Rocky Mountain Mission was reorganized into distinct Oregon and California subdistricts, and its new superior, Father Michael Accolti, SJ, made no effort to disguise his greater enthusiasm for his southern outposts, particularly San Francisco, which he predicted would soon become the “leading commercial place... of the entire world.”

It was the practice then to place missions under the wing of established Jesuit provinces which could supply manpower, funds and expertise. So, in 1854, the newly renamed “California-Oregon Mission” found itself attached to the Province of Turin, Italy. This should have strengthened Jesuit efforts, but the new mission superior, Father Nicholas Congiato, further isolated the Northwest’s three surviving missions by moving his headquarters south to Santa Clara.

Jesuit morale in the Northwest improved in 1862 when Father Joseph Giorda, SJ, took over as superior of what was once again called the “Rocky Mountain Mission.” Giorda relocated the mission headquarters to Oregon, reassigned priests from California to help rebuild and extend the Northwest missions, and he reaffirmed the Jesuits’ priority for allocating priests and resources to Native Americans over the white settlers now streaming west.

Unfortunately, President U.S. Grant’s corrupt “Indian Policy” combined with the sheer mathematics of white immigration to undermine the Jesuit position. The abuse of native rights and treaties and the Federal Government’s blatant partiality toward Protestant missionaries over Catholics broke DeSmet’s spirit, and he died in 1873.

The tradition established by DeSmet found a new, indomitable champion when Father Joseph Cataldo, SJ, succeeded Giorda as superior in 1877. Photographs of Cataldo show a small man with an almost elfin face, but history reveals a shrewd, determined administrator whose hand was as firm in guiding his Mission as his heart was soft toward the natives among whom he worked from his arrival in the Northwest in 1866.

The foremost object of Cataldo’s affection was the village that would become Spokane and the surrounding tribe of the same name, and it was there that he established his headquarters. Cataldo believed in the destiny of Spokane as the center of a future “Inland Empire.” He staked his reputation on it, and thereby helped make the dream a reality.

At the same time, he inveighed against “the
universal neglect of the Indian Race in the American Republic, even by the Catholics themselves.” Cataldo constantly reminded his priests that whatever their obligations to the burgeoning white population, *Sumus primo pro Indianis* — we are here for the Indians above all.

Not all of Cataldo’s priests agreed. One, Father Victor Garrand, SJ, a young Frenchman recently recruited from the missions of North Africa, went so far as to complain to the Superior General in Rome that Cataldo’s emphasis on tribal missions was “out of date and no longer means anything.”

Garrand overstated his case; Cataldo was trying to maintain a precarious balance between competing, almost irreconcilable demands. By 1887, with barely a hundred Jesuits, he had rebuilt the native missions, expanded white parishes throughout the Northwest, and founded Gonzaga College (then little more than a high school).

Cataldo had more than enough on his hands when the first letters began arriving from Seattle begging the Jesuits to found a school — and perhaps a college.

Seattle counts its days beginning November 13, 1851, when Arthur Denny and two dozen settlers assembled on Alki Point. Exposure to winter storms forced the party to resettle the following February on the eastern shore of Elliott Bay, where they dreamed of building New York Alki — “New York by and by” in the Chinook trader jargon. The village ultimately decided to name itself Seattle after the tribal tyee who tolerated its presence.

The settlers did not abandon their urban ambitions, which received a major boost when Henry Yesler arrived in the summer of 1852 and decided to build the region’s first steam-powered sawmill at the foot of what became Skid Road (now Yesler Way). The mill was not yet finished when Bishop Demers visited the hamlet in August 1852.

Demers inquired if there were any Catholics among the few score souls huddled on the edge of the Duwamish River’s broad mudflats. Arthur Denny replied that there were none (which was not quite true), but invited the Bishop to offer mass anyway. It was the city’s first Christian ceremony and the entire population crowded into Yesler’s new cook house on August 22 to hear the Bishop sermonize on charity, which, like Catholics, was also in short supply in early Seattle.

