

Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 4: CIRCULAR FOR BISHOP BLANCHET'S BEGGING TOUR OF MEXICO

23 FEBRUARY 2014

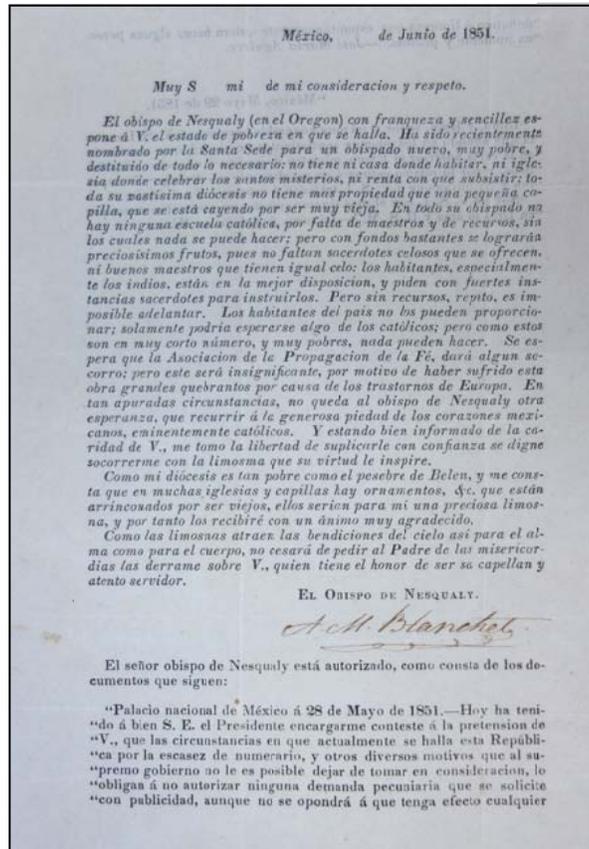
When Bishop Blanchet and Father Brouillet reached Vancouver, they found safety—but virtually nothing else. Gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill on January 24, 1848, just a few weeks after the Whitman massacre. Upon arriving at his new episcopal seat, Bishop Blanchet did not find a flourishing community but "a diocese consisting of ghost towns" because so many had left to seek their fortunes in the California Gold Rush!

The Bishop needed money, but the few Catholics in his new diocese had none to spare. The funds Blanchet had expected to receive from the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome were delayed owing to the unrest in Europe. Nor could Blanchet appeal to his brother, the Archbishop of Oregon City. Archbishop Blanchet owed the Hudson's Bay Company somewhere in the neighborhood of \$50,000!

The brothers put their heads together and decided that if there was money in California, that was where they needed to be, too. They sent Father Brouillet to San Francisco to invite the newly-rich to contribute to the needs of the Church in the Northwest. "Missions are few, struggling, and totally inadequate to the needs of the country," they wrote in a circular letter that accompanied him. "Thousands of Indians are calling earnestly for instruction and the bread of life, and hardly any one is found in the country to distribute it to them.... In his perplexity, his hope is in you, and he calls on you, confident that you will help him out of this difficulty. He solicits at your hands whatever help your generosity and your zeal for religion may prompt you to afford him." The circular concluded with a verse from Proverbs: "He that has mercy on the poor lendeth to the Lord, and he will repay him. Prov. xix." Father Brouillet was quite popular in San Francisco—in fact, they wanted to keep him!—and he returned in September, 1850, carrying 250 ounces of gold dust, valued at about \$4,000. It was a good start, but they would need much more.

Bishop Blanchet himself resolved to go on a begging tour of his own to Mexico, which was a wealthy—and a very Catholic—nation. He set out in March, 1851, on a journey which would take him through the dioceses of Michoacan, Durango, Mexico City, Puebla, Tamara, and Guadalajara, among others.

Blanchet brought with him a circular letter in Spanish. In formal prose the letter outlined the difficulties he faced in his



Bishop Blanchet distributed copies of this "begging letter" to Catholic dioceses and institutions across Mexico. *Courtesy of the Archives of the Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle.*

brand-new diocese: no house to live in, just a tumble-down building; no churches to pray in; no schools, no teachers, no priests. "In such straitened circumstances," he concluded, "the bishop of Nesqually has no other hope but to resort to the generous mercy of the eminently Catholic hearts of Mexico, and, knowing your charity, I take the liberty to plead with confidence that you might deign to help me with whatever alms your virtue inspires."

The 'eminently Catholic' hearts of Mexico responded with extraordinary generosity. Bishop Blanchet collected about \$30,000 in money as well as vestments, vessels, paintings and images, including a jeweled miter, a gift of the Archbishop of Mexico City, and three six-foot-high canvases representing the Crucifixion, Our Lady of Guadalupe, and St. Ignatius Loyola. (It is hard to imagine the rough walls of the first St. James Cathedral so richly adorned!)

But one of the most memorable gifts Bishop Blanchet received in Mexico was one he did not ask for.

After leaving Acapulco early in his tour, Bishop Blanchet realized he had left his pectoral cross behind. Efforts to recover it were unavailing and the Bishop was obliged to proceed on his journey.

In his diary, Blanchet describes a brief stay at a Franciscan monastery, almost abandoned by the monks who had "fallen from their first fervor." To his surprise, he met there a venerable Bishop by the name of Jose Maria de Jesus Belaunzaran y Ureña. Belaunzaran had been appointed Bishop of Monterrey in 1831, and was immediately embroiled in conflict with the local government. Belaunzaran's staunch defense of the rights of the Church led to his banishment from his own diocese in 1838. Now he lived in retirement in the monastery.

Upon hearing that Bishop Blanchet had lost his pectoral cross, Bishop Belaunzaran immediately took the cross he was wearing and placed it around Blanchet's neck. He had worn it every day since his own consecration, he told Blanchet, including during all those difficult days in Monterrey. Bishop Blanchet wore it proudly, a reminder of steadfast service of the Church. It was also a reminder of the generosity of the people of Mexico, which helped to build the Church in the Pacific Northwest.

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