

Saint François de Laval



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Centre d'animation François-De Laval Newsletter



Msgr. de Laval and the Church for our time

By Georges-Édouard Demers

After a year in lockdown, we can get a sense of perspective by taking a look at men and women who have lived through similarly difficult situations in the past. With kind permission from Pastorale-Québec, we reproduce here a far-sighted article by the great Laval scholar Georges-Édouard Demers. It dates back to 1977 but remains surprisingly up-to-date.¹ The subheadings, references and illustrations are editorial.

We are only too quick to take offence: "Young people today know nothing about history! Quiz show contestants can identify any tune by *Harmonium*, but cannot state the exact (and unforgettable!) date of the Battle of Carillon!"

We, the adults, are proud of the few details we have garnered from our history lessons, but do we really apply them as we should, especially the lessons from the saints? Our pride in being scientific men and women of the 20th century has lessened our capacity to feel wonder at the exploits of our predecessors in the faith. We do not, of course, deny the "communion of the saints" in the Credo, but our current worries cut us off from a remote past that is so different to the civilization that surrounds us.

However, the saints in heaven are not indifferent onlookers as we struggle with anxiety and fatigue. They continue to live with us and "share" our difficulties, and their intercession protects us even when we consider them merely as "models from the past".

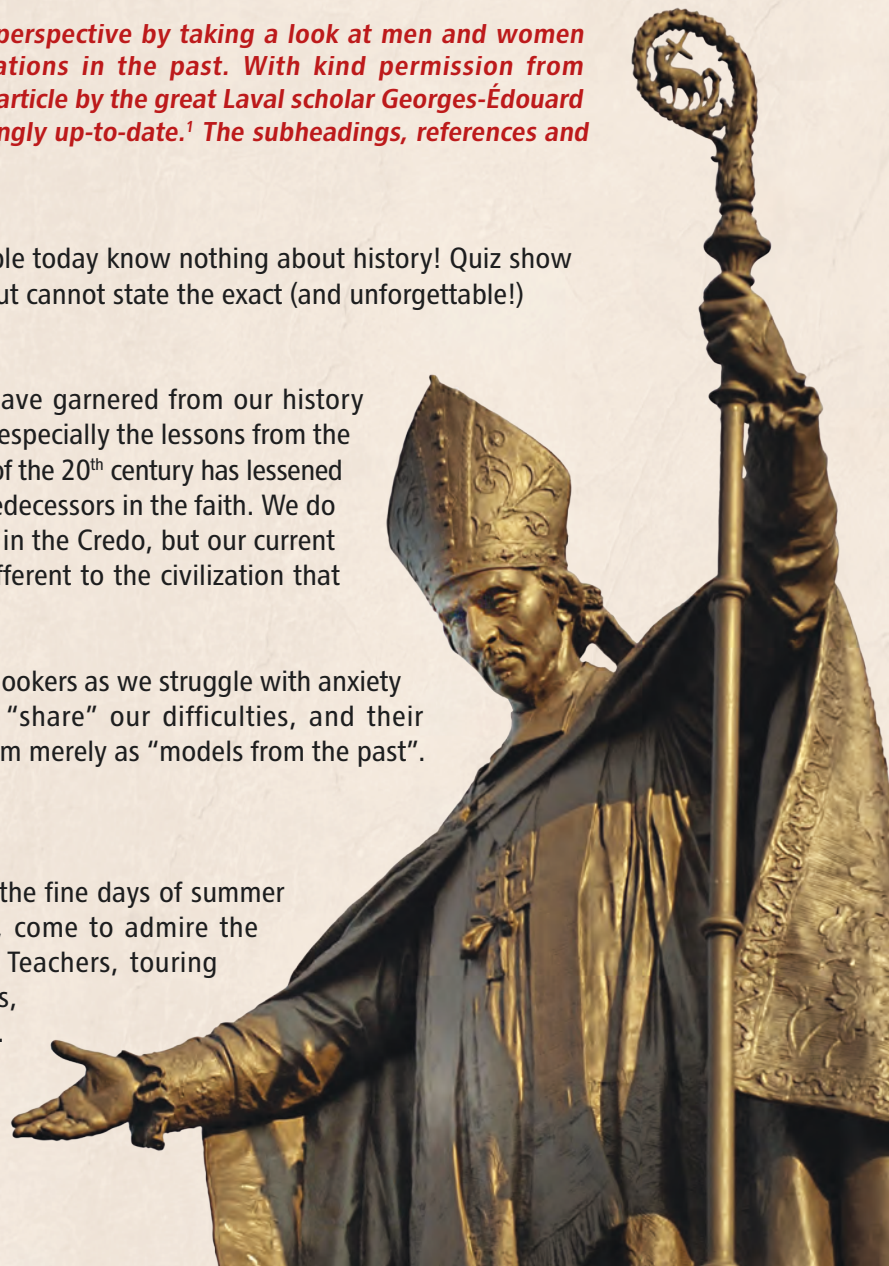
Models for the present

Msgr. François de Laval is one such model. During the fine days of summer many tourists, especially from the United States, come to admire the polychrome marble adorning his funeral chapel. Teachers, touring Old Québec with their secondary school students, bring them to see the tomb of this historical figure.

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Detail of the Monument Laval on côte de la Montagne, Québec

Photo : Fonds Daniel Abel





Msgr. de Laval and the Church for our time

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A PAGE OF HISTORY

Sometimes, a solitary pilgrim can be found kneeling on the granite slab that covers the mortal remains of the man who is known as, and who was in reality, the founder of the Canadian Church.

In fact—and it would be a mistake to forget this—Msgr. de Laval was not just the founder of the institution known as the Québec Seminary. He was also the spiritual father of practically the whole of North America, which originally made up his diocese, and specifically of the diocese of Québec.

Msgr. de Laval built a new Church in a new country, among a Christian community that was still young but already marked by the zeal of the first missionaries and enriched by the blood of its martyrs.

We, in turn, need to consolidate the structure of a renewed Church in an unstable world that is seeking direction, in an unusual context that has been called “the uncertain aftermath of the Council”. Our apostolic work, even though it takes place in a transformed social context, is like that of our first bishop: the joys and disappointments he faced are similar to our successes and failures.

