

OKLAHOMA CATHOLICISM: THE  
CONTRIBUTIONS OF FRENCH MONASTIC  
FOUNDATIONS

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Abstract: Oklahoma Catholicism: the Contributions of French Monastic Foundations focuses on the transmission of French monastic culture to the United States. After suffering the closure of monasteries during the French Revolution and subsequent Napoleonic Era, the Benedictines enjoyed a renaissance during the reign of King Louis-Phillipe that extended through the twentieth century. One of the primary animating features of the resurgent Benedictines was an enthusiasm for establishing new monasteries around the world in cultures very different from their own. Of these new monasteries, two opened in what is now Oklahoma: Sacred Heart Abbey and Clear Creek Abbey. How did two French monasteries end up in Oklahoma while there were no other such monasteries in the United States? In both cases, Oklahoma attracted the missionary-monks with a unique combination of a hospitable culture, a disenfranchised minority population to minister to, cheap land, and anonymity from local ecclesial authority. It is here argued that the United States proved to be especially salutary ground for the Roman Catholic Church apostolate and Oklahoma more so than many other states. French contributions to Catholicism in the United States in Oklahoma show a unique European culture at the service of a unique American culture, thus providing further evidence that a single historical model for interpreting the American Church is insufficient.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The Catholic Church in the state of Oklahoma was connected to the Catholic Church in France. Two Benedictine monasteries in what became the state of Oklahoma, Sacred Heart and Our Lady of Clear Creek, represented the confluence of three histories: the history of Catholicism in America, the history of European monasticism after the French Revolution, and the history of the monasticism in America. The United States proved to be salutary ground for the Roman Catholic Church and Oklahoma more so than many other states: for the Catholic Church in the United States the transmission of French Catholic Culture to the monasteries of Sacred Heart and Clear Creek provides further evidence that a single historical model for interpreting the American Church is insufficient, because French contributions to Catholicism in the United States in Oklahoma show a unique European culture at the service of a unique American culture.

#### **The Interwoven Histories**



Saint Benedict of Nursia, a sixth century Christian, founded the order bearing his name: the Benedictines. Starting with the two communities founded during Benedict's lifetime, Subiaco and Monte Cassino, the Benedictine order spread quickly throughout the disintegrating Western Roman Empire as the Germanic tribes converted to Christianity and re-established Christian culture in the Latin West. Benedict's sister, Scholastica, founded the Benedictine order of women next to her brother's first establishments. The histories of Benedictine men and women run parallel yet are very different. For the modern period, women's monasteries were at once better tolerated by political authorities, more numerous and successful at attracting recruits, and less independent from their local bishops. As the economy and the infrastructure of the Ancient World crumbled in the sixth century, giving way to the Dark Ages, Benedictines proliferated across the Latin West. Lay men and women, eager for order and protection, often gathered in communities adjacent to the monasteries. Soon enough Benedictine monasticism was the dominant expression of monastic life in Latin Christianity. Unlike the Christian East, the Benedictines organized themselves in a more or less uniform structure: guided by the founder's "Rule of Saint Benedict," governed by an abbot, and given over to a semi-eremitic life of work and prayer. Up until the French Revolution, Benedictine history is a cycle of decline followed by renaissance and renewal.<sup>1</sup>

A set schedule of daily life, known as the horarium, was the foundation of life for the Benedictine monks. The monks gathered to pray the Divine Office (the daily liturgy of the Catholic Church) eight times every day, beginning in the early morning and ending around eight o'clock in the evening. The monks' quarters were isolated from contact

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<sup>1</sup> David Knowles, *Christian Monasticism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), chapters 3-4, 12.

with outsiders in an area called the cloister. The cloister, typically, was attached to the monastery church and had a courtyard in the middle. Monks were divided between “priest monks” and “lay brothers,” the former being from well to-do families that could afford the education required before ordination and the latter being the sons of common families.<sup>2</sup>

There are three major religious orders derived from the communities Saint Benedict and Saint Scholastica founded: the Benedictines, the Cistercians, and the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, known as the Trappists. The Cistercians and Trappists distinguish themselves from the Benedictines by prioritizing seclusion, silence, and contemplative withdrawal more than the Benedictines, with the notable exception of Thomas Merton. As the French Trappists fled the French Revolution, some found their way to the United States, where they founded Gethsemani Monastery in Kentucky. But just as the history of female monastic communities is separate from the history of male communities, so too are the histories of the Benedictines, Cistercians, and Trappists. Even the most cloistered and retiring Benedictines struggled with balancing worldly engagements and the eremitic vocations of silence and seclusion, but the balance for the Cistercians and Trappists was never an issue. There were no Trappist schools or parishes or missions, just prayer, work, and silence.<sup>3</sup>

The Benedictine renewal in the nineteenth century after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Era, created a movement that effected the expansion of Christian

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., chapter 20.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. See also Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1948); Michael Pasquier, *Fathers on the Frontier: French Missionaries and the Roman Catholic Priesthood in the United States, 1789-1870* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

monasticism across the world. Moving back into the abandoned medieval and early modern monasteries, the Benedictine monks consolidated into cohorts, called congregations, that (with one exception) divided along national boundaries. Each congregation of monasteries developed different worldly commitments, prayer regimes, and religious practices yet followed the Rule of Saint Benedict. Three German congregations developed, two Italian congregations, one Swiss congregation, one Austrian congregation, and one transnational congregation headquartered near Rome. In France, there were two congregations: the Solesmes Congregation and the French Province of the Subiaco Congregation. Prosper Guéranger and several of his fellow clergymen in the Diocese of Le Mans restored the medieval monastery of Solesmes and started the Solesmes congregation. Solesmes's mission was to restore the Benedictine monasteries as they existed in the Middle Ages, restore the monastery as a place of scholarship, and advocate liturgical and theological conformity with the pope. John-Baptiste Muard and his companions founded the monastery of Sainte-Marie de la Pierre-qui-Vire<sup>4</sup> and united themselves with the Subiaco Congregation (headquartered near Rome). Thus united, Pierre-qui-Vire began the French Province of the Subiaco Congregation. Pierre-qui-Vire's mission was to live an ascetic life in community according to the Rule of Saint Benedict. Secondly, Pierre-qui-Vire proselytized in rural French villages and in missions beyond Europe.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Translated as "Stone Which Turns," named for the ancient Druidic stone altar located at the monastery.

<sup>5</sup> Knowles, *Christian Monasticism*. See also Daniel Rees, "The Benedictine Revival in the Nineteenth Century," in *Benedict's Disciples*, ed. David Hugh Farmer (Leominster, England: F. Wright Books, 1980).

Nineteenth century France was a secularizing society, however. After the fall of the restored Bourbon Dynasty in 1830, and especially after the rise of the Third Republic in 1870, anticlericalism became the official policy in some of the national governments of France. In 1880, anticlerical legislation illegalized monasteries as incompatible with the ideals of modern French society and forced the monks out of the monasteries and into exile. The monks from Solesmes either went to monasteries in neighboring countries or founded new communities in England and Spain. Pierre-qui-Vire, founded with the intent of an apostolate outside of Europe, established monasteries outside of France prior to 1880. After the monastic closure of 1880, many went to the foreign communities previously established while others founded communities in England. The French government after 1880 until World War I wavered between tolerance and intolerance for the monastic communities and the process of exile followed by repatriation occurred more than once. The periods of exile precipitated an apostolate of monastic community-building from the Solesmes congregation in addition to the French Subiaco congregation. The movement of French monks back and forth across national borders and across continents from the last half of the nineteenth century created supranational monastic communities which mirrored contemporary French colonial developments insofar as they spread European values across the world.<sup>6</sup>

As the Benedictine renewal developed in Europe, Roman Catholicism grew in the United States. The growing number of Catholics in the United States in the 1830s and

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<sup>6</sup>Louis Soltner, *Solesmes and Dom Guéranger: 1805-1875* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 1995). See also Joseph F. Murphy, *Tenacious Monks: The Oklahoma Benedictines, 1875-1975: Indian Missionaries, Catholic Founders, Educators, and Agriculturists* (Shawnee, OK: Benedictine Color Press, 1974); Knowles, *Christian Monasticism*; Rees, "The Benedictine Revival in the Nineteenth Century."

the 1840s were immigrants from Germany and Ireland who settled in the industrializing cities on the Eastern seaboard or in the territory west of the Appalachian Mountains. As the century progressed, the growing Catholic population counted more immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe than from Germany and Ireland. The population of Roman Catholics in the United States expanded rapidly and moved westwards, mirroring the nation-wide trend of growth, diversification, and expansion. Beginning with the diocese of Baltimore in 1789, the pope created several new dioceses by middle of the nineteenth century in western regions such as Bardstown, Kentucky and Saint Paul, Minnesota and the large Eastern cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. By the American Civil War many American bishops were nationally known figures. Notable among them was John Hughes of New York, shepherd of the large Irish population in that city.<sup>7</sup>

The period preceding the Civil War, with Irish and German immigrants arriving in bountiful numbers, witnessed the first national wave of Anti-Catholic Nativism among the Protestant majority of the East Coast. Non-Catholic rioters in 1840s Boston burned the Ursuline convent to the ground after alleged reports of sexual misdeeds and intrigue between the “captive” nuns and the priests serving the convent as chaplains. New York City also witnessed city-wide protests, and when municipal authorities looked the other way, John Hughes threatened to “shut the city down,” by which he meant ordering the swarms of young Irishmen to obfuscate the rituals of daily life and commerce in the city by blocking traffic, protesting in the streets, and setting up barricades. American writers and intellectuals of the era, with the exception of the Catholic convert Orestes Brownson,

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<sup>7</sup> Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History From Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), chapters 5-12. See Also John Tracy Ellis, *American Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), chapters 2-4.

also promoted an anti-Catholic ethos. Jenny Franchot has argued that “Anti-Catholicism operated as an imaginative category of discourse through which Antebellum American writers of popular and elite fictional and historical texts indirectly voiced the tensions and limitations of mainstream Protestant culture.” After the Civil War, in which Catholic immigrants fought on either side, the wave of anti-Catholic rhetoric subsided as denominational Protestantism faced its own questions and challenges, not sparing the time to address the place of Catholicism in American society as it had in the 1840s. As the Italians and Poles overtook the Germans and Irish as the dominant cohort of Catholic immigrants, from the 1880s through the 1910s, Catholicism became the largest religious group in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

A new anti-Catholicism developed contemporary with the arrival of the Southern and Eastern European immigrants. Responding to the proliferation of Catholic health, educational, and social institutions, the American Protective Association lobbied national and state legislators to obstruct Catholic institutions. Many state legislators passed Blaine Amendments, forbidding religious schools to receive public money. Among the Native Americans, Grant’s Peace Policy insured that Protestant institutions received a disproportionate number of charters to administer schools. In 1926, the prelate of Chicago, Archbishop Mundelein, hosted the World Eucharist Conference, an event of public pageantry that the Chicago Daily News imagined a “...scene of pageantry like that

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<sup>8</sup> Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: the Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 1994). See also John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003); Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*.

of the Church in the Middle Ages.”<sup>9</sup> After providing support for the Wilson administration during World War One, American Catholics utilized the Congress to demonstrate their new comfort with Catholicism’s place in the United States. From the conclusion of the war through contemporary times, Roman Catholicism was the largest religious group in the United States and often the dominant cultural force.<sup>10</sup>

Across this modern period of American Catholic history, more German Catholics immigrated to the United States, and King Ludwig of Bavaria commissioned the renascent Benedictines there to establish a monastery and engage in an apostolate to the immigrant communities. Led by Boniface Wimmer, the Bavarian monks settled in Latrobe, Pennsylvania and opened the first Benedictine community in the United States, Saint Vincent monastery. The monks of Saint Vincent built a large monastery (by modern standards) and operated parishes for the German-American community. The monks of Saint Vincent monastery opened monasteries (called “daughter houses”) throughout the expanding United States and established the first Benedictine congregation outside of Europe- the American Cassinese Congregation. The monasteries of the American Cassinese congregation grew to be the largest Benedictine congregation in the world. An early tension within the American Cassinese involved adapting the life of the monk to the realities of the frontier. For Wimmer, the apostolate to the German immigrants on the frontier was a larger priority than the monastic schedule of prayer five

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<sup>9</sup> Robert W. Casey, “Skokie Valley Scene of Pageantry Like that of Church in Middle Ages,” *Daily News* (Chicago), June 21, 1926, Accessed July 20, 2016, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/11319.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception: An American History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004). See also Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*; Charles R. Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most Powerful Church* (New York: Times Books, 1997).

times daily—the “horarium.” This tension lasted throughout the history of the American Cassinese, dividing the monks along either sides of the issue. The cultural changes that were contemporary with the Second Vatican Council caused an exodus of monks from the monasteries and the history of the congregation from the second half of the twentieth century forward is a history of decline.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the German Benedictines, the Swiss Abbey of Einsiedeln founded Saint Meinrad monastery in Indiana to provide a home for exiled monks should the Swiss authorities suppress monasteries in Switzerland. Saint Meinrad’s also founded monasteries, although less than the American Cassinese, throughout the expanding western frontier. Pioneer monks such as Martin Marty<sup>12</sup> opened missions among the Northern Plains tribes and achieved recognition across the United States. The history of the Swiss Benedictine congregation is also one of prolonged growth from the mid-nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century, at which point it experienced prolonged decline through the last half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.<sup>13</sup>

### **Historiography**

If works on the challenges confronting the Catholic Church during the French Revolution are numerous, works on the monastic revival of the nineteenth century are

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<sup>11</sup> Jerome Oetgen, *Mission to America: A History of Saint Vincent Archabbey, the First Benedictine Monastery in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2000). See also Jerome Oetgen, *An American Abbot: Boniface Wimmer, O.S.B., 1809-1887* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1997); Joel Ripinger, *The Benedictine Order in the United States: An Interpretive History* (Collegeville, MN.: Liturgical Press, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Not the contemporary historian.

<sup>13</sup> Ripinger, *The Benedictine Order in the United States*, chapter 4.



not. Of those that exist in English, several stand out: Mary Robinson's *Regulars and the Secular Realm*, David Knowles' classic *Christian Monasticism*, and Daniel Rees' pithy article, "The Benedictine Renewal in the Nineteenth Century," published as part of a collection of essays by D.H. Farmer. Covering the phenomenon of French foreign apostolates in the nineteenth century, the essays published in *In God's Empire: French Missionaries and the Modern World* edited by Owen White and J.P. Daughton are crucial for framing the milieu of the monks who traveled from France to Oklahoma. Less academic and following in the monastic tradition of retelling and chronicling the history of their community, Louis Soltner and Denis Huerre wrote biographies in French of the founders of their communities in the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup>

Mary Robinson's *Regulars and the Secular Realm* focuses on the Benedictine Congregation of Saint Maur during the Revolution. Although not covering the nineteenth century renewal, Robinson's argument, that the Benedictine monasteries were demographically healthier than the standard narrative presents, is a necessary foundation. Robinson's contribution demonstrates that the level of commitment and zeal that the monasteries inspired, even in their atrophied forms. Because of the abiding interest in monasticism that survived the Revolution, the renewals inaugurated by Guéranger and Muard in the nineteenth century received the support from the church needed to thrive.<sup>15</sup>

Daniel Rees and David Knowles, whose works are cited above, provide important background on the revivals on the nineteenth century. Rees argues that the Benedictine

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<sup>14</sup> Mary Kathryn Robinson, *Regulars and the Secular Realm: The Benedictines of the Congregation of Saint-Maur in Upper Normandy During the Eighteenth Century and the French Revolution* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2008). See also Owen White and J. P. Daughton, *In God's Empire: French Missionaries and the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Robinson, *Regulars and the Secular Realm*.

renewal received the support that it did from the popes because they were useful in the Vatican's efforts to achieve greater ecclesial, theological, and liturgical hegemony over the Catholic Church. In return for the pope's support, the monks aided the cause of "Ultramontanism" and organized themselves into more centrally organized monasteries than in previous centuries (or at least since the zenith of the medieval powerhouse Cluny). He also points out that the monastic congregations renewed in the nineteenth developed the intellectual habit of "founder's intent," the anxiety over following the will of the order's founder exactly and enshrining his memory as an object of veneration.<sup>16</sup> For the monks of Sacred Heart and Clear Creek, this would indeed play a major role in their self-understanding and the decisions that they made. Knowles' *Christian Monasticism* is a survey of the entire history of monasticism in European/ Mediterranean Christianity, with three chapters at the end dedicated to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Latin West. He points out that the monastic renewal of the nineteenth century was due in large measure to the sympathies that the Romantic movement aroused towards Europe's medieval past, certainly a feature in the arc of Guéranger's and Muard's lives. He adds that the story of women's communities is different than that of male monasticism, and maintains that as such they should be treated in separate works. Both Rees and Knowles provide readable and short chronicles of the main movements of the era.<sup>17</sup>

Owen White and J.P. Daughton, in the introduction to *In God's Empire*, attempt to describe French colonial apostolates and unite them to the larger phenomenon of

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<sup>16</sup> Rees, "The Benedictine Revival," 286, 300.

