

# **PRECIOUS BLOOD CATHEDRAL (1875)**

**778 QUEEN STREET EAST**

**CI SW PTN PK L 25,26**



\*This is an edited copy of the original document, originals included in the Municipal Heritage Committee Binder –  
Titled: “Precious Blood Cathedral”

The history of the Roman Catholic Church in Sault Ste. Marie is almost as long as the history of French involvement in Canada. In the fall of 1641 two Jesuit priests celebrated the first mass in the Sault amongst the "Saulteaux Indians." Few places in Canada can share the distinction of such early beginning of church history.<sup>1</sup> These visits however, were infrequent and the mission posts that were established were merely temporary. By 1673 most of the posts had been abandoned or moved because of Indian hostilities.<sup>2</sup> References to Sault Ste. Marie are very sketchy after this date and the Jesuits did not return to this area, in any number, until 1836.

The first church on the Canadian side of the river was merely a log chapel built on a site near where Precious Blood now stands.<sup>3</sup> In 1846 William Cullen Bryant, described a stroll he took in which he points out "a church and burial ground west of the Old Stone House."<sup>4</sup>

In the fall of 1846 Father J. Menet arrived in the Sault on the invitation of the American Bishop Baraga, to take charge of the missions.<sup>5</sup> In 1852 he wrote "On the Canadian side we have a good piece of land and a church partly built in which we hope to hold services next summer."<sup>6</sup> Father Menet was instrumental in helping to establish the church as it now stands, and on July 8, 1857, Menet received from the Crown, a grant of four acres of land on Lot no. 25 and 1 ½ acres of the north part of Lot no. 26.<sup>7</sup>

The abstract book records no payment for the land, but some records indicate that Menet paid £2.10 to the Crown.<sup>4</sup> The land stretched from the river to the boundary which is now Wellington Street. The abstract book also destroys any evidence that Ermatinger (owner of the Old Stone House), Andrew Hynes, and F.J. Biron donated the land for the church. In fact, an 1846 plan of the town of St. Mary's shows that land corresponding to that purchased by Menet was always used for a church and burial ground.<sup>8</sup> By 1857 however, Jean Baptiste Menet held the title deeds. Whether he held the land in trust for the church is doubtful for upon his death, he left the land to "Henri Hudson (of the College of St. Francis Xavier, New York, U.S.), John Cunningham (of St. John's College, Fordham, near New York, U.S.), and Peter Hamel (of St. Francis Xavier College, New York, U.S.), as tenants in common all that parcel or tract of land adjoining the Town of St. Mary's . . . containing by measurement - five and a half acres be the same more or less; . . . being composed of Lots no. 25 in the first concession in the aforesaid Town of St. Mary. Also the north part of Lot no. 26, to hold them, the said Henri Hudson, John Cunningham, and Peter Hamel, their heirs and assigns, forever."<sup>9</sup>

This will appears to have been forgotten or disregarded in the belief that Menet left the land for the church; a reasonable assumption since it was the site of the burial ground and had a wooden frame church standing on it, that Menet had helped to build in 1850.<sup>10</sup> This information is confirmed when we see that the will of Menet was not registered in the Land Office until the 7th November, 1878, three years after the laying of the corner stone of Precious Blood, and on the same day that "Henri Hudson et al" placed in the Registry Office, a "Quit Claim" to the land, dated 2nd October, 1878.<sup>11</sup> We can only guess at the events leading up this quit claim, but the land was signed over for one dollar to the Rt. Rev. John Francis Jamot, who had arrived in 1870 and was made a Bishop. The land was now back in the possession of the church, whose building stood on it.

The building of the main part of the present church was begun in July of 1875.<sup>12</sup> "An entry in the house diary at Garden River records that the cornerstone of Sacred Heart Church (now Precious Blood) was laid at Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario on July 4, 1875. Archbishop Lynch and Bishop Jamot, Civar General of the Vicariate of Northern Canada, performed the ceremony."<sup>13</sup> The original structure consisted of the present nave, the main entrance, and the tower.<sup>14</sup> The stone used for the base was from the American ship canal, under construction at the time "because the stone on the Canadian side was too small." Local "citizens donated the rest of the stones for the church."<sup>15</sup> The building was raised through "corveys or bees" where local citizens and members of the parish would donate their time to the church's construction. Indians and half-breeds blasted and drew the rock while his Lordship (Bishop Jamot) collected funds in the Toronto diocese, probably Kingston, and in France to pay for the labour and other materials.<sup>16</sup> The completed structure was formally dedicated by Archbishop Lynch of Toronto on July 30, 1876.<sup>14</sup>

