

Marian History in the Archdiocese of Halifax

by
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In this paper we shall deal with the Marian history of the Archdiocese of Halifax before the Diocese of Yarmouth was formed in 1953. The Diocese of Yarmouth constitutes that part of the Archdiocese which is associated most closely with the history of the Acadian people in Nova Scotia. In that area devotion to Our Lady goes far back in the pages of Canadian history. The early settlers brought with them from France a strong devotion to Our Lady, which they transplanted on the shores of Nova Scotia as early as 1604. That year De Monts led an expedition from France, accompanied by Champlain, geographer of the King of France. They explored and minutely described the large body of water that indents Digby County and called it St. Mary's Bay (la baie Sainte-Marie). Along its shores a whole people have kept their Faith and their devotion to Mary all down the years.

Missionary activity, centered around Port Royal, began about 1604. On August 14, 1632, the vigil of the Assumption, the Capuchin Fathers arrived at Port Royal with the Commandant de Razilly. We have no direct evidence that the missionaries celebrated their first Masses on the following day, the Feast of the Assumption. De Razilly reached La Héve on September 8, Feast of Our Lady's Nativity, and called the fort Sainte-Marie-de-Grâce. The mission at Pentagouet was called *Notre-Dame-de-la-Sainte-Espérance*.

In 1638, King Louis XIII consecrated France and its colonies to Our Lady and chose August 15 as the National Feast, which is one reason, at least, why the Assumption became so dear to the early settlers of Acadia; and in 1678 the church at Port Royal was canonically erected by Bishop Laval and given the name of the Assumption of Port Royal. During the time of the Capuchins the Litany of Our Lady was recited every day in this church.

From the earliest days of the colony the Acadians regarded Mary's Assumption into Heaven as part of their Faith and closely associated with their colonial history. It was an echo of Old France, *Regnum Galliae, Regnum Mariæ*. In the midst of their trials after the expulsion (1755) the Acadians had an unshaken confidence in the Blessed Virgin, and in 1881 Our Lady took official possession of Acadia. The first gesture of the Acadians that year was to choose Our Lady of the Assumption as patron of Acadia, a choice officially confirmed by His Holiness Pope Pius XI on January 19, 1938, when he declared Our Lady of the Assumption Patron of Acadians wherever they

live. In 1884, the Acadians chose as their national flag the tricolor with the Star of the Sea, Star of Mary, and as their national song the “Ave Maris Stella.” On September 15, 1890, Feast of Our Lady of the Seven Dolours, the Eudist, Father Blanche, arrived at Church Point to found Collège Sainte-Anne. On September 18, 1903, the Société Mutuelle de l’Assomption was formed and has done much to preserve the traditions and customs related to Our Lady.

La Pointe-à-Major was the cradle of the colony around Saint Mary’s Bay. There on September 8, 1769, Feast of Our Lady’s Nativity, in the home of Joseph Dugas, Father Bailly celebrated the first Mass said on Saint Mary’s Bay after the expulsion of the Acadians. In 1889, a little chapel was built there in the old cemetery and a statue of Mary Immaculate enshrined in it. The old cemetery wherein lie the bones of the early colonists and the little chapel with its historic memories have made the place specially dear to the people of that area. There they have gathered in large numbers for ceremonies marking the closing of the month of May and the Crowning of Our Lady.

So steeped, indeed, in devotion to Our Lady is Acadia and the Diocese of Yarmouth, that Bishop Leménager on the day of his episcopal consecration called his Diocese the “Kingdom of Mary.”

Let us turn our attention now to Marian devotion in the present Archdiocese of Halifax. Here we shall not find much recorded history of devotion to Our Lady in the early days. The early Catholic settlers in and around Halifax were largely of Irish origin; and whereas we know that devotion to the Blessed Virgin is deep in the piety of the Irish and Scotch peoples, there was not a climate of religion, or better of tolerance of “Papists,” which was conducive to public demonstration. By Acts of the Government at Halifax of 1758 and 1766 ‘Papists’ had no right to hold land, hold office, have religious service or priests, or have or open schools.¹ The struggle, then, was one of winning the right to exist civilly and religiously. Missionaries visited Halifax from time to time and found Faith but not liberty of worship. The Catholic laity won the repeal of these Acts and gained rights to hold land and to worship (1783) and to open schools (about 1801). Their first thought was to build a church, which they began in 1784, and called it St. Peter’s, out of loyalty to the Holy See. This church developed into the present Basilica and its name was changed to Saint Mary’s. The laity had made application to the Bishop of Cork for a priest and in 1785 an Irish Capuchin, Father James Jones, took up residence in Halifax with the full approval of the Bishop of Quebec, under whose jurisdiction the mission of Nova Scotia lay at that time. Father Jones’ great achievement was to organize the parishes and direct the many missions of Nova Scotia by his