<sup>17</sup> Rees, "The Benedictine Revival." See also Knowles, *Christian Monasticism*, foreword, chapters 14-16.

colonialism. They argue that modern French Catholicism “radiated outwards” and expanded across the globe, carrying French culture, often inadvertently, to disparate parts of the world. If they did so with seemingly more vigor and zeal than other national cohorts, this was because of the memories and struggles that French Catholics endured during the revolutionary era. They also suggest that the influence of French colonial apostolates has been overlooked by scholars through an anticlerical prejudice dominant among French colonial scholars.<sup>18</sup>

Louis Soltner and Denis Huerre, both former abbots of the monasteries that Guéranger and Muard founded, wrote biographies of the founders of their orders. Both are instrumental in providing a precise if uncritical background of the beginnings of the two French Benedictine congregations.<sup>19</sup>

Scholars of American religious history interpret the American Catholic Church as bearing many features of the country at large: more democratic, more vigorous in building great social institutions, and more likely to engage as a participant in a pluralistic denominational system than Catholics from other parts of the world. Moreover, the Catholic Church in the United States is often portrayed as ahead of its time, living out the changes wrought by the Second Vatican Council before the rest of the church. Of these historians, Jay Dolan is the most current and widely known scholar with his 1985 publication of *The American Catholic Experience*, summing up the 500-year history of Catholics in the United States. Recent developments in the field stress the importance of a transnational understanding of American Catholicism, especially obvious

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<sup>18</sup> White and Daughton, *In God's Empire*.

<sup>19</sup> Denis Huerre, *Jean-Baptiste Muard, Fondateur de La Pierre-qui-Vire* (St-Léger-Vauban, France: Presses Monastiques, 1978). See also Soltner, *Solesmes and Dom Guéranger*.

in the works of Patrick Allitt and Peter d'Agostino, who argued that developments in Europe carried more significance for the Catholic Church in the United States.<sup>20</sup>

Joel Ripinger and Jerome Oetgen, monks of the Swiss-American and American Cassinese congregations respectively, wrote the standard histories of the Benedictine Order in the United States. Both similarly focus on Abbot Boniface Wimmer as the center of the order's history in the United States and the tensions that all American Benedictine monasteries faced between traditional monastic seclusion and monastic apostolates among neighboring communities. Although focusing mainly on the story of the two large American Congregations, Ripinger, in *The Benedictine Order in the United States*, early in his work reflects on the French monks who settled in Oklahoma. He argues that the primary draw for French monks to Oklahoma was the antireligious laws passed by the French government in the last half of the nineteenth century. Oetgen chronicles the life and times of Boniface Wimmer in *Mission to America: A History Saint Vincent Archabbey*, tracing the development of Metten Abbey in Bavaria, and its relationship the King Ludwig, as key elements in the development of the American-Cassinese congregation.<sup>21</sup>

Thomas Elton Brown and Joseph Murphy are the primary chroniclers of the Roman Catholic Church in Oklahoma. Brown's *Bible Belt Catholicism: A History of the Roman Catholic Church in Oklahoma 1905-1945* argues that the Roman Catholic Church in Oklahoma faced a struggle to mature and develop in a culture that was alien to the

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<sup>20</sup> Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997). See also Peter R. D'Agostino, *Rome in America: Transnational Catholic Ideology from the Risorgimento to Fascism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Oetgen, *Mission to America*. See also Ripinger, *The Benedictine Order in the United States*.

Catholic Church. His work begins with the erection of Oklahoma as a diocese and thus does not cover the history of the French monks at Sacred Heart monastery. Joseph Murphy, a monk of Saint Gregory's Abbey (the successor monastery to Sacred Heart), wrote a readable and reliable chronicle of the "main events" of the monks in Oklahoma, *Tenacious Monks*, which is invaluable in providing a synopsis and chronology of the Sacred Heart Mission.<sup>22</sup>

### **Present Research**

Introducing the stories of Sacred Heart monastery and Clear Creek monastery, founded by the Benedictines of the monastic renaissance in France, I noted that they sit at the confluence of these three histories: French monastic history, American religious history, and American monastic history. Sacred Heart belongs to all three histories but is given major attention in none of the major works in each field. Clear Creek is a relatively new community, so the importance of its foundation in Oklahoma for all three histories has yet to be explained. As mentioned above, the United States proved to be salutary ground for the Roman Catholic Church and Oklahoma more so than many other states: for the Catholic Church in the United States the transmission of French Catholic Culture to the monasteries of Sacred Heart and Clear Creek provides further evidence that a single historical model for interpreting the American Church is insufficient, because French contributions to Catholicism in the United States in Oklahoma show a unique European culture at the service of a unique American culture.

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Elton Brown, *Bible Belt Catholicism, a History of the Roman Catholic Church in Oklahoma, 1905 to 1945* (New York: United States Catholic Historical Society, 1977). See also Joseph Murphy, *Tenacious Monks*.

French monastic histories, notably those produced by the chroniclers Soltner and Huerre, make little to no mention of the foundations in Oklahoma. Soltner's biography of Guéranger, the founder of the congregation to which Clear Creek belongs, was written before Solesmes's daughter house Fontgombault established Clear Creek. And, extremely little has been written about Fontgombault itself<sup>23</sup>, rendering Clear Creek a new foundation from an obscure monastery! Solesmes' dominant position in Rees's and Knowles's histories of the Benedictine renewal of nineteenth century Europe renders Fontgombault's obscurity all the more glaring. Huerre mentions Sacred Heart towards the end of his biography of Jean-Baptiste Muard, but it remained for him an obscure side note to Pierre-qui-Vire's story. Indeed, Huerre, despite traveling to Oklahoma and befriending the monks of Saint Gregory's (the successor to Sacred Heart,) commented that Sacred Heart was situated in the present-day state of Texas. The present research compliments the work engaged in Daughton and White's *In God's Empire*, demonstrating the combination of overseas apostolate and French culture in a region not also a French colony. As will be seen, many monks from Pierre-qui-Vire spent time at Sacred Heart and its satellite missions. Importantly, all the superiors of the monasteries in Pierre-qui-Vire's orbit spent time in Oklahoma just as all the superiors of Sacred Heart originated from Pierre-qui-Vire. The Solesmes Congregation's foundation of Clear Creek, at the close of the twentieth century, requires a reappraisal of assumptions about the vitality of the Catholic Church in France as well as the continued cultural dependence through which American Catholicism relies on Europe.

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<sup>23</sup> Jacques de Bascher, *L'Abbaye Royale Notre-Dame de Fontgombault* (Poitiers, France: Editions P. Oudin, 1991).

Brown and Murphy served Oklahoma well with their works on the early history of Catholicism in Oklahoma, but both are due for a revision. Brown focuses his study after the main period of French monks at Sacred Heart and further argues that Oklahoma was a landscape requiring Catholicism to struggle to “gain maturity,” but the histories of both Sacred Heart and Clear Creek rather suggest the opposite: that Oklahoma provided the hospitable cultural climate, coupled with a niche demographic to support their efforts, for the Benedictine monks to flourish. Murphy assembled a great deal of sources, both from the Sacred Heart Archives (of which he was the archivist), the Oklahoma State Archives, and from records at Pierre-qui-Vire (he was a contemporary of Huerre.) However, he wrote his chronicle to present a simple chronology and synopsis of Sacred Heart Abbey, not interested in its relationship with trends in Europe or America. Moreover, Murphy died ten years before the foundation of Clear Creek, and so the arrival of two French monastic communities to Oklahoma, and why this might be, was not a question for him.

For Rippinger and Oetgen, an exploration of the contributions of French monasticism to the development of Catholicism in Oklahoma serves to complement their works. Once again, as Clear Creek is a new monastery, its foundation invariably complicates the tableau of monasticism in America. Examining Sacred Heart monastery and Clear Creek monastery, French communities in Oklahoma, expands the understanding the history of American Catholicism and the history of French and American monasticism. Analyzing whether Sacred Heart and Clear Creek were part of a unified phenomenon or are parallel phenomena, this study also seeks to understand why both cohorts of French monks established communities on Oklahoma.

Chapter one examines the hagiography written by the communities under scrutiny about the much-revered founders of their respective congregations in the middle of the nineteenth century. A study of the founders, and how the communities of Sacred Heart and Clear Creek held up a certain ideal and mythology of the founders, is a necessary component for understanding why both communities ended up in Oklahoma and the distinctions between them. Prosper Guéranger and Jean-Baptiste Muard both had a hand in the Benedictine renaissance of the nineteenth century, as attested to in the works of Knowles and Rees. Guéranger sought to found a monastic movement committed to liturgical conformity with the pope and the reestablishment of a medieval ideal of monasticism within France, focused on secluded work and prayer, while Jean-Baptiste Muard sought to instrumentalize the Benedictine tradition to further his ambition of a community of monks dedicated to an apostolate both overseas and in rural France. Although very different, both instilled in their communities an appreciation of autonomy from local bishops, a trait born out of the experience of Revolution and Gallicanism endured by the French Catholic Church.

Chapter two examines Pierre-qui-Vire's foundation in Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma,) and how the monks came to build their abbey in a seemingly strange wilderness. At the time of Sacred Heart's foundation in 1875, Indian Territory was nominally under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Arkansas, who had neither the time nor the interest in administering an apostolate to the non-European Native Americans to the west. For the monks from Sacred Heart, the promise of an apostolate to a "savage" people coupled with guarantees of autonomy rendered Indian Territory the ideal spot to construct Sacred Heart monastery. This study relies heavily on the extensive archives of



Saint Gregory's Abbey to argue that the monks from Pierre-qui-Vire who built Sacred Heart were drawn to Oklahoma because it was an obscure backwater with a disenfranchised population for whom it could provide administration of Catholic sacraments and education, fulfilling the founder's vision of overseas apostolates among non-Europeans.

Saint Gregory's Abbey, the monastic community that succeeded Sacred Heart in 1929, has an archive which has preserved a great deal of documents, letters, and sundry materials produced by the monks from Pierre-qui-Vire and its daughterhouses across the world. Of particular value was the notebook written in 1910 by the monk Adalbert Hafner. The document, the "Annals of Sacred Heart," was a retrospective by Hafner on the first years of the monastery, of which he was a primary witness. Another valuable source in the archives (available also on the Library of Congress's "Chronicling America" digital resource) is the *Indian Advocate*, the newspaper that Sacred Heart produced from 1888 and 1910. Also published by Hafner, it serves as an ideal source for examining the community's priorities over the years. The archives are organized tidily thanks to the efforts of Joseph F. Murphy, who assembled many of the documents when he wrote *Tenacious Monks*, and the present archivist and abbey guest master Benet Exton, a trained librarian who has catalogued all the documents.

Chapter three examines Clear Creek monastery, founded in 1999 in Oklahoma by the monks from the Solesmes' monastery of Fontgombault. Clear Creek and its mother house Fontgombault were centers of the traditional Latin liturgy that the Roman Catholic Church used until the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council; and both were dedicated to the mission of Prosper Guéranger to renew plainsong chant and other elements of

medieval Roman /Latin monasticism. It was the only Benedictine community in the United States which did not belong to an American Benedictine congregation. Indeed, uniting itself with a resurgent conservative/traditionalist American Catholicism, Clear Creek had a markedly different experience of the Post-Vatican II era than did the other Benedictine communities in the United States. Although different in crucial respects from Sacred Heart, the monks from Fontgombault founded Clear Creek monastery in Oklahoma for similar reasons: cultural hospitality and ecclesial autonomy in an obscure location through which the monks had access to the community of American conservative/traditionalist Catholics, emboldened in response to developments under the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

## CHAPTER II

### DIVERGENT FOUNDERS: PROSPER GUÉRANGER AND JEAN-BAPTISTE MUARD

That Sacred Heart and Clear Creek were daughter houses of the two very different congregations of Benedictines in France rendered each unique. The personalities and vocations of the two monks who founded the monastic communities to which Sacred Heart and Clear Creek belonged made this inevitable. John-Baptiste Muard founded the monastic community of La Pierre-qui-Vire in 1850, just as Louis-Napoléon consolidated power and began the Second Empire. Prosper Guéranger founded the monastic community of Solesmes in 1833—less than two decades prior to Pierre-qui-Vire. Examining both men in relationship to one another, through the hagiography—the official laudatory biographies-- their respective communities created, provides the opportunity to appreciate the different priorities that each bequeathed to their communities, and the pursuit of these priorities in Oklahoma.

Guéranger's Solesmes was devoted to reviving a Christian culture by returning to earlier liturgical and monastic traditions, while Jean-Baptiste Muard's Pierre-qui-Vire sought to make the Benedictine tradition an instrument of a new missionary apostolate. Although Guéranger and Muard founded communities with divergent outlooks on the Benedictine tradition, both communities came to prioritize autonomy from bishops and a missionary apostolate.

### **Sources**

The foundation of two parallel Benedictine Congregations on France occasioned explanation even at the time. As one journal explained:

There currently exists in France two Benedictine Congregations. One founded in 1850 by the Most Reverend Muard at La Pierre-qui-Vire (Department of the Yonne), and the other founded in 1833 at Solesmes (Department of the Sarthe) by Dom Guéranger. The difference between these two congregations is sufficiently indicated if we add that Dom Guéranger wanted principally to revive of the intellectually-oriented Congregation of Saint Maur, while the Most Reverend Jean-Baptiste Muard embraced the Rule of Saint Benedict as a means to prepare the Religious [community of monks] for the apostolate and for the works that would fecundate their activities. The two congregations also fraternize cordially and in the future will

see without doubt them forming only one single monastic body. They developed parallel to one another and already count, each, a number of abbeys and priories.<sup>24</sup>

Over the years, monks from both monastic communities produced hagiographical accounts of their founders, Guéranger and Muard, advancing the commitments, loves, and charisms of their communities. As such they are ideal sources not so much for the accuracy and level of detail that they provide, but for the insight they provide into the priorities of the monastic communities.<sup>25</sup>

Dom Louis Soltner, contemporary with the monks of Clear Creek and a monk of Solesmes, wrote the standard modern hagiography of Prosper Guéranger. Translated into English, it is the work that Clear Creek itself recommended to persons curious about the beginnings of their monastic community and why it had the charisms that it did. Soltner's account is not an academic work, but represents the image that the monks of Clear Creek advanced of their congregation's founder. Other works about Guéranger referenced in this chapter were also works put forward by Clear Creek as exemplifying their monastic project.<sup>26</sup>

Published in 1886 in Dublin, the monks of Buckfast Abbey (the reader is not told which one specifically) compiled *The Life of Jean-Baptiste Muard: Founder of the*

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<sup>24</sup> Petit Séminaire de Saint-Pé, *Annuaire du Petit-Séminaire de Saint-Pé* (Bagnères-de-Bigorre, France: Bagnères Press, 1895), 119. Gallica, accessed on June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k9628003j/f117.item.r=jjean-baptiste%20muard.zoom>

<sup>25</sup> Daniel Rees, "The Benedictine Revival in the Nineteenth Century," in *Benedict's Disciples*, ed. David Hugh Farmer (Leominster, England: F. Wright Books, 1980), 300.

<sup>26</sup> A look into Clear Creek's gift shop, both online and at the monastery, demonstrate the place these texts have in the Conservative/Traditionalist community.

*Congregation of St. Edme and of the monastery of La Pierre-qui-Vire.* What I will call the “Buckfast Manuscript” is a compilation of biographical sources on the life of Muard, relying on the first biography (in French) written by Father Brulée (published in 1855) and the English translation of the Brulée work done by Isidore Robot, the founder of Sacred Heart monastery (published in 1882.) The Buckfast Manuscript also reflects the memoir of Father Benoit, one of Muard’s earliest followers. A note in the beginning claims that the purpose of the work is to serve the case for John-Baptiste Muard’s canonization.<sup>27</sup>

Whoever was the actual author of the Buckfast Manuscript, the superior of Buckfast Abbey (a sister house to Sacred Heart and a daughter house to Pierre-qui-Vire) was Dom Thomas Duperou, the monk who that same year became the first abbot of Sacred Heart Abbey in Indian Territory. Originating at Pierre-qui-Vire, Duperou journeyed to Buckfast in 1880 after the government closed monastic communities across France. The Abbot of Pierre-qui-Vire appointed Duperou to be the superior of Buckfast, and a picture of the community from 1884 displays him at the center, holding a book that perhaps was the manuscript that is here under scrutiny.<sup>28</sup> A monk of Pierre-qui-Vire, Buckfast, and Sacred Heart, Duperou and the work that he approved if not wrote himself are exemplary sources not only on the life of the founder, but on the priorities and charisms that Pierre-qui-Vire accentuated and pursued.

In the twentieth century a monk from Pierre-qui-Vire, Dom Dennis Huerre, wrote what has come to be the standard biography of his monastery’s founder. Huerre, who

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<sup>27</sup> Buckfast Abbey, *The Life of Jean Baptiste Muard: Founder of the Congregation of St. Edme and of the Monastery of La Pierre-qui-Vire* (New York: Burnes & Oates, 1886), vii.