The Crown granted Rt. Rev. Jamot a water lot on April 3, 1880, but this was the only addition made to the land immediately surrounding the church. The land however, beginning in 1915, was gradually sold off to private individuals, or groups, or donated to Catholic organizations. In 1915 the church sold part of Lot 25 to the city and a part to a man named John A. Kaye, who the next day, sold his section to the Sault Ste. Marie Coal and Wood Company Ltd. at a large profit.<sup>17</sup> In 1934 the church sold part of Lots 25 and 26 to the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Diocese of Peterborough for \$4,000.00 to establish a school. They made another sale to this group, now the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie, in 1946. These sales continued until most of Lot 26 had been sold and the property as it stands now on Lot 25, was all that was left.

The building, in 1876, was built of the local red grey sandstone. It was designed in the Gothic-Revival style with a single nave, tall lancet windows, and an imposing tower and slate roof.<sup>18</sup> The design reflects the form and style dictated by the remote setting of Sault Ste. Marie at the time. There were no railroads and the workers had to build the church out of the most accessible materials. There is no record (I can find) of the architect, but it may have been Bishop Jamot himself, as the building is often referred to as "his" church and the purpose, upon his arrival in 1870, may have been to design and organize the construction of the church. (We can only guess as to whether or not this is true).

A photograph of the church taken in 1887 reveals a building that looks much the same as it does today. The projecting tower with its pinnacled spire and dormers is unchanged. The lancet windows in the tower also have the same wood plate tracery. The church had three bays on the south façade, the centre one being the bell tower. The east and west walls had five bays with a tall lancet window in each bay. The most striking feature of the church was the way it dominated the old skyline of the city. In a city of log or frame houses, there are few visible structures that could rival its sophistication. Precious Blood, as well as the Old Stone House, the Wemyss Simpson House, and Bishophurst were giving Sault Ste. Marie evidence of its own growth and importance.

In the fall of 1901, transepts were added onto the north wall. The new wing was 85 ft. wide by 42 ft. deep and was added on at a cost of \$13,000.00.<sup>21</sup> The architect of the new addition was "Mr. H. Russell Halton, who also made the designs of the new stained glass windows."<sup>22</sup> The Sault Star also recounted what had happened to the interior of the church. "Two new galleries to seat about 50 people each were built, one on each side of the church. The sanctuary is 30 ft.

by 22 ft. and is enclosed with a handsome carved communion rail and sanctuary screen."<sup>22</sup> Most of the stain glass dates from this time. Each transept has a large stained glass window measuring 19 ft. by 8 ft. <sup>22</sup> The Star also recorded that a new vestry, 16 ft. by 25 ft. had been built and that the former chapel and vestry "will in future be used exclusively as a winter chapel. The old part of the church will be repainted and redecorated."<sup>22</sup> This new addition was built of sandstone and stuck basically to the same design as the original. When a new vestry was built in 1936 behind the east transept, it too was built of sandstone in the same design.

The church interior was redecorated in 1925 by Father T. J. Crowley. The changes were few because of Father Crowley's age and bad health, but a new "neo-gothic" alter was installed at this time. Further renovations were made in the fall of 1963 and were heralded as very necessary and welcome. The Star added that "wisely, the project, while modernizing the interior, has safeguarded the hushed tranquil stateliness and simplicity which have always been (the church's) central character."<sup>23</sup>

In front of the church is a large white marble statue on a black marble base, commemorating the martyrs who died in establishing the church in this area. This was placed here in 1925 by Father Crowley. On the southwest corner of the property is an historical plaque placed there by the Ontario Historical Foundation.

### **Architectural Description**

Precious Blood Cathedral provides a visual focus for the city of Sault Ste. Marie. Against the skyline, its tower and spire stand above the rest of the city<sup>24</sup> even after one hundred years. The church stands on the main street (Queen Street East) of Sault Ste. Marie, and is surrounded by commercial buildings dating from the first two decades of this century. These buildings facing directly onto the sidewalk are in sharp contrast to the cathedral, which is set back from the street on a well kept lawn amongst a number of large trees. The setting is almost like a small park.

