

The Church of Notre-Dame de Laterrière

And the role of bishops in the construction of parish buildings

A new parish in a new country

Colonisation started in the Saguenay - Lac-Saint-Jean area at the beginning of the 19th century. In the early 17th century, navigation on the Saguenay was controlled by the Amerindians who occupied Tadoussac at the head of the fjord. Little by little, fur trading posts were set up around the lake, and this remained their sole livelihood until the beginning of the 19th century. At this time commercial interests in forestry exploitation, along with the desire to develop new centres of agricultural production, called into question the exclusive right that the Hudson Bay Company and its fur commerce had over the region.



Façade

Photo : Germain Casavant

The first sawmills of the Price company were built there in the eighteen-forties. The increase in population resulting from these new industries soon created a need for the establishment of new parishes. Notre-Dame de Laterrière was built for this reason and is typical of the architectural structures of the eighteen-fifties in this part of the province of Québec.

A functional church

This church is an example of an economical use of resources. It was felt necessary to erect a functional building so that the needs of the parish could be met without embarking on a project that would prove to be over-extravagant. It has a single nave with side galleries and a semicircular apse ending with a sacristy built in alignment.

It is built of stone and lit from huge windows which are in effect bisected by the side galleries. The West front is fashioned in the form of three separate tiers in three vertical sections. This arrangement makes for a building which is visually simple and effective. The presence of a Venetian window and the base of the pediment suggest a certain Palladian influence.

The interior of this compact structure creates an impression of tranquility with corresponds well to the exterior. This is achieved through the use of shades of colour which are almost monochrome and a simplicity of lines dividing the nave into bays.

The plans for the building were drawn up by the architect J.-Félix Langlais in 1861. In 1862 a contractor from Chicoutimi, Ignace-Georges Gagnon, was chosen by the church council to build the church. The foundation stone was laid on 28 December 1863 and on 12 January 1865, Dominique Racine, the future bishop of Chicoutimi, consecrated the building. The contractor himself supervised the making of most of the interior furnishings such as the pews and the side altars. The three altars, however, were replaced in 1899, and the sculptor Joseph Villeuneuve was commissioned for the project.

Thomas Pearson built a bell-tower in 1871. This, having been omitted from the first plans, completed a building which must have seemed rather basic to the parishioners. Its structure is modelled on that of Saint-Alexis de Grande-Baie in the county of Chicoutimi. Once the main work was complete, the plasterer Édouard Lépine of Baie-Saint-Paul decorated the interior. He also created the beautiful entablature marking the choir and giving it that special character which it still has today. The gilding of the nave and choir dates from 1900 and is the work of Ferdinand Gignac.



Detail of
the choir entrance

Photo: Germain Casavant

Some restoration took place in 1915-1916 and it was during this time that the balconies at the West end of the church were extended into the nave forming the two side galleries each twelve metres long and three metres wide. In 1971 the pews in the nave and galleries were finally re-made along with the pulpit (no longer there) and the baptismal fonts.

The prominent part in decision-making played by Monsignor Charles-François Baillargeon, bishop of Québec

A recent study describes how bishops frequently played a key role in making decisions on matters concerning architecture in their dioceses.

"Not content with being assured that church building or repairs are in fact taking place, the bishop also intervenes in deciding on the overall appearance of ecclesiastical buildings. As soon as the bishop's emissary determines the site for the church, he decides on the size. The bishop's particular influence is in determining the dimensions, specifying the length, the width and the height of the building, taking into consideration the total population of the parish and its requirement for a specified floor area for purposes of worship." (Raymonde Gauthier, *Construire une église au Québec. L'architecture religieuse avant 1939*, Montréal, Libre Expression, 1994, p.45)



The choir
Photo : Germain Casavant

This is exactly what happened in Laterrière. The building was commissioned in the first place by Monsignor Charles-François Baillargeon, bishop of Québec, in 1858. He asked for a building 30.5 metres long and 12 metres wide with a sacristy measuring 12 metres by 9 metres. In addition to issuing his original instructions, at the time when the plans came up for approval he insisted on modifications to the sacristy and the choir.

Conditions at the time of colonisation partly explain why such intervention was needed. It was essential that some unifying vision should control the process of creating increasing numbers of new parishes in a rapidly changing situation. However, this phenomenon also exists, particularly from the 19th century onwards, in the other dioceses in the province of Québec, sometimes with even more central oversight. Monsignor Ignace Bourget, the second bishop of Montréal, became similarly involved in the second half of the 19th century. He considered the building of churches to be so important that he himself decreed, through the intermediary of his own chosen architect, that particular plans should be used. Victor Bourgeau benefited enormously from this episcopal protection. This, of course, did not always meet with the approval of the parish leaders who sometimes showed a certain reluctance to accede to the bishop's demands.

Charles Bourget

Text translated by Rachel Tunncliffe

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