<sup>28</sup> Community Photograph, Buckfast File, Saint Gregory’s Abbey Archives, Shawnee, OK.

died at 101 years in March 2016, was a contemporary of Father Joseph Murphy, the monk and chronicler of the first hundred years of Benedictine life in Oklahoma.<sup>29</sup> The two monks, writing in the same years, established an exchange of materials from the archives of their monasteries. Presumably, many of the materials Murphy assembled on the lives of the early monks came from Huerre. He traveled at least once to Oklahoma and the current archivist of Saint Gregory's Abbey in Shawnee remembers him well, although Huerre never seemed to get an accurate conception of the geography of the United States—claiming, as I have noted, that his home monastery had founded Sacred Heart “...in Indian Territory, today in the state of Texas.” Additionally, as abbot of Pierre-qui-Vire from 1952 until 1978 and President of the Subiaco Cassinese Congregation from 1980 until 1988, Huerre had privileged access to many manuscripts, letters, and documents relating to the founder and the monastery's first years. Indeed, his text carries almost as many reproductions of the writings of Jean-Baptiste Muard as it does Huerre's own musings on the founder. Trained as a historian, Huerre created a tight and reliable account of Jean-Baptiste Muard.<sup>30</sup>

So then, the hagiography produced by the communities that Guéranger and Muard founded reveals the priorities and experiences that shaped and informed their respective congregations. Soltner emphasized Guéranger's dedication to the liturgy and to the cause of Ultramontanism, as well as portraying the founder as a man of nearly superhuman

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<sup>29</sup> Marie Malzac, “Dom Denis Huerre, ancien abbé de La-Pierre-qui-vire, est décédé,” *La Croix* (France), March 10, 2016, accessed June 27, 2016, <http://www.la-croix.com/Urbi-et-Orbi/Carnet/Dom-Denis-Huerre-ancien-abbe-de-La-Pierre-qui-vire-est-decede-2016-03-10-1200745846>.

<sup>30</sup> Denis Huerre, *Petite vie de Jean-Baptiste Muard, Fondateur de la Pierre-qui-Vire* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1994), 179. See also Marie Malzac, “Dom Denis Huerre, ancien abbé de La-Pierre-qui-vire, est décédé,” *La Croix* (France), March 10, 2016, accessed June 27, 2016, <http://www.la-croix.com/Urbi-et-Orbi/Carnet/Dom-Denis-Huerre-ancien-abbe-de-La-Pierre-qui-vire-est-decede-2016-03-10-1200745846>.

virtue, discipline, and holiness. The Buckfast manuscript portrays Muard as an extreme person, dedicated and endowed with surpassing holiness for his entire life.

Understanding how both hagiographies characterize both of the founders clarifies Oklahoma's appeal for both French Benedictine congregations as well as distinguishing their parallel claims to the Benedictine tradition.

### **Prosper Guéranger and Solesmes**

Prosper Guéranger's love for the medieval monastic milieu was written into his imagination as a young child.<sup>31</sup> Born in 1805 in Sablé, a small village outside Le Mans, he spent his childhood scampering among the ruins of the medieval priory of Solesmes. His father was a petty merchant before opening a small (and at first only marginally legal) school in the town. Contemplating joining a religious order before the Revolution, Pierre Guéranger infused his pupils with a Catholic education. One local official referred to his curriculum as "fanatical" on account of its Catholic character. Indeed, the school (and the Guéranger home) was located in an old convent before relocating to a mansion formerly owned by Solesmes. That the elder Guéranger was devoted to the spirit of the counter-revolution was evident, not just in the denunciations of local officials, but also in his taking the risk of being married by a refractory priest during the violence of the revolution.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> David Knowles, *Christian Monasticism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), 170-172.

<sup>32</sup> Louis Soltner, *Solesmes and Dom Guéranger: 1805-1875* (Brewster, MA.: Paraclete Press, 1995), 1-6. See also Dom Prosper Guéranger, *In a Great and Noble Tradition: the Autobiography of Dom Prosper Guéranger (1805-1875): Founder of the Solesmes Congregation of Benedictine Monks and Nuns* (Herefordshire, United Kingdom: Gracewing, 2009), 3.



The younger Guéranger indicated from an early age he was interested in the retiring and intellectual features of the religious life. He indicated in his autobiography that “The lives of the Eastern solitaries also made a great impression on me. I often began to daydream about this subject. I sought my own desert among the picturesque rocks mingled with greenery, which have since been spoilt...I also frequently thought about settling on the *poulie* of Solesmes, whose spiky rocks and uneven terrain attracted me greatly.”<sup>33</sup>

Under his father’s tutelage, the younger Guéranger was a voracious reader, and became engrossed himself in the study of the Fathers of the Church. Knowing from an early age that he wanted to be a priest, Guéranger entered seminary on track to become a secular priest for the Diocese of Le Mans. While in seminary, he fell into reading the great works of the pre-revolutionary Benedictines, the Maurists—the largest congregation of Benedictines in France before the French revolution, known for their scholarship. Contemplating what life as a monk entailed, he maintained his devotion to reading the Maurist texts throughout his time in seminary. He became the secretary to the bishop, Claude-Madeleine de la Myre-Mory, upon graduating from seminary. An aged *ancien régime* aristocrat, the bishop introduced the young Guéranger to several influential Catholic intellectuals, numbered among them were Felicité de Lamennais, Montalembert, and Lacordaire. In addition to spending time in these circles while in Paris with the bishop, Guéranger gained access to the libraries of Paris. More important to Guéranger’s

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Soltner, *Solesmes and Dom Guéranger*, 14-19.

future, however, was the friendship he developed within this circle with the abbot of the Trappist monastery of Melleray (Department of Marne).<sup>34</sup>

The forced use of the Gallican liturgy (using a series of French liturgical books which were parallel to the Roman liturgical books, associated with conceptions of the French Church's relative freedom from papal influence) characterized Guéranger's early years as a priest. Complementing his role as secretary to the bishop of Le Mans, Guéranger also served as the canon of the cathedral until the bishop retired, at which point he relocated with him to Paris and began his acquaintance there with the Parisian Catholic intelligentsia. While the appointment as canon was a prestigious post for any young clergyman, the Gallican Rites grated on Guéranger, who described them as lacking the depth and sanctity as compared to the Roman Rite. In 1828 the bishop gave him, while still the canon, permission use the Roman missal and breviary and he penned what was to be his first foray into the debates of the Church in the decades leading up to the First Vatican Council, writing essays in defense of the Roman breviary and missal. When the bishop died, he stayed on in Paris and began to write still more in defense of both the traditional Roman liturgy and in favor of papal infallibility—two issues which preoccupied him for the remainder of his life.<sup>35</sup>

Far from politics, the restoration of the traditional Roman liturgy was for Guéranger the most important goal that renewal and restoration of Catholic Culture in France had to accomplish. The young priest grew disillusioned with nostalgia for the *ancien régime* in France as he listened to the bishop's Parisian circle of aging aristocrats

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 14-19.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 20-27.

sit and dream of its restoration. Guéranger knew that a plurality of the church before 1789 embraced Gallicanism, and towards that he was antipathetic. Nor could Guéranger have overlooked the fact that the Bourbon monarchs had long sought to siphon the resources and privileges away from the monastic houses to various other favored groups and individuals. Years later, he wrote to a fellow abbot that the pre-modern religious and political economy worked to restrict and dampen the spirit of monasticism that had been so strong for a millennium. For him, the revolution and the Empire freed the “monastic spirit” from bondage and enabled it to blossom as it had done “in the days of Alcuin, Hildebrand, and Bernard.” The Maurist preoccupation with manuscripts and research, he believed, was all that they had the opportunity to do; otherwise their charisms would have looked more like the monks of the first Benedictine centuries. Instead, Guéranger dedicated his energy to problems that were within the church, the loss of a traditional (and presumably homogenous) liturgy, rigorous theological scholarship, and a strong monastic character to center the entire culture. He wrote that “the need of the church seemed to me so urgent, the ideas about true Christianity so falsified and so compromised in the lay and ecclesiastical world, that I felt nothing but an urgency to found some kind of center wherein to recollect and revive pure traditions.”<sup>36</sup>

His busy life as an intellectual Parisian clergyman came to a halt in July 1830 as the Bourbons were once again swept from power and the bourgeois monarchy took their place. Guéranger returned to Le Mans even as he continued to write essays for Lamennais’s *L’Avenir* and other Catholic journals. The pivotal moment in Guéranger’s life came the following year when the old priory in his hometown of Sablé went up for

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Soltner, *Solesmes and Dom Guéranger*, 27, 209.

sale. After unsuccessful attempts to make the monastery into a factory, the owners decided to sell it. When the monastery entered the property market, Guéranger began to consider leading a restoration of the abbey through founding a community of monks guided by the Rule of Saint Benedict and the Benedictine tradition.

He now had a focus for his vision of renewing the church in France—the restoration of the Benedictine Order, which had been a recurring preoccupation as a seminarian. When Guéranger revealed his plans to his friend Lamennais, his friend pledged his support, commenting that “nothing could be more in harmony with the needs of the Church. Nothing could more aptly regenerate the ecclesiastical sciences in a solid and lasting manner.” Guéranger acted delicately in pursuing intellectual renewal-- aware as he was of the failed attempt to restore the Maurists in 1816 by Dom Leveaux, a former Maurist then serving as novice master for Downside Abbey in England. At a time when he felt that success required hiding his preoccupation with the Roman liturgy, Guéranger sought to “disarm suspicions” that his new foundation would be a Roman fifth column (that is, of course, exactly what it became.) The timing was propitious, for at the same time as Guéranger ruminated on restoring the Benedictines to France, the ancient abbey of Subiaco, founded by Saint Benedict himself outside Rome in the sixth century, was renewed under the guidance of Dom Pietro Casaretto. Pope Pius VII saw in the renewal of Benedictine life in Europe an easy victory for the cause of Ultramontanism, for the monastic communities historically answered to Rome and not to local bishops. For a papacy engaged in an effort against many bishops for more jurisdiction over the bishops’ dioceses, the renewal of communities which more or less abrogated the bishops’

authority in favor of the pope's authority was an obvious choice. The pontiff's support provided cover for Guéranger's soon-to-be established monastery.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to the support of Lamennais, he enlisted the support of a wealthy family in Sablé and several of his fellow priests in the diocese of Le Mans. With the bishop's permission and with several would-be monks joining him, Guéranger purchased the old monastery and began conventual life there in 1832, over 40 years after the revolution's Legislative Assembly ordered the nationalization and sale of the monasteries across France. Almost at once Guéranger set out to raise money and awareness for his new monastery.

Initially established under the authority of the bishop of Le Mans, the nascent community of Solesmes moved to receive formal recognition (and independence from the bishop) from Rome two years after conventual life began. Understanding the history of the monastic prerogative of independence from the bishops, and the acrimonious feuds that often had overwhelmed the relationship between bishops and monasteries, Guéranger was eager to vest his community with the historic privileges monastic communities needed in order to thrive. Pope Gregory XVI denied this first request and Guéranger's revised constitutions along with it, supposing Solesmes could well flounder as much as an earlier attempt to resurrect Benedictine life had fifteen years earlier, and he was not as certain of Guéranger as he was of Casaretto. Sure of the need to secure independence for Solesmes, Guéranger embarked for Rome quickly after receiving the news of the

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<sup>37</sup> Guéranger, *In a Great and Noble Tradition*, 134. See also Soltner, *Solesmes and Dom Guéranger*, 29; Rees, "The Benedictine Revival," 285-286.

pontiff's refusal. Aided by the Jesuit Superior-general and Montalembert, Guéranger made a favorable impression on the Roman court and even with the Pope himself.<sup>38</sup>

Although filled with admiration for the Italian community of Benedictines (known as the Congregation of Subiaco) as well as the former Benedictines of France, Guéranger made it clear that his order would be a return to what he considered the undiluted simplicity of the Rule of Saint Benedict, the paradigmatic text of Christian monasticism in the West. He wrote to Pope Gregory of his intentions for his new community that he wanted to reactivate Benedict's rule as understood during his lifetime while also dedicating his monks to defending papal prerogative and serious scholarship (such as the Maurists had done.) But unlike the Maurists, his monastic community was to be free of Gallicanism. More than that—it was to be an ardent opponent of Gallicanism. He wrote “As for us, the Alps do not exist. We are Romans, and we are ready to fight for the Roman doctrine in all matters.” Guéranger, Ultramontane from youth, conceived dedication to the pure Rule of Saint Benedict, use of the Roman liturgy, and commitment to a powerful pontifical authority as the three components of a healthy renewal in France of both the Benedictine way of life and the church at large.<sup>39</sup>

Guéranger may have been no Gallican, but he believed in the distinct identity of local and national churches. Thus, when members of the Roman court suggested Solesmes joining the Subiaco Congregation, he declined. In a letter to the abbot of a Bavarian monastery four decades later, Guéranger wrote that “Each monastic family takes on the physiognomy of the country where it establishes itself.” He described a

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<sup>38</sup> Soltner, *Solesmes and Dom Guéranger*, 40-46.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-50. See also Guéranger, *In a Great and Noble Tradition*, 248-9.

monastery as an organism—interacting with and feeding off of the local culture even as it moved to purify and sanctify it. Anticipating the mood in Rome towards centralization, he wrote that if all the Benedictine houses united under a Roman federation “living spontaneity will be destroyed” Joining in the life of Subiaco would have meant relinquishing the spontaneity inherent in local rule-- and so he looked neither to replicate the Maurists nor the contemporary Congregation of Subiaco.<sup>40</sup>

Guéranger’s journey to Rome proved fruitful, as Gregory XVI assented to the Solesmes project. Desiring his nascent Benedictine congregation to be named “the Congregation of Solesmes,” the pope suggested instead the “Congregation of France.” The title meant something significant to the pope, for Solesmes was not only granted the permission to continue their local project in Sablé, but were also given all the titles, permissions, and privileges formerly possessed by the three French Benedictine Congregations of the *Ancient Régime*: Cluny, Saint Vanne, and Saint Maur. Gregory recognized Solesmes as the inheritor of all three. With this title came the commission to restore Guéranger’s conception of authentic Benedictine monasticism across France.<sup>41</sup>

Guéranger fought with his bishop over the autonomy of his monastic community when he arrived back at Solesmes. Bishop Bouvier, heretofore a supporter of the Solesmes project, took offense over a ceremony for a local convent that Guéranger presided over without asking the bishop’s permission. The dispute, ultimately about the prerogatives of the local French Church over those of the Pope, to whom Solesmes was directly responsible, rehearsed the battle between Gallicanism and Ultramontanism that

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<sup>40</sup> Sister Mary David Totah. *The Spirit of Solesmes* (Petersham, MA.: St. Bede’s Publications, 1997), 232.

<sup>41</sup> Soltner, *Solesmes and Dom Guéranger*, 46-49.

was in progress across France. Guéranger used the occasion to advocate the tradition of monastic independence that existed in previous centuries while the bishop, now nearly half a century after the revolution, was unaccustomed to such arrangements, absent as they had been from France for living memory (and in certain respects much longer). The dispute required Rome to intervene, at which point Gregory succumbed to the bishop's pressure and required Solesmes to exist under the bishop's authority for 7 years. This setback for Guéranger reinforced the strong need for future projects to begin only after the local bishop guaranteed monastic autonomy.<sup>42</sup>

For the remainder of his life (dying in 1875) Guéranger had two interwoven commitments: the expansion and consolidation of his nascent congregation and advocacy of liturgical, theological, and ecclesiastical Ultramontanism. The first, the expansion and consolidation of Solesmes, began as soon as the disagreement with Bishop Bouvier ended. Guéranger established a monastic colony in the ancient headquarters of the Maurists in Paris: Saint Germain-des-Prés. Guéranger had a wide network of supporters and friends and could operate outside Bishop Bouvier's interference. The choice of Paris made further sense because his brother monks, as they joined the monastery, needed not only access to theological education that Solesmes was not mature enough yet to provide, but also access to the great Parisian archives and libraries that provided the intellectual resources necessary for the monks to carry on the Maurist project of serious scholarship. Guéranger himself developed into a serious commentator on archeology—in a similar way to the Maurist monks who became geographers, and librarians. In attaining for the studious monks all the benefits of Paris, however, Guéranger did not want them to live

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 50-55.



long periods outside the rhythms and habits of conventual life. Although the *Saint-Germain* community eventually floundered due to mismanagement by one of Guéranger's lieutenants, it inaugurated the period of Solesmes's slow but steady pursuit of returning liturgically and dogmatically orthodox monasticism to French society.<sup>43</sup>

The next opportunities to open new monasteries came at the invitation of the local bishops. The first was to restore the monastery of Saint Martin de Ligugé, which was the oldest monastery in France. Allegedly, Saint Hilary of Poitiers converted the Gauls *en masse* at the spot where these newly converted founded Saint Martin's. Soltner wrote of both the enthusiastic local bishop and Dom Guéranger that they understood one another's desires and became eager allies. The bishop shared the monk's desire "...to give back to France its centers of prayer...in the same places where they had shone in the past..." Guéranger called one of his monks from Bavaria, where he was exporting the Solesmes model, to become the superior of the restored St Martin de Ligugé. The second foundation was in Marseille, again at the enthusiastic invitation of the local bishop. The Marseille community, once again on the grounds of a former Benedictine monastery, was in the center of Marseille and met with a warm welcome from the bishop and many of Marseille's most engaged Catholics at its establishment.<sup>44</sup>

Arguably the most important foundation that Guéranger made during his life, apart from Solesmes itself, was the women's monastery of Saint Cecilia. Within walking distance of Solesmes, the foundress, Cécile Bruyère, on whose behalf Guéranger, in his old age, began this new monastic community, was a daughter of a family of local

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 58-64, 88, 92-94.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 188-191.