As was mentioned earlier, the original building consisted of the present nave, main entrance and bell tower. The church was built of coursed rubble sandstone which was the most common building material, except for wood at the time. The church had five bays on the east and west walls, and three bays on the main façade; the centre one being the projecting bell tower and spire. Each corner of the building and the tower is quarried in the same red sandstone, although it is coarser than the other stone. The east and west walls are pierced by five tall lancet windows. Each window has a single sash that protects an inner stained glass window. The outer sashes have paired lancet tracery in the head of the painted arch. The rest of the window has six panes of glass. The window is slightly recessed and the stone on the inner edge is cut smoothly. The stone surrounding the window consists of alternating long and short blocks of cut stone with an arrow-shaped keystone at the head of the arch. The window sills are plain stone that slant towards the ground.

The lancet windows on either side of the bell tower are decorated in the same manner except that they lack the paired lancet tracery of the side windows.

The bell tower is twice as high as the gable roof that tops the church. The roof has plain projecting eaves. The tower is divided, basically, into four sections. The ground level, the windows located just below the peak of the roof, the belfry and the spire. The base has two main entrance doors on the south and east sides of the tower. The doorway is within a painted stone arch decorated with alternating blocks of coarse cut stone with a central arrow-shaped keystone. The inner edge of the arch has been chamfered and is smoothly cut.

The main south doorway has a new wooden door. Above the spring of the arch is a stained glass window. The east doorway has the same stone decorations. The door is hidden behind plain outer doors with iron hinges. The doorhead is slightly arched. Above the spring of the arch is a large circular stained glass window in (stone) mouldings. The rest of the arch is also filled with stained glass. The west side of the tower has a small lancet window filled with stained glass, with no outer sash.

The second level of windows, one on each side of the tower, are small lancet windows decorated in the same manner as the other lancet windows. These windows, however, are double sashed with a two-over-two pane arrangement. There is no stained glass as these are used to light and ventilate the tower. At the roofline or the base of the belfry, is a stone string course surrounding the tower.

Above this point is the belfry, with a large lancet window cut into each wall. The wall surrounding the window is recessed so that the corners become pier-like elements. The windows are decorated with the same stone surrounds. The window head is filled with very ornate and heavy wooden tracery in a circular pattern. Below this is a series of overlapping boards to allow for ventilation. On top of each "pier" are square stone capitals, plus a projecting stone frieze in between.

Topping the belfry is the four-sided pointed spire. It is covered with slate shingles. At each corner is a pinnacle with gable decorations topped by a wooden finial. On the face of each side of the tower is a decorated gable dormer. The spire is topped by a decorated wooden cross.

In 1901 new transepts were added, as we can see in a photograph from that year.<sup>25</sup> The back, or north wall, of the church was removed and the new addition was built. It was also built of squared rubbed sandstone, although it tends to be lighter in colour. The architect used basically the same design as the windows and doors are decorated in the same manner. The transepts and projecting sanctuary were each covered with a gable roof. On the east and west walls of the transepts was a large 19 ft. by 8 ft. stained glass window. On the south wall of the west transept is a gothic doorway. The wooden gable roof portico that once covered it <sup>25</sup> has been removed. On the north wall is a large circular stained glass window representing the crucifixion. The outer wall, is decorated by alternating, radiating stone voussoirs. The 1936 vestry was built onto the north wall of the east transept. The roof on this building is flat, but it is for the most part, decorated in the same manner, although the lancet windows are shorter and wider, and there is a stone cross built in the centre of the north wall just below the eaves.

To the east of the church, a new section has been built that contains the church offices and Sunday school rooms. It was built some time during the past 20 years of red sandstone, in an entirely different style.

The interior of the church is plainly decorated and has been much altered by subsequent changes. The walls are plain, the ceiling has been painted light blue; and the floor is covered with red carpeting.

### **Interior Features**

The pews are new and are decorated with small carved crosses at each end. The stained glass in the lancet windows in the east and west transepts depict the "Flight from Egypt" and "Christ with the Little Children." The main altar, which was added in 1925, is gold in colour and is decorated in the gothic style. It depicts four saints against a background of red velvet. At the back of the church is the organ loft that is reached by a flight of steps in the southwest corner. The barrel vault ceiling is decorated by exposed rafters and braces in the gothic style. A decorated corbel supports a slightly curved wall post. A tie beam then extends across the span of the church to the other side. A king post and two small posts, one to either side, support two principle rafters that form a curved gothic-style arch. This is repeated throughout the church. It may be an original part of the church or it may have been added in 1901. All of the stained glass dates from this time.

### **Significance**

Since the destruction of St. Luke's Anglican Church in 1952, Precious Blood Cathedral remains as the oldest surviving church in Sault Ste. Marie. As such, and on account of its central location on the busy main street, Precious Blood, along with the Old Stone House (1814) is one of the most well known older buildings in the city. Its historic importance has also been recognized by the Ontario Heritage Foundation, as is evidenced by the plaque that stands on the front lawn. Such local and provincial awareness of the value of this building does not place it in much danger, but its designation by the city, will protect it from future changes or alterations.

The church is plain by most standards in Ontario and in a town that was largely French speaking, resembles an Anglican or Presbyterian church rather than a Catholic one. The plainness of the outer walls, the windows, and the eaves, was very suitable to the Presbyterian character, but Precious Blood did not adopt such plainness through doctrine but through necessity. The Sault's isolation in the 1870's forced the builders to rely on the most readily available materials, as well as an architectural style that was simple and yet "ecclesiastical". The plain Gothic-style church that resulted is evidence of this fact, although the pinnacled spire with its gable dormers is, apart from the interior, the most highly decorated part of the building. As the most public feature of the building, it is one of the most significant and therefore one of the most worthy features to save and preserve.

The interior of the church has been greatly altered, but the stained glass dating from 1901 is one of the most significant features of the interior. The 1925 altar and the decorated rafters should also be considered as worthy of preservation, if ever the church decides to renovate the interior. In this way, the city will be preserving for the future, one of the most beautiful old churches in Sault Ste. Marie.

## FOOTNOTES

1. from - incomplete History of the Roman Catholic church in Sault Ste. Marie, compiled by Kay Punch and Don Burgess, "The Seed is Planted", page 10
2. Ibid., page 11
3. Ibid., page 2
4. Ibid., page 4
5. Ibid., page 3
6. Ibid., page 4
7. Abstract Index Book 1-1, first section, Lot No. 25, Folio 56, also Lot No. 26, Folio 58, (Land Registry Office - Sault Ste. Marie)
8. from - incomplete History of the Roman Catholic Church in Sault Ste. Marie, Kay Punch and Don Burgess, page 17, "A Plan of the Park Lots Adjoining the Town of St. Mary's, crown Lands Dept., June 19, 1846
9. Abstract Index Book 1-1, first section, Lot No. 25, Folio 56,, 21 - Will 1st March, 1967, "The Last Will and Testament of Jean Baptist Menet"
10. from - incomplete History of the Roman Catholic Church, page 7
11. Abstract Index Book 1-1, first section, Lot No. 25 and 26, Folio 56, # of Instrument 406
12. from - incomplete History of the Roman Catholic Church, page 18
13. Ibid., page 9, "Dedication"
14. Ibid., page 18
15. In a letter dated July 2, 1925 to H. c. Hamilton from Emery Boissineau who was a member of this parish in 1875, and left a written description of the church - see Kay Punch and Don Burgess History, page 18
16. From a letter to H. C. Hamilton, dated July 29, 1925, from a Father P. Monahan, see Kay Punch and Don Burgess History, page 18
17. Abstract Index Book 1-1, first section, Lot No. 25, Folio 56
18. Historical Plaque, "Precious Blood Cathedral", in front of the church, erected by the Ministry of culture and Recreation
19. Sault Daily Star, January 16, 1964, "Old Church Sets New Look", page 1
20. See Photograph # 1, from a panoramic view of the Town of Sault Ste. Marie in 1887, from Sault Armouries Museum



21. Sault Star, December 7, 1901, "New Church Dedicated", page 1
22. Sault Star, November 21, 1901, "New Church Will Seat 650", "To Be Opened December 1st", page 1
23. Sault Daily Star, January 16, 1964, "Old Church Gets New Look", page 1
24. See Photograph # 2, photo of skyline around 1910, Sault Armouries Museum, Filing Cabinet "B", Category "F", Item 142
25. See Photograph # 3, Sault Armoury Museum, uncatalogued, 1901

**Photos courtesy of the Sault Ste. Marie Museum**

