

The basilica-Cathedral Marie-Reine-du-Monde of Montréal.

The vision of an ambitious man



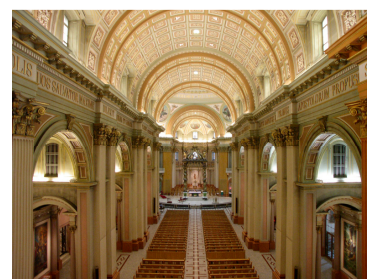
Ensemble extérieur
Photo : Germain Casavant

Soon after his nomination, Mgr Ignace Bourget, the second bishop of Montréal and worthy successor of Mgr Jean-Jacques Lartigue, entered into controversy both with the Sulpicians, who claimed absolute authority over the large parish of Montréal, and also with settlers of other religious denominations of the Protestant persuasion. In the second half of the 19th century as eclecticism (which some called "historicism" on account of its tendency to imitate the styles of the past) was on the increase, this veritable "guerre de clocher" (war of the bell-towers) could be seen reflected in the religious architecture not only in Montréal but also in the rest of the country.

Following the fire which destroyed the Cathedral of Saint-Jacques, in 1852, the bishop of Montréal intended to reconstruct the building. It was an ideal occasion to portray the glory of the Catholic Church in this growing metropolis. To achieve his aim he did not hesitate to compete with the Sulpicians who had introduced a new religious symbolism by turning to the neo-gothic style in the Basilica of Notre-Dame . The bishop, for his part, referred instead to the architecture of the Vatican to affirm the supremacy of Rome in this matter. Mgr Bourget unhesitatingly declared that it was up to "the bishop alone to decide on the plans and principal dimensions of the churches of his diocese" and that his right stood "without question and that he was answerable to nobody except the Supreme Pontiff himself."

The Sulpicians were not the only adversaries of Mgr Bourget. He also counted on being able to challenge the Anglican bishops, who had also adopted the neo-gothic style for their churches, by choosing, as the site for the new cathedral, a place in the heart of the anglophone sector of Montréal, very close to Christ Church Cathedral , built from 1857 to 1859. Moreover, in constructing the building in the west part of Montréal, near to the newly built Windsor station, he was distancing himself from the Catholic francophone population he was supposed to be serving.

In 1856, with the intention of building a church copied from St. Peter's in Rome, Mgr Bourget sent the architect Victor Bourgeau to the Eternal City to study and measure the church. Bourgeau followed his instructions but tried in vain, on his return, to convince the bishop that a monument such as that of the Vatican was not capable of being reproduced, even less so on a reduced scale, and that the architecture needed to respect the canons of proportion, harmony and beauty. However, in the eyes of Mgr Bourget, symbolism took precedence over architecture: to copy St. Peter's of Rome was to demonstrate the people's attachment to the Holy See, while ensuring that this time his cathedral would not be copied by the Protestants.



Vue vers le Baldaquin
Photo : CPRQ

Ignoring the reticence of Victor Bourgeau, the bishop sent Father Joseph Michaud, a cleric from Saint-Viateur who had some knowledge of architecture, to Rome as chaplain to the pontifical Zouaves. This military corps had been raised by Mgr Bourget to go to the defence of the Holy See which was threatened by Victor-Emmanuel II, King of Piémont. The chaplain was given a secret mission to construct a model of the basilica and bring it back to Montréal as soon as possible.

The determined bishop had to bide his time. Work only began in 1875, under the supervision of Father Michaud, and Bourgeau had to resign himself to accepting the role of consultant and help by giving advice. The architect died during the construction and Father Michaud finished the work alone. According to some sources, the workers used the model prepared by the latter to a greater extent than the plans produced by Bourgeau!



Baldaqin
Photo : CPRQ

The new church was consecrated in 1894 and dedicated at first to Saint-Jacques-le-Majeur as was the first cathedral destroyed by fire in 1852. It is the biggest church in Québec, with the exception of Saint-Joseph's Oratory and the Basilica of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, which were pilgrimage centres erected afterwards in the 20th century. It was given the title of minor basilica in 1919 and in 1955 assumed the dedication by which it is known today.

In place of the figures of the twelve Apostles found at St Peter's in Rome, the statues on the façade are of the thirteen patron saints of the parishes which collectively form the diocese of Montréal.

As with the exterior, the interior is also copied from St. Peter's. The baldachin in gilded bronze is a reduced-scale copy of the work of Bernin, created here by the sculptors Arthur Vincent and Olindo Gratton.

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Text translated by Rachel Tunnicliffe

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