benefactors to Solesmes. Surveying the milieu of women's congregations, he decried that there were few communities for women religious not dedicated to the myriad Gallican liturgies and what the hagiographer referred to as stuck in the eighteenth century. And so, dedicated as he was to restoring the Roman liturgy and monastic traditionalism to France, he aided the foundress in establishing Saint Cecilia's. At once vocations flooded Saint Cecilia's as the foundress (and now abbess) Cécile Bruyère became a prolific writer. After Guéranger's death, she was the unassailable and universally-recognized interpreter of the mind of the founder—holding sway over Saint Cecilia's and Solesmes alike. Like Solesmes, Saint Cecilia's founded monasteries across France in the ensuing decades. Indeed, the yearbook of Saint Pé-de-Bigorre Minor Seminary, running an article surveying the contemporary Benedictine establishments in France, remarked on the success of Saint Cecilia's that "From the beginning of the century, diverse communities of women have embraced the Rule of Saint Benedict; their monasteries today are a great deal more numerous in France than those of the male Benedictines."<sup>45</sup>

When not tending to his expanding monastic community, Dom Guéranger was a leading participant in the theological controversies that culminated in 1870 during the First Vatican Council. Although unable to attend the council himself, Guéranger laid the intellectual groundwork for the deliberations that transpired at the council. An ally of Pius IX, Guéranger articulated the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception that the Pope used in his dogmatic definition. Most important (and controversial) was his defense of papal infallibility in the book *The Pontifical Monarchy*, which according to Soltner was

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 195-199. See also Petit Séminaire de Saint-Pé, *Annuaire du Petit-Séminaire*, 117-120.

the formative text in the Council's adoption of the doctrine. Sixty-five at the time of the Council, Guéranger's contribution was his final contribution to the cause of Ultramontanism. However, things had changed in the decades since the foundation of Solesmes, for now he was respected and feted by the French hierarchy who had moved progressively away from two centuries of Gallicanism.<sup>46</sup>

Dom Guéranger founded the community of Solesmes to resurrect monasticism both for its own inherent value as well as an effective and necessary component of returning the church in France to what he deemed was orthodox liturgy and ecclesiology. He corresponded with fellow Benedictines across the United States and Europe. He became the wise man of the worldwide Benedictine restoration, always responding when others wrote for advice (which they often did). After his death, Solesmes retreated even further within itself as the founder's successors strove towards an ever more perfect liturgy. As mentioned above, Dom Guéranger during his lifetime never lost his interest in engaging the world beyond the monastery, notably joining in the battles over papal infallibility and the liturgies that Catholic communities outside his own would use. This trend inwards foreshadowed the foundation decades later of a daughter house in the monastery of Fontgombault. The Fontgombault branch of the Solesmes Congregation typified this inward movement and stood apart from its sister houses as adherents to the old Latin mass after the Second Vatican Council. Through its hagiography of their founder, the monks of the Congregation of Solesmes demonstrated their mission to

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<sup>46</sup> Soltner, *Solesmes and Dom Guéranger*, 75-88.

restore traditionalist Benedictine monasticism to serve as centers of orthodox liturgies and theological training.<sup>47</sup>

### **Jean-Baptiste Muard and Pierre-qui-Vire**

The official hagiography of Jean-Baptiste Muard was written and translated into English by a collection of the founder's successors, Father Brulée, Isidore Robot, and the monks of Buckfast Abbey, who his life in order to further the cause of his canonization. Denis Huerre wrote a more modern and formally historical biography which could be called hagiography in a general sense. Although sharing mutual admiration, Guéranger and Muard had different priorities vis-à-vis the Benedictine tradition, although they shared a common religious zeal and wariness for submission to overbearing bishops. Even according to the Buckfast manuscript, Jean-Baptiste Muard was a restless itinerant bent on using the ancient Benedictine model as an instrument to evangelize rural France and non-western peoples unacquainted with Christian culture. In his words, his goal was "to ally two lives entirely different, the coenobitic and the apostolic."<sup>48</sup>

Born in the village of Vireaux in the diocese of Sens in 1809, Jean-Baptiste grew up in a family of small means who were ambivalent towards the Church. However, the local priest, Father Rolley, quickly undertook to educate the young Muard, who was precocious and naturally pious. Entering seminary as a teenager, he already exhibited the preoccupations with the three elements that dominated his life: ascetic discipline, foreign missions, and coenobitic life. He took to wearing a hairshirt and practiced severe mortifications that only became more pronounced as he grew older. Inciting his

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<sup>47</sup> Soltner, *Solesmes and Dom Guéranger*, 171.

<sup>48</sup> Buckfast Abbey, *The Life of Jean Baptiste Muard*, 3.

imagination for evangelizing overseas, he also subscribed the *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi* (which became a financial backer of Pierre-qui-Vire's Sacred Heart mission), and early in his life intended to join the overseas missions. When in the preparatory seminary he created what he termed a "little congregation," for which he drew up a rule and recruited fellow students!<sup>49</sup>

After graduating from the seminary in Sens and his subsequent ordination, Muard served the diocese as a parish priest. His first assignment was to the village of Joux-la-Ville, although he never lost his ambition of overseas missions. Throughout his seminary days he kept a correspondence with his old mentor Father Rolley. Rolley encouraged Muard in his pursuit of ascetic discipline and also inspired in the younger man his love of preaching in the most rural villages. In his letters from seminary, Muard outlined and discussed the rule that he constantly amended, writing in 1833 that he sought "1. Humility. 2. Continuous penance 3. Chastity. 4. Christian Softness. 5. Abnegation and mortification of the will. 6 Mindfulness of the presence of God 7. Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and Mary. 8. The Love of God, completing all the virtues, or instead the uniquely Christian Virtue." During this time in Joux-la-Ville, he promoted all the myriad and sundry pieties of the day: confraternities, prayer groups, and the like. After Joux-la-Ville, the bishop assigned him to the considerably larger town of Avallon. This second assignment provided him the network and close community ties that proved crucial when the opportunity of founding Pierre-qui-Vire arose. In Avallon, not only did he find the financial resources to further his missionary endeavors, but also an enthusiastic community eager to aid him in his undertakings. As he had done in the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 5-48.

seminary, he wrote a rule for himself to follow that anticipated his foundation years later of both Pontigny (see below) and Pierre-qui-Vire. The Buckfast Manuscript claimed that Muard's Rule contained over sixty articles and sought to facilitate "leading a life at once active and tranquil"—features that he emphasized for his Benedictine monastery years later. In Avallon and Joux-la-Ville, Muard was fulfilling the preoccupation of his seminary days: to create his own Rule.<sup>50</sup>

Even as a parish priest, Muard was always trying to get overseas as a missionary. Reading the lives of the Franciscans and Jesuits who sailed to exotic locations during ages past, he was desperate to join their ranks. The bishop, however, declined his requests for permission to sail for parts unknown. Muard kept pressing, all to no avail; the bishop retained Muard in spite of the priest's "so painful a state" engendered by his longing for the overseas missions. He had written a note himself while in seminary, asking God (and the bishop) to "Order me to go to the backregions of China and America, and I will fly!" If the bishop declined Muard's ambition, he did allow him to carry on missions throughout the rural villages of the diocese, those much like his native Vireaux. At the same moment when the United States was in the throes of the Second Great Awakening, Muard endeavored to rebuild piety in the villages of the diocese with a similar flare for emotive preaching. He preached in the evenings and led Eucharistic processions, and above all heard confessions. After training with an order of preachers in Lyon, Muard returned to Sens and, under the approval and auspices of the bishop, began a quasi-order of missionary preachers to circuit throughout the diocese. The bishop allowed him to recruit other diocesan priests for the in-house missionary endeavor and

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 108. See also Huerre, *Petite vie de Jean-Baptiste Muard*, 15, 21.

supplied the local seminary, from which Muard himself had graduated, as their headquarters until they could raise the funds to relocate. Though he had begun his new project, Muard was still frustrated in his longings for overseas missionary work. The Buckfast Manuscript recorded that when several priests who Muard knew in Lyon were on the way to New Guinea that he was glad for his friends even as the desire burned inside him to join them, all the while “complaining at God for giving me attractions which he would not allow me to follow.”<sup>51</sup>

His community of revival preachers needed a home, and the seminary was not suitable permanently. However, the ancient church of Pontigny, abandoned since the closures of 1791, was in the diocese of Sens, and it was only a brief time until Muard started eyeing it for his community of preachers. Not only was it centrally located within the region he was to evangelize, but it was a pilgrimage destination as well. St. Edmund of Canterbury, buried there for four hundred years, was reported as incorruptible and drew the pilgrims in order to venerate the old saint. His missionary priests would then be able to hear the confessions of the pilgrims. Additionally, the church itself was large and magnificent, and Muard imagined turning the whole complex into a retreat house. After a journey to inspect the old abbey, Muard recognized in Pontigny the perfect location for his community. Muard got his wish when the funds became available from the bishop, and the community of diocesan missionaries established themselves there under his reluctant leadership. At Pontigny, Muard began to articulate the ideal community that he hoped to create: a community of ascetic cenobites, united under a rule, independent of the

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<sup>51</sup> Buckfast, *the Life of Jean Baptiste Muard*, 120-140. See also Huerre, *Petite vie de Jean-Baptiste Muard*, 24.

bishop's authority who, preached wherever they were called—be it overseas or the next village over.<sup>52</sup>

Muard got Pontigny, soon to be organized under the name of “the Congregation of Saint Edmund.” But he was restless, not wanting to be still under the bishop's jurisdiction nor to be the superior of the community. In fact, he dreaded the idea and sought his associate, the *abbé* Bravard, to assume the responsibility. He implored him, saying “You know that I am not formed for commanding but for obeying; you are aware of my timidity as regards giving advice, or administering reproof if such necessity should occur.” But nobody else wanted to be Muard's superior—obedient he may have been, but their never appeared a time when he did not chafe at receiving orders. To his dismay he became the community's superior, and the difficulties were no less a burden than he anticipated. The Buckfast Manuscript noted that “when we remember the constant claims of the spiritual order which were daily made upon him...it is marvelous how he could find time for everything, not to speak of bodily strength.”<sup>53</sup>

The regimen that he drew up for community life, the Rule, was considered rigorous if not harsh. One of his fellow missionary priests, after Muard showed him the Rule, considered quitting the new community at once. Muard himself, however, lived beyond his own Rule, adding in more disciplines and ascetic practices than it enumerated. For him, drinking solely water and eating only vegetables and bread while living in the

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<sup>52</sup> Buckfast, *the Life of Jean Baptiste Muard*, 140-160.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 160-180.



tool shed (especially on hot and cold nights) grounded his radical commitment to the renewal of Catholicism in Sens.<sup>54</sup>

And yet, Pontigny had barely begun when the superior began to imagine still another community, one that would *fully* match his desires and ambitions. Moreover, he grew convinced that a stronger commitment to a life of prayer and penance for his community was the only way to combat what he saw as an evil century. He wrote to his friend, a priest in Séry, in 1845 that theirs was an evil century that required exceptional holiness from Christians. He went on to claim that the only antidote to the evils of what subsequent churchmen called “Modernism” –belief in a secular political economy and a cultural shift away from metaphysical realism-- was to reestablish the monastic vigor of the first Benedictine centuries. Just as Guéranger’s childhood among the ruins of Solesmes left him with images reworked into practical plans, so too did the ancient monastery of Pontigny leave an impression on Muard’s imagination. He started to believe that God promised him that either he would find the means of founding a congregation that undertook missions overseas, or his soul would be damned. He developed a plan to go to Rome and seek the Pope’s permission to found a new order--or start his own branch of an already-existing one. After convincing (through wearing down) both the bishop and his confreres at Pontigny that this was what he needed to do, he set out for Rome with the two companions who formed the beginnings of his soon-to-be community. As embarked for Rome he stated that “I am discharged of the headship of Pontigny, the responsibility of which weighed heavily on me.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 192-250. See also Huerre, *Petite vie de Jean-Baptiste Muard*, 56.

After an adventurous journey, Muard and his companions arrived in Rome, where they met with the Pope and the superior of the Franciscan order. Pope Pius IX was amenable to Muard's aspirations. The Franciscans, with whom Muard had at first considered joining (or adapting their Rule for his own designs), were not interested in supporting his desire to establish a severe "preaching monastery" in France. So he and his companions made their way to the ancient Abbey of Subiaco. Subiaco, the oldest Benedictine monastery, was the motherhouse of the Subiaco Congregation. The abbot of one of the communities attached to Subiaco, a Frenchman named Defazy, found affinity with Muard and provided space in a hermitage onsite for the three companions to stay. Muard finally settled on the Benedictines, with their Rule of Saint Benedict, as the ideal choice for his longed-for foundation.<sup>56</sup>

The abbot loaned Muard his copy of the Rule of Saint Benedict, and Muard shared the constitutions of the order he was planning with the abbot. The abbot, invoking the memory of the Benedictines who had Christianized the Germanic tribes, convinced Muard that the Rule could indeed be employed for missionary endeavors. He came to the conviction that "God has provided for us, moreover, in the code of St. Benedict a rule which adapts itself perfectly to the kind of life which we wish to lead...adapting itself wonderfully." Muard, now committed to the Benedictines, envisioned in his constitutions something that the abbot warned was too severe, and so not likely to be approved by the Pope. Muard's rule called for a restricted diet of water, vegetables, and bread in recompense for not beginning the daily liturgy in the middle of the night. This, he believed, would render the monks well-disposed to the life of what he called the

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<sup>56</sup> Buckfast, *The Life of Jean Baptiste Muard*, 250-298.

“Benedictine preachers.” When he met Pius IX one final time before leaving for Sens, he received the pontiff’s encouragement in establishing this new order of Benedictines. The Abbot, always supportive of Muard, was nevertheless puzzled by his decision not to join with Guéranger at Solesmes. On this matter, neither the Soltner manuscript nor the Buckfast Manuscript explain why Muard did not consider joining Solesmes. Given Muard’s goals, Solesmes was too relaxed ascetically, too focused on traditional monastic life, and too preoccupied with liturgical developments. Muard wanted what he had always wanted: a community of monks who were to somehow also be missionary preachers both in France and abroad. Muard was not a person to stay content in another’s project; he longed for the freedom that founding a new order guaranteed.<sup>57</sup>

Back in Sens, he located the remote area, near Avallon, where he founded Pierre-qui-Vire. Sitting on the marches between to dioceses of Dijon, Névres, and Sens, Pierre-qui-Vire was the foundation of the new order of Benedictine preachers. The Marquis de Chastellux, a local noble and a devout Catholic, donated the land. Yet, in a rupture with the Benedictine commitment to a stable life rooted in one place, Muard wanted to lease the property from its owners, and so revealed himself to be deeply attracted to the mendicant orders. But in 1850, as Pierre-qui-Vire was erected as a permanent monastery, people came from all over the region to celebrate the opening of the monastery’s church. Even local officials and the national guard came to celebrate (an ironic twist considering that these same institutions would forcibly remove the monks from their monastery thirty years later).<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 298-349.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 345-380.

Muard lived another four years, spending all his time giving missions in the rural villages, much as he had done at Pontigny. Indeed, until his Rule received sanction from Rome, Pierre-qui-Vire was still under the bishop's jurisdiction! This would change after Muard's death, even though the zealous founder's original Rule was never approved. These monks, of whom Muard said "We are not...simply Trappists, or simply Benedictines, we are Benedictine preachers," were to join the Subiaco Congregation because Muard's rule was deemed too harsh, just as his friend, abbot Defazy, had predicted. Even after joining Subiaco, Pierre-qui-Vire distinguished itself from the rest of the congregation through its severe discipline and ascetic practice. Pius IX was said to remark that "it is more admirable than imitable." The early history of Pierre-qui-Vire testified to the foresight in Rome's decision, for monks under Muard began to burn out, much in the same way that Isidore Robot would in Indian Territory twenty years later. For if Pierre-qui-Vire belonged to Subiaco, the monks never abandoned their founder's wishes, and many of those most dedicated to his legacy ended up in Indian Territory where they were free to institute Muard's severe Rule.

In his last several years as superior of the new monastery, Muard was surprisingly ambivalent about formal recognition of his community. Indeed, at the time of his death he already was remarking that the office of abbot of Pierre-qui-Vire was a heavy burden, and he was gone more often than not giving missions as he had always done. The monastery became canonically recognized as a daughter house of the Subiaco Congregation, thus granting it freedom from the bishop. Additionally, Pierre-qui-Vire was allowed and encouraged to keep up their missionary work. In the following decades,

Pierre-qui-Vire established communities in Indian Territory, England, Ireland, Vietnam, Cambodia, Madagascar, Morocco, and still more locations across France.<sup>59</sup>

Guéranger, years after the death of Muard, visited Pierre-qui-Vire upon the erection of its grand sanctuary. He was reported to have always held Muard in high regard. Both had a vision that included the central place that a renewed Benedictine Order in France would have in the reweaving of Christian culture both in France and across the world. Guéranger understood the monastic tradition to be valuable on its own terms while Muard instrumentalized it to create effective missionaries. When the congregations they founded established monastic communities in Oklahoma, they complicated and enriched the Christian monastic experience in the United States. Sacred Heart at the time of its foundation was the only Benedictine monastic foundation given entirely to the Indian missions (although the Swiss American Congregation also had a robust Native American mission). Over one hundred years later, after Sacred Heart became the Americanized Saint Gregory's Abbey, Solesmes's Clear Creek became the only Benedictine monastery for men which restricted itself to Guéranger's own priorities. Different in many ways from one another, the monastic communities that Guéranger and John-Baptiste Muard founded shared a commitment to laboring for the restoration of Christian culture generally and a robust monastic culture specifically.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 400-534. See also Knowles, *Christian Monasticism*, 172, 192.