To deal with uncertainty, he took the somewhat daring step of bringing all his diocesan priests together in a sacerdotal community. This is how he instilled a team spirit or collegial approach, as we would say today, by pooling the resources of many different individuals. “The prelate,” one of his first collaborators said, “never did anything important unless in collaboration with us.”

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Tomb of François de Laval in the Exterior Chapel of the Québec Seminary, 1950 Photo : Fonds Daniel Abel



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His project, which led to the foundation of the Québec Seminary in 1663, was undermined by his successor's lack of understanding, when his divergent views reduced the Seminary to a mere educational institution.

An organized clergy

One of Msgr. de Laval's first tasks, when he arrived at Québec as the Apostolic Vicar of New France, was to organize the ministry for settlers living in the three villages of Québec, Montréal and Trois-Rivières, as they were at the time, or scattered along the shores of the St. Lawrence.

"The prelate never did anything important unless in collaboration with us. Our property was held in common with his. I never saw him make any distinction between us, between poor and rich, or consider a person's birth or standing, seeing us all as his brothers. We also preserved a perfect union with the Jesuits and the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice, and this union was never disrupted. Msgr. de Laval neglected nothing to ensure that a spirit of charity would be perpetuated in his Church; he succeeded and during his episcopate, the union was perfect. All the ecclesiastics, canons and parish priests and the Seminary formed a single community, whose saintliness earned the respect of all."

(Letter from Maizerets to Denonville, quoted in La Tour, Vie de M. de Laval)

Finding future candidates for the priesthood was a major concern for Msgr. de Laval, just as it is for us, but for entirely different reasons. The shortage of priests made it difficult to ensure that they had the necessary contact with their parishioners. How to find missionaries in France who would agree to exile themselves in a country with such a harsh climate?

In addition, Msgr. de Laval was apparently planning to prepare Indigenous clergy members, who would have a clearer understanding of the aspirations of their community and bring them closer to the requirements of Christianity. This is why, starting in 1668, some "children from the forest" were admitted to the Seminary along with the young sons of several settlers. Although the idea of an Indigenous clergy turned out to be a chimera, a few years later the Bishop had the joy of performing the imposition of hands on priests newly graduated from the Minor Seminary, dedicated to the Infant Jesus.

Union with God

In his hectic life as a pastor facing inevitable administrative difficulties, and also when plunged into his apostolic activities, Msgr. de Laval felt the need for a deep union with God through preaching and prayer, like Jesus in his years as a preacher and also like us, on certain days. He knew that an intense inner life was the "soul of any apostolic teaching", as we used to say not so long ago. It is true that the regimen of spiritual exercises to which he subjected himself every day required the kind of heroism that is not part of our easy lifestyle and capricious behaviour today. However, this is where he found peace, consolation, and the same "solace" that makes our present-day activism effective. It is also where, according to Marie de l'Incarnation, he achieved "a sublime degree of prayer".