Demers did not tarry in the village and he apparently saw little reason for the Church to devote its scant resources to it. But Catholic influence was strong enough among the natives to offend the town’s Methodists. The Reverend Dr. David Blaine, Seattle’s first resident preacher, complained that many of “the coarse, filthy, debased natives” had “already learned enough religion through the Catholics to make the sign of the cross and say ‘Ilk papa ikt sockala Tiee,’ one pope and one God.” Among these was Chief Seattle himself, who was reputedly baptized by no less than Archbishop Blanchet.

A Catholic priest did not set foot again on Seattle’s muddy streets until August 1858 when Father Louis Rossi visited on his parish rounds, which included the entire Puget Sound basin. Again, he found no white Catholics, but he paid for two lots for a future church just in case things improved.

Finally, in the fall of 1867, Seattle received its first permanent priest, Father Francis Xavier Prefontaine. A French Canadian like the Blanchets, Prefontaine volunteered for the new Nesqually [sic] Diocese in 1863 and quickly made a reputation as an industrious and popular religious leader. When he landed in Seattle, Prefontaine could find only 10 avowed Catholics out of 600 settlers. Undeterred, he rented a cabin and converted two rooms into a rough chapel. There he conducted his first service on November 24, 1867, for a congregation totalling two white women.
The following winter, Prefontaine added two lots to Father Rossi’s homestead on Washington Street between Third and Fourth Avenues and began clearing the trees for a new church. At that moment, Bishop Blanchet called on an inspection tour, and was unimpressed by what he found. “Seattle as a mission center was a lost cause,” the Bishop declared and forbade construction of a church. Such pessimism may seem shortsighted today, but there was little reason at the time to believe destiny would favor Seattle over Fort Steilacoom, Olympia, Tacoma, Port Townsend, or even Father Cataldo’s beloved Spokane.

Prefontaine was not the sort to take “no” for an answer, and Blanchet finally surrendered to his pleas and allowed church construction to proceed, provided no debt was incurred. Funded by parish fairs and the collection plate, Prefontaine finished the Church of Our Lady of Good Help in the autumn of 1870.

Events during the following decade did little to contradict Bishop Blanchet’s dim view of Seattle as the population slowly climbed to 3,553. Meanwhile, Tacoma, the self-declared “City of Destiny” surged after winning the coveted terminus for the Northern Pacific Railway in 1873.

Still, by 1876, Seattle was large enough in the Bishop’s judgment to warrant assignment of a second parish priest. Meanwhile Prefontaine enthusiastically welcomed the first Sisters of Charity of Providence in 1877. He helped them secure the contract for managing the county poor farm and establish a hospital at Fifth and Madison. Similarly, Prefontaine actively recruited the Sisters of the Holy Names, who arrived in 1880 and set up their first school at Second and Seneca.

The next two decades witnessed a stunning reversal of metropolitan fortunes on Puget Sound. Most would-be cities depended on a single industry and soon stagnated for lack of capital or markets. Seattle’s founders had made a point of diversifying their economy and encouraging long-term development rather than short-term exploitation, and the town boomed.

Not even the Great Fire of 1889 (which spared Prefontaine’s church but little else in the clapboard downtown) slowed Seattle’s progress; if anything, it heated up as the town quickly rebuilt with stone and brick. The census the following year tallied 42,837 residents, almost 7,000 more than the “City of Destiny” to the south and rivalling the far older Portland. Seattle was now the largest city in the new State of Washington, and thanks to the influx of thousands of European immigrants, especially the Irish, its Catholic community was also the state’s largest.