## CHAPTER III

### FROM PIERRE-QUI-VIRE TO INDIAN TERRITORY: SACRED HEART ABBEY

In 1875, Dom Isidore Robot of La Pierre-qui-Vire monastery was far from his home in Burgundy. Arriving in the United States two years earlier, the monk and his companion sought a project that suited the missionary ambitions of the monks of Pierre-qui-Vire. Robot was near to losing hope when Bishop Fitzgerald of Little Rock offered Robot the project of building a Catholic presence among the Native Americans of Indian Territory. Indian Territory was part of Fitzgerald's diocese but was virtually abandoned through lack of resources. Robot accepted the bishop's offer, establishing Sacred Heart Monastery and Mission within a year. Rome granted Robot the title of Apostolic Prefect over the Indian Territory while also tasking his superiors at the French monastery of Pierre-qui-Vire with supervising their monk's progress. The Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Lyons, as a center for French evangelizing missionary work, agreed to fund the effort.

This missionary endeavor was an outgrowth of the monks' traditional, pre-modern role of quiet, cloistered work, study and prayer. Sacred Heart was the sole French monastery for men founded in the United States—until Clear Creek monastery opened in 1999-- also in Oklahoma.

### **French Beginnings**

Why did the monks from Pierre-qui-Vire found Sacred Heart Abbey and accept the rigors of frontier evangelization in Oklahoma? This question is complicated, given that the Benedictines of Pierre-qui-Vire, soon after beginning their mission to Indian Territory, engaged in missions across the world, with many of the same monks traveling between different missions. Reflecting on the difficulty of tracing the history of the Benedictine Order in the nineteenth century, Clément Nastorg wrote “to speak of a renewal of religious life in the nineteenth century is to enter a poorly explored forest... to do so requires the tenacity and patience of a Benedictine!” Despite the difficulties in identifying the many motivations of individual actors, it became clear that the monks from Pierre-qui-Vire founded Sacred Heart Abbey because Indian Territory offered a hospitable (yet under privileged) society while also providing abundant land and anonymity from local ecclesial authority, fulfilling the vocation of the home community of Pierre-qui-Vire.<sup>60</sup>

Dom Isidore Robot's early life reflected the experience of many young French clergymen in the mid-nineteenth century. He grew up in the Burgundian village of

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<sup>60</sup> Clément Nastorg, “Le Renouveau de la vie religieuse en France au XIX<sup>me</sup> siècle: Diversité et dynamismes,” in *Centenaire de Belloc* (Belloc, France: Editions Ezkila, 1977), 18.

Tharoiseau (thirty kilometers from the monastery) and began studies in the diocesan seminary. As he progressed in his studies, he changed course and joined the Benedictines of Pierre-qui-Vire and began life there as a novice monk. He served the French army as a chaplain during the Franco-Prussian War and witnessed firsthand the disaster that beset the French at the Battle of Sedan. As was normative for the monks of Pierre-qui-Vire, Robot developed an intense devotion to Dom Muard, Pierre-qui-Vire's founder—the monk who, along with a handful of others, restored Western monasticism after the French Revolution. Muard, dying four years after Pierre-qui-Vire's founding in 1854, believed that it was the monks' duty in the modern day to reverse the secularization of European society and pursue the conversion of non-Europeans. Pierre-qui-Vire, along with its daughter houses, bore this mission, believing they were inserting themselves into a great narrative of heroic monks from millennia earlier who facilitated the conversion of the Germanic tribes of Europe. Robot believed it was his vocation to follow Muard's vision and to sacrifice himself for the cause of converting pagan peoples--just as his monastic forbearers had. This trend of "radiating outwards"<sup>61</sup> was a dominant feature of the French Church. It was in the pursuit of this vocation that Robot arrived in the United States.<sup>62</sup>

### **The Apostolic Prefecture and The Monastic Settlement of Sacred Heart**

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<sup>61</sup> J.P. Daughton and Owen White, eds. *In God's Empire: French Missionaries and the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6.

<sup>62</sup> Annals of Sacred Heart Abbey, Sacred Heart File, Saint Gregory's Abbey Archives, Shawnee, OK. See also Mary Urban Kehoe, "The Educational Activities of Distinguished Missionaries Among the Five Civilized Tribes," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 24, no. 2 (April 1946), 170; *Indian Advocate* (Sacred Heart, OK), May 01, 1900; 1888.



Indian Territory was not Robot's first choice. He came to the United States after multiple unsuccessful attempts to persuade his superiors to send him as a missionary to North Africa, where fellow monks from Pierre-qui-Vire had recently established a monastery and mission. His superiors found Robot to be unreliable and perhaps even unstable. Finally moved to act on Robot's repeated request to transfer to the North African mission, the abbot compromised and sent the monk to the United States, where along with his companion, Brother Dominic Lambert, he was to offer his services to Archbishop Perche of New Orleans. Robot accepted his abbot's assignment and arrived in New Orleans in 1873 speaking no English and expecting an enthusiastic greeting. Perche, who issued a plea to France for priests the year before, was unexpectedly ambivalent about their arrival and treated the new arrivals to a chilled reception. He was unimpressed with the monks and postponed assigning them a project for months. Robot grew increasingly despondent: his sojourn in America so far did not have the romantic flair that he imagined existed in North Africa. Perche eventually assigned the monks to a backwater region near the Texas border where they were to serve local parishes on a circuit and serve as chaplains for a small convent.<sup>63</sup>

Although Robot was glad was glad to be in North America, Perche's assignment grated on the ambitious and hyperactive monk, for whom the remote assignment on the Texas border was never a permanent endeavor. True to Pierre-qui-Vire's vocation, he believed that the assignment distracted from his mission to serve as a missionary among a

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<sup>63</sup> Isidore Robot, *The Life of the Rev. Mary John Baptist Muard* (New York: Fr. Pustet and Co.: 1882), 302. See also Joseph P. Murphy, *Tenacious Monks: The Oklahoma Benedictines, 1875-1975: Indian Missionaries, Catholic Founders, Educators, Agriculturists* (Shawnee, OK: Benedictine Color Press, 1974).

pagan or overlooked people. Moreover, Perche's assignment provided the monks no opportunity to establish a monastery independent of Perche's authority on land that would belong to the monks. Not willing to continue in such a capacity, Robot began searching for an assignment that responded more closely to the vision and vocation of his home monastery. He met Bishop Fitzgerald of Little Rock at a gathering of regional Catholic clergy and developed a far better relationship with him than he had with the aloof Perche. Fitzgerald offered him the task of establishing an apostolate in the Indian Territory. The Indian Territory was nominally under the jurisdiction of the diocese of Little Rock, but with only nine priests to tend to the entire state of Arkansas, the bishop was in no place to establish a meaningful and permanent mission among Native American tribes settled to the west. Prior to the Frenchmen, the priest from Fort Smith traveled occasionally to Indian Territory. The Indian Territory project, Fitzgerald surmised, would appeal to Robot and would not cost the diocese of Little Rock manpower or money.<sup>64</sup>

Robot began to plan for the new mission immediately. In the summer of 1875 he sent word to Fitzgerald that he and Lambert would accept the offer. After his initial enthusiasm, it was only a matter of time before the monk recognized the magnitude of the project. Here was the chance that the monks of Pierre-qui-Vire sought: the opportunity to spread his religion among a people who had little-to-no experience with it. In addition, Fitzgerald, in being so chronically shorthanded, would have virtually no opportunity to interfere with the monks' projects even if he desired to exercise authority. Seen from the

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<sup>64</sup> Robot, *The Life of the Rev. Mary John Baptist Muard*, 300-305, 431. See also Ripinger, *The Benedictine Order in the United States*, 29; Murphy, *Tenacious Monks*, 54.

perspective of the French Benedictines in the nineteenth century, it offered the same opportunity that North Africa presented—to bring faith and civilization to the pagan and indigenous peoples of the earth while establishing an autonomous community. Like Saint Boniface of old, Robot was to be a monk sent out to convert the barbarian and build a stable community.<sup>65</sup>

Not only was the project consistent with the monk's vocation to missionary-monasticism and evangelization, Bishop Fitzgerald also promised to lobby Rome to name Robot "Prefect Apostolic" over Indian Territory. This was the essential guarantee of episcopal non-interference—the American bishops would have no say once Indian Territory was its own recognized jurisdiction. Rome assented and Robot acquired independence from the bishops in the United States as Fitzgerald relinquished Indian Territory. Rome demanded that the abbot at Pierre-qui-Vire take responsibility for the project. Robot was thus a bishop, yet still answerable to his superiors in France. The Vatican's Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith also tasked the abbot of Pierre-qui-Vire with providing the mission's financial and human resources. When the French Government forced the mother monastery to close in 1880, the Society for the Propagation of the Faith assumed the role of financier. Indian Territory was the responsibility of the monks of Pierre-qui-Vire, its other daughter houses, and increasingly, the entire French Catholic Church. Robot was not to be a solitary missionary in North America, but the ambassador of the revived French monastic

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<sup>65</sup> Murphy, *Tenacious Monks*, 65. See also Robot, *The Life of the Rev. Mary John Baptist Muard*, 435; Annals of Sacred Heart Abbey, Sacred Heart File, SGA.

tradition invested in converting Non-European peoples and consolidating its strength through new monastic communities.<sup>66</sup>

Robot peregrinated across Indian Territory for the first year. After riding in from Fort Smith on horseback, he arrived in the town of Atoka, then in Indian Territory, in October. The small community of white Americans developed along the rail line as a link between the tribes and the outside world. There was a small Catholic population among the townsfolk and even a rudimentary building that functioned as their church. The monks based in Atoka as Robot sought the place where he could build his monastery and mission headquarters. Traveling at first to the Choctaw Tribe, based in the southeast portion of the territory, the monks responded to the tribe's request that they build a missionary school (to be placed alongside the monastery) to serve the tribe. The deal fell through when Robot realized that the tribal leaders were not interested in allowing him autonomy, but merely offered to lease the land to the monks. Just as with Perche in New Orleans, Robot would compromise neither the monks' autonomy nor their capacity to build a permanent monastery on their own land. Without the title to the land, the monk's security in Indian Territory as a refuge could not be guaranteed.<sup>67</sup>

The scene in Atoka soured, however, and the monks needed a permanent location for their monastery. In his eagerness to begin his apostolate, Robot hired a teacher and opened a school in the rudimentary church. There were enough families in Atoka interested in a Catholic education, but Robot left on his scouting missions for weeks at a

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<sup>66</sup> Annals of Sacred Heart Abbey, Sacred Heart File, SGA. See also Kehoe, "The Educational Activities of Distinguished Missionaries Among the Five Civilized Tribes," 167; Murphy, *Tenacious Monks*, 82; Oeuvre Pontificale Missionnaire de la Propagation de la foi, *Annales de La Propagation de la Foi* (Lyon: M.P. Rusand, 1888), 937.

<sup>67</sup> Robot to Abbot Moreau, February 21, 1876, Sacred Heart File, SGA.

time. Although the school had enough students to justify its continued operation, the teacher Robot hired quit after a year. Although it did not comport with the Catholic experience either in the past or in the coming years, Robot blamed a small group of allegedly anti-Catholic townsmen for scaring the teacher away. Although likely untrue, Robot's imagination got the better of him as he perceived persecution at the hands of these "Protestants." It would not be the last time Robot would find antagonism where it was not. Whatever happened to his school, Robot developed a vocal and shrill anti-Protestantism, complemented by an intense Catholic triumphalism, which he maintained until his death. The Atoka ordeal was Robot's first encounter with a setback and he responded by retreating into familiar beliefs about the evil nature of Protestantism. In a letter to the abbess of the French monastery of Jouarre, Robot claimed that his chief difficulty in establishing a meaningful Catholic presence in the Territory was a toxic mixture of sin and Protestantism. He was ambivalent about Protestantism until he felt it jeopardized his designs—at which point Protestantism became yet another adversary that the monks needed to overcome.<sup>68</sup>

Robot eventually agreed with the Citizen Potawatomi tribe to build his monastery and mission on their reservation. A poor and small tribe, the Citizen Potawatomi periodically hosted Jesuit missionaries in Kansas and Nebraska prior to relocating to Indian Territory. Many families in the tribe maintained the remnants of Catholic religious customs and welcomed priests among them again. Robot agreed to open a day school and a boarding school for the tribe in exchange for the ownership of the land for

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<sup>68</sup> Murphy, *Tenacious Monks*, 59. See also Robot to Superior of Jouarre, Annals of Sacred Heart Abbey, Sacred Heart File, SGA.

the monastery. The abbot of Pierre-qui-Vire approved of Robot's decision and sent several more monks to help Robot and Lambert. Later in 1876, the monks travelled seventy miles west from Atoka with lumber brought in on the train. In the spring, while living in tents on site, the monks and Potawatomi tribesmen built Sacred Heart Monastery and School. They completed the first building within weeks and the monks moved in and began normal monastic life. Here was to be Pierre-qui-Vire's daughter house—a center to evangelize the Native Americans, a mission out of the reach of any local ecclesial authority, and a refuge for monks fleeing the persecution that was soon to confront the monks in France.<sup>69</sup>

Within the same year Pope Pius IX named Robot Apostolic Prefect of Indian Territory. This status marked the first step towards becoming a Catholic diocese. The Vatican granted Robot this status after members of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith impressed upon Robot's superiors at Pierre-qui-Vire (among other French missionary bodies) that they now held responsibility for this new territory. Specifically, the majority of Robot's financial support came from the Lyonnais missionary organization, the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, which in its periodical *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi* connected the French missionary projects from across the world and presented their activities to benefactors in France. The *Annales* ran several stories about Robot and his mission to the Native Americans. It served as the main source

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

of revenue for the Prefecture Apostolic. More than it was American, Indian Territory was now a part of the French Catholic Church.<sup>70</sup>

Sacred Heart enabled Pierre-qui-Vire to live up to their monastic forbearers and to the exhortations coming out of the Vatican. In 1888, the monks published the words of Pope Leo XIII to Dom Ignatius Jean, Prefect Apostolic after Robot: “Your constant preoccupation should be the propagation of the faith among the Indian tribes, confided to your care.” They went on to recall that “...this is not the first time that the Holy Father has given evident proof of His[sic] paternal solicitude for the Missions, in which the children of St. Benedict are now laboring with activity and success. On several other occasions He publicly expressed His desire to see the Order of St. Benedict take up again the Cross of Christ and carry it triumphantly and victoriously to the heathen nations.” Never far from either the monks’ or the Pope’s mind was the long history of Benedictine evangelization: “...His Holiness expressed the conviction, that the Benedictine Fathers are called by God to take a part of Missionary work worthy of that, which they played in the regeneration of the ancient world.” Pope Pius IX in 1877 established a plenary indulgence for any person who stepped into a church to pray for the evangelization of the Native Americans.<sup>71</sup>

In this climate, the monks from Pierre-qui-Vire joined Sacred Heart monastery in steady numbers. By 1880 Robot’s outpost, “the lost children of Pierre-qui-Vire,” boasted seven Benedictine monks. Within ten years, that number more than doubled.

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<sup>70</sup> Letter of Robot to Pierre-qui-Vire, 1876, Sacred Heart File, SGA. See also *Annals of Sacred Heart Abbey*, Sacred Heart File, SGA; *Oeuvre Pontificale Missionnaire de la Propagation de la Foi, Annales de La Propagation de la Foi*, 938.

<sup>71</sup> *Indian Advocate*, 1888, January 01, 1889.

