

Wayside crosses and shrine. Symbols of sacralisation of the land.

A religious imprint on the countryside in Québec

In Québec, religion had an exceptional influence on man and his environment. This tendency was due to the early colonisation being strongly clerical, and it continued until quite late into the 20th century. The persistence of this prevailing tendency can be partly explained by the strong religious identity of each of the founding communities between whom the relations were, at times, rather tense. Religion in some way represented a bastion of resistance in the face of the inherent differences in their two cultures, Catholic and Protestant. It was the francophone Catholics, from their weak position, who multiplied the number of monuments in order to affirm and legitimise their distinctive beliefs. By this means, their feeling of cultural identity crystallised around their religious beliefs.

In this way all inhabited land seemed to be regarded as sacred. This is suggested either by the toponomy, or by the various monuments erected to the glory of God and his earthly representatives. About half of settlements, waterways and mountain ranges have names borrowed from the host of Christian saints, martyrs and prophets, or from the Persons of the Holy Trinity. What with an abundance of town and country parishes, a church in every village, chapels-of-ease, shrines, crosses by the roadside or in cemeteries, there is a practically unbroken sacred fabric woven by these religious artefacts which has become altogether incorporated into the scenery.

Wayside crosses and shrines are by far the most numerous of these places of devotion. In fact there are between 2500 and 3000 of them dotted around the countryside in Québec.

A truly Christian tradition?



The cross of
Saint-Eugène de L'Islet
Photo : François Brault

It is not necessarily common practice, even in the Catholic tradition, to erect crosses along the roadside as has been done here since the beginning of New France. In France, for example, roadside shrines near parish churches are seldom found outside Brittany. And these small stone erections, although similar to the crosses and shrines found in Québec's cemeteries, are not in fact built for the purpose of giving a sacred significance to places beyond the parish boundary.

The Québec phenomenon is more like the gesture of an explorer taking possession of a territory in the name of his king rather than an imitation of the monumental customs of Brittany. Jacques Cartier erected five crosses in the name of François I between Gaspé (1534) and Trois-Rivières (1536). The explorers of the 17th century did likewise on the banks of Lake Erie in 1670 and in Louisiana in 1683. In a similar way, the French-Canadian



The cross at Saint-Eugène de
L'Islet



details of the cross-pieces
Photo : François Brault

Settlers who cleared the land between the 17th and 20th centuries also erected crosses along the sides of the roads which they were building as the colony extended. The cross therefore added a sacred marker to a territory of which one had taken possession. Often these crosses were constructed on particular sites where important events had taken place. For example, in Saint-Germain de Kamouraska the Calvary is situated at the crossroads where the frozen body of a drunkard was discovered. This cross therefore calls the local citizens, as well as passers-by, to be temperate. The monument becomes both commemorative and educational at the same time.



Calvary cross in a bottle
Photo : François Brault

These wayside crosses, which were already numerous in the middle of the 18th century made a great impression on Pehr Kalm, a Swedish naturalist travelling in Canada:

« During my journey across Canada, I came across crosses standing here and there along the main road. They are two to three toises high and proportionately wide; many people say they mark the parish boundaries but there are more crosses than boundaries; on the side facing the road a deep hollow is dug where either a crucifix or a statue of the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus in her arms is placed; a pane of glass is placed in front to protect it from the wind and rain. Every Frenchman who passes a crucifix takes off his hat and crosses himself. The cross often looks like this. In some places all the instruments that we believe were used to crucify our Saviour are added to the scene, and sometimes Peter's cockerel is placed on top ».¹

Definition of an original art form



The calvary cross at
Petite-Rivière-
Saint-François,
Charlevoix
Photo : François Brault

According to the above description it appears that the tradition of placing wayside crosses reached its peak during the French regime. However, these monuments continued to be erected, as described by Kalm, until the middle of the 20th century. Some 3000 examples, still in existence today, belong to three clearly defined forms.

The unadorned cross illustrates the most rudimentary expression of this art form. It can include decorative elements at the extremities and have a heart, floral motif or halo where the two sections cross, and that is all the decoration there is. It can be found all over Québec but especially in outlying regions such as the Gaspé Peninsula and the North coast.

The cross combined with the symbols of the Passion is seen to be altogether more sophisticated than the unadorned cross. Decorated with various objects, usually along the cross-piece, these crosses differ markedly from one another. The spear, the sponge, the hammer, the nails and the crown of thorns give them a considerable more dramatic appearance which speaks of a faith which is both childlike and devout. In more than forty percent of the wayside crosses may be found an image of the Virgin Mary or a representation of the Descent from the Cross. This type of cross was mainly erected in the regions of Montréal and Québec.

¹ Pehr Kalm. Voyage de Pehr Kalm au Canada en 1749, traduction annotée du journal de route par Jacques Rousseau et Guy Béthune, avec le concours de Pierre Morisset, Montréal, Pierre Tisseyre, p. 430. Cité par Jean Simard. L'art religieux de routes du Québec, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1995, p. 40.

The third kind of wayside cross is the 'Calvary', so called because it bears the image of Christ crucified. Sometimes the figures of The Virgin Mary and Saint John are placed at the foot. Mary Magdalene and the two thieves are seldom depicted. The group is sometimes placed inside a small, specially made structure to protect it from the weather. It is as if the twelfth Station of the Cross had been selected and placed on its own by the side of the road as a place of recollection for passers-by. Most of these Calvary crosses can be found on the banks of the Saint Lawrence between Montréal and Québec.

Folk art and works of well-known artists

Crosses which for the most part are erected for ordinary country folk generally have a feeling of folk art about them. They are often designed by local craftsmen. Ghost-like hands nailed to the cross-piece, faces with childlike expressions and a surprising anatomy are all characteristics which attract us to these compositions.



The protected calvary
at Varennes
Photo : François Brault

Up until the Second World War, folk art in Québec was particularly attracted by religious subjects. The idea of miniature crosses and Calvary crosses fascinated these simple artisans.

Elsewhere however, well-known artists were called upon to produce statues of the Saviour or other biblical characters. Thomas Baillargé and Louis-Thomas Berlinguet produced several sculptures of Christ during the first half of the 19th century both in Québec and Montréal. As for the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century Louis Jobin took the lead around the Québec area. He was one of the greatest sculptors of his time in Québec and used living models to create his works. In his workshop one could come across small-scale wooden models of the arms of people crucified. One of his many works is the Calvary cross which can be found in the cemetery at Portneuf.

The collection of wayside crosses in the province of Québec is really an invaluable treasure. Unfortunately, because of the western society's growing disinterest in religion, this heritage tends to suffer from a lack of upkeep. The principal material used for these monuments is wood, which has a poor resistance to the ravages of both time and weather. However, everyone agrees on the importance and interest of these landmarks dotted around the countryside of Québec.

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