Like us, at some points in our lives, Msgr. de Laval experienced despondency following the failure of certain undertakings that he believed to be essential for the good of his Church and the faithful placed in his care. His recourse in times of difficulty and trial (and once again, this can serve as a lesson to us) was prayer, and his unflinching trust in and total abandonment to divine Providence. "The first and, I believe, the best way is to rely on prayer²," he wrote one day when the Seminary was in the midst of a dire financial crisis.

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The Saint-Joseph staircase in the Procure Wing of the Québec Seminary Photo : Fonds Daniel Abel



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This is not to say that he neglected the human means suggested to him by the Lord. "To expect victory without being willing to fight is a sign of bad breeding," Charles Péguy wrote at a later date.³ Msgr. de Laval was too well-bred and too distant from the quietist doctrine of his time to refuse either to fight or to work. However, his trust in God led him to believe that, without divine assistance, nothing durable could be achieved on Earth. "However, in the midst of our troubles we must not lose heart; if men have the power to strike down, the hand of Our Lord has infinitely more power to raise up."⁴



Georges-Édouard Demers in the tomb of François de Laval, February 1964. Photo : Séminaire de Québec

Charity

Msgr. de Laval liked to serve the sick and the poor, in the name of the God whose suffering they represent and in the name of human dignity, as stated at the last Council. In the far-off days of his young priesthood, he had worked as a volunteer nurse with the plague victims of small towns in Normandy. Later he could be found at the Hôtel-Dieu hospital in Québec, in the infirmary at the Seminary, and in Amerindian huts performing the same acts of compassionate charity. Marie de l'Incarnation was overcome with admiration.



Coloured sketch by Jacques Sergeff, presented to the Québec Seminary for the completion of a bas-relief in the Saint-Louis chapel at the national military school of La Flèche in 2013. Photo : Fonds Daniel Abel

To help the poor, he deprived himself of everything. The eldest son of his family, he gave up his inheritance when he was asked to become Apostolic Vicar for Vietnam; he handled and administered substantial amounts of money to support good works in his Canadian diocese; but at the end of his life, after giving everything away, he had nothing. In the fall of 1707, he sadly admitted that he would not live for much longer, because he lacked the resources he needed to relieve poverty.

Rich in poverty

A few months later, on May 6, 1708, he departed for his Father's house, rich in his voluntary poverty. However, his heart remained with us, we who continue his work. "The [present-day] Church is in the desert [...] The desert has always been, in the history of salvation, the place where God's connection with His people had been made manifest" (Pierre Bockel). To find its way through the obstacles of the desert, the Church has always had the assistance of the Holy Spirit and its representatives. It also needs the invisible guides who, like the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire, will bring it, purified and renewed in strength, to the promised land.

These guides are the saints, our brothers in heaven. It would be ungrateful and imprudent to ignore them. "I believe in the communion of saints." ■

1. Demers, "Monseigneur de Laval et l'Église de notre temps", *Pastorale-Québec*, vol. 89, no 9, 12 May 1977, p.196-197
2. Letter from Laval to Saint-Vallier (15 February - 15 March 1686)
3. Charles Péguy, "L'Argent, suite" in *Œuvres en prose complètes*, t. 3, 1913
4. Letter from Laval to Milon (Québec, fall 1689)



François, my friend

Lyrics by: André Fontaine

EXPRESSION

On a boat where illness was rife,
A boat filled with all the misery of life,
As you set course
For a new country.

François, my friend, you left a life of abundance
In the sun-filled land of France,
To come here, in the reign of Louis.

The shores on which you set foot
as you stepped off the boat,
Exhausted, sick, desperate for the sight of land
Remember you. "I remember" you.

As the sun of Resurrection shone,
As the waves of April pointed to a new horizon
Where a thousand cares
and a thousand songs awaited.

François, my friend, you came bearing the flame,
To a place where you improvised, imagined,
Invented, created almost.

François, my friend, I write this letter today
To you, my friend, for all the madness,
All the love that carried you towards the infinite,
François, my friend.