They busied themselves with the growth of Sacred Heart school, which evolved from a school and monastery with a handful of pupils into a boarding school and a day school for boys. Still in the years before the Oklahoma Land Run of 1889, the monks continued working to convert and assimilate the Native Americans rather than engage the scattered populations of white settlers in places like Atoka. The growing number of priests from Pierre-Qui-Vire arrived and joined Robot and Lambert beginning as early as 1876, meant that the monks established missions among other Native American tribes besides the Citizen Potawatomi tribe.<sup>72</sup>

One of the explanations for the steady influx of the French monks to Sacred Heart was the suppression of the French monastic houses under the anti-clerical policies of Jules Ferry's liberal government in 1880. Linking monastic traditions, at least as they were experienced at Pierre-qui-Vire (and Sacred Heart), with the *Ancien Regime* and anti-modern resistance to the policies of the Third Republic, the Ferry Regime ordered the closing of Pierre-qui-Vire. Its monks were not allowed to continue to live at their monastery and were forced out by the National Guard. In the years leading up to World War I, the restrictions on monastic life in France eased, but not entirely. With the suppression of Pierre-qui-Vire, the monks went at first to either Sacred Heart, the Palestinian mission, or to Leopardstown, a monastery under their care in Ireland. The suppression had a caveat that directed much of the French missionary activity for the remainder of the Third Republic (1870-1940): They were encouraged to spread throughout the world, especially the French colonial world, to set up institutions that

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<sup>72</sup> Annals of Sacred Heart Abbey, Sacred Heart File, SGA. See also *Indian Advocate*, January 01, 1893.



would strengthen French culture abroad. This was an important realm of accord between the secular government and the Benedictines. Pursuing self-determination and autonomy like Robot in Indian Territory, two years later the superiors from Pierre-qui-Vire purchased the ancient Buckfast Abbey from an English Catholic philanthropist and the majority of exiles spent at least a portion of their lives in the restored monastery. Its first superiors were Thomas Duperou and Boniface Natter, two men whose peregrinations exemplify the Pierre-qui-Vire experience. Both spent considerable time also at Sacred Heart. Duperou became abbot of Sacred Heart after founding another daughter house of Pierre-qui-Vire in the Basque portion of Southern France—Belloc. After Belloc, the superior of Pierre-qui-Vire sent Duperou to found a monastic colony in England, Buckfast Abbey. Natter and Duperou demonstrate the monastic triangle Pierre-qui-Vire established—from France to England to Indian Territory they engaged in a cross-Atlantic effort to resurrect Benedictine monasticism and spread Catholicism among the underserved, all the while securing independence from both bishops and secular governments.<sup>73</sup>

While more monks arrived, Robot’s personality proved a challenge for many of his comrades. It is remarkable how much the community grew considering Robot’s erratic style. Receiving complaints from monks returning to Pierre-qui-Vire after working with Robot, his superiors sent Dom Etienne Denys to investigate the dysfunction. Although he stayed for two years, nothing came of this investigation. During this time, however, Robot asked Vatican officials to name Dom Felix DeGrasse

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<sup>73</sup> “A Short History Guide,” Buckfast Abbey File, SGA. See also “Belloc History Guide” Belloc Abbey File, SGA, “Le Renouveau de la vie Religieuse en France au XIX<sup>m</sup>e siècle: Diversité et dynamismes” in *Cenenaire de Belloc*.

as his sub-prefect. For the duration of Denys's stay at Sacred Heart, Robot lived in the mission south of Sacred Heart in the town of Krebs, undoubtedly perceiving hostile motives from his old colleagues back in France. Although no longer involved at Sacred Heart as the superior, Robot retained his position as Apostolic Prefect and continued to travel to the various missions he had built across Indian Territory. No longer was the office of Prefect and abbot invested in one person. Dom Denys, after leaving Sacred Heart, became abbot of Pierre-qui-Vire. He took back to France a settled—if gentle—opinion of Robot. Writing to the Abbess of Jouarre of the impossible dangers of life at Sacred Heart Mission, Robot once related how there were thousands of poisonous snakes and horrible weather wherever one went and Indians still practicing scalping. Denys informed the Abbess that “our Dear Brother” Robot exaggerated his condition wildly. Robot, the Benedictine apostolic entrepreneur, found motivation in the mortification inherent in the Sacred Heart project. This same dramatic personality alienated his confreres.<sup>74</sup>

Robot repeatedly turned to the dramatic in his writings. Depicting life with the Native Americans after his arrival, Robot decried that although their souls were as precious to God as the souls of French monks, they were wild and unformed. Displaying his imagination to carry his point, Robot informed his superiors that the Cheyenne and Arapaho, peopling the plains west of Sacred Heart, would *still* scalp a white man if agitated. Moreover, the unschooled Indian was a degenerate, good at imitating white men but not of the same level of thought. He likened them to French liberals who wanted

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<sup>74</sup> Annals of Sacred Heart Abbey, Sacred Heart File, SGA. See also Robot to Abbess of Jouarre, 1880, Sacred Heart File, SGA.

to model society on pagan Roman models. Despite the Native Americans' alleged proclivity to subterfuge and stupidity, Robot claimed that his schools cured these traits in their young. Not only could their minds be cured of savagery, but their souls made for excellent Christians once converted—a belief rooted in a supposed saintly piety the Native American converts possessed. In a letter to a French abbess, Robot points out that the children are not only cute, but sing well when accompanied by the piano. His confreres recalled that although the Native Americans were often not accustomed to European/American ways of life, they all sought Robot to open schools among them because the Osage, Choctaw, and Citizen Potawatomi all had a significant Catholic population. These Native American Catholics had access to priests in the lands from which they had been moved, but neglected to move with them to the Indian Territory reservations.<sup>75</sup>

The biggest trouble that the monks faced was not one of personality or of local hostilities or even of ecclesial interference, but one rooted in their commitment to living a complete monastic regimen while responding to a growing number of missionary commitments. It was hard to pray eight hours every day and teach pupils, build permanent structures, travel on the ministry circuit, and farm the land all the while acclimating oneself to a foreign land and foreign tongues. The same year that Robot and Lambert left, Pierre-qui-Vire published “*Règlements des Bénédictins de Ste Marie de la Pierre-Q[sic]-Vire,*” which served as the guide for monks to live their vocations. The first words of the *Règlements* mandated “*on se lève tous les jours environs dix minutes*

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<sup>75</sup> Robot to Dom Abbot Moreau, February 21, 1876, Sacred Heart File, SGA. See also Robot to Abbess of Jouarre, 1880, Sacred Heart File, SGA.

*avant deux heures du matin.*” Rising was followed by Lauds, Matins, and silent prayer in the sanctuary. In preparation for their day and after prayers, the monks breakfasted lightly— “...on ne donne également que du café noir avec une petite croutelette de pain...” by sunrise the monks, already active for several hours, began their non-prayer labors. For Robot and the other superiors from Pierre-qui-Vire, there would be no compromise on the commitment to the regimen—it was followed regardless of the magnitude of other commitments the monks faced. The dedication to be monastic and apostolic was the biggest challenge to monks coming to Indian Territory. It was impossible to do both, yet the monks tried. Given the rigors of the frontier, the prayer schedule beginning in the middle of the night, and the agricultural and school work load, many of the monks left for the relative tranquility of Sacred Heart’s sister monasteries in England.<sup>76</sup>

The rigorous life of Sacred Heart was not unique, but was a feature of John-Baptiste Muard’s vision for the restoration of the Benedictine Order. His monks were to live heroic lives, separated from complacency and comfort. When presented with his rule for approval, Pope Pius IX pointed out this impossible design and demanded Pierre-qui-Vire to adopt a less strict model. Specifically, in Muard’s rule (that Pope Pius had vetoed) was the observance of a punishing, near-malnourishing diet. No meat was consumed by the monks in addition to fasts during penitential seasons of the liturgical calendar. The rigor may not have been the law, but it was an energizing feature in the monastery as men like Robot were drawn to the extreme commitments suggested by

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<sup>76</sup> “Règlements des Bénédictins de Ste Marie de la Pierre-Q[sic]-Vire”, Pierre-qui-Vire File, SGA.

Muard. For example, a contention at Sacred Heart under Robot started as Robot implemented Muard's original idea for the abstention from meat.<sup>77</sup>

### **Missions out from Sacred Heart**

Isidore Robot died in 1887 after laboring in Indian Territory twelve years. Giving up the duties of Apostolic Prefect some time before, Robot relocated in his final years to McAlester, a mining community south of Sacred Heart. The Society for the Propagation of the Faith published a laudatory obituary in its publication, *Les Annales*. In addition to the *Annales* obituary, the French newspaper *Le Monde* (not the contemporary *Le Monde*) also printed an obituary. His health, which allegedly had been poor since childhood, deteriorated rapidly following his relocation. Usually with frontier clergy this was a polite way to acknowledge alcoholism. His confreres eventually relocated his remains from McAlester to Sacred Heart Abbey.<sup>78</sup>

As Sacred Heart passed from its initial stages as Robot's mission, it grew in size and continued to be an outpost of French monastic fervor. The monks of Pierre-qui-Vire opened more schools and churches for the Native Americans in Indian Territory and later in Oklahoma Territory. They continued even after the Vatican transferred administration of the territory out of their hands in 1891—which the monks resented. The mission to the Native Americans, no matter how condescending their attitudes toward them, dominated the French monastic experience in the two territories. On the eve of the great Land Run of 1889, Robot's successor, Don Ignatius Jean, delivered a speech to the white settlers

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<sup>77</sup> Robot, *The Life of the Rev. Mary John Baptist Muard*. See also Robot to Dom Abbot Moreau, February 21, 1876, Sacred Heart File, SGA; Robot to Abbess of Jouarre, 1880, Sacred Heart File, SGA.

<sup>78</sup> Annals of Sacred Heart Abbey, Sacred Heart File, SGA. See also Oeuvre Pontificale Missionnaire de la Propagation de la Foi, *Annales de La Propagation de la Foi*, 939.

preparing to acquire the new lands. The abbot, conciliatory and polite, spent the length of his speech admonishing the new arrivals to remember from whom the land had been taken. He promised that if they disregarded the Native Americans, God would punish them.<sup>79</sup>

In 1888 Sacred Heart began publishing the *Indian Advocate*, a quarterly magazine from which they advocated respect towards Native Americans and wrote about Catholic culture in countries with a profound Catholic tradition. Issues had essays exploring miracles in places such as Loretto or reporting how the Southern European peasants--carriers of traditional Catholic piety and culture *par excellence*—feasted, worshipped, and worked. The *Indian Advocate* provided insight into the challenges and priorities that drove the French Benedictine monks from Pierre-qui-Vire to Indian Territory. The first words that the *Indian Advocate* published summed up the priority of both the missionaries and the paper:

“The object of this quarterly Review is the progress of civilization in the Indian Territory, by promoting the spiritual as well as temporal welfare of the Indian race. It is placed under the Protection of Our Lady of the Rosary, of St. Michael, the Prince of the heavenly hosts, and of St. Benedict, the great promoter of civilization in ancient as well as modern times. It will appear...to plead the cause of the last remnants of the Indian tribes, and of the Benedictine Missionaries, who have consecrated their life to the evangelization of those Children of the Wilderness.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Speech of Ignatius Jean before Land Run, April 21 1889, Sacred Heart File, SGA.

<sup>80</sup> *Indian Advocate*, January 1888.

By 1890 the monks had built eighteen churches administered by twenty-two priests in addition to lay brothers such as Dominic Lambert and nuns of various orders and nationalities recruited to run the schools. Here were monks leaving their civilization in order to evangelize a people they viewed as untutored. Many of the monks who traveled to Indian Territory returned to Europe for visits, often staying indefinitely. It was common for monks to come and work at Sacred Heart for a few months or years. It was also common for the superiors to travel back to Europe and the East Coast, as Robot did when he travelled to Baltimore and Rome before retiring to McAlester. The second Prefect Apostolic of Indian Territory, Ignatius Jean, never wanted to replace Robot, but the abbot sent him regardless. As the French government peregrinated between acceptance and intolerance of their vocation, monks travelled to Sacred Heart as exiles and returned to Pierre-qui-Vire during times of tolerance.<sup>81</sup>

The itineraries of many monks who came to Sacred Heart suggest the transient and improvised nature of Benedictine life in the nineteenth century. At any moment from 1876 to 1910 there were between two and twenty monks stationed either at Sacred Heart or its satellite missions across Indian Territory. The life of a typical monk from Pierre-qui-Vire often included lengthy stays in daughter houses in England, Ireland, and Indian Territory. Many men came until the physical and emotional hardships compelled them back to Europe. Ignatius Jean only came because abbot Bernard Moreau of Pierre-qui-Vire sent him and returned to France as soon as the opportunity arose. This stood in contrast to the monks who lived prior to the disruptions of the French Revolution and the ensuing Napoleonic Wars and modernization—monks who had remained in the same

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<sup>81</sup> *Indian Advocate*, January 01 1896.

monastery for the duration of their lives. In the milieu of the nineteenth century this proved to be a near impossibility at least for the monks of Pierre-qui-Vire. A commitment to missionary apostolate precluded any chance of staying in one place.<sup>82</sup>

However, many who travelled to Indian Territory stayed. Dom Felix DeGrasse, the man who later became abbot, opened a school among the Osage Indians in Grey Horse, complementing the one he built a year earlier in Pawhuska. The Osage had previous encounters with French missionaries-- Jesuit missionaries from Quebec prior to the Louisiana Purchase. De Grasse reported many houses where the elders of the house kept an icon of the Virgin Mary or another saint on the mantle. Situated by 1876 on the Osage Reservation in Indian Territory, they received a Jesuit from Kansas who traveled among them sporadically, administering the Church's sacraments. DeGrasse's project among the Osage lasted until he became the publisher of the *Indian Advocate* and later abbot of Sacred Heart. After he left, a succession of monks from Sacred Heart took his place, evidently to successful ends: the Osage maintained a vibrant Catholic community throughout the twentieth century.<sup>83</sup>

The monks from Sacred Heart continued to build missions further west-- into Oklahoma Territory. Dom Isidore Ricklin built a boarding school in Anadarko, Oklahoma Territory for the Comanche, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Apache tribes. He was from the Alsace region of France and joined the monastery of Pierre-qui-Vire as a young man. Born in 1862, he was orphaned at the time of the Franco-Prussian War. His oldest brother, a priest who earlier immigrated to the United States, turned him over to the

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<sup>82</sup> Annals. See also *Indian Advocate*, July 01 1897, page 75.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.



monks of Pierre-qui-Vire. There he took his vows, and when the monastery closures first struck in 1880 he went to Buckfast Abbey in England. He found his way to Indian Territory, lured by the call to join the Indian Territory adventure. Ricklin was unsuited for a life behind the cloister—the life of a monk. Almost as soon as he arrived at Sacred Heart he began to press upon his superior, Abbot Duperou, to allow him to live among the “blanket Indians” to the West.<sup>84</sup>

Arriving in Anadarko, Indian Territory from Sacred Heart in 1890, Ricklin lived among the Comanche and Kiowa Indians who set their tents all across the surrounding Southwest Oklahoma landscape. He warmed to his neighbors by celebrating masses for the newly converted in teepees. The Comanches, reflecting the esteem accorded to him, adopted him into the tribe in 1892. With the sisters secured, the land provided, and the funds raised, he opened Saint Patrick’s Indian Boarding School at the end of 1892. Ricklin was an enthusiastic man, and quickly after his arrival established a school in Anadarko: Saint Patrick’s Academy. This school, run by a group of Franciscan sisters from Pennsylvania, was the longest lasting of the Benedictine Indian contract schools, supervised by Ricklin until his death in the 1921. The school began with fifteen children but soon reached one hundred. As the rival public school closed due to lack of funds, Saint Patrick’s purchased its building and assumed responsibility for some of its pupils as well.<sup>85</sup>

Saint Patrick’s school and mission, as the most successful of the Sacred Heart projects in Indian Territory, received attention from Father Ricklin’s confreres in addition

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<sup>84</sup> Ricklin Obituary file, SGA.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

to Catholics across the United States. Heiress-turned-philanthropist Katherine Drexel provided a portion of the operating costs and the *Indian Advocate* ran frequent stories about Saint Patrick's and Ricklin. A typical report from the newspaper ran: "These children seem pleased with their situation, and though their nature calls them to the dreamy prairie or the lovely woods to hunt squirrels and rabbits, or to the silent and grassy brink of the treacherous Washita where fish abound, they consent willingly to bond over a book or submit their tiny fingers to the pen. The natural coarseness of their character fades away in a short time and cedes to more civilized manners. In fact, you would not recognize in those children the sons of the fierce Comanches and Apaches, of the sly Kiowas, and of the brave Caddo and Washita warriors." For the monks, their apostolate to civilize Native Americans stood in the tradition of their order- savagery turned meek and civilized with the reception of Catholicism and the attendant Western culture.<sup>86</sup>

Ricklin's confreres at Buckfast Abbey and Pierre-qui-Vire never tired of hearing the adventures he was having in Indian Territory. They wrote often asking for descriptions about life among the Native Americans. When the school burned in 1909 (typically Indian schools burned through the agency of the inmates), the monks of Sacred Heart had a picture taken of Ricklin dressed as a Comanche warrior. Ricklin and his superiors attached this photograph to the fundraising appeals that they sent across the United States. The image also delighted the monks back in France, who held on to it as the iconic image of their venture into the American wilderness. In addition to his confreres In Europe, he made a lasting impression on several of the most prominent

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<sup>86</sup> *Indian Advocate*, July 01 1896, page 71.

Native American visual artists of the twentieth century—Stephen Mopope and several of his colleagues painted a series of murals depicting Father Isidore Ricklin, in whose boarding school they spent childhood.<sup>87</sup>

In 1901 the federal government opened the Comanche Reservation to white settlement. Thus, in addition to his efforts with Saint Patrick's, Ricklin assumed responsibility for a local parish--opened to serve the newcomers. When Saint Patrick's burned to the ground in 1909, it took Ricklin less than a week to find a temporary location for the school to operate. The monk set to work rebuilding and traversed the East coast fundraising. Within a year and a half Saint Patrick's was rebuilt. Adding on to the burden of the school and the parish were his endeavors as one of the spokesmen for the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, which periodically begged him to embark on fundraising missions across the country. The Bureau in return assumed responsibility for mediating the relationship between Saint Patrick's and the Department of the Interior. After the fire and rebuilding, the Department purchased the boarding school from the monks, but employed them to manage the operation. Ricklin himself labored at Saint Patrick's for the rest of his life, and his successor monks stayed on until 1973. His legacy continued, however, and tribal celebrations honoring him lasted through the 1970s.<sup>88</sup>

Some monks who came to Sacred Heart by 1900 were from the French Pyrenees Mountains. Originally from Belloc Abbey, another daughter house to Pierre-qui-Vire, these monks were instrumental in a project that demonstrated the improvisational, missionary nature of French Benedictine monasticism at this time. Leo Gariador and

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<sup>87</sup> Picture of Ricklin, letter from a monk at Buckfast to Ricklin, Ricklin File, SGA; Saint Patrick's Mission File, SGA.