By 1890, the current Bishop of Nesqually, Aegidius Junger, had to acknowledge Seattle’s dominance and Prefontaine’s need for help, particularly in the matter of education. A new, larger Holy Names Academy was adequate for children and young women but male Catholics were left largely to the mercies of secular education. This now included the University of Washington, founded almost thirty years earlier in the heart of downtown on land donated by Arthur Denny, something both Prefontaine and Junger regarded less an act of civic selflessness than unfair competition.

So it was that the bishop and Prefontaine began dispatching urgent appeals to Father Cataldo in distant Spokane. Although chronically shorthanded, Cataldo was curious about this rising metropolis on Puget Sound, which he — and every other Jesuit to date — had somehow omitted from his itinerary during the previous half-century of crisscrossing the Northwest.

For the honor of being the first member of the Society of Jesus to set foot in Seattle, Cataldo selected a young Jesuit, Father Augustine Laure, SJ, who was described by one historian as an “ecstatic Frenchman who had given his heart to the Indians.” Laure had only just completed his tertianship (the final year of study and medita-
tion before Jesuit vows) at Sacred Heart Mission in Idaho and had been assigned to Yakima when Cataldo dispatched him to assist Prefontaine during the Lenten season of 1890 and also to serve as his eyes and ears on Elliott Bay.

Laure arrived in Seattle in March 1890 and was instantly won over by the city. In his report to Cataldo, Laure rhapsodized, “This city is beautifully situated on hills, formerly covered with trees where men had to let in daylight with axe in hand. On the east is an immense lake of fresh water. To the west is Puget Sound which is connected to the ocean... The climate is so mild the grass is green all the year round.” The Chamber of Commerce couldn’t have painted a prettier picture.

Laure departed after a stay of barely seven weeks, but not before confidently predicting that Jesuits would quickly return to establish a college in Seattle. This proved optimistic and by July, Bishop Junger complained to Cataldo, “The people there are down on me for they think that it is my fault” that the Jesuits had not delivered the college promised by Laure.

Cataldo finally responded in the late fall by sending Father Leopold Van Gorp, SJ, his trusted procurator and a member of Gonzaga’s original faculty, on a new reconnaissance of Seattle for a school site. After scouring the city, Van Gorp decided on nine lots fronted by Madison and Knight (Marion) Street and Broadway and Williamson Street (Tenth Avenue) in Arthur Denny’s newly platted Broadway Addition.

A contemporary photograph shows a scrubby ridge as inviting as a Cascade clearcut, and in those days, just about as remote from the city center. The college-to-be all but surrounded the block’s solitary structure, a large frame house owned and operated by the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. Van Gorp’s choice implied enormous faith in Seattle’s future expansion toward Lake Washington. And it wasn’t cheap: Denny, who had donated the heart of downtown Seattle to the University of Washington, demanded $18,382 in hard cash for the Jesuit’s campus. Van Gorp put $2,000 down on November 6, 1890, and the Rocky Mountain Mission remitted the balance the following February.

Prefontaine was not content to wait for the Jesuits to develop this site and set about building his own school house at the corner of Sixth Avenue and Spring Street (where the Women’s University Club now stands). The elegant, two story structure was named St. Francis Hall, and opened classes for some sixty students in February 1991. The ever helpful Sisters of the Holy Names supplied the teachers.

Volunteer labor was not enough to keep the new school’s books balanced, and Prefontaine quickly realized he could not afford St. Francis.

Bishop Junger wrote to Cataldo on April 11, 1891, pleading anew for Jesuits. He explained that Prefontaine’s St. Francis school had become “an elephant on his hands” and the Bishop prayed that the Jesuits would “take hold of the school for boys in Seattle and also establish a parish there.”

Cataldo’s personal feelings upon receipt of Junger’s latest plea are not known. He could not have entirely welcomed it since he had just acquired all of Alaska as a new administrative ward to be staffed, in addition to Gonzaga and his cherished native missions, by the fewer than 150 Jesuits at his disposal. Nevertheless, Cataldo promised Prefontaine that he would take over St. Francis until a permanent facility could be developed on the Broadway site.