

**A PARTIAL CRONOLOGICAL
HISTORY OF PIONEER
OLD CATHOLICS IN THE UNITED STATES**

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INTRODUCTION

My name is Donald M. Weeks and I am Benedictine in the Old Catholic Church. In the past ten years I have chronicled Old Catholic History at the Abbey and in my private Oratory. In the following pages I will put together a timetable of events that the reader can understand the times and places in Old Catholic History here in America.

I also do this because there are many misconceptions among Old Catholics about their beginnings in America and since there is no American Seminary or training center, I feel that it is correct for me, a senior prelate and in the Benedictine tradition to share and make available what knowledge I have about the beginning's of Old Catholicism to you the reader.



PART ONE

FATHER CHARLES CHINIQUY



Father Charles Chiniquy is a very unique man. He was a Roman Catholic priest who joined the Old Catholic movement in Berne, Switzerland and there he was assistant to Bishop E. Herzog. He migrated to Illinois where he started a work among the French.

He was born in Quebec, Canada in 1809, and received his education between 1820-1832. He was ordained a priest September 29, 1833 and served as curate in parishes in the Quebec Diocese. He later went to Illinois and established Saint Ann's Church near Kankakee, Illinois. He was opposed to Canonical authority and excommunicated by the Bishop of Chicago in 1858, and began an

independent ministry among the French speaking people in North-Central Illinois and later in Canada. He became an advisor to Bishop Joseph Rene Vilatte. It is said that he was a friend with President Abraham Lincoln. Father Chiniquy authored several books and magazine articles. While he is not the "Father" of Old Catholicism in America, he helped to establish Old Catholicism in the Americas.

1809 Born in Kamouraska, Quebec, Canada, the son of Charles Chiniquy, Public Notary, and of Reine Perreault.

- **1820** Private course in St. Thomas of Kamouraska, Quebec, under Tutor Allen Jones.
- **1822** Classical studies at the Petit Séminaire in Nicolet, Quebec.
- **1829** Theological studies at the Grand Séminaire in Quebec City.
- **1832** Ordained deacon in Quebec R.C. cathedral church, on May 18, by Bishop J. Signay.
- **1833** Ordained priest in Quebec, on September 29 (+J. Signay). Appointed Curate of St. Charles Parish, Rivière-Boyer, Quebec.
- **1834** Curate of St. Roch Parish, Quebec City.
- **1838** Vicar of the Parish of Beauport, Quebec. Founder of the Temperance Society (1839).
- **1842** Vicar of the Parish of Kamouraska, Quebec.
- **1844** Publication of the Temperance Society Manual.

- **1847** Appointed Temperance Preacher in the Diocese of Montreal, Quebec. Bishop Ignace Bourget gave him the title of Temperance Apostle in 1850.
- **1852** Transferred to Chicago Diocese, U.S.A., to work as a missionary among French-Canadians of Kankakee County, Illinois. Most Rev. L.O. van der Veld, Bishop of Chicago, blessed its Mission Church dedicated to St. Anne.
- **1858** Opposed by R.C. authorities and clergy for his biblical and community based teaching, the Diocese of Chicago excommunicated him. At a general meeting held April 11, decision was made by the people to turn St. Anne Parish into a Community Church, and to appoint Father Chiniquy as Pastor in charge.
- **1859** A church society was organized under the name Christian Catholic (Community) Church. It was filed for records in Kankakee County District Court on September 13. Rev. Chiniquy was elected President of the Board of Directors.
- **1861** Intercommunion agreements were concluded between Christian Catholics and other Christian bodies. The first of these agreements was with the Presbyterian Communion.
- **1862** Extension of the ministry to the Michigan French-Canadian colony of Muskegon. The Rev. R. Desroches was appointed pastor.
- **1870** Publication of his book *The Church of Rome*.
- **1875** Took charge of the Franco-Canadian (Interdenominational Missionary) Society in Montreal. The Presbyterian Church supported the missionary work. Preached against the New Roman Dogma of the Infallibility of the Pope, defined by the Vatican Council of **1880**. Was joined, in Montreal, by two former teachers: **J. René Vilatte** and **Jean-Baptiste Gauthier** (. They served the Church under the auspices of the Franco-Canadian Society, first in Quebec (St. Hyacinthe and Maskinonge), then in the States (French-speaking colonies of Illinois and Wisconsin). Were sent to McGill University to be trained in theology, graduating in 1883.
- **1884** Preached in Wisconsin and supported J.R. Vilatte's ministry among the French-Canadians and the Belgians. Referred him to French reformer **Hyacinthe Loyson**), who like him was opposing the New Roman dogma of the Infallibility of the Pope, and had served as Christian Catholic rector in Geneva, under Swiss Bishop Edward Herzog. The Swiss Church was and still is a member of the Old Catholic Movement.
- **1885** Publication, in Chicago, of his book: *Fifty Years in the Church of Rome*.
- **1893** Receives Doctor of Divinity (D.D.) degree from Presbyterian College at McGill University, Montreal
- **1899** Died in Montreal, January 16, and was buried in Mount-Royal Cemetery. The same year was published his last book: *Forty Years in the Church of Christ*.

May he rest in peace!



PART TWO

HIS EXCELLENCY

THE MOST REVEREND

JOSEPH RENE VILATTE

The First Old Catholic Missionary to America

{Editor's Note} The life of Bishop Joseph Rene Vilatte is indeed a sad and hurtful one. While he worked to save souls there was a conspiracy against him by some Episcopal Church bishops. Bishop Vilatte had thriving congregations of French-Belgium people in Northeast Wisconsin; He established congregations of people, parochial schools and a Seminary; he built missions for Native-Americans; and he helped thousands of Polish-Americans that were dominated by Irish bishops in the Roman Catholic Church. Bishop who would not let the Poles celebrate their traditions and folk lure. For more information about Bishop Vilatte please visit the *Pioneer Bishops* section of this web page.

The stories of French-Canadian priest, Charles Chiniquy, and French-born priest J. René Vilatte, are an interesting and important part of Old Catholic and Wisconsin history. Associated with the (Old) Catholic and Gallican Catholic religious movement, Chiniquy and Vilatte came to Wisconsin and Illinois to minister to the French-Canadian, Swiss and Belgian residents of these states. Vilatte, who had lived in Namur, Belgium and who spoke *wallon*, the French dialect of the Belgian settlers in Northeast Wisconsin, arrived in Green Bay in 1884. Churches of the Old Catholic tradition in the area today include the Church of the Precious Blood, Bruxelles-Gardner, (established by Vilatte in 1886) and the Church of the Blessed Sacrament, Green Bay (established by Father J.B. Gauthier in 1909), both now part of the Episcopal Diocese of Fond du Lac, and the Robinsonville Presbyterian Church, Robinsonville, Wisconsin.

1854 Born on January 24, the son of Joseph René Vilatte, a Parisian business man, and Marie Antoinette Chaurin. His mother passed away (in 1857) when he was very young. He was brought up in the Department of Maine, by his paternal grand parents who belonged to the Petite Église, a Catholic minded type of French Community Church movement dating back to the Napoleonic era.

- **1867** Brought back to Paris by his father. Trained by the Christian Brothers for the teaching profession. Graduated in 1870.
- **1870-1871** Military service at the time of the Franco-Prussian war. Served under the celebrated Bergeret. Saw the horrors of the Commune.
- **1871** Hired by the Hull School Board in Western Quebec, Canada. Taught at Saint Anthony School for boys under Father Louis Reboul, O.M.I. He was a celebrated missionary to the lumberjacks and presided at the local school board. Vilatte assisted Father Reboul at Notre-Dame Parish Church as a catechist. He also learned Latin at the time. He entered the Order of Christian Brothers to be able to continue working with Father Reboul.
- **1876-1877** Time spent in Namur Belgium at the Christian Brothers noviciate. While in Belgium, he found out the his protector, Father Reboul, had died on March 1, 1877. He returned to Canada and entered college there.
- **1878-1880** Studied philosophy at the College of The Fathers of The Holy Cross in Ville Saint Laurent, a suburb of Montreal. Father Vanier, one of his teachers wrote " he was a charming man, generous, pious, respectful and had a lot of friends"

At that time in his life, he met Father **Charles Chiniquy** (*right*) (1809-1899), the Quebec reformer who had founded the French-Canadian Community Movement in the United States (registered in Kankakee District Court, Illinois (1859), under the name Christian Catholic Church). Vilatte joined Chiniquy in Montreal and worked in his Franco-Canadian interdenominational mission movement, under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church. He was sent to Saint Hyacinthe, Quebec as a teacher and catechist at Saint John Church with Rev. Moïse Boudreau, a disciple of Father Chiniquy.

At the suggestion of Father Chiniquy, he (Vilatte) entered the ministerial training program offered at McGill University by the Presbyterian Church and graduated in 1884.

- **1884-1885** Sent to Green Bay, Wisconsin, he worked as a lay missionary to the Belgian and French-Canadian colonies of Brown County. Father Chiniquy went there to support his ministry and preached in Green Bay, Fort Howard and Marinette (October 1884). At that time Vilatte was asked to serve as pastor at Calvary French Church, Green Bay. His talent as a preacher brought many people to the church, not only from the Green Bay, Brown County area, but from the northern French-speaking colonies of Door County; where an independent catholic movement had been initiated at Desert, Wisconsin, among the Belgians. Mr. **Édouard de Bekker** (*right*), the president of the movement came to see Vilatte in Green bay and asked him to become their pastor. He presented the situation to Father Chiniquy and it was felt favorable to get in touch with French reformer **Hyacinthe Loyson** (*left*). He had been a Christian Catholic (Old

Catholic) rector in Geneva and was close to Bishop Edward Herzog, the Swiss Bishop. He recommended Vilatte to him. Following a tutorial training program under Bern University Professor E. Michaud, Vilatte passed an comprehensive examination in Christian Catholic theology and was ordained to the priesthood on June 7th. The ceremony took place in the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in Bern.

Vilatte returned to Wisconsin with the support of the Robillards, a French-Canadian family, and settled in Little Sturgeon, Door County, where he celebrated his first mass on June 27. The Robillards lent him a log cabin which served as chapel and rectory. He called his mission 'Good Shepherd'. Here is a description made by Rev. S.J. French:

"Landing there, walked south along the lonely shore of Green Bay for about three miles where you will find a small house facing the bay, a log cabin clapboarded over the logs, with a crodd arising from the center of the ridge-pole. This at once is the rectory and chapel. Its overlook is most lovely. It is entered by door in the middle of the front side. Entering the door we are in the middle of holy poverty. The seats in the chapel are rough planks resting on temporary structures, the altar construction likewise, which is concealed by plain white muslin frontal. The top is covered with fair linen cloth, the priest himself makes the altar ornaments of wood, and their roughness concealed by a coat of paint or folds of white paper. A platform a few inches high does duty for foot pace and on the floor surrounding the altar and foot pace is tacked a strip of crash toweling. This is the chancel. The sanctuary lamp is a taper in a tumbler of oil resting on a bracket nailed to the window frame. An equally rough lectern completes the furniture. For vestments, a cheap set of white Roman pattern with a chalice and paten.

"The office and bedroom of the priest are opposite. Here there is no attempt at a credible appearance, except that as a chapel, all is scrupulously neat. In the office, a small cook stove and pine table covered with enamel cloth. Over the table is a rough shelf containing a few books, small crucifix and photographs of Bishop Edward Herzog, Père Hyacinthe Loyson and Dr. Eugene Michaud? A similar shelf in the bedroom contains a few more books. On the floor is no sight of carpet, on the bare logs of the house no coverings but whitewash" (The Living Church 10-24-1885).

At this time Marcel Pelletier joined Vilatte as a lay missionary.

(Editor's Notes: Reading the above, we see how simple Vilatte lived in his mission territory. There were few creature comforts and like many other pioneer priests, he made a sacrifice to live among and minister to the people of God in North-eastern Wisconsin. I believe that this is what Bishop Brown saw, when he visited the station. Vilatte was a humble man and many people saw this.)

- **1886** Out of the mission station grew a parish of 140 people, in only a few months, including the Desert/Brussels congregation. The need for a larger

permanent church was felt. Between January 23 and March 22, Vilatte gathered the sum of \$4,500 preaching in Chicago, New York, Boston and Baltimore. He was given a piece of land in Gardner, a few miles from Little Sturgeon. At this location, the **Church of the Precious Blood of Jesus** (*right*) was started. The Episcopal Bishop of Fond du Lac, Bishop J.H. Brown, presided at the ground breaking ceremony. Brown was supportive of Vilatte's ministry and supported the ministry until his death in May 1888. He wrote to a colleague in New Jersey that he regarded Vilatte and the French Canadians as "Uniats". Part of the money gathered by Vilatte was used for the printing of catechisms and prayer books. They were published in New York in the French language, based on Swiss materials.

- **1887 Jean-Baptiste Gauthier** (*right*), a friend and colleague of Vilatte from the French-Canadian Chiniquist permission movement, joined him and Marcel Pelletier in Gardner during the summer. He had ministerial training from McGill University (Presbyterian College) and had been working as a teacher and catechist in Illinois since 1885. He was a former Christian Brother and was teaching in Ottawa when Vilatte was in Hull, with Father Reboul, on the Quebec side of the river. On July 7, together with Marcel Pelletier, they formed the religious order called the **Society of the Precious Blood** and made it known in a pamphlet that was published in Gardner, under the title *The Society of the Precious Blood: A Presentation*. This publication brought two new members: Henri Neville and Erasmus Proth, both admitted in the month of October.
- **1888** The Belgian Independent Catholic congregation in the Desert/Kewaunee area turned into a parish and a permanent church and rectory were built in Dyckesville, later called Duvall. The parish church was put under the patronage of Saint Mary, Mother of the Lord. Vilatte moved there with Brother Proth. Father Ernest de Beaumont, a priest of the Anglican Church also joined the order and became pastor of Precious Blood, Gardner, and was assisted by Brother Gauthier, at that time, Brother Marcel Pelletier and Brother Sylvio Fournier also assisted. A seminary was established in Sturgeon Bay, in the month of September.
- **1889** Brother Gauthier was ordained a priest in Bern and appointed pastor of Precious Blood Parish in Gardner, at the end of October. There were about 1,000 people in the Movement at that time: 235 in Duvall; 240 in Gardner; 40 in Menominee (Michigan), plus a dispersion made at the following places and numbers of families: Green Bay (5); LaGrande Baie (22); Marinette (5); Robinsonville (4); Stevenson (5); and Valin (25). At the suggestion of Mr. Édouard de Bekker, an assembly of clergy and delegates was held in Saint Mary's Church, Duvall, on November 16, for the purpose of putting in place the Church structure called for by the faith and order commonly shared by the French speaking independent Catholics. The assembly used a working document called "A Sketch of the Belief" that had been prepared by the Society of Precious Blood religious and had been published in Duvall on July 7 under the signature of Vilatte, superior. It formed the basis of the "Duvall Faith & Order Declaration"

which is still observed today by some of the Old Catholic based Canadian Churches. It was at this meeting that Vilatte was elected to the office of Bishop.

- **1890-1892** Support for Vilatte's consecration came from the Independent Catholic Church of Sri Lanka, Goa and India, through Father Bernard Harding, a priest in Roman orders who had been a missionary there (then called Ceylon) before joining the Society of Precious Blood in 1890. Upon his recommendation, synod council members were in touch with the bishops of that church and in particular, Bishop Antonio F.X. Alvarez. The Bishop gave a positive answer to their request and stated that he had to consult with the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch, and with his colleagues, the Syrian Malabar bishops of India. The patriarch gave his permission for the consecration in a bull that was issued in Mardine, on December 29, 1891, and the ceremony took place in the Cathedral of Our of Good Death, in Colombo, on May 29, 1892. Indian Malabar bishops, Mar Paul Athanasius (Kottayam) and Mar Gregorius (Niranan, India). Acted as co-consecrators. U.S. Council, William Morey acted as official witness. Returning to Wisconsin, Vilatte established his see at Duvall and used Saint Mary's as his pro-cathedral. Vilatte ordained Edward Knowles on August 15, for an English-speaking mission in West Sutton, Massachusetts, Published the book, Ecclesiastical Relations with Foreign Churches, written in collaboration with synod officers G. Barrette, E. De Bekker and A. Marchand. The document deals mostly with the difficult rapports with Anglican Bishop Grafton of Fond du Lac and the Old Catholics in Europe, following Vilatte's Episcopal election in 1889.
- **1893** Vilatte wrote and published an Encyclical to Bishops of the Apostolic Succession, mostly to respond to false accusations made by Bishop Grafton re: his episcopate. Opened new parishes St Joseph in Walhaim, Kewaunee County, Wisconsin. Admitted a new Society of Precious Blood member, Louis A. Fournier.
- **1894** Contacts initiated with synod members of the Polish Catholic Church, centered in Cleveland, Ohio. The leader was, Father Franciszek Kalasweski, rector of Immaculate Heart of Mary Church, Cleveland, this church and its members joined with the Wisconsin Synod and came under the jurisdiction of Vilatte. Also, the first women were admitted to the Society of Precious Blood, Sister Mary, of Chicago. Others admitted were Brother Albert Messenge of Gardner and Father Florent de Menlenane, appointed to St. Mary's Pro-Cathedral, Duvall.
- **1895** The **Cathedral Church of St. Louis of France** was erected and blessed in Green Bay, Wisconsin. The Episcopal see was transferred there from Duvall. Father J. Lebourt, a former Roman Catholic priest, is admitted to the diocese and appointed pastor at Gardner.
- **1896** Fr. Gauthier began his ministry in Quebec, Canada. He was accompanied by Brother Stephen Côté, of the Society of Precious Blood, after a short time, Brother Côté went to Montreal to start a work there.

Vilatte published a small missal, which was the English version of the French Prayer Book (NY 1886), and St. Peter in Rome, a booklet documenting the Syrian

Orthodox Apostolic Succession. A second woman admitted to the Society of Precious Blood, Sister Ann. of Chicago. Father Theodore de Latte, a former Roman Catholic priest is admitted to the Diocese and appointed to Duvall.

Vilatte also proceeded with the following ordinations:

- For The Polish constituency: V. Gaurychowski and C. Grzybowski (August 14)
 - For The English constituency: Edward Donkin (October 26)
 - For The French constituency: Nicholas Pleimling (December 24)
 - For the Lithuanian constituency: Anthony Pilzak (date unknown)
- **1897** Ordained and appointed to St. Louis Cathedral, Green Bay: Father Paul François, a Haitian, who was trained by Vilatte to establish the Church in his country.
- **1898** Vilatte consecrated Father Stefan Kamminski, pastor of Holy Rosary, Buffalo, NY, for the Polish constituency. In that same year Vilatte ordained to the priesthood on April 19: Fathers François Minguy and Claude G. Reader.
- **1899-1900** Bishop Vilatte left the management of the jurisdiction to Vicar General François Minguy of Duvall. He went to Europe. There he had a retreat at the French Benedictine Abbey in Liguge. He visited friends and relatives and then moved on to Italy. There Father Paulo Miraglia-Gulotti, the leader of an independent catholic movement in Piacenza, acquainted him. Bishop Vilatte consecrated Gulotti a bishop on May 6. In the same year, he went to Llanthony Abbey in Wales and ordained the monk, Father Ignatius to the priesthood.
- **1900-1906** Along with Sister Ann (Chicago), Bishop Vilatte established the Ontario mission of Our Lady of The Lake in Gawas, County of Algoma. In 1901, he appointed Father Claude Reader in charge and moved on to Quebec. There he spent time with Father Gauthier in Maskinongé County. At that time Bishop Vilatte transferred his Episcopal See to Montreal (1902). There he lived with Father Côté on the street now called President Kennedy. Shared in the Montreal Mission ministry and celebrated mass at the Anglo-Catholic Church of Saint John the Evangelist. That year, he ordained Édouard O'Neill to the priesthood.
- **1907-1908** Placed Father O'Neill in charge of the Canadian missions and returned to France to help with the establishment of the Gallican Church. He lived in Paris and ministered at the Legendre Street Church.
- **1909-1922** Back in America he ordained to the priesthood Father **Casmir F. Durand** to succeed Bishop Vilatte. The Service took place at the Polish Notre-Dame church in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada in 1909 then in 1914 assigned him to ministry in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He established the American Catholic Church Council, the jurisdictions and groups which had come out of his Episcopal ministry or were under his oversight. Among them were French and English speaking constituencies, a Polish ordinariate under Bishop S. Kaminski and an Italian ordinariate under Bishop Paulo M. Gulotti (Gulotti had left Italy and moved to New York City). Vilatte designed the 'Council' based on the Faith and Order Declaration and the Episcopal Succession of the Christian Catholic Church Rite. It was published in a booklet form, under the name An Order for the Apostolic Reunion in America (Chicago 1909). Vilatte also wrote the Episcopal oath that was to be adhered to by the bishops. It later became part of the 'Council'

- Constitution.
Letters Patent were issued by the State of Illinois in 1915. Headquarters were established on North Mulligan Avenue in Chicago. A parish was dedicated to Our lady was opened the same year in the same building and offered services in English, French and Polish. Fathers Frederick Lloyd and Leon Zawistowski administered it.
Frederick Lloyd was consecrated on December 29, 1915 by Bishop Vilatte, representing the English people, Carl Nybaladh, was consecrated by Lloyd to represent the Swedish people and on September 23, 1921, Vilatte consecrated George A. McGuire to represent African Americans.
- **1922-1929** Vilatte resigned from the 'Council' in 1922 and was succeeded by Bishop Lloyd. From Chicago he went to France; lived for three years in Paris; and in 1925, entered the Common Observance Cistercian Abbey of Port Colbert, near Versailles. He died there from a heart attack on July 1, 1929 and was buried the following day in Godard Cemetery, Versailles. Contrary to what most Independent Catholic writers say, he was not buried as a layperson but with full honor and dignity of a Church Bishop. Abbot Janssen of the Cistercian monastery ordered that he lie in state in his Episcopal vestments and miter. (Ref. B. Vignot, *Les Églises parallèles*, Le Cerf, Paris, 1991, p.36).

Requiescat in pace.
May he rest in peace!



The Very Reverend

Jean Baptiste Geuthier, SPB, VG

Father Gauthier knew Bishop Vilatte from seminary days in Canada. He went to NE Wisconsin to help Bishop Vilatte establish the Society of the Precious Blood. He served as pastor and vicar-general in Bishop Vilatte's Diocese.

1853 - 1922

- 1853 Born in Montreal December 17, son of Jean Gauthier and Sophie Lorrain (Laurin)
- 1870 Entered the Order of the Brothers of Christian Schools at Côté Street House, Montreal, on November 14. Known in religion as Brother Zoel-James
- 1877-1879 Teacher in Ottawa (La Salle Academy) and in Montreal (St. Brigit School). During those years he was converted to the Gospel of grace by Quebec reformer priest Charles Chiniquy. He took part in his evangelical crusades held at Côté Free Church
- 1880 Left the Christian Brothers and worked as teacher and catechist in the French Missions in Quebec and in the French-Canadian colony of Illinois
- 1888 Joined Bishop (then Father) J. Rene Vilatte in the missionary Society of the Precious Blood (S.P.B.) Took the religious habit on July 1st. Published, with Bishop Vilatte the booklet called The Society of the Precious Blood: A Presentation
- 1889 Ordained an Old Catholic priest in Berne on October 26, by Swiss Bishop Edward Herzog. Appointed Rector of Precious Blood Church, Gardner, and Superior of the Society of the Precious Blood. Acts as Clerical Secretary of the Synod convened in St. Mary's Church, Duval, on November 16, and signed the Faith &

- Order (Duval) Declaration with Synod Council members Guillaume Barrette, Édouard de Bekker and Augustin Merchand
- 1896 Missionary in Quebec. Posted in Maskinonge County: municipalities of Brandon (St. Gabriel), Louiseville and St. Ursula Falls. Assisted by Rev. Etienne Côté and Claude Reader. One became Pastor in Montreal; the other in St. Joseph Island in Ontario (Mission of Our Lady of the Lake)
 - 1904 Rector of Precious Blood, Gardner, and St. Mary's, Duval, Wisconsin
 - 1909 Founder Rector of the Parish of the Blessed Sacrament, Green Bay Wisconsin, including Precious-Blood, Gardner, and St. Anne, De Pere
 - 1922 Died August 20. Buried in Woodlawn Cemetery, Bay Green

Requiescat in pace! May he rest in peace!