¹ Laws of Nova Scotia, Vol. 1.

labors until 1800. The only direct evidence of a tribute to Our Lady was the dedication of the church built for the Irish settlement at Prospect in 1794 to Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Father Edmund Burke, later to become Bishop Burke when Halifax was made a vicariate apostolic in 1817, came in 1801 and laboured until his death in 1820. It was his achievement to carry on the work of Father Jones but to labour especially for Catholic education. He saw a Catholic school as a “pressing need,” and in this regard he has shown himself to be a man of action. In a letter of January 16, 1802, to the Bishop of Quebec, he complained of the law which forbade Catholic schools; and in a letter of July of the same year he wrote: “Our college is being built quite expeditiously.”² His college grew into Saint Mary’s University, which was granted a University charter in 1841. In his time also we find only passing reference to devotion to Our Lady. In the same letter of January, 1802, he wrote: “Abstinence on Saturday is established... We celebrated the Feasts of the Conception of the Virgin, of New Year’s and of Epiphany with a packed church, something unheard of in Halifax.”

Bishop Fraser succeeded Bishop Burke as second superior of the Apostolic Vicariate of Nova Scotia, and he continued to live at Antigonish. When a new and larger church to replace the old Saint Peter’s was completed in 1833, Bishop Fraser announced that the new church and parish were to be called Saint Mary’s.³ Saint Mary’s was always the Cathedral Church under the title of Our Lady’s Assumption and it was raised to the honor of a Basilica in June, 1950. The name Saint Mary’s became an intimate part of the Catholic life and history of Halifax. It literally graced numerous pious, cultural, educational, social and athletic societies and organizations. Actually, the list is too long to enumerate. With the growth of other parishes these societies became limited in their scope to the present Basilica Parish of Saint Mary’s. But we still find the wider implication in the Saint Mary’s Boat Club, summer recreational centre, and in the City’s Senior and Junior Hockey Clubs which until the name was changed a couple of years ago, were called Saint Mary’s. All this stood for more than a name or a nominal allegiance to Mary: behind it all and permeating it all was a quiet, personal tribute to Mary.

Halifax was made a Diocese in 1842. We come now to Bishop Walsh (1844-1858), later to be Archbishop (1852); and we shall linger at this stage in the story, because it was in the time of Archbishop Walsh that the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception was defined. The basic civic and ecclesiastical rights of Catholics had been established; the climate for open profession of religion, for public demonstration of Catholic Faith, was more favourable.

² Letters of Bishop Burke, Chancery, Halifax.

³ January 15, 1833. From Papers and accounts Bishop Burke to Archbishop Walsh, 1801-1858, Chancery, Halifax.

For this reason and also because the event is dear to the Catholics of Halifax, we shall deal briefly with the story of Holy Cross Cemetery in Halifax. A piece of property was acquired for a Catholic cemetery. On the Feast of Saint Anne, July 26, 1843, every Catholic man and boy who was able to work, met at Saint Mary's Cathedral and went in procession, led by Bishop Walsh, to the site of the cemetery. Working industriously with pick, shovel, hammer and saw, and watched with amazement by the curious public, this throng of workers in one day levelled the property, built the big entrance gates and a bridge over the brook, and returned at twilight in procession to Saint Mary's.⁴ On August 31 of the same year they went again in procession, led by the Bishop, and in one day they built the lovely cemetery chapel dedicated to Our Lady.⁵ The record of the official opening in a clear, legible hand seems to be written with a joyful pen:

Sunday, September 17, 1843.