Engraving by Gérard Castonguay for the Comité des fondateurs
FONTAINE, André, *Par-dessus les toits*, 33 1/3 microgroove,
Les disques Ville-Marie, VM-69201
Photo: Fonds Daniel Abel



François of Québec

He was called François.
François of Québec.

He walked, like us, on dusty roads.

He came to know the tempestuous sea, at a time of heroic ocean crossings.

History has left us a severe official portrait.

But did he not, like us, spend time with the poor and care for the sick?

And how could he not have listened, for hours at a time,
to the wild geese at his haven in Saint-Joachim?

A colossus like Abraham, he is our spiritual father, the father of the French Canadian people.

Roger Leclerc, producer, Radio-Canada, in *François de Laval, seigneur de la Côte*,
Gilbert Lévesque, Leméac, 1978, 94 p.

Inventory project: *Entretenir la mémoire de saint François de Laval* [Keeping the memory of St. François de Laval alive]

Over the past several months, the Séminaire de Québec has been working on an exhaustive inventory of all documentation that calls to mind or refers to St. François de Laval. The Centre d'animation François-De Laval has been assigned a part of this undertaking: the task of developing a descriptive catalog of the content of these documents, notifying the various repositories, and, where possible, digitizing the items to be inventoried.



To infinity and beyond!¹

By Martina de Vries

In recent months I have had more time than ever to spend on our inventory project—while, in the evening, enjoying Disney movies with my 6-year-old niece. I have had expert assistance from Father Roger Laberge, rsv, the last postulator for the Cause, and Abbé Paul-Hubert Poirier, emeritus professor at Laval University, who have begun translating the letters in Italian and Latin between Msgr. de Laval and Rome. Reading this official (and infinitely courteous) correspondence, I realize that, like the heroes in children's films, François de Laval was a man of action, a person who "decided to see every problem as the opportunity to find a solution" (Walt Disney).

***It's better to use your head than break your back!*²**

As soon as he landed at Québec in 1659, he decided to conduct a grand tour of his diocese to assess the current situation. "My first care was to travel to the villages close to Québec, on a six-day tour, to meet at least part of my flock, to observe and not just to listen."³ He quickly noted the numerous problems and shortcomings of the Church in Canada, despite the best efforts of the missionaries who had gone before. Even Lightning McQueen found it difficult to win a race with two blown tires!⁴

What was needed was solid, durable foundations backed up by an enthusiastic, skilled team, "because I believed there was no better way to lay out the foundation for the Québec Church than to strengthen everything, correctly and solidly, in such a way that it cannot be destroyed by the passage of time."⁵

***All it takes is faith and trust!*⁶**

And a little bit of pixie dust⁶, or, for François, a few royal and papal decrees.

He crossed the ocean, *second star to the right and straight till morning*⁶, to attend the civil foundations at

the court of the King of France, "where my solicitude for the Church caused me to go, to come more surely to the assistance of Christianity which was going to wrack and ruin, to say the least, because of the Governor's neglect. The Most Christian King received me with great kindness and agreed to all my requests; he established a new governor for those regions, who will support and promote Christianity through his piety; he next created a Sovereign Council, placing all business in its hands; last, he promised auxiliary troops for next year, who will crush and disperse the baleful Iroquois, enemies of the Church, already greatly enfeebled by their numerous defeats; in addition, the said Most Christian King gave me an abbey to support the Canadian episcopate."⁷

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For the religious foundations, François wrote to Rome, first to request the creation of a titular bishopric for Québec (since, as G.-É. Demers explains, “the title of Bishop of Petra and Apostolic Vicar diminished his authority in the eyes of the people and the civil governors”)⁸ and, second, the creation of a parish in Québec and its affiliation with the Québec Seminary “filled with men of sound doctrine and proven morals, [on whom] is founded all our hopes of strengthening, preserving and promoting Christianity in this country.”⁹ But *even miracles take a little time*¹⁰ and he had to repeat the same requests for more than eleven years ... *By time and toil we sever, what strength and rage could never.*¹¹

The flower that blooms in adversity is the most rare and beautiful of all¹²

While waiting for the country to develop and prosper, François found some temporary solutions, keeping Rome and the King informed to obtain their approval. His “masterstroke”¹³ was to found the Québec Seminary, which became the centre of the Church in Canada. The Bishop mentioned, in the decree creating the Seminary, that “It is of the greatest importance in these early stages to give the clergy the best possible structure in order to train them as workers able to cultivate the Lord’s new vine [...] in accordance with the holy practices of the first centuries, retained and followed even today in several dioceses of this Kingdom.”¹⁴ He explained to the Pope that “I have seriously considered the need to entrust, and I have entrusted, the direction and care of the Seminary to six priests, who strive principally, with all their strength and excellence, on this work. [...]” From the Seminary, he gained movable priests “until it appears appropriate to do otherwise, according to the canons, and there can be nothing more suitable for this Church, especially since this is but a first step.”¹⁵

As an righteous man, he felt the need to inform Rome that “our King has confirmed all of this by his authority and the Supreme and Royal Council of New France has made note of it”¹⁵ and he begged the Pope that “for the rest, if the Sacred Congregation sees any difficulty in any of the aforementioned things, I humbly request that, as far as possible, these initiatives be tolerated. It will be easy to put things to rights later.”¹⁶

Don’t just fly, soar!¹⁷

And everything was put to rights when, at last, in 1674 the diocese was officially created, along with the parishes, to which “fixed, stable priests” could be assigned “to care for souls, so that the shepherd may know his sheep and the sheep, hearing the voice of their shepherd close by, become more accustomed to the discipline of salvation. I have applied myself to this task even more conscientiously since the Most Christian King indicated to me more than once that it would be agreeable to him and that all the people were calling keenly, by their wishes and shared entreaties, for this consolation for their souls. [...] I have entrusted to the Seminary [...] the parish of Québec [...] and I have joined them together in perpetuity; because one can scarcely say how greatly the priests of the said Seminary have contributed to the good and the edification of the work and endeavours of our Church.”¹⁵

The moral of the story? In the words of Walt Disney: “All our dreams can come true, if we have the courage to pursue them.” ■

Photos from the film *François, Apostle of America, Salt & Light, 2014.*

Photos: Fonds Daniel Abel

1. Lasseler J. (1995), *Toy Story*, Pixar animation studios - Walt Disney Pictures
2. Annakin, K. (1960), *Swiss Family Robinson*, Walt Disney Pictures
3. Letter from Laval to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda (Québec, October 29, 1660)
4. Lasseler J., Ranft, J., (2006), *Cars*, Pixar Animation Studios
5. Letter from Laval to Innocent XI (Québec, November 6, 1678)
6. Geronimi C., Jackson W., Luske H. (1953), *Peter Pan*, Walt Disney Pictures
7. Letter from Laval to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda (Québec, October 26, 1663)
8. Relation of the Canadian Missions (Québec, October 29, 1660)
9. Letter from Laval to Clement IX (Québec, 1667)
10. Geronimi C., Jackson W., Luske H. (1950), *Cinderella*, Walt Disney Pictures
11. Jean de La Fontaine, *The Lion and the Rat, The Fables of La Fontaine, A New Edition, Book II, 1882*
12. Cook, B., Bancroft, T. (1998), *Mulan*, Walt Disney Pictures
13. Gilles Routhier, *L’invention du Séminaire de Québec. Un coup de génie de François de Laval, une histoire à réactualiser*
14. Order establishing the Québec Seminary (Paris, March 26, 1663)
15. Letter from Laval to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda (Québec, August 29, 1667)
16. Letter from Laval to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda (Québec, October 26, 1668)
17. Sharpsteen, B. (1941) *Dumbo*, Walt Disney Pictures



Photos : Fonds Daniel Abel

ICONOGRAPHY

Saint-Michel Basilica-Cathedral in Sherbrooke

At the request of Msgr. Jean-Marie Fortier, Patricio Rivera created the altarpiece in the founders' chapel. It comprises 5 panels and depicts the Canadian Blessed (today recognized as Saints). In the centre, François de Laval presents the Canadian Church with Marie de l'Incarnation, Marguerite d'Youville, Kateri Tekakwitha and Marguerite Bourgeoys.

The Chilean sculptor was inspired by primitive African art. He settled in Sherbrooke after fleeing the Pinochet dictatorship established after the coup in 1973.

Patricio Rivera (1948-2000), completed in 1981, enamel on embossed copper (2 m x 3 m)

Photo : Martin Brideau



TESTIMONY

I am sure that you will find Msgr. the former Bishop of Québec in the same frame of mind. You are familiar with his piety, selflessness, prudence and intelligence; he knows the country, and he knows better than anyone the state of its Church. Ask for his advice and do whatever he tells you to do blindly, since we are all simply seeking God's intentions and this is how to discover them.

Excerpt from a letter from Tronson to Dollier (Paris, May 20, 1687)