

CHAPTER XIV

The Gospel Preached to Thousands of Roman Catholics in Montreal. I hear the Priest of Napierville Denounce me from his Pulpit

The Lord of Hosts is With Us; The God of Jacob is Our Refuge.—Ps. 46:2

My heart would have fainted within me, the morning of the second of February, 1859, had not the words of the prophet, read at the head of the chapter, come to strengthen me.

Very early the tempter had whispered in my ears, "What can you do here, when alone, cursed by the whole clergy, and absolutely forsaken by the Protestants. For have you seen anyone of their ministers or people here last night to shake your hand or to give you a welcome? No! The seventy-five French Canadians who saved your life are freethinkers who do not care a straw for the Gospel you want to preach.

"They like you because they think that you will help them to demolish the power of the priests whom they hate and fear. But they are night-birds, you will not see them during the day. They are ashamed of you. They do not want to be known or be seen among your friends.

"The ground on which you stand here is cursed by the Bishops and priests as well as by their faithful Roman Catholic people . . . cursed by the Church of Rome, despised by the Protestants, you will be left alone in these large parlours as if infected with the smallpox. You have made a fool of yourself by coming back to Canada after your apostasy from the Roman Catholic Church. You have to go back to your colony covered with shame and followed by the execrations of your French Canadian fellow countrymen. Far from converting them from their errors, you will make them stronger in their faith by your miserable failure."

There was so much common-sense in those thoughts that I had no answer to give them. I felt for a time overwhelmed by their weight. Those thoughts were to my mind what the dark clouds are to the sun in a stormy day; they had taken away the light. I felt surrounded by such a desolating mental darkness, that I could not see where to put my feet, or on what side to turn my face. Alone in that large parlour of St. Lawrence Hall, which my friends had engaged for me at such a high price, it seemed that my position was so ridiculous and so compromising, that the people would speak of sending me to the lunatic asylum before the end of the day.

Whether pacing that large parlour, alone, or sitting in one of the fine chairs or sofas, without anyone to exchange a word of friendship, or inquire about me, I was asking myself, "What shall I do here? Why did I come to Montreal? Where are those who invited me to come and speak to them of the Gospel?" There was no answer to my inquiries—no echo to my fainting voice. At the breakfast table I had tried to exchange a few words with the two guests nearest me, but they had refused to answer; the servants were keeping as far as they could from me as if I had had the plague.

Ten o'clock had struck and I was still alone! Every moment of that solitude seemed to me as long as an endless night looks to the poor sick when devoured by a deadly fever. My heart was filled with an unspeakable sadness. My poor soul seemed to be crushed under a mountain of lead. I fell on my knees, and as much with tears as with my lips I prayed to the only One from whom help, strength and life can come. But my merciful God had heard my humble supplications even before I had uttered them. For I was hardly on my knees to pray, when I heard three knocks at the door. The waiter was come to say that several persons wanted to see me. "Let them come in," I answered. And it was my unspeakable joy to see a band of thirty farmers from the vicinity of Montreal, who had been among my most devoted friends when

I was preaching temperance, enter to give me a hearty shaking of hands with the assurance that the whole people all around Montreal were pleased to hear of my coming again to spend a few weeks in Canada.

I had not finished offering them the chairs and the sofas to sit on, when a still larger number followed, and so on till the large hall was so filled that there was no more room to sit or to stand. I was beside myself with surprise and joy.

“My dear friends,” I said, “I have no words to tell you how I thank God for the privilege He gives me to see so many of my dear countrymen here, around me, to-day . . . You remember how happy we were together, some years ago, when I was establishing the societies of temperance all over Canada. I see by the expression of pleasure on your friendly faces, that you remember those happy days. I was then going among you with a drop of the waters which flow from the fountains of eternal life—temperance. You tasted that drop and you found it sweet. You accepted that temperance as one of the greatest blessings God had ever given to your families and to our dear country. But it was in this Bible that I found that blessed drop of water. To-day I come to offer you not only a drop, but the whole fountain of the waters of life, by presenting you this Bible, as the most precious gift heaven has ever given to earth. Yes! I am coming back into the midst of my dear countrymen, to ask you to accept this Bible as the most precious treasure God has ever given to man. You will accept it, I hope, as the bread of your souls, as the light to your steps, as the key which opens the gates of heaven to those who possess it.”

For about one hour I spoke on the Bible and on the necessity to accept, read and study it in every French Canadian family, as the only way to make our dear Canada happy, great, prosperous and free.

Never have I seen anything like the attention, respect and pleasure of my auditors as in that happy hour when one of the chief policemen in the city came and interrupted me by

saying, "The street before the hotel is absolutely crammed with such a multitude of people, who want to see and hear you, that the circulation is completely stopped. Though it is against the law to let such a crowd fill the street, we did not like to be hard on them, when they tell us that their only desire is to see and hear you once more, if it were only for a few minutes. Would you be kind enough to grant the request they have asked me to ask you, which is to show yourself at the window and address them for a few minutes?"

