

# Monastery, convent, college and hospital chapels. A symbol of the communities which built them.

## The religious communities in French Canada

### playing a key role in the development of the country



Abbey of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac,  
gallery of cloister  
Photo : Germain Casavant

The religious communities in Québec were involved in all the stages of community development right from the start of colonisation. The Recollects arrived in Québec in 1615, but were chased out by the English in 1629. They only returned in 1670. The Jesuits soon followed them in 1625 and the Ursulines came to Québec in 1639. The Sulpicians, however, established themselves in Montréal in 1657. All these communities involved themselves in various activities ranging from evangelising the native peoples, to teaching the children of the first colonists and their descendants. They also cared for the sick and the needy. Once the basis of the French-Canadian society had been established, especially from the 19th century onwards, the newly-installed monastic religious communities added a contemplative dimension to this armada of secular orders.

In every one of these community houses, the chapel is the focal point of the building. The architectural forms used for these places of worship made a great impact in the colony when it came to building churches in town and country. At the beginning of the 17th century there were not many architectural designs to choose from, so those that existed spread through the valley of the Saint Lawrence like wildfire. The Jesuit plan and Recollect plan therefore greatly influenced the building methods of the builders of New France, and then French Canada, up until the middle of the 19th century.

These chapels, each one unique in its own way, became, over the years, symbols of the collective ambitions of the communities they served. They also reflected the architectural patterns of their era. A few examples of these follow :

## **The teaching and evangelistic communities**

Teaching is fundamental to the advance of civilisation as well as to the cultural development within nations. New France and Lower Canada started out as a colony and then became a dominion after the confederation of 1867. This is a sign of the country's rapid evolution which was mainly orchestrated by the intellectuals from the more scholarly environments of the present-day provinces of Québec and Ontario.

The religious communities of French origin supervised the teaching of most of the Québécois people before social changes were brought about by the peaceful revolution in the nineteen-sixties. The first francophone university in North America, University Laval, was founded in 1852 in Québec. It was adjacent to the Seminary where priests had been trained since 1863, and originally occupied rooms in the heart of the historical quarter of the former capital of New France. Several chapels were built for the priests, seminarians, and later for the students, and together formed a very functional group of buildings. This was completed by the direct link from the Seminary complex to the Cathedral of Notre-Dame. The chapel of Mgr Briand was built in 1784-1785, and is situated in the wing of the Procurator, while the chapel of la Congrégation was built by Thomas Baillaigé in 1823, and is situated in the wing of the same name. The

outside chapel was destroyed by fire in 1888 and was rebuilt in 1900. In 1950 the remains of Mgr de Laval, the first bishop of the French colony, and founder of the institution, were interred there. The symbolic character of the building as the first francophone centre for higher education was therefore heightened by the presence of this pioneer's remains. The complex of Seminary buildings was listed as an historic monument in 1968.



Chapel of Bishop's University,  
Lennoxville  
Photo : François Brault

In Lennoxville, the chapel of Bishop's University founded in 1843 is one of the gems of architectural heritage for the Protestant Church in Québec. Its magnificent woodwork, mainly in the stalls and the exposed beams, gives a sense of warmth to the chapel as well as endowing it with a certain prestige. It was built in 1852 and the interior was refashioned after a fire destroyed it in 1891.

Other communities such as the Sœurs du Bon-Pasteur met different needs. "Founded in 1850 to help young, delinquent and abandoned girls", the community established itself on the outskirts of the town (as it was at that time) on the edge of what is now known as Parliament Hill situated on the Rue de la Chevrotière in Québec. Thomas Baillairgé designed their church which also served as the parish church for the districts which developed around it.

### The Ursulines of Québec

The Ursulines were a teaching community par excellence in New France (in Lower Canada and then Québec). They have been instrumental in the education of many generations of women since they came to Québec in the first half of the 17th century. Under the strong leadership of Marie de l'Incarnation, they soon built their convent. Sadly, it was to be burnt down several times over the years. Without showing any signs of being discouraged, they rebuilt the damaged parts each time.



The Ursulines of Québec,  
aerial view  
Photo : François Brault

The architect David Ouellet designed the present chapel and the nun's chancel in 1901. He re-used some of the original features in both the exterior façade and the interior, conserving the pulpit and the magnificent reredoses produced by Pierre-Noël Levasseur between 1726 and 1736. These had come from the 1715 chapel.