<sup>88</sup> Ricklin Eulogy, Ricklin File, SGA.

Gratian Ardans, upon arriving in Indian Territory, were sent to California to serve their Basque countrymen who settled there. They built a monastery that served the Basque farmers of Los Angeles in the same way Sacred Heart fulfilled that function for the Native Americans. They built the monastery of Montebello and several parishes complete with grammar schools. Pictures of the early years of Montebello's missions portray young children dressed formally, their features distinctly Basque. Several of the Basque monks from Belloc came directly to Montebello for a period of work, never stopping to pass time at Sacred Heart. Although physically complete as a monastery, the monks of Montebello focused on their missionary work and practiced a lighter form of the taxing Pierre-qui-Vire prayer regimen. The mission that they built there was to be served by the monks from Sacred Heart (and its successor Saint Gregory's) until the 1990s.<sup>89</sup>

In 1901, a fire destroyed Sacred Heart Mission. The monastery, the convent, and the schools for both boys and girls burned in the middle of the night. Although no one was hurt, this incident marked a change. After rebuilding Sacred Heart within a year and continuing its missions to the Native Americans, the monks ceded the initiative in evangelizing Indian Territory to another Francophone—the Belgian Theophile Meerschaert, named as the new Vicar Apostolic of Indian Territory. Three decades later, during and after World War I, very little money and few monks flowed in to Sacred Heart from Pierre-qui-Vire. Sacred Heart Monastery joined the Congregation of the American Cassinese and from this time on, the history of Sacred Heart Monastery followed that of

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<sup>89</sup> Dom Jean-Pierre Inda, "Le Visage de Belloc en son premier Siècle" in *Centenaire de Belloc*. See also *Historical Sketch*, Montebello File, SGA.

the other Benedictine houses in the United States, although the last monk from Belloc worked there until 1963. It joined the American Cassinese, but the half-century that it stood as a French missionary outpost marked the foundations of the Roman Catholic Church in Oklahoma and its shared identity with French values and ideals. Many decades later, a package arrived from Pierre-qui-Vire at Saint Gregory's Abbey for Brother Benet Exton: It was a box of old photographs, including several taken of a young Isidore Robot.<sup>90</sup>

Indian Territory offered Robot and his confreres autonomy from the American hierarchs, something they lost with Rome's appointment of a new Apostolic Vicar. Until Bishop Theophile Meerschaert arrived in 1891, the monks were responsible for the Catholic apostolate in the territories. However, Meerschaert entered Indian Territory with a developed idea of how a frontier region needed to be evangelized. Born in Belgium to a devout middle class family, Meerschaert came to the United States as a young priest to serve in the farmland surrounding Natchez, Mississippi. His energetic activity impressed the bishop, and he became the vicar-general of the diocese. He was a large and regal man, and all photographs of him betrayed his serious manner. In an expression of filio piety, one of the priests who served under him recalled twenty years after his death that "Bishop Meerschaert was truly with heart and soul a missionary bishop... He loved his priests and stood by them. They venerated him and were devoted and submissive to him. He was democratic in his ways and of easy approach by the people (The monks would have demurred)." His background as a pastor in rural

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<sup>90</sup>Fr. Jean-Louis Verstreplant to Br. Benet Exton, January 30, 2002, Sacred Heart File, SGA. See also Murphy, *Tenacious Monks*, 188.

Mississippi prepared Meerschaert for the relative seclusion and isolation of Indian Territory. The governor of Indian Territory and the Mayor of Guthrie greeted the bishop as he got off the train in what was to be his home for the rest of his life.<sup>91</sup>

The monks at Sacred Heart, dismissed from the task of administering Indian Territory, focused on building schools for Native Americans and pastoring their churches while Meerschaert attended to the growing white settler population—a division that has an analogue in the Methodist Church during this same period. As previously mentioned, Isidore Ricklin opened Saint Patrick’s Church and School in Anadarko in November of 1892. Ricklin built this school for Comanche, Kiowa, and Apache children from Western Oklahoma. Meerschaert did not participate in the foundation of Saint Patrick’s although he said mass in the new church several days before the school opened, largely leaving Ricklin to himself.<sup>92</sup>

The power struggle between the bishop and the monks shifted in 1901 when the fire destroyed Sacred Heart Mission. This was the turning point in the institutional life of the Catholic Church in Oklahoma. In the middle of the night, a fire swept over the mission and consumed every building within a short amount of time. Students at the boarding school went home to their families, unable to resume their studies. The Sisters of Mercy, operating the convent school for girls adjacent to the boy’s school, sent their

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<sup>91</sup> Urban DeHasque, *Historical Resume of Catholic Rural Centers in Oklahoma* (Stillwater, OK: Catholic Rural Life Conference, 1944), 3. See also Midoke, “Bishop Meerschaert: First Bishop of Oklahoma, 1847-1924” (master’s thesis, Catholic University of America, 1950), 6-8; James D. White, *Diary of a Frontier Bishop: The Journals of Theophile Meerschaert* (Tulsa: Sarto Press, 1994), 39, 45; Annals of Sacred Heart Abbey, Sacred Heart File, SGA.

<sup>92</sup> *The Indian Advocate*, 1 January 1893. See also White, *Diary of a Frontier Bishop*, 105; Tash Smith, *Capture These Indians for the Lord: Indians, Methodists, and Oklahomans 1844-1939* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014).

students home as well. While the monks rebuilt their mission, with its monastery and school, they migrated to their various parishes across the territory to live temporarily. Although the Sisters of Mercy and the Benedictine monks rebuilt Sacred Heart Mission within a year, it never regained its status as the center of Catholic Life in Oklahoma.<sup>93</sup>

After Sacred Heart burned, the Benedictine monks did not continue to found new parishes in the territories, correctly predicting the conflicts that were to come with Meerschaert. The monks began to focus on running Sacred Heart School and its remaining mission parishes, only expanding in their missions to the tribes. The Sisters of Mercy relocated their convent school from Sacred Heart to Oklahoma City in 1904. In Oklahoma City, they opened Mount Saint Mary's, which served as both the convent for the nuns and as a girl's boarding school. Oklahoma City provided the nuns closer contact with the bishop as well as the most recently founded of their schools. With the leadership of Mother Catherine, one of the first of the Mercy sisters to come to Sacred Heart in 1884, they started schools in Ardmore, El Reno, Shawnee, and a day school in Oklahoma City that was distinct from Mount Saint Mary's. An article in the *Indian Advocate* ran "In September of the present year the Order opened a magnificent Academy for young ladies at Oklahoma City. This is the largest educational institution for young ladies in either territory.... It is fitted with all modern conveniences." Sacred Heart was in 1904 still a secluded place, and Oklahoma City provided the nuns with the opportunity to be closer to both the center of the Catholic life in the state as well as their newer schools.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Annals of Sacred Heart Abbey, Sacred Heart File, SGA.

<sup>94</sup> Murphy, *Tenacious Monks*, 3. See also Urban DeHasque, *Historical Resume of Catholic Rural Centers in Oklahoma*, 8; *The Indian Advocate*, 1 December 1905; Annals of Sacred Heart Abbey, Sacred Heart File, SGA..

The bishop never mentioned the Sacred Heart fire in his diary. Traveling in Louisiana at the time of the fire, the bishop only records that he was on a “trip to collect for the Indian Schools.” It is possible that he did not receive word of the calamity until he returned to Guthrie on February twenty-sixth, but he did not mention it in the entries for that period either. This was not the temporary neglect of a busy bishop; he had not travelled to Sacred Heart since November 1898. After returning from Louisiana the bishop made several trips to churches across the state, but never stopped at Sacred Heart. By April of that same year, he travelled to Europe and did not return until the end of the year. By this time, the monks had accomplished the greater part of the rebuilding. In the subsequent years, the bishop often traveled to communities within several miles of Sacred Heart but did not stop there until 1903. Almost five years passed, the monks rebuilt after a fire-- a new century had come to Sacred Heart but Meerschaert had not.<sup>95</sup>

If Meerschaert was silent about the tragedy that befell Sacred Heart four years earlier, the monks reciprocated the neglect. The *Indian Advocate*, sole newspaper for the vicariate, reported the news of the erection of the Diocese of Oklahoma from the Vicariate Apostolic of Oklahoma in a spare, out-of-the-way line. The monks at the *Advocate* did not grant the news of Meerschaert’s triumph anything close to a full article. Pressed between information about priests coming for a visit to Sacred Heart and the obituaries, the bishop received his small recognition. The monks placed so much insignificant information around the bishop’s announcement that it was clear what they thought of the news. Indeed, it was in this same year the monks recalibrated their

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<sup>95</sup>White, *Diary of a Frontier Bishop*, 263, 284, 306. See also *Annals of Sacred Heart Abbey*, Sacred Heart File, SGA.



apostolate, from new activities in Indian Territory to founding a new monastery in California.<sup>96</sup>

At the same time, Meerschaert forced parishes out of the monks' control. However, he lacked a sufficient number of priests to fill the growing number of churches that he was now responsible for staffing. At this time, he established new churches as well. Unable to find a sufficient number of good candidates in the United States, he returned often to his native Belgium to recruit priests. Meerschaert stationed most of these new European priests in the western portion of his vicariate—those lands recently settled by white pioneers. Several of these men whom he recruited remained in Oklahoma for decades and became important members of the Oklahoma Catholic clergy.<sup>97</sup>

By 1902, the relationship between the bishop and the abbot had deteriorated. In a letter to fellow abbot Boniface Natter of Buckfast Abbey, England, Sacred Heart abbot Felix DeGrasse outlined a list of abuses that Meerschaert committed against the monks. Natter, having spent considerable time at Sacred Heart, was aware of the situation that the monks faced in Indian Territory. Further, he had connections at the Vatican to members of the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith. DeGrasse complained that Meerschaert violated ecclesial precedent by insisting that all church property deeds be in his name even if they were missions founded by the Benedictines. The bishop, DeGrasse wrote, also insisted that it was the bishop's prerogative to appoint whomever he wanted

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<sup>96</sup> Phillip C. Knisell, "The Catholic Press in Oklahoma, 1888 to 1958" (Master's thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1958), 14. See also *The Indian Advocate*, 1 October 1905; Annals of Sacred Heart Abbey, Sacred Heart File, SGA.

<sup>97</sup> White, *Diary of a Frontier Bishop*, 22. See also Urban DeHasque, *Historical Resume of Catholic Rural Centers in Oklahoma*, 2; *The Indian Advocate*, 1 April 1902.

to serve as pastors to these churches. The abbot wrote that “the manner of acting of our Rev. Vicar Apostolic...becomes more and more intolerable.” Lastly, the bishop ordered the monks to stay away from the parishes from which they were reassigned and threatened the nuns living in Shawnee with eviction.<sup>98</sup>

DeGrasse explained to Natter that this interference by the bishop in the affairs of Sacred Heart was unjustifiable, given the precedent that abbots and bishops across the United States established. DeGrasse was right about this. As the Bavarian Benedictines founded new monasteries in the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century they faced similar attempts by local bishops to deprive them of authority, not just in their parishes but in the monasteries as well. As these conflicts grew, abbots and bishops both appealed to the Vatican to intervene on their behalf. Consistently, the Vatican ruled on the side of the monks. In Sacred Heart’s case, DeGrasse appealed to Rome through Natter when his alleged attempts to work out a compromise with Meerschaert failed. As no peace was possible and with the bishop “want[ing] to crush down the Benedictines,” DeGrasse appealed to the Society of the Propagation of the Faith for three rulings: to exclude the bishop from decision-making on the priests assigned to the Abbey-administered churches; the Abbot would retain the deed to the same parishes, and to forbid the bishop from any decision-making regarding Sacred Heart Monastery in general.<sup>99</sup>

Competing to administer the territory, Meerschaert and the monks built a large number of churches and schools. In 1890, the last year of the Apostolic Prefecture, the

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<sup>98</sup> Dom Felix DeGrasse to Dom Boniface Natter, 12 January 1902, Sacred Heart File, SGA.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

United States Census reported that there were 6,231,417 Catholics in the United States. The combined value of the Catholic Church's property was \$118,069,746. Within this large, established Catholic population, the Catholics in Oklahoma numbered just 2,510 with Church property valued at \$10,150. By 1905, Oklahoma had 25,137 Catholics in over 300 communities. In addition to the churches, Catholics in 1905 had two high schools and forty-two primary schools run by 195 nuns. A transition this size, amid sometimes primitive conditions, required a great deal of dedication and work from the Catholic clergy of Oklahoma. It is important to note that this progress happened in spite of, not because of, the relationships between the monks and the bishop.<sup>100</sup>

Ultimately, the French monks of Pierre-qui-Vire succeeded in establishing and sustaining Catholicism in Indian Territory because evangelization of unreached peoples was a firm part of the identity of the Benedictine Order in the nineteenth century--to evangelize among peoples who appeared to have no access to institutional Catholic life and to assimilate them into Western culture. Furthermore, the monks of Pierre-qui-Vire needed to escape from the deprivations of the secularizing French government and society. Seen from this angle, the French monks not only desired a mission to the Native Americans as a part of their identity, *they needed a place to go*. When the first of the succession of monastic closures struck in 1880, the monks had foreseen this possibility and established daughter houses in Ireland, the United Kingdom, Palestine, and Indian Territory. As many as half those monks forced in to exile chose to work in Indian Territory. And best of all, *in Indian Territory they were urgently wanted*. This was the most compelling

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<sup>100</sup> U.S., Bureau of the Census, *Statistics of Churches 1890*, 1890, 235. See also *Catholic Directory, Almanac and Clergy List* (Milwaukee: M.H. Wiltzius Co., 1905), 620; Annals of Sacred Heart Abbey, Sacred Heart File, SGA.

dynamic of all—the fact that the Native American tribes desired the monks to labor among them. Instead of victimized exiles, the French monks of Pierre-qui-Vire became respected, lionized, honored, and feted in the United States by the Native Americans among whom they labored, and came to play a major role in the history of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century French Catholic missionary effort..

## CHAPTER IV

### CLEAR CREEK AND THE RETURN OF LATIN TRADITIONALISM

In 1999, one hundred and twenty-four years after the missionaries from La Pierre-qui-Vire founded Sacred Heart Monastery in Indian Territory, nine monks from the French monastery Fontgombault landed in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The abbot of Fontgombault sent them to found a monastery, to be called “Our Lady of Clear Creek,” on a tract of land outside of Tahlequah that sat on a hill beside a rocky northeastern Oklahoma creek. Clear Creek grew rapidly in the first fifteen years of its existence, complicating the trend of monastic decline that Roman Catholicism experienced in the second half of the twentieth century. This monastery, daughter house of Fontgombault Abbey in France, and a member of the Benedictine Congregation of Solesmes, was to carry different priorities than their co-monastics of Sacred Heart (later Saint Gregory’s). Whereas Solesmes in general kept the Latin liturgy albeit in its new form, the Fontgombault family continued to use (with permission from Rome) the old liturgy that had been otherwise abandoned after the Second Vatican Council.

Instead of emphasizing the activity of the missionary-monks of Pierre-Qui-Vire, the monks of Clear Creek and Fontgombault sought to build a monastery ordered to traditional “contemplative monasticism” practiced according to the *old* Latin Rites (the new liturgy, *novus ordo*, was in Latin but available for use in the vernacular.) Among the original group were five Americans by birth, two Canadians, and two Frenchmen.<sup>101</sup> The founding of Clear Creek marked the second time that the monks of the modern French Benedictine congregations ventured into present-day, Oklahoma.<sup>102</sup> Curiously, the French Benedictines did not establish monasteries anywhere else in the United States. Why did both cohorts of monks establish in Oklahoma to the exclusion of anywhere else in the United States and how did their priorities match one another? Oklahoma provided a friendly local culture where the monks had access to the disaffected, traditionalist old Latin mass community as well as provided a warm yet autonomous relationship with the local bishop.

### Sources

Although in many respects a monastery that sought to minimize its interaction with modern ways of life, Clear Creek nevertheless embraced technology in

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<sup>101</sup> Rod Walton, “Abbey Road,” *Tulsa World*, September 18, 1999. See also Phillip Anderson, interview by Mitch Pacwa, *EWTN Live*, February 26, 2014, accessed February 8, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onKSNLNhlUY>; *Living the Liturgy*, directed by David Biddle (Clear Creek Abbey, 2010), accessed July 22, 2016, <https://clearcreekmonks.org/media-gallery/videos/>.

