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MATHIAS LORAS

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## The First Bishop of Iowa

The year 1839 saw the arrival of two great religious leaders in the upper Mississippi Valley. The one was Mathias Loras, Catholic Bishop of the vast region now comprising the States of Iowa, Minnesota, portions of the two Dakotas, and, for a few years, parts of Wisconsin and northern Illinois. He came to Dubuque. The other was Joseph Smith, head of the newly founded Mormon sect, who established himself on the other side of the river, at Nauvoo, Illinois, although some of his followers settled on the Iowa shore. The efforts of the former soon began to blossom in the wilderness he faced; the work of the other was shortly uprooted from the rich soil of the valley and transplanted to the sandy deserts of Utah. But at one point the two creeds came into direct contact. In February of 1843, one of Loras's priests, the daring and intrepid Dominican, Samuel Mazzuchelli, crossed the ice from Fort

Madison to Nauvoo and visited the leader of the Mormons in his own sanctuary in an endeavor to convert him to Catholicity.

The new See of Dubuque was created on July 28, 1837. The first bishop, Pierre Jean Mathias Loras, was consecrated on December 10, 1837, in Mobile, Alabama. He it was who gave the trend during his life to the ecclesiastical events in that immense territory under his jurisdiction and who left his impress on them for years after his death. In this respect allusion may be made to a peculiar fact: the Catholic Church of the Northwest whose national descent is so preponderantly Teuto-Gaelic, had its foundations laid hardly a century ago by Italo-French pioneers. Joseph Rosati, the distinguished Neapolitan, later bishop of St. Louis, Samuel Charles Mazzuchelli, gentle born Milanese, Mathias Loras, aristocrat of Lyons, and Joseph Cretin, later first bishop of St. Paul, son of a bourgeois baker of Montluel — these are the names carved on the respective sides of the cornerstone of the Church of the Northwest.

Under the striking title of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Willa Cather has told the story of the son of an old, aristocratic and Catholic family of France, a gentleman of culture, refinement, and learning, cut off from civilization, laboring among Indians and semi-savage whites in New Mexico, enduring mental agonies and bodily hardships almost incredible, and finally slipping out of this mundane vale, an exile. It

is but the story of Mathias Loras with another setting and a slightly later date — a story dusty with age and dingy in outward aspect to the glance of the casual student, which needs but the romantic pen of another Willa Cather to reveal to the world in a colorful light the epic deeds of a saint of our forests and prairies, whose life melted painfully away under the crude labors and dangerous tasks of his day.

Born at Lyons just as the Revolution in France was rushing to its climax, Mathias Loras was but an infant in his mother's arms when she pleaded with the tyrant Couthon for the life of her husband, a wealthy aristocrat and councillor of Lyons. But Loras *père* was in the very first group to be guillotined in the Square des Terreaux, and a few days later the same fate overtook two of his sisters and two brothers, one of the latter being Mayor of St. Cyr. In all, seventeen persons of the Loras family lost their lives for their political and religious convictions. And it is only after understanding this background of Loras that we can appreciate his viewpoint of things American as well as his heroic work in the forests and on the prairies of his far-flung diocese.

Young Mathias Loras received his early education at the hands of priests who sought the hospitality of his mother's home during the turbulent times of the French Revolution. In an old Carthusian house near-by he commenced his priestly studies and had as his classmate Jean Baptiste Vianney,

later the famous Curé d' Ars, subsequently canonized by the Catholic Church. As a lad, Loras had visited the exiled and imprisoned Pope Pius VI at Valence. In 1807 he entered the seminary of L'Argentière and was ordained a priest in the Cathedral of Lyons by the Cardinal-Archbishop in 1817.

It is a tribute to his ability that he was immediately appointed president of the Petit Seminaire of Meximieux, and that in 1824 he was promoted to the important office of the Superior of the Seminary of L'Argentière. Having resigned in 1827 to act as pastoral missionary in the Lyons archdiocese, he met Bishop Portier of Mobile, Alabama, and decided in 1829 to accompany him to America. For seven years he labored in Alabama as vicar-general of the young southern diocese, as pastor of the Cathedral of Mobile, and as president of the newly founded Spring Hill College — a college which celebrated its centennial this very year of 1930.

Although consecrated a bishop in Mobile in 1837, he did not arrive in his tiny see-city of Dubuque until April 19, 1839, having spent the intervening months in France seeking priests and funds for the American missions. How little he knew of his new and immense diocese may be gleaned from the questionnaire which he sent to Bishop Rosati at St. Louis just before his consecration:

1. What are the limits of the diocese?
2. Approximately what is the number of inhabitants?

3. What are its people, Irish, American, French, savage?
4. Is there any other town besides Dubuque?
5. What is the quality of the soil?
6. Is the climate because of the latitude very cold?
7. Are there any Catholic Indians?
8. At what distance is Dubuque from the Mississippi?  
How does one reach there?
9. How many priests ought to be brought from Europe?
10. Would a German priest be necessary?
11. Would 3 nuns from St. Charles be useful?
12. Is Dubuque the best situated town for the see-city?
13. Has the country been visited often by missionaries?

