

VISITING OUR NORTHERN BORDER: PEMBINA'S PIOUS PIONEERS

No, I was not sick last Sunday, but you might say I was playing “hooky,” making a “run for the (northern) border.” No, not to Taco Bell, but I did attend a wonderful celebration in Pembina (population 563) in the extreme northeast corner of North Dakota. Here’s a little background. In September of 1818, the Bishop of Quebec sent **Fr. Josef Dumoulin** to a settlement known today as St. Boniface, Manitoba, the “twin city” to Winnipeg, separated by the Red River. Indeed, that’s the same Red River that separates Northern Minnesota from North Dakota, infamous for its occasional floods. When numerous families fled due to the destruction of their crops by grasshoppers, Dumoulin was dispatched about 60 miles due south to a settlement called Pembina, still part of the **Red River Colony** established by the Hudson’s Bay Company. Life was not easy in the northern plains of today’s Manitoba. But, obedient to his superior, the intrepid missionary administered the sacraments faithfully to the small community entrusted to his care.

All went relatively well until he was recalled for reasons completely beyond his control. In October of 1818, a treaty was negotiated between the Monroe Administration and the British, attempting to settle once for all the border questions between their respective lands following the War of 1812. After a little horse trading, the United States ceded some territory north of Montana to the British. In return, we acquired substantial acreage in northwest Minnesota and North Dakota that was not included in the Louisiana Purchase. We gained more land than we lost, but it was finally agreed upon that the border would be the **49th parallel**, and the settlement of Pembina happened to be **less than a mile** south of the newly established border. The treaty took effect in 1819 and the priest was recalled— after all, he was ministering to newly-minted Americans! But soon enough another priest arrived, and there has been a stable Catholic presence ever since.

The Diocese of Saint Paul was formed in 1851 and by 1860 a corps of twenty-seven missionary priests labored over 166,000 square miles. Thirty-one churches, plus ninety other mission stations comprised our diocese which then **included Pembina**. This was the era of the Ox Cart Trail, and St. Paul received goods both from the north and the south. My favorite story about St. Paul’s second bishop, **Thomas Grace, O.P.** surrounds his missionary spirit that took him in August 1861 by stagecoach to Pembina, then in Dakota Territory, accompanied by the indefatigable **Monsignor Augustin Ravoux**. After succeeding Fr. Lucien Galtier at the Cathedral, Ravoux served as Vicar General to Bishop Grace. The pair embarked upon a nearly two-month long visitation of the Catholic missions and monasteries between Saint Paul and Pembina, confirming numerous French Canadians along the way and observing the Chippewa with whom they traded. They also faced hardships including incessant mosquitos, bumpy stagecoaches, steamer delays on the Red River, terrible food and bitter coffee!

It is for these reasons that I desired and was delighted to attend last Sunday’s celebration in Pembina. Six (Arch)bishops attended, including Archbishop Hebda and Archbishop Albert LeGatt of St. Boniface, Manitoba. The weather, perfect for an outdoor Mass, was followed by music and a dinner. It was well worth the long drive because it is the first time that our region has celebrated a stable Catholic presence in a mission parish for two hundred years, a **significant milestone** in this part of the country. I also have such deep respect for the faith, zeal and courage of these early missionary priests, who often accompanied the fur traders on their explorations in the region. But our Archbishop was certainly not the first to travel to Pembina. When there, we saw photos of Archbishop Leo Binz processing with numerous cassock-clad *monsignori* and priests for the 150th anniversary in 1968. **Bishop John Folda** of Fargo celebrated the Mass and delivered an inspiring homily encouraging everyone to keep the faith that was planted here 200 years earlier. “God is present here,” he repeated, the Lord is in our midst. We need to celebrate these milestones.

When visiting the Pembina State Museum before Mass, we ascended seven stories to an observation deck. On a clear day, visitors have a **360-degree view for ten miles**— indeed, that is exactly what we saw. From our perch, we could easily see Canada, and its many windmills. Earlier in the breezy day I had commented— “I wonder why there are not wind turbines up here?” Well there are, just across the border. Then I had to chuckle upon seeing two names figure prominently in the history— **James J. Hill** who extended the railroad network to that region and **Norman Kittson**, the latter a senior partner of the American Fur Company that had an establishment in Pembina. Recognize that last name? A Minnesota county just across the river from Pembina is named in his honor. It was **his family’s mansion** that was purchased and then razed to become the **site** of

our current Cathedral. I traveled 398 miles only to see the names and photos of two men who lived just across the street from each other!

I was able to reconnect with two Fargo priests who were seminary contemporaries, and listened to a wonderful band after Mass. Though I skipped the dinner due to the long drive home, I can recommend a wonderful place for tacos in Grand Forks! Back in the car for the 398-mile return trip to the rectory, my heart was filled with gratitude. Along the way, one could see the endless rows of sugar beets, ready for the October harvest, and the golden hues of the wheat fields glistening against the fading sun. Undoubtedly, my journey was significantly easier than Bishop Grace's, and yet I thought of him with the cruise control comfortably set at 75 mph (I-29 in ND) and 70 mph (I-94 in MN) and left with a sense of pride for the tremendous zeal that motivated our predecessors in the faith. May we imitate their zeal and work to preserve intact the faith for the future generations who will follow in our footsteps.

- The desire of our capital city (i.e. the mayor) to eliminate **overdue library fines**, while at the same asking for an additional \$215,000 in funding for the library utterly stupefies me. What message are we sending about basic social responsibilities? Late fees **need not** disproportionately impact low income families. Responsibility applies to all socio-economic classes. News flash— if you borrow a book, return it!
- Rebuilding takes time...After 17 years, the WTC Courtlandt subway station reopened in New York, a by-product of the 9/11 bombings. The station had been buried by tons of debris. Q: Total cost for the rebuild? A: Nearly \$181 million. Q: Total time and cost to **rebuild trust** in our Church? A: Priceless, but we have to begin somewhere. I am grateful to all who prayed the Penitential Psalms with the priests of this Archdiocese Saturday on the Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows.
- I would like to draw your attention to an upcoming offering on a trial basis later this fall. *The Marriage in Christ Seminar* is a five-week seminar for couples who want to establish good patterns of prayer & friendship. I am looking for six to eight couples willing to invest five evenings that I truly believe will strengthen your marriage.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,

Rector



North Dakota



Photo Above:

Six bishops, over twenty priests and lay faithful commemorated 200 years in the life of Assumption Catholic Church in Pembina, ND.

To the Left: Map indicating the location of Pembina, ND.