<sup>102</sup> Although it was the first men’s monastery founded in the United States by the Solesmes Congregation, it was predated by the women’s community of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem Connecticut, founded fifty years before from Jouarre Abbey in France. As David Knowles argued in *Christian Monasticism*, the history of female monastic communities is markedly different from the history of male communities.

communicating with interested people outside the cloister about the purpose, vision, and self-conceptions of the monks. From its inception the superior of the community, Phillip Anderson, issued a newsletter to the monastery's supporters in the United States. Included in these newsletters were updates on the construction projects at the monastery, reflections on both monastic life and events in the culture at large, fundraising appeals, autobiographical accounts of individual monks as well as the Solesmes communities, and pastoral anecdotes. Additionally, Clear Creek authorized several short documentaries and interviews in which the monks were interviewed and spoke on these subjects as well. Local newspapers, especially the *Eastern Oklahoma Catholic* and the *Tulsa World*, also ran stories about Clear Creek as it grew and matured. Together, these sources provide evidence of why the monks came from France to Oklahoma and what they hoped to accomplish, how the monks saw their place both in the Church and in society at large, and what their aspirations, thoughts, and priorities were. Although these sources are different than those of older monastic communities, they nevertheless provide the same kind of insight as the *Indian Advocate* and the *Annals* do for Sacred Heart monastery.

In addition to these sources, the works of John Senior, Johnathan Robinson, Peter Kwasniewski, and Louis Bouyer regarding contemporary developments in the church and in society (and all for sale in the Clear Creek monastery gift shop) are important links regarding the relationship between the traditionalist/conservative Catholic community in the United States and the developments within the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council. Their inclusion provides insight not because they provide objective

history of these developments (which they do not), but because they demonstrate the self-conception of Clear Creek and the traditionalist community—how they see the history of the church in recent decades and why they believe that they were wronged by the broader Church and how they came to become disaffected and take the positions that they did. They allow the reader to appreciate the conflict over liturgy in the Catholic Church and how Clear Creek developed alongside—and through-- this controversy.

### **Latin Traditionalists and the Post-Vatican II Developments**

That the traditionalist Latin Mass community in the United States was a disaffected community requires explanation in order to appreciate Clear Creek monastery and its mission. Whether self-imposed or not, the traditionalist Catholic community became ostracized after the Second Vatican Council and largely operated apart from the Church mainstream as the reformed liturgy became the standard (if not required) liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church. The history of the revision of the Catholic Church's liturgy began in the nineteenth century and received official status at the Second Vatican Council. What follows is a brief explanation of this history followed by a review of the conflicts that developed as a result. Understanding this conflict is integral not only to the *milieu* of Clear Creek, but also why the monastery was founded in the first place.

The Roman Catholic Church's reformation of its liturgy began in the nineteenth century, reached its apex at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), and continued through the Church's deliberations in the wake of the council. Catholic



moderates/liberals and conservatives debated the liturgical reforms, embodied in a “liturgical movement,” from the nineteenth century, through the twentieth century, and into the early twenty-first century. Focused primarily on the accessibility of the liturgy for the laity, the liturgical movement advocated a vernacular liturgy, the priest facing the people during mass, lay participation in the spoken portions of the liturgy, and greater variation on Sunday mass times to assist the laity fulfilling their Sunday mass obligations. By 1945 the liturgical movement gained the upper hand against conservative detractors and Pope Pius XII asked the members of his curia who were involved in the movement to draft an outline of the profoundest reforms that the liturgy needed. He also released the pro-reform documents *Mystici Corporis* and *Mediator Dei*. By 1956 the tensions surrounding the proposed reforms convinced the pope that the reformers’ demands were multiplying too quickly for the hierarchy to process. When the next Pope, John XXIII, opened the Second Vatican Council, the first topic addressed was the liturgical reforms. Most of the participants of the council favored the reformers instead of the conservatives and the church document that came of the council’s deliberations, *Sacrosanctum Consilium*, adopted the changes advocated by the liturgical movement as official church policy.<sup>103</sup>

Following the method of prior councils, the Second Vatican Council left the implementation of *Sacrosanctum Consilium* up to the pope (now Paul VI.) In 1964 the

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<sup>103</sup> Kevin Seaholtz, *New Liturgy, New Laws* (Collegeville, MN.: Liturgical Press, 1980), 2-25.

pope appointed Giacomo Lercaro and Annibale Bugnini to head the committee, called the Consilium, tasked with reforming the Roman liturgical books and implementing the liturgical changes of *Sacrosanctum Consilium*. The Consilium worked from 1964 until 1970 preparing recommendations for the pope and the curia to consider. The changes to the liturgy that came from the Consilium's work (vernacular and updated mass and Liturgy of the Hours), and the document *Sacrosanctum Consilium* provided fresh material for the moderates and liberals (attached to the changes) and conservatives (attached to the old liturgy) to debate over. Below is a summary of these debates, the characters involved in the debates, and how Clear Creek and its community both participated in and responded to the liturgical developments and reforms.<sup>104</sup>

*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, “the Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy,” was the first document issued from the Second Vatican Council when Pope Paul VI promulgated it in December 1963. Its main accomplishment was to permit the translation and usage of the Roman Catholic Church's liturgy into the vernacular of each country, thereby ending the exclusive use of Latin in the Roman Church and making the church's liturgy comprehensible to the laity. It stated the essential element of the liturgy was the “...full and active participation by all the people...” More generally, *Sacrosanctum Consilium* called for the liturgy to be revised and “restored” so as to erect a liturgy that took root from Patristic liturgical texts and other sources more ancient than the Tridentine Latin

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 26-37, 143.

mass. In addition, the document called for a liturgy which “the Christian people, so far as possible, should be enabled to understand them with ease and to take part in them fully, actively, and as befits a community.”<sup>105</sup>

*Sacrosanctum Consilium* showed deference to the old Latin liturgy as often as it called for the vernacular. The guidelines for the Divine Office stated that while use of the vernacular for priests praying the Liturgy of the Hours was permissible, Latin was to be considered normative. Section 36.1 stated that “particular law remaining in force, the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites.” Even if *Sacrosanctum Consilium* wanted the vernacular mass to be normative, it stated that a rigid and uniform rite was unnecessary and contrary to the church’s tradition of providing myriad different rites under the Roman penumbra. The document confessed at its debut that “...the sacred Council [Vatican II] declares that holy Mother Church holds all lawfully acknowledged rites to be of equal right and dignity...” The document also granted that “care must be taken that any new forms adopted should in some way grow organically from forms already existing.” The Council did not call for Latin or the old rite to be expunged from the liturgy.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Vatican, *Sacrosanctum Consilium*, Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness on December 4, 1963, accessed July 22, 2016, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html)

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

The committee that Paul VI appointed to implement *Sacrosanctum Consilium*, the Consilium, had a diverse group of theologians and liturgical specialists working to create the new mass. Mirroring the debates over the liturgical movement that preceded it, the Consilium had in its membership moderates/liberals and conservatives. One member disgruntled with committee's process was Louis Bouyer, a liturgical theologian who was active in the council's proceedings as well. He complained that stereotypical Vatican political maneuvers blunted the moderate vision of Vatican II and instead provided intellectual cover for a wholesale rejection of the Latin in the liturgy. Careful to point out the quality and professionalism of many of the Consilium's members, Bouyer nevertheless sharply criticized the leadership of Giacomo Lercaro and Annibale Bugnini: "[Lercaro] was utterly incapable of resisting the maneuvers of the mealy-mouthed scoundrel that the Neapolitan Vincentian, Bugnini, a man as bereft of culture as he was of basic honesty, soon revealed himself to be..." Bouyer described how the Consilium rushed its work, writing a new version of elements overnight that had developed over two thousand years. According to Bouyer, Bugnini tricked the Consilium's participants into accepting something that they opposed by claiming "But the Pope wills it!" But Bugnini told the Pope the inverse, telling him when he was skeptical of the changes that Bugnini had forced upon the committee that the committee was in unanimous consent! Manipulating *Sacrosanctum Consilium* to grind private theological and liturgical axes, Bugnini and his collaborators altered the church's liturgy, after which what once was

normative became outlandish and foreign when it was meant only to be modified. With such a change in the liturgy, toleration of the old liturgy subsided.<sup>107</sup>

Suffering exclusion since the new Roman Rite took effect in 1969, conservatives/traditionalists were relieved when in 1988 Pope John Paul II issued the *motu proprio* “Ecclesia Dei.” Primarily drafted to excommunicate radicalized traditionalists under the leadership of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, it also created the opportunity for the use of the old Latin mass and established a commission tasked with facilitating its renewal in Catholic dioceses across the world. The pope wrote “respect must everywhere be shown for the feelings of all those who are attached to the Latin liturgical tradition, by a wide and generous application of the directives already issued some time ago by the Apostolic See for the use of the Roman Missal according to the typical edition of 1962 [the Latin mass produced after the Council of Trent and under Pius VII].” Ten years later Joseph Ratzinger (soon to be pope) began a public argument in favor of tolerance towards the Latin mass that would last through his own tenure as pope. Ratzinger acknowledged the concerns that toleration of the Latin mass and its adherents was divisive and contrary to the aspirations of the Second Vatican Council. According to Ratzinger, opponents of the Latin mass viewed it with mistrust because in it they saw an implicit rejection of the Second Vatican Council and saw small distinction

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<sup>107</sup> Louis Bouyer, *The Memoirs of Louis Bouyer: from Youth and Conversion to Vatican II, the Liturgical Reform, and After*, trans. John Pepino (Kettering, OH.: Angelico Press, 2015), 219-226.

from Archbishop Lefebvre's community. Ratzinger went on to more or less dismiss this fear as unfounded and called instead for tolerance for those who preferred the old mass.<sup>108</sup>

Within two years of becoming Pope in 2005, Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI, mandated a shift in the Catholic Church's relationship to the older liturgy (and its adherents) when he issued the document "*Summorum Pontificum*: on the Use of the Roman Liturgy Prior to the Reform of 1970." *Summorum* normalized the practice of the old Tridentine liturgy and made it available to all priests--regardless of their bishops' or superiors' preference. With the old Tridentine liturgy called the "Extraordinary Form" while the post-conciliar reformed mass was the "Ordinary Form," both were to be offered to laity who expressed an interest. For good measure, Benedict XVI reinterpreted the Second Vatican Council in order to ensure what he called "the hermeneutic of continuity" in examining the council rather than what he called the "hermeneutic of rupture," and in so doing assuring Catholics that it was the anti-old rite partisans who were out of step with Vatican II and not vice-versa. He wrote that the latest edition of the old liturgy, released in 1962 by Pope John XXIII, was never condemned by the council and that it once again enjoyed the support of the pope. Most importantly for the monks of Fontgombault and Clear Creek was Article 3 of "*Summorum Pontificum*," which

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<sup>108</sup> Vatican, Apostolic Letter "Ecclesia Dei" of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II Given Motu Proprio, July 2 1988, accessed July 22, 2016, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_commissions/ecclsdei/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_motu-proprio\\_02071988\\_ecclesia-dei\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_commissions/ecclsdei/documents/hf_jp-ii_motu-proprio_02071988_ecclesia-dei_en.html). See also Joseph Ratzinger, "Ten Years of the Motu Proprio 'Ecclesia Dei,'" Conference of Cardinal Ratzinger, October 24 1998, accessed July 22, 2016, <http://www.fssp.org/en/annivratz.htm>.

specifically supported the use of the 1962 liturgical books in monastic communities. That it took a papal promulgation forty years after the closing of the council to rehabilitate the old rite in more than a piecemeal manner demonstrates the controversy around and suppression of the old rite in the council's wake.<sup>109</sup>

The controversy over “*Summorum Pontificum*” began as soon as it left the Vatican Press Office. Sister Joan Chittister, longtime critic of conservative Catholicism, published a scathing denunciation of the document in her column in the *National Catholic Reporter*, sardonically titled “Coming Soon to a Church Near You.” Chittister, like most liberal commentators who responded to *Summorum*, attacked it for jeopardizing the church's commitment to *lex orandi, lex credendi*: by allowing for multiple rites, the old and the new, the church courted a bifurcation in the beliefs and catholicity of its believers. She argued that the old mass, with the priest facing away from the people and uttering prayers inaudible and in a foreign tongue, was incompatible with “the essence of the Christian faith.” It rendered the laity passive rather than participants and incorrectly elevated the priest, on whose behalf the mass was now given—“The celebrant becomes the focal point of the process, the special human being, the one for whom God is a kind of private preserve.” For Chittister, the Latin mass only returned the church to a bad history of marginalizing the people that the mass was supposed to be serving. She argued

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<sup>109</sup> Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter Given Motu Proprio, “*Summorum Pontificum*, on the Use of the Roman Liturgy Prior to the Reform of 1970,” July 7, 2007, accessed July 22, 2016, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_motu-proprio\\_20070707\\_summorum-pontificum.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20070707_summorum-pontificum.html)

that the Latin liturgy's proliferation was a movement backwards--away from liberating, progressive egalitarianism in favor of obscurantism and repression. Instead of moving towards allowing women equal status in the church and the liturgy, the Pope embarked on full-scale ecclesial revanchism. She closed her critique by claiming that the old liturgy's return betrayed both Vatican II and the bishops who now had little control over the uses of the old liturgy in their dioceses.<sup>110</sup>

Better suited to demonstrating antagonism to the old Tridentine liturgy following Vatican II was the debate forum hosted by the mainstream Catholic periodical *Commonweal* after Benedict's *Summorum Pontificum* was released. The responses ran from outright rejection of the document to tepid and equivocating neutrality. Nowhere in the five articles submitted for the debate was there a confident expression that the Tridentine Rite and its return was healthy, good, and tolerable. Also using the *lex orandi, lex credendi* criticism, the contributors entertained the fear that there was a conspiracy at work in the pope's plans. Peter Jeffery wrote "But does it make sense to have parallel forms of the liturgy if they are going to be intermingled anyway? Or is the real intent to eviscerate liturgical reform by 'Tridentizing' the Mass of Vatican II?" Summing up his position, Jeffery wrote "...the whole thing [the old liturgy] looks like an enactment of monarchical right-wing political values masquerading as the Christian gospel." Jeffery

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<sup>110</sup> Joan Chittister, "Coming Soon to a Church Near You," *National Catholic Reporter*, July 10, 2007, accessed July 22, 2016, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/where-i-stand/coming-soon-church-near-you>.



gave voice to the belief about the old mass in the years following the Vatican II that led to its near-elimination in most Catholic countries.<sup>111</sup>

Another contributor Rita Ferrone attacked Pope Benedict XVI and even the Clear Creek Benedictine family directly. She clarified that although Benedict was not a schismatic like Marcel Lefebvre, he nevertheless was a champion of marginalizing the new rite and elevating the old rite. By upholding Klaus Gamber, a skeptic of many reforms from the Second Vatican Council, as an exemplary liturgical theologian while he was still Cardinal Ratzinger and long before he was Benedict XVI, the pope aligned himself with the enemies of the reformed liturgy—enough for Ferrone to air the conspiracy charge along with Jeffery: “...it marks another step toward a goal that the vast majority of Catholics would not countenance if it were openly acknowledged—namely, the gradual dismantling of the liturgical reform in its entirety.” Such responses to the return of the old liturgy demonstrate the fraught position that the old mass and its adherents found themselves in after the Second Vatican Council. Dom Philip Anderson, the eventual first abbot of Clear Creek Monastery, responded with joy about the papal pronouncement and rushed to Benedict’s defense, quoting the Pope as acknowledging

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<sup>111</sup> Peter Jeffery, “Widening Our Hearts: the Latin Mass is Back,” *Commonweal*, September 2, 2010, accessed July 22, 2016, [https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/widening-our-hearts?\\_ga=1.216986646.121875797.1469207952](https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/widening-our-hearts?_ga=1.216986646.121875797.1469207952).

“...many bishops would offer a determined opposition to a general authorization” of the old mass.<sup>112</sup>

If moderate/liberal Catholics had misgivings about the old mass, a newly confident traditionalist/conservative community, partially vindicated by the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, did not always offer gentle suasion to their skeptical, progressive co-religionists. Johnathan Robinson, author of *The Mass and Modernity: Walking to Heaven Backward*, acknowledged the misgivings that fellow Catholics had about the old mass, knowing for them that it conjured “...a dead past, which often carries with it suspicions of an unpleasant aestheticism.” Following this he fulfilled the fears of skeptics, stating that despite their discomfort, he and his traditionalist allies were indeed out to drastically reform the entire church’s liturgy to be closer to the old liturgy! His colleague Peter Kwasniewski, Professor of Philosophy at Wyoming Catholic College, echoed Robinson when he wrote in the preface to his old Latin mass manifesto, *Resurgent in the Midst of Crises: Sacred Liturgy, the Traditional Latin Mass, and Renewal in the Church*, that “the retention of a strong connection with the past came to be regarded by many clergy and laity as a dangerous thing, an obstacle to relevance, effectiveness, humility, [and] poverty.” Opposing this view and prescribing of the

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<sup>112</sup> Clear Creek Abbey Newsletter, August 2007, Newsletter Archive, Clear Creek Abbey, accessed February 15, 2016, <https://clearcreekmonks.org/category/letters-to-the-friends/>.

traditional Latin mass for the entire Roman Catholic Church, at least in the United States, was the argument that he presented in *Resurgent*.<sup>113</sup>

The chapters of Kwasniewski's traditionalist tract followed a tidy pattern: name the deficiency of the new liturgy and describe how the old Latin liturgy provided the solution. He argued that the new mass lent itself to a fatal lack of solemnity among the faithful during the recitation of the liturgy, something (the author claimed) one witnessed in American Catholