

Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 1: THE CATHOLIC LADDER

12 JANUARY 2014

In 2010, the renowned British Museum in London produced a series of podcasts entitled “The History of the World in 100 Objects.” The series traced the progress of humanity by exploring objects in the British Museum, from a stone age chopping tool to a solar-powered lamp. With this series of bulletin inserts, we will explore the story of the growth of the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest through significant objects that can be found in local archives.

Francis Norbert Blanchet—older brother of our first bishop, A. M. A. Blanchet—was one of the first priests in the Pacific Northwest, and the first to take up permanent residence in this part of the world. He came from French Canada with a mission to bring the message of the Gospel to those who had never heard it—the Native American peoples—and to bring back to the faith the Catholic trappers living in the area, some of whom had been without priests for decades.

By all accounts, F. N. Blanchet was a severe and tireless apostle. Historian Wilfred Schoenberg, SJ calls him “a nineteenth century iron robot, programed to preach and bless crosses and holy water.” He left Montreal on May 3, 1838, and reached Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River seven months and 4,325 miles later. Blanchet arrived on November 24, and on November 25, a Sunday, he offered Mass and announced that he and Father Demers, his companion, would be offering a mission beginning that very evening. The mission consisted of daily Mass, preaching, prayers, hymn-singing, and catechism classes, and lasted no less than four months and twenty days!

It was the hymn-singing that began to draw the Native American peoples to the mission in addition to the whites. One evening, the 76 Catholics at Fort Vancouver were joined by 140 Native Americans from the neighboring tribes. Father Demers, with a special gift for languages, was soon able to converse with them in the Chinook Jargon.

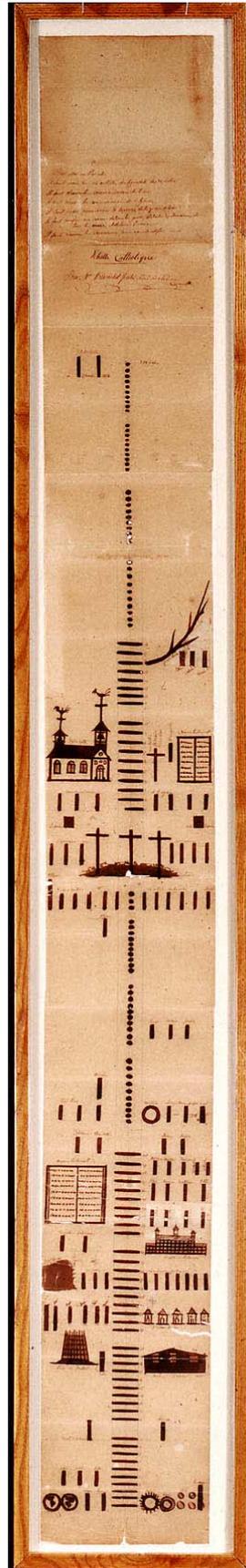
Word about the missionaries spread, and when they offered another mission in Cowlitz, north of Fort Vancouver, in 1839,

tribes from around the region sent delegations to listen to this “good news” and bring it back home. This was a new challenge: how could they convey the essentials of Catholic teaching not only in a short time, but in a way that could be readily understood and imparted to others?

Blanchet came up with an imaginative and inspired answer to this question. He had seen the Native Americans communicate complex stories through carved wooden poles. He decided to do the same. On a piece of wood—later, on paper—Blanchet notched forty horizontal lines, representing the forty centuries from the creation of the world to the birth of Christ. Then he made thirty-three dots, representing the years of Christ’s life, and above them three crosses—the death and resurrection of Christ. Then eighteen more horizontal marks, and thirty-nine dots brought the story up to the present moment—1839. Using this simple scheme, Blanchet could point to key moments in salvation history—the creation, the flood, the giving of the commandments, the resurrection, the establishment of the Church, and so on. Blanchet called it *l’échelle historique*, the “history ladder.” The Native American peoples called it the “*sahale* stick,” the “stick from heaven.” It allowed them to share the Christian story with each other.

The “Catholic Ladder” was an immediate success, and was used by missionaries in the west for decades. It also sparked controversy. On the Ladder, Blanchet placed a withered branch, representing the various Protestant movements. Non-Catholic missionaries working in the Northwest responded with a “Protestant ladder,” vividly illustrated with mitered figures falling into hellfire. (It is hard not to wonder what the Native Americans, hearing the Gospel for the first time, made of these competing visions of Christian history.) Nevertheless, the Catholic Ladder remains a powerful example of inculturation in the preaching of the Gospel in the Pacific Northwest.

Corinna Laughlin, Director of Liturgy



Left: This Catholic Ladder was drawn by F. N. Blanchet in 1840. It is housed at the Oregon Historical Society in Portland. Reprinted with permission.