P. S. Permit me, Monseigneur, to conjure you to send to this mission a good priest. This would indeed be a great consolation for me and I believe the necessary thing. I would always be sincerely grateful for this.

Some of these questions which he addressed to the Bishop of St. Louis indicate a lack of information or else a naïveté which is almost startling. And yet it is highly probable that Bishop Rosati himself could not give an exact answer to a single one of these questions. This new territory was a hitherto unknown and neglected wilderness. Fortunately for Bishop Loras, he had, while still at Mobile, befriended a distinguished fellow Frenchman who was later able to enlighten him concerning the conditions of his new diocese.

In the late winter and early spring of 1839, Bishop Loras on his return from Europe was compelled to wait at St. Louis for a favorable opportunity to take a steamboat up the Mississippi to Dubuque. There

at St. Louis he encountered the man to whom he had shown hospitality at Mobile. The gentleman was Jean Nicholas Nicollet, known to American posterity as an illustrious explorer and geologist as well as an astronomer. Engaged by the United States government, he began in 1836 a great exploration trip to the headwaters of the Mississippi. And now on his return, he proved to be a veritable mine of information for the anxious bishop; he was an authority on the ethnological data of the Indians, and on the topography and natural history of the Northwest; and it was with keen delight that the bishop listened to the learned opinions of the explorer on the magnificent areas of his new diocese which as yet he had never seen.

When he arrived at Dubuque with two priests and four seminarists from France, he found one lone sentinel of the Faith in his vast province — the Dominican, Samuel Charles Mazzuchelli. A little stone cathedral, erected by the miners under the direction of the Italian missionary, was still in an unfinished state. There was no house for the new bishop.

“I find myself too rich indeed,” he wrote ironically to Bishop Rosati in a moment of apparent discouragement a short time after his labors had begun, “for all Iowa hasn’t another congregation besides Dubuque and Davenport, and the latter has only four Catholic families. Mr. Mazzuchelli is leaving for Burlington, where, I am told, there are none at all.

Blessed be God. — This Diocese will have to be closed in the course of time. In the meantime we are going to strive not to die of starvation. This winter flour costs already \$10, and other things in proportion. It isn't a small affair to keep up a house like ours. God will provide."

Besides the Iowa towns, Prairie du Chien in Wisconsin and Galena in Illinois took up much of the time and the care of the Bishop. Shortly after his arrival in Dubuque, he made an historic and a memorable missionary excursion to the upper Mississippi. Going by steamboat from Dubuque on June 23rd, he disembarked at Fort Snelling where the St. Pierre River (now the Minnesota) flows into the Mississippi, and ministered to the Indians and Canadians who gathered at the settlement then known as St. Pierre. "No pen can describe the joy which this apparently lost flock of the Church manifested, when its members saw the bishop in their midst, since up to this time no priest, much less a bishop, had gone up to them," said a writer in *Der Wahrheitsfreund* of Cincinnati that year. Loras was accompanied by the Abbé Pelamourgues whom he had brought with him from France.

What a picturesque tableau must have struck the eyes of the "Bishop of Du Buque" on this occasion! There in that open cathedral, whose pillars were the tall trees of the forest primeval, whose vaulted ceiling was the azure sky peeping through the interlacings of the fragrant branches, stood Mathias



Loras, in whose veins flowed the blood of the old French aristocracy. Round about him he saw trappers from the far-away West and *bois-brulés* from the Red River dressed in deer skins trimmed with other furs, traders from Prairie du Chien, soldiers from the army post, and women attired in animal skins and homespuns.

Deeper back in the checkered shadow and sunlight of the forest, peered the Indians. On the first two days of baptism, the Sioux and Chippewa, who had met for a peace parley at Fort Snelling, may have been present; later in all probability the Sioux alone were there, exhibiting the bleeding scalps of many Chippewa, with whom in the interval they had quarreled and fought. With curiosity they gazed at the "China-sapas" — the black gowns; the middle-aged bishop and the youthful *abbé*, in surplice and stole, the one with crucifix and ritual in his hands, and the other with the water and oils of baptism. And perhaps from afar came the barely distinguishable musical rumble of Minnehaha's waters.

One of those baptized on this occasion, Baptiste Campbell, a Sioux-Scotch half-breed, was twenty-three years later a leader in the bloody Sioux insurrection in Minnesota and was hanged at Mankato on Christmas day, 1862. . . . It was the visit of Bishop Loras in 1839 that resulted in Father Galtier's arrival the next spring; that resulted in the erection of the chapel of St. Paul, the nucleus of the

future city; and that thus resulted in the naming of the capital of Minnesota.

A discouraging responsibility did he find this task of acting as spiritual shepherd of such a gigantic diocese at first. Half-breeds and traders, miners and land-seekers composed his widely scattered flock. No labor among them was too menial, no difficulty insuperable. He travelled in Minnesota and Wisconsin, in Illinois and especially in Iowa: on foot, on steamboat, in oxcart, and in canoe. The most distant Indian, and he had over thirty thousand in his diocese, he hoped some day to convert. A trip of hundreds of miles even in the severest winter weather never dismayed him; the tepees of the savages and the huts of the hard-drinking frontiersmen were his home.

His unyielding perseverance ultimately brought success; under his magnetic influence parishes were formed and churches and chapels sprang up in various parts of Iowa. An interesting example of this is shown in the following translation of a letter of his to France early in 1841 dealing with the beginnings of the parish in Iowa City.

“You will find enclosed a plan of the City of Iowa which will give you an idea of the rapidity with which foreign population spread over these countries. Only eighteen months ago this locality was a desert sixty miles from the great river. The Government chose this place as its capital. There are over a hundred squares of ground separated in the middle

by an alley of twenty feet. The streets are eighty feet wide. More than 600 people have established themselves in them, and a great many houses are built or under construction. The capitol, you can see in the sketch, will ornament a beautiful public place, to which comes a street of one hundred and fifty feet in width. Already 150,000 francs have been employed on the construction and it will not be completed for two years. Near there will be the park with a building for public schools and two churches on each side, viz. Catholic, Episcopalian, Presbyterian and Methodist. The ground for our church will be one hundred and fifty feet by one hundred and sixty feet, and has been given us on condition that we build a church of 5000 francs in thirty months time. The offer was accepted and it has been promised to us that, should we build it big enough the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate will hold their sessions there during the two years until the capitol is completed. This arrangement is nearly concluded. We will leave on this lot a sufficient place to build later on a beautiful church, and this year we will build only a brick house of fifty by twenty-five feet of two stories, which will cost us 11,100 francs and will serve as a provisional church and then as a Catholic school and college. During the next two years it is not we who will preach justice in the house, but justice will be exercised and laws made in our house. For anyone who knows the country, it is an advantageous thing, because of the

influence that it gives to establish the kingdom of God in this country.”

The far-seeing mind of Bishop Loras visioned his great diocese peopled with the Catholic immigrants flocking to America in the forties and fifties. He wished to draw them from the crowded slums of the eastern cities where they were hewers of wood and drawers of water, and make them self-reliant and independent farmers of the generous Northwest where lands were cheap and natural resources unlimited. But, alas! The narrow-visioned prelates of the Atlantic seaboard frowned on his efforts among their peoples, and the fair promise of the colonization plan was blighted. Fortunately, however, not altogether did his vision fail of due fruit; some of his labors resulted in the founding of Catholic settlements in Iowa, southern Minnesota, and eastern Nebraska; and the last statistical statement from his pen just four months before his death showed that the number of Catholics had increased from 3100, when his diocese included Minnesota and the Dakotas, to 54,000 when it consisted of Iowa alone.

His connections and influence in Europe had enabled him to secure much financial help from the Society for the Propagation of the Faith of Lyons, France, from the Leopoldine Society of Vienna, Austria, and from the Foreign Mission Society of Munich, Bavaria. In 1846 he discovered to his surprise and joy about one hundred German Catholic

immigrants in the forest lands about thirty miles west of Dubuque, and he induced them to name their community New Vienna, in honor of the capital of Austria and home of his benefactor.

Elsewhere in Iowa, with the strategic eye of a consummate general, he picked church sites in new villages even before the arrival of Catholics; he organized schools; he brought in teaching and nursing sisterhoods; he induced a Trappist order of monks to erect a monastery near Dubuque; and he founded a college, Mt. St. Bernard's, of which Columbia College of Dubuque is the lineal descendant.

Loras, an ardent lover of American institutions, participated actively in many public and civic movements. A firm total abstainer, he appealed to the Catholics to uphold temperance by voting for the first Iowa prohibition law. In May, 1846, he called on James Buchanan, then Secretary of State, and succeeded in having President Polk appoint chaplains to serve the Catholic soldiers during the Mexican War.

Offered an archbishopric in France by influential relatives if he would return to that country, he refused it emphatically. And roused by remarks of some French bishops he wrote: "We have no martyrs of blood in the U. S. but many of charity. We impose on ourselves private privations of which our worthy bishops of France have no idea, viz., in Dubuque I have no horse, no carriage; I visit the sick by foot one or two miles from the city; my table is

as frugal as was that of St. Augustine and other holy prelates and sometimes more so. I have just been ill four months with a trembling fever, during which I had to travel 200 leagues to plant the faith on the borders of the Missouri River, as otherwise heresy would have taken hold forever of these countries."

Small wonder then that at his death, which occurred in 1858, one of his priests wrote: "Everyone here venerates him as a saint and many are disputing over pieces of his cassock and of his hair; moreover parents are proud to give to their children the name of Loras".

M. M. HOFFMANN