

Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 7: THURIBLE OF FATHER CHIROUSE

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One of the treasures of the Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle is the thurible of Father Eugene Casimir Chirouse, OMI, a missionary priest who was among the first to minister to the Yakima, Tulalip, and Lummi peoples, earning the title “apostle of Puget Sound.” The thurible is made out of a tin can, some rope, and wood, in places blackened with much use. The thurible is a tangible witness to the ingenuity—and the poverty—Father Chirouse and the Native peoples among whom he lived and worked.

Chirouse was born near Lyons, France in 1821. His mother died on the day he was born, and he was raised by a grandmother. As a boy, he read an article by Bishop Rosati of St. Louis, describing how a delegation of four Indians from the west came to him asking for priests. Two of them died before reaching him, and the others never made it home again. This story made a profound impression on the boy. In 1844, at the age of 23, he took perpetual vows as an Oblate of Mary Immaculate, a new missionary order established by the saintly Eugene de Mazenod.

Chirouse, along with his fellow Oblate Charles Pandosy, accompanied Bishop A. M. A. Blanchet to Walla Walla in 1847. They were ordained to the priesthood in the tense days following the Whitman massacre. There was no cathedral in which to celebrate the rite, so they were ordained in the room that served them as dining room, dormitory, and parlor. Chirouse had to borrow a long nightgown from an officer at Fort Walla Walla to supply the place of an alb for his ordination! Within a few hours, he was on the road, bound for his first mission among the Yakama Indians.

An early biography gives us a vivid picture of the young missionary: “Father Chirouse was small in stature, but robust and well built. . . . He was known to be a man of considerable strength, but this was tempered by his kindness. The kind expression of his brown eyes and the charm in his smile were the marks of his most pleasing personality.”

Writing back home to his religious superiors in France in 1851, Father Chirouse described a typical day at the Yakama mission: “At five in the morning I call them with the blast of my oxborn which takes the place of a bell. . . . and everyone comes promptly to prayer. Next I go over the Catechism at this time, but only for half an hour in order not to fatigue them too much. They leave after this for an hour, and then return to assist at Mass. At noon, the oxborn reminds them all to recite the Angelus. About two o’clock, instruction for all who desire to receive Baptism. At six, a detailed explanation of the Catechism lesson recited in the morning; then a class of Scripture reading for the children, some hymns, and night prayers, after which each retires. . . . After my frugal supper I play some tunes on my accordion to keep up my spirit, prepare my



Father Chirouse made and used this thurible in celebrations of the liturgy at the Lummi and Tulalip missions. *Courtesy of the Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle.*

meditation, examine my conscience, and take my rest in the peace of the Lord.”

Chirouse’s capacity for work was phenomenal. When told to rest, he replied: “I must do my work.” When encouraged to ask for an easier assignment among the whites, he would say, “The Indians need me; the whites do not. This is my life; I wish to die among the Indians.” Chirouse was devastated when the Yakama Indian War forced him away from his first mission: “All of the country is on fire,” he wrote. “One only hears of battles, murders, plundering, burnings. . . . For fifteen days I have not slept. . . . Pray for us.”

In 1856, Chirouse headed west, to take up ministry in the more peaceful region of Puget Sound. Here he would remain for more than twenty years, ministering to the Snohomish, Lummi, and Muckleshoot tribes, among others. Fascinated by languages, Chirouse learned to speak the dialect of each tribe among whom he ministered. He translated the psalms, the catechism, and various hymns, and preached and taught the people in their native languages. He authored the first grammar and dictionary of the Salish language.

As a missionary, Chirouse was phenomenally effective. In just one month—May, 1859—he baptized four hundred people and convinced 2,000 more to commit themselves to a new way of life without gambling, fighting, or killing. His secret, according to an early biographer, was his close identification with the people he served: “When he went to his mission he went to it body, mind, and spirit, and lived the life of his people with his people. If they lived on fish, he lived on fish.” Chirouse shared their poverty, and served not only as spiritual guide, but as teacher and doctor. During an 1863 smallpox epidemic which decimated the tribes up and down Puget Sound, Father Chirouse vaccinated several thousand people, saving many lives. No wonder it was said that on the Tulalip Reservation, time was measured as “before Father Chirouse came,” and “after Father Chirouse came.”

When Father Chirouse was reassigned to British Columbia in 1878, thirty Native American elders wrote to Bishop Blanchet begging him not to send the priest away. “We hear that you are going to remove our beloved Father Chirouse that what makes us very sorry and feel bad because we call him he is our beloved father and best protector for that reason we all wishing your kindness to let our beloved father stay long with us till he saves the souls he want save.” The elders later appealed to the superior of the Oblates and to Pope Pius IX, but without success. Father Chirouse left Puget Sound for Canada. The beloved missionary made many return visits to the Lummi and Tulalip missions before his death at St. Mary Mission in Westminster, BC, in 1892.

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