"On this day, the Feast of the Seven Dolours of the Blessed Virgin

Mary, the Parishioners, Clergy and Bishop advanced in procession from the Cathedral to the Cemetery, when Dr. Walsh blessed the New Church in presence of an immense multitude ...

"The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was then celebrated in the New Church ...

"The Church was dedicated: *DEO OPT. MAX. sub invocatione BEAT.E MARLJE VIRGINIS juxta crucem Dolorosæ and was called The Church of Our Lady of Sorrows.*"⁶

At an audience with Pope Pius IX on January 28, 1855, His Holiness granted the Archbishop's request "that the altar of the Church which is called of the Seven Dolours of the Blessed Virgin in the midst of the Cemetery at Halifax should be a Privileged Altar for every Mass celebrated thereupon on three days of each week, for ever."⁷

On February 2, 1849, Pope Pius IX addressed an Encyclical to all the Bishops of the world asking them to indicate to the Holy See the devotion of their clergy and laity to the Immaculate Conception and their profound desire for the definition of that Dogma, and also the judgment and wishes of the Bishops themselves in this regard.

Bishop Walsh wrote:

⁴ *The Cross*, August 4, 1843, Chancery, Halifax.

⁵ *The Cross*, September 8, 1843, Chancery, Halifax.

⁶ Papers and accounts, Bishop Burke to Archbishop Walsh, Chancery, Halifax.

⁷ Indulgence in Archdiocese of Halifax, published 1855.

To the Most Eminent Lord Cardinal, Pro-Secretary of State.
Most Eminent and Reverend Lord:

I am unable to express on paper, Most Eminent and Reverend Lord, how great is the sorrow with which I have been afflicted by the upheaval of the Christian Temporal Power, by the cruel dispersal of the Venerable Fathers raised to the Purple, and by the bitter sorrows of Our Holy Father Pius IX.

As soon as I learned that His Holiness had been driven from His Holy See by most villainous men, I ordered public prayers throughout the Diocese of Halifax for the Supreme Pontiff and for the Sacred College of Cardinals as well as for the peace of the whole Church of God.

My sorrow increased day by day because, at a time of so great calamities for the Church, we were unable to alleviate the needs of Our Holy Father on account of our own poverty; for in this region, due to the failure of the crops for the past three years, the Faithful have been in dire distress.

Having received the Encyclical of our Most Holy Lord Pope on the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I immediately ordered public prayers of petition, which was done according to the wishes of His Holiness, on the third Sunday after Easter, that is, on the Feast of the Patronage of Saint Joseph, the faithful Guardian of the Immaculate Purity of our Most Holy Mother.

The opinions of both the priests and the people were written to me in various letters.

All unanimously believe that the Blessed Virgin Mary, even in her very Conception, was entirely free from all stain of sin. Some few, however, for various reasons, which it is not necessary to go into here, were not very eager to have a proclamation of a dogmatic definition on this matter. However, if it should seem good to His Holiness in His wisdom to define it, they will hold this firmly as a dogma of the Catholic Faith.

My own mind, in favour of the affirmative, has ever been the same and never varied. And so when I was in Rome in the year 1844, I humbly begged His Holiness Gregory XVI of happy, and for me of the dearest memory, that in this Diocese the words "Et Te in Immaculata Concepcione" should be recited and "Queen conceived without Original Sin" should be added to the Litany of Loretto; which favours His Holiness kindly granted.

I already wrote Your Eminence about this and other matters concerning religion some time ago, but I was not able to find out your place of residence. Recently, when the gates of the City were opened to the Catholic World, I wrote a short letter to the distinguished Rector of the Irish College, Very Reverend Paul Cullen, asking that in my name he should make known to Your Eminence the above-mentioned opinions.

I hope to write Your Eminence again after some time on the state of Religion in the Diocese of Halifax.

Meanwhile, I beg Almighty God to Keep Your Eminence well and happy.

Your Most Reverend Eminence's,
Most Obedient Servant,

William Walsh,
Bishop of Halifax.

Given at Halifax in Nova Scotia from Saint Mary's Rectory,
September 15, 1849.⁸

Unfortunately, up to the time of writing this article, it has been impossible to find exact documentation on the celebrations in the Archdiocese on the occasion of the definition of the Dogma in 1854. Copies of *The Cross*, the contemporary Catholic Archdiocesan publication, are not available for the years 1854 and 1855. If the Archbishop wrote a special pastoral for the occasion – and there seem to be indications that he did – it is not on file. In his pastoral for Lent, 1854, the Archbishop devotes three pages to a eulogy and defence of Mary, Model of Purity. We have space to quote only the opening sentences:

Jesus was the King of Virgins, and the Lover of holy purity. His Precursor, and His Beloved Disciple who enjoyed the inestimable privilege of reposing on His chaste bosom at the Last Supper, were both spotless Virgins. He was Himself the precious Fruit of the Virgin's womb, and His Immaculate Mother was the brightest ornament of her sex, and the pre-elected favorite of Heaven, on account of her extraordinary purity, as well as the profound humility which accompanied and preserved it...⁹

It is not unlikely that the Archbishop was disposing the minds and hearts of His Faithful for the great event in December.

Archbishop Walsh was present at the ceremony in Saint Peter's when Pope Pius IX solemnly announced the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary a Dogma of our Faith. In the Chancery Archives is the Papal Document making Archbishop Walsh an Assistant at the Pontifical Throne, dated at Saint Peter's December 8, 1854, the day of the Proclamation of the Dogma. In the Rare Book Collection, of the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Halifax, is a copy of *Preces Recitanda* and in it Archbishop Walsh wrote in his own hand, "William Walsh, Abb. of Halifax. This book was used on the occasion of the Definition of the Immaculate Conception at Rome, 8. December, 1854." Some light is also thrown on the part played by Archbishop Walsh by a footnote to the Pastoral written in 1855 by the Archbishop "Aux Acadiens, Population Francaise de la Nouvelle Ecosse, Sur Les Souffrances et Les Vertus de Leurs Ancêtres."¹⁰ The note added by an Editor or the Printer reads: "We are all aware that the Archbishop of Halifax was one of the prelates called by the Pope to represent the Church in

⁸ Collection des Pareri, Vol. 2, pp. 130-131.

⁹ Pastoral Letters, Chancery, Halifax.

¹⁰ Pastoral Letters, Chancery, Halifax.

America in the meetings which preceded the definition of the Immaculate Conception, and the Holy Father did not cease to honor him during his stay in Rome with the most conspicuous marks of his esteem.”

We regret that we have not more original documents and records of this particular year in the history of Marian devotion in the Archdiocese. However we shall now consider an event which indicates the impact of the year 1854 in Church history in the Archdiocese and in the Ecclesiastical Province of the Maritime Provinces. While in Rome in 1854-1855 Arch. bishop Walsh obtained permission to hold a Provincial Council of all his metropolitan area. This Council was held at Saint Mary’s Cathedral from September 7-15, 1857. The following suffragan Bishops were in attendance: Thomas Louis Connolly, Bishop of Saint John; Colin Francis McKinnon, Bishop of Arichat; and Bernard Donald McDonald, Bishop of Charlottetown.¹¹

An interesting aspect of the proceedings is the Marian mind of all present and whenever a formula of Divine invocation is found, it is always accompanied by an invocation to Our Lady under the title of Immaculate Conception: *Beatissima Virgine Genetrice Maria, sine labe originali concepta, Ad laudem Beatissimae semperque Immaculatae Virginis Dei Genetricis Mariæ*, etc. It is regrettable that we have not the sermons preached at the Solemn High Masses and at the Solemn Benediction each evening. We know that Bishop McKinnon of Arichat preached at the Solemn Mass on September 13 on the Most Holy Name of Mary.¹²

The Second Session, which was held on September 10, opened as follows: “At the request of the Archbishop the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus* concerning the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God was read by the Archdeacon. After this, all, as though by unanimous instinct, applauded and again and again repeated, Amen, Amen. *In Æternum Fiat!* We firmly believe and we make profession with glowing hearts. Mary is all beautiful and there was never any stain in Her. May She flourish. May the Immaculate Mother of God flourish forever.”¹³

Under the heading *De Fide Servanda*, we read:

And seeing that we are speaking of Faith, we ask all our dear sons, both clerics and the laity, to place this virtue with the greatest confidence under the patronage of the most Blessed Virgin Mary who alone destroyed all heresies everywhere and who was blessed because she believed. This Immaculate Mother of God, this Queen of Angels and of all Saints, who was conceived without original sin and preserved from all stain through a singular privilege of God, we venerate with all our hearts and choose as the

¹¹ *Acta et Decreta Primi Concilii Provincialis Halifaxiensis*, p. 8.

¹² *Idem*, p. 19

¹³ *Idem*. p. 18.

patron of this Province (Metropolitan) of Halifax and therefore submit a written petition to His Holiness, the Pope, to approve this favour. May we here express how great was our joy that on that ever memorable day, the 8th day of December 1854, when the Infallible Decree of the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God was solemnly proclaimed by Our Holy Father Pius IX, by God's Providence Pope, in the Church of the Vatican, our most Reverend Metropolitan was present amongst the Bishops of the whole Catholic world and thus showed the devotion and profound veneration of all Catholics of this Province (Metropolitan) towards the most Glorious Mother of God and besides was a faithful witness of the unanimous consent of all, as a Dogma of the Catholic Faith, that she never was stained by original sin, as was then defined.¹⁴

Under the heading *De Vita et Honestate Clericorum* we read:

“Let them excite in themselves and promote in others devotion to the Blessed Eucharist and the Passion of Our Lord which is proclaimed through the Eucharist, and to the most Blessed Virgin Mary, conceived without Sin.¹⁵

The following is an extract from the letter of the Fathers to their Most Holy Lord, Pope Pius IX.

“he Dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God which you proclaimed with infallible voice from the throne of Peter, afforded the greatest joy to us together with the other Christian faithful throughout the world.

We have all agreed to choose the same most Blessed Virgin Mother conceived without sin as the Patron of the whole Province of Halifax and we earnestly beg your Holiness to approve our choice.¹⁶

The letter of His Holiness Pope Pins IX to “The Venerable Brethren, William, Archbishop of Halifax and the Suffragans of the Same” reads in part:

Most pleasing to us was your great joy in our definition of the Immaculate Conception of the most Holy Mother of God, the Virgin Mary, proclaimed by us with unbelievable joy of soul. We cannot but greatly approve and highly praise your most salutary desire adopted by common consent to have the most Blessed Virgin conceived without original sin as the Patron of the whole ecclesiastical Province of Halifax.

Wherefore we trust that all the faithful will endeavour by a more

¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 35.

¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 62.

¹⁶ *Idem*, p. 71.

ardent expression of true filial piety and devotion to love and venerate more and more every day the Virgin Mother of God and our most loving Mother, so that under Her leadership, Her auspices, Her Protection, they may advance worthily, pleasing God in all things and fruitful in all good works.¹⁷

We shall conclude this paper at this point with the keen realization that there are whole vistas of Marian history down which it would be interesting to wander. There comes to mind a study of the Marian literature in books published by some of the Archbishops and in articles contributed to *The Cross* over many years; the work done by Archbishops, the Clergy, Sodalities, the Legion of Mary, and Marian Societies; the devoted apostolate for Mary carried on by the Sisters of Charity in their Mount Saint Vincent College, their Academy and numerous schools through their Sodality of the Children of Mary, which held its first reception of one hundred and fifty candidates on December 8, 1854; the deep love for Our Lady instilled by the Religious of the Sacred Heart since 1849 through the Children of Mary of the Sacred Heart; the zealous teaching and preaching by the Eudist Fathers of Holy Heart Seminary of devotion to the Heart of Mary; the manifest proof of genuine loyalty to Our Lady and Her Rosary demonstrated by the response of the laity to the Archdiocesan Rosary Crusade in 1950.

We close with an incident that was at once a symbol and a sign. On November 1, 1950, His Holiness Pope Pius XII solemnly proclaimed that Mary's Assumption, body and soul into Heaven, was a Dogma of our Faith. That evening students of Saint Mary's University, Mount Saint Vincent College, Convent of the Sacred Heart and nurses of the Halifax Infirmary filled the nave of the Basilica of Saint Mary's dedicated to the Assumption. As they sang Mary's praises with the enthusiastic faith of youth, time seemed to stop in its course and all the memories of the past to crowd back into the old Basilica: long Marian memories of the historic Archdiocese of Halifax.

¹⁷ *Idem*, p. 75.