Asking the crowd around me to pardon me if I would leave them alone for a few minutes, in order to grant the petition of their friends, who were in the street, I opened the window. To my unspeakable surprise I saw that the policeman had not exaggerated. The street was absolutely crammed by such a compact multitude, that the usual circulation was impossible.

The noisy expression of the joy of that crowd when I put my head outside of the window was such that I became almost mute by the sentiments of emotion which filled my heart. My address lasted about fifteen minutes—on the text: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth."

After exhorting them to read and follow the Gospel, as the surest guide to an eternal life of happiness, as the only way to become a happy, great and free people, I thanked them for the joy they had given me by coming, some of them a long distance, to hear the Christian message I had to deliver to them, and addressed a short prayer to our merciful heavenly Father to bless them all with their families.

Then a voice from the crowd said, "Would you be kind enough to give me one of those Bibles of which you have said such beautiful things?" "Yes, my dear friend," I answered, "come this afternoon and you shall have as many as you want."

It was then nearly twelve o'clock, I had spoken over an hour and a half, a part of the time in the open air, through the window, and I was feeling the want of rest; so, after a

short prayer, I dismissed the crowd which was filling the parlour. But many of them had questions to put to me, and they asked permission to come again, after expressing gratitude for what they had heard.

Where can I find words to tell the sentiments of admiration and gratitude I felt towards my God when alone, thinking of the marvelous things that I had seen that morning?

Peter could not have been more astonished and grateful at the enormous quantities of fishes he had hauled in his nets, at the voice of the Saviour, than I was at the incredible number and the respectful attention of the people who had come to hear the messages of peace I had delivered to them.

What had just occurred that morning was not less miraculous, to me, than the hauling of the fishes, to Peter. Both occurrences were true miracles of the mercies of God.

Two o'clock had not struck before not only the large parlour was again crowded to its utmost capacity, but the street before the St. Lawrence Hall was so filled with the people of the city and the surrounding country, that it was rendered impassable. At the request of the police, I began by addressing from the window my friends in the street. After I had spoken to them for half an hour, and had dismissed them, I gave an address of one hour to those in the parlour. But when I had closed that address, a new crowd, as large, which had gathered in the street and in the corridors filled again the large hall and it was nearly five when, absolutely exhausted, I was left alone to breathe.

I soon, however, forgot my fatigue, when one of the greatest Christians of Canada, Sir William Dawson, with Mr. James Court, one of the founders of Pointe aux Trembles College, was kind enough to visit me and invite me to dinner with him at his residence, McGill University. The élite of the Protestants of Montreal, the Dougalls, the McKays, the Redpaths, the Lymans, etc., were there to give me the first as well as the most earnest Christian welcome I ever received from my Protestant brethren of Montreal.

But I could remain with them only till eight o'clock, when my French Canadian friends came with sleighs to take me to the Mechanics Hall, where 2,000 of my Roman Catholic countrymen were waiting for a lecture on the reasons why I had left the Church of Rome. In order to keep the rowdy class from our meetings, my friends had determined that no one should enter the hall without paying twenty-five cents to help me to meet my expenses.

But will not the readers help me to bless the Lord with the old prophet, that the works of His mercies are above all the works of His hands, when I tell them that the story of this my first day in Montreal, is the history of the following four days, with the only exception that the next day I took dinner with Mr. Lyman and the third with Mr. Redpath? By the good providence of God, though we were in the coldest season of Canada, those four days spent in Montreal were so mild and the sun so bright, that the snow was melting all the time. We had not any trouble in any of the meetings except that on the Saturday night, when a few men, sent by the priests, tried to make some noise, but they were stopped by the police and turned out of the hall.

During those four days it had been my privilege to present the Bread of Life to at least 10,000 hungry souls and to distribute 800 Bibles and Testaments. Eternity alone will reveal the good done during those four days. The Church of Rome lost her power over many who began to see the light of the Gospel and to love it, and though the fruits were not ripe to be gathered immediately into the granaries of the Father, the good seed was not lost. To-day we see the fields, everywhere, covering themselves with a rich crop which will soon be ripe.

The night of Saturday had been chosen by my friends to drive me to Napierville, which was the first parish we wished to attack.

Though I was very tired, I traveled all night, in order to be

in that village at the dawn of the Sabbath. It had been found less dangerous to select that time.

It was about four o'clock Sunday morning when I could take some rest in a dear friend's house. The sleep from four to eleven that morning was sweet indeed. For my heart was filled with such a joy! And the expressions of gratitude of the thousands I had preached the Gospel to, the last four days, were like music from heaven to my soul.

