

Processional chapels. Symbols of piety or scale models of religious architecture?

Processions of the Sacré-Cœur and popular devotion

The most memorable processions in Québec concern the :

«celebrations of the festival of the Sacré-Cœur which used to take place on a fine evening in the month of June, more precisely, the Friday after Corpus Christi. The whole parish came together for the procession. The faithful were grouped behind their respective banners and everyone carried a torch with a cardboard cone protecting the flame from the wind. Firmly secured to its shaft, the statue of the Sacré-Cœur was the central point of the procession. The honour of carrying the statue was normally accorded to four members of the Ligue du Sacré-Cœur. This torchlight procession in the town or village streets included various stops along the way. It always finished at the same place where it began, in other words, at the church. The procession of the Sacré-Cœur was celebrated with great pomp and circumstance from the eighteen-seventies, and was very different to the Corpus Christi procession which dated back to the beginning of the colony »¹.

The stops were at temporary altars set up in the church or outside where the Blessed Sacrament was placed. This was a real expression of popular devotion. From the 18th century to the middle of the 20th century, these 'stations', erected to the glory of the Saviour, were adorned with a variety of decorations such as branches, banners, various draperies, flowers and garlands.



Interior of the Chapel of
Sainte-Anne de Varennes
Photo : François Brault

The chapels of the Blessed Sacrament and the Corpus Christi processional chapels are small buildings which are mainly to be found in the diocese of Québec. They were often used as stopping places for these processional events. They were built in New France from the beginning of the 18th century. Their presence along the roadways of Québec was attested in 1733 in Saint-Étienne-de-Beaumont, on the south shore of the Saint Lawrence river to the east of Québec. The tradition of constructing processional chapels was continued into the middle of the 20th century when enthusiasm for these local events started to wane. In spite of this, thirty-one of these structures devoted to piety have been preserved in the Saint Lawrence valley between Varennes (Montérégie) and les Éboulements (Charlevoix) on the north shore and Saint-Roch-des-Aulnaies (Chaudière-Appalaches) on the south shore.

The symbolic power of these structures, however, remained important throughout the whole year. Their main aim was to bring God to the highway, and, like the wayside crosses along the country roads, they became landmarks in the Québec countryside thus playing their part in making the land sacred. They were often built in pairs in the same area. Being placed in different parts of the village, it was possible to follow various routes between the church, the chapels and the other stations set up here and there on private land. On l'île d'Orléans for example, the parishes of Saint-Jean, Saint-Laurent, Saint-Pierre and Sainte-Famille each has its own chapel for processions, whereas in Varennes, there are two for the same parish. In Deschambault, Neuville, Lotbinière, Saint-Antoine-de-Tilly, l'Islet and Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, the chapels form a part of some very interesting collections

¹ Porter, John et al, *Le grand héritage, l'Église et les arts sacrés au Québec*, Québec, Musée du Québec, 1984, p. 257.

of buildings including the magnificent churches which together are truly representative of the rural religious ideal of the 19th century.

An architectural practice linked to that of church architecture

These symbols of popular devotion among the French-Canadians took on the form of miniature churches. Their ground plan and style were adapted to current trends and corresponded in the main to the development of architectural practices.

Certain characteristics however remained constant. The ground plan was always simple and never included a transept. It was finished in a semicircular or flat chevet and very occasionally in a three-sided apse without buttresses. Inside, furnishings were kept to those which were strictly necessary. These obviously included an altar, a low balustrade and a few pews.

The exterior appearance and the interior decoration conformed to the style of the time of construction. We can therefore find chapels which remind us of the traditional Québec architecture of the 18th and 19th centuries. Their façades are built with double doors, a round arched window is situated on each of the side elevations, and the gable is surmounted with a bell-tower and single lantern in imitation of the more complex lantern-towers of the parish churches.



Chapel of Saint-Louis
de l'Île-aux-Coudres
Photo : François Brault

As with the parish churches, neo-classical forms followed by neo-gothic forms gradually changed the general appearance of these small constructions. The different stylistic characteristics were integrated without really altering the conventional structure of the building.

In certain cases, even well-known architects were commissioned to draw up the plans and supervise the work. For example, in Varennes Victor Bourgeau produced a neo-gothic chapel, the chapel of Sainte-Anne, in 1862. The structure is of an undeniable quality and is relatively complex. The architect designed the layout according to the traditional Recollect plan. This gives the altar a more prominent position, making the interior look much more complete.

An unusual example - the processional-chapel of Saint-Jacques-le-Mineur



Processional-Chapel of
Saint-Jacques-le-Mineur
Photo : François Brault

The chapel of Saint-Jacques-le-Mineur, commissioned by Mgr Fabre, archbishop of Montréal, was built in 1889 by J Marcil and decorated by T Rousseau, an associate of Napoléon Bourrassa. It was listed as an historic monument in 1987 and differs from the other examples presented up until then because of its ground plan, décor and its function.

« According to the archbishop's wishes, the chapel was built to be used exclusively for the Corpus Christi procession. In this way, it differs from the processional chapels generally built before this time. Usually these served as landmarks determining the limits of all rural parish processions, replacing, in a manner of speaking, the churches and chapels which strew the path of these liturgical processions in the larger towns »².

² Luc Noppen, Les chemins de la mémoire, t, II, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1991, p. 315

This functional difference is clearly explained by the use of a new architectural style. The chapel is built using a concentric octagonal plan with a pavilion roof. Colonnets stand at the junctions of the walls, and a cornice supports the slightly overhanging roof. The use of double-doors, typical of these rural chapels, allows for a large opening adapted to public sermons. In Saint-Jacques, the interior is particularly plain with its simple wood panelling and the absence of windows.

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