

A Church on the Move – *The history of St. Vital Roman Catholic Church*

You may have wondered why the church at the corner of Pembina Hwy and Manahan Avenue carries the name of St. Vital Roman Catholic Church when it is located in the area known as Fort Garry. In fact, this has caused much confusion over the years, and has been referred to as the Parish of St Vital of Fort Garry or simply Fort Garry RC Church. The cemetery shares the same problem as it is often mistaken for St. Vital Cemetery on River Road. There were attempts to change the name as this entry in the minutes of the Church Committee of St. Vital dated February 11, 1935 records:

“Father (Cournoyer) will approach His Grace, the Archbishop in connection of changing the name of the Church. This would be desirable for different reasons and avoid confusions with the Municipality of Saint Vital. The name St. Therese was suggested.”¹

Unfortunately, there is no follow up record to indicate the results of the discussion. We can safely assume that the matter was put to rest as the church maintains its original name to this day.

In 1860, His Grace Archbishop Taché of St Boniface entrusted the education of the people of Saint Vital to the care of the Grey Nuns. He chose to build a mission school on the east side of the Red River on Lot 48. At the time, the lots of Parish of Saint Vital extended from the Seine River in the east across the Red River west to Brady Road. The river only began to act as a divider with the establishment of the RM of Fort Garry in 1912.

In September of 1860, the nuns opened the small schoolhouse located along the river bank very near the present site of Riel House National Park. Msgr Taché arrived at the little mission school on September 8, 1860 to bless the school and humbly rejected the suggestion from the Metis that he name the mission St. Alexander for his own patron saint. The school was later referred to as Grandin School. Bishop Taché also presented the nuns with a bell to call the children to class. The bell has been in the possession of St. Vital Church on Manahan Ave to this day.

¹ Saint Vital Parish Archives, records of Parish Committee for the year 1935.

On the 20th of September two Grey Nuns, Sisters Espérance-Youville and Connelly, began classes and record that they had 64 students that first year. It is very likely that the famous Louis Riel and his brothers and sisters formed part of that first group of students. We know from the Parish Archives that Alexandre Nault attended the little school from 1881-87. He lived on the West side of the Red River and had to cross daily, by row-boat in summer and on foot in winter, along with other children. There is a sketch ² by one of the nuns of the “école-chapelle” which helps us visualize the school.

During the winter months of 1860-61, the nuns set aside a space in the school room for a small chapel. A folding door served as a separation between the school and the sanctuary. On April 4th, 1861, Archbishop Taché celebrated the first Mass and placed the mission church under the patronage of St. Vital, patron saint of his auxiliary, Bishop Vital Justin Grandin. Mass from this time forward was celebrated twice a week.

In 1871, the records of the Department of Education include a report written by Mr. Royal, school inspector for the district.

“The school-house of St. Vital is spacious, well-illuminated, but of defective ventilation. The class under the direction of the Sisters of Charity, is in excellent condition and few schools of the same kind could boast of an equal standing, i.e. for its tenure, its progress or for the advancement of its pupils. The number of pupils 64 (38 boys and 26 girls).”³

Sister Samson, who taught at the school from 1880-87, describes the first chapel.

The sanctuary was separated by folding doors. There was just room for the altar with a small shelf on each side and a prie-Dieu and chair for the Archbishop with another priest. The Blessed Sacrament was kept there and one can recall that Mrs. L. Riel came regularly to visit the Blessed

² Archives Générales, Les Soeurs de la Charité de Montréal (Soeurs Grises), Maison de Mère d’Youville

³ Department of Education, Inspector’s Report 1871, Legislative Library, Province of Manitoba

*Sacrament. Mass was said twice a week but the priests changed very often.*⁴

On November 19, 1885 an article in newspaper *Le Manitoba* reports that on Monday, November 16, Archbishop Msgr Taché learned of the execution of Louis Riel and asked L'abbé A. Dugas, parish priest of the cathedral to bring the sad news to the Riel family. The next day, Tuesday November 17th, 1885, Father Dugas offered a Mass in the chapel of Saint-Vital for the repose of the soul of Louis Riel. The wives of the Riels and their children were in attendance.

This is the last mention that we have of that particular school and chapel as they were closed in 1887 for no apparent reason. During this time, the people of Saint Vital were forced to travel either to St. Boniface or to St. Norbert to attend Mass. The Parish history records that many people walked the five miles to St. Norbert to receive Holy Communion. Besides the Riels, many of the family names that are important to the history of our province are recorded in the parish registers and many of them have been buried in the Parish cemetery on Crescent Drive. Among the list of names you will find: André Nault, Michel Dumas, Elie Carrière, Julien Laurence, Louis Sansregret, Eduoard Perreault , Eliza Perreault, Amable Gaudry, Janvier Richot, Benjamin Nault, Baptiste Laurence, J-B Plouffe, Paul Proulx, Mme Paul Sauvé, Firmin Hamelin and the Honourable Solomon Hamelin. These are the founding families of Saint Vital Catholic Church and are part of its rich history.

Stayed tuned for the next chapter – **The Church crosses the Red River**

⁴ Archives Générales, Les Soeurs de la Charité de Montréal (Soeurs Grises), Maison de Mère d'Youville