### The Montréal Seminary and the training of priests by the Sulpicians



Chapel of Montréal Seminary,  
floor motifs  
Photo : Germain Casavant

« It was in 1676 that the Sulpicians Guillaume Bailly and Joseph Mariet, together with nuns from the Notre-Dame community, established a mission devoted to evangelising the Amerindians. They set up their mission on the southern slope of Mount Royal »<sup>1</sup>.

The mission was vacated in 1705. The building were rented out for a while and then returned to the Sulpicians at the end of the 18th century. However, it was not until 1840 that

<sup>1</sup> Casavant, Germain, *Les chemins de la mémoire (Tome 1)*, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1991, p. 129.

Monsignor Ignace Bourget asked the priests of Saint-Sulpice to undertake the training of the seminarists in the Montréal diocese.

This was the prelude to the reconstruction of the former mission of Mount Royal. John Ostell was commissioned in 1854 and drew up plans for a building in the classical style. The chapel for this complex was not erected until 1904 to 1907. Jean-Omer Marchand (1873-1936), an architect trained at the École des Beaux-Arts de Paris, undertook the project. The structure was designed in the Beaux-Arts tradition adopting neo-romanesque forms in which the richness of the floor motifs and the woodwork of the pews were contrasted with the austerity of the freestone walls.

### **The nursing communities**

The tradition of Hôtel-Dieu hospitals, of medieval origin, was brought to New France at the beginning of the colony. The hospitals were built adjoining cathedrals and the care of the sick and the poor was undertaken by the religious communities. The proximity of the hospital to the Cathedral and Seminary is particularly noticeable in Québec.

### **The hospital staff of the Hôtel-Dieu de Québec**



Chapel of the Hôtel-Dieu,  
aerial view  
Photo : François Brault

The Augustine hospital staff came to Québec in 1639 and established themselves in Sillery until 1644 while their monastery was being built. Their first chapel was blessed in 1646, a second one in 1654 and a third in 1658. Construction of the present building began in 1800 from the plans of Father Desjardins, their chaplain.

«At that time, Québec had a Catholic parish, Notre-Dame, and a daughter-church, Notre-Dame-des-Victoires. Faced with the parish's opposition to any kind of division, before 1830, the bishop encouraged the religious communities to build and see to the upkeep of their own churches. One of these was the chapel of l'Hôtel-Dieu de Québec which Monsignor Joseph-Octave Plessis consecrated as a place of worship on 29 September 1803»<sup>2</sup>.

The bell-tower was erected in 1809 above the sacristy. Work on the nun's choir followed shortly afterwards between 1816 and 1825. The façade was altered by Thomas Baillaigé from 1829 to 1835 when he also undertook to decorate the interior. It is possible that the ground plan of the side chapels forming the transept influenced the layout of Saint-Joseph de Deschambault which he began in 1833. The doorway was refashioned according to a design by Baillaigé in 1839. Raphaël Giroux, his pupil, produced the two side altars in 1845. Finally, in 1931, the bell-tower was moved to the façade, and the building acquired the appearance it has today.

### **The hospital staff of the Hôpital général de Québec**

The site of the Hôpital général de Québec has been inhabited since the very beginning of the colony. At first it was the site of a Recollect convent. When they left in 1629, the building was taken over by the Jesuits who stayed there until the exiled Recollects returned in 1670.

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<sup>2</sup> Noppen, Luc, *Les chemins de la mémoire (Tome I)*, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1990, p.190.

« In 1672, Mgr Jean-Baptiste de la Croix de Chevrières de Saint-Vallier, the second bishop of Québec, bought the convent in order to make it into a general hospital. [...] The hospital opened in October. Sister Ursule from the Notre-Dame community, took care of the sick with the help of charity workers. The following year, the bishop begged the first Mother Superior of the monastery of the Hospitalières de Notre-Dame-des-Anges of Québec, Louise Soumande de Saint-Augustin, to come and occupy the rooms which had previously belonged to the Recollect fathers. She agreed to run the hospital with the help of the Sisters of the Miséricorde de l'Hôtel-Dieu. The institution was for the benefit of the poor, the handicapped and the aged »<sup>3</sup>.



Chapel of the Hôpital général  
Photo : Germain Casavant

The chapel was finished in 1673. A choir was added on for the community in 1701 without altering the main structure. The damage caused during the battle of 1759 necessitated major restorations between 1763 and 1770 by Pierre Émond, a carpenter. He enlarged the choir, removed the side chapels, moved the chapel of Mgr Saint-Vallier two metres to the west, and created a new reredos. The building took on the proportions we know today.