When the hour of dismissing the Roman Catholics from their church, after mass, had come, I dressed myself to go and meet the people at the door of the church. My host tried to dissuade me from that project, by showing the evident danger I was running to be insulted, or even beaten if not killed by the people. "It is to-day," he said, "that the letter of the Bishop against you will be read in the church . . . you will be shown there under the darkest colours. The people will be furious against you when they will have heard their priest calling you 'a devouring wolf.' Do not go into the midst of such a people when there will not be any one to protect you." I answered him, "You are mistaken when you think that I am alone. I do not come here in my own name, or for my private interest and pleasure. There was no pleasure for me last night to travel through the three feet of snow and the frost of one of your coldest nights of a Canadian winter; and I have no personal interest, surely, to go into the midst of that poor deluded people. But I am the ambassador of Christ and I am sure He is with me to protect and shield me as He protected Daniel in the den of lions."

And I went to the door of that large church. When there, without noise, I opened it a little to see if the service was near the end. The priest was in his high pulpit, just beginning to read the long and terrible letter of the Bishop against me. I was represented as the ambassador of the devil, a monster, a devouring wolf among defenseless lambs. The people were forbidden under pain of excommunication and eternal

damnation, to hear me, shake hands with me, to lodge and receive me into their houses, etc.

When the priest had finished reading that interesting letter from his superior, he added his remarks, and said, that the eternal fires of hell would be the abode of those of his people who would listen to my seducing words, or talk with me or even shake hands with me. "That monster has already sent to hell thousands of precious souls," he said, "and he is coming into the country only at the instigation of the devil to destroy and damn you. Though I hope that he will not come to soil our dear parish of Napierville with his infectious presence, I hope that, if he comes, you will give him such a reception that he will not be tempted to come again."

After these words he finished his mass by blessing the people and dismissing them.

I had closed the door before any one could suspect that I was there hearing every word of their priest against me, and I had withdrawn to the northern corner of the high platform which the people had to pass from the church down the stairs.

No words can tell the surprise of that people, when, coming out of the building, they perceived and recognized me standing there. They could hardly believe their eyes. I appeared to them as a phantom (as some told me after), others thought that they were dreaming. As I had many times visited that people when a priest in Canada, passing whole weeks in their midst, preaching, hearing their confession, and giving them the pledge of temperance, they had all known me and loved me till that day, as if I had been their own father.

Their eyes had hardly met mine, when they had all forgotten what they had just heard from their priest. Many, pressing my hands with the warmest expressions of respect and friendship, were saying: "How happy we are to see you again in our midst." Many others, unable to approach me on account of the dense crowd, which, coming as an irresistible

tide, was driving them down the stairs in spite of themselves, were crying to each other with unmistakable expressions of joy: "Father Chiniquy! Father Chiniquy here! Is it possible? How glad we are to see him again!"

Only two or three said, "Father Chiniquy has no business here. Our duty is to drive him away."

But their voices were drowned by hundreds of people saying, "If you do not like to hear or see Father Chiniquy, shut your eyes and run away. For us we like to see and hear him again."

I do not really think that there has been another circumstance so strange and solemn in my whole life. I felt more than ever in that strange hour that "the Lord was my keeper and that He was with me."

As the people were going down the stairs, carried by the irresistible tide of the multitude coming out of the church, they were turning their faces towards me, and in a few minutes I stood alone on the high platform, having at my feet more than one thousand of those dear, honest fellow countrymen evidently waiting to hear what I had to say. As soon as the last ones had taken their position at my feet, I said: "My dear friends and countrymen, you have just heard in your church what your priests and Bishops say against me. Now would you not like to know what I have to say in my defense? You are too honest and Christian to condemn a man without hearing him, even if he is accused by priests and Bishops. God has given you two ears that you may hear both sides of every accusation. I do not come here to say one single word against your venerable Bishops and pastor. I respect them. I only ask you to allow me to say a few words in my defense to explain to you my present position. Will you grant me that favour?" The whole multitude answered with one voice: "Yes, Father Chiniquy, speak—speak—we are glad to hear you!"

Then I said, "Many of you are fasting, for some of you have received the communion this morning, I know it. Many

good mothers are in a hurry to see their dear little ones at home. And we are all in the open air where it is not safe to talk much. I ask you all to grant me the favour of coming to hear me at three o'clock this afternoon in that large hall which is there in your beautiful village.

“When I came here I was sure that I would be among a noble and most intelligent people, and I was not mistaken. The way you have received me here, just after what you have heard, is the assurance that your minds are as bright as your hearts are noble—not condemning me before hearing me.

“Wherever your admirable present conduct towards me will be known there will be a cry of admiration for your high and honest intelligence, and you will be blessed.

“May the God of the Gospel bless you all, and may He bless our dear Canada forever.”

The whole crowd had only one voice to say, “May God bless you also, dear Father Chiniquy!” And they quietly dispersed.