### The Grey Nuns of the Hôpital général de Montréal



Grey Nuns of Montréal,  
aerial view  
Photo : François Brault

The community of the Sisters of Charity of the Hôpital général de Montréal (or Grey Nuns) managed this institution from 1747 when the community of the Freres Hospitaliers of Saint-Joseph de Montréal was dissolved. Consequently the General Hospital was moved to Pointe-à-Callière near the port which quickly developed and eventually incorporated the land occupied by the religious institution.

The community acquired its present site at the corner of the Rue Guy and the Boulevard René Lévesque in 1858 with the specific intention of providing improved amenities for the sick. Reconstruction began in 1868 under the supervision of Victor Bourgeau.

The chapel of l'Invention-de-la-Sainte-Croix is the central feature of the convent. All the other wings are linked to it. It was built according to a basilican plan and was inspired by the French Romanesque tradition of the beginning of the 12th century. The facade is built around a central four-level tower surmounted by a magnificent octahedral spire.

<sup>3</sup> Picard, François et Vianney Guindon, *Les chemins de la mémoire (Tome 1)*, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1990, p. 212.



## Urban and rural monasteries

### **The Fathers of the Holy Sacrament of Montréal**

« Mgr Fabre, whose episcopate began in 1876, saw the arrival of several new French religious communities to the country. These included as many female as male communities. Their duties were very different from those who had worked under the previous bishop, Ignace Bourget, who were mainly devoted to teaching and charity work. This third bishop of Montréal welcomed several religious orders who were dedicated to the life of prayer. These included the Carmelites, the Trappist Monks and the Fathers of the Holy Sacrament»<sup>4</sup>.



Notre-Dame-du-Très-Saint-Sacrement, choir  
Photo : Germain Casavant

The architect of the chapel and monastery was Jean-Zéphirin Resther (1857-1910) who was well-known for designing important Montréal buildings such as the Collège Mont-Saint-Louis and the boarding school Saint-Nom-de-Marie in Outremont. Construction started soon after the arrival of the Fathers in 1890. It portrays all the characteristics of a Second Empire eclecticism with its massive forms, its mansard roof and its richly adorned skylights.

The interior is surprisingly elaborate. A central nave covered with a flat ceiling is flanked by side aisles on three levels. A side aisle with a two-tier gallery above it provides this church with a diversity in style which sets it apart from most of the other religious architecture of Québec. Georges Delfosse was commissioned for the painted ornamentation in 1915, and the richness of the colours he chose gives emphasis to the general sculptural effects which were not particularly common of the interior ornamentation.

### **The Abbey of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac**



Abbey of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac  
Photo : François Brault

The Benedictine Abbey of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac is in a wonderful situation on the edge of lac Memphrémagog. The style used in its construction is indicative of a turning point in architectural development. The original design for the project was by dom Paul Bellot (1876-1944), who was trained at the École des Beaux-Arts de Paris and was a Benedictine monk from the Abbey of Solesmes in France.

He also worked at Saint Joseph's Oratory in Montréal where he produced the impressive dome in 1937. In Saint-Benoît-du-Lac, he designed just two of the wings of the monastery which were built between 1936 and 1944. Dom Claude-Marie Côté continued the work of his master by designing the abbey hospice.

The chapel remained at the project stage for a long time before it was finally built at the end of the nineteen-eighties, between 1989 and 1994, by an architect from Montréal, Dan Hanganu (1939- ), of Rumanian origin, a graduate of the university of Bucharest in 1961.

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<sup>4</sup> Gauthier, Raymonde, *Les chemins de la mémoire (Tome 2)*, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1991, p. 137.

Hanganu was renowned for the buildings he designed in Montréal such as the musée de la Pointe-à-Callières. The chapel has a steel structure which is exposed on the interior. The delicacy of its support features which continue up into the metal structure in the ceiling inside are reminiscent of the rationalism of gothic architecture. Similarly, the imposing rose window lights the nave as in the large French cathedrals.

« Hanganu [...] like dom Bellot,[...] always maintained that he was interested in the past and, like dom Bellot, he has always wanted the building materials and structural elements to be visible rather than be hidden by camouflage or the use of trompe-l'œil »<sup>5</sup>.



Chapel of abbey of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac,  
passageway  
Photo : Germain Casavant

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<sup>5</sup> Bergeron, Claude et Geoffrey Simmins, *L'abbaye de Saint-Benoît-du-Lac et ses bâtisseurs*, Québec, PUL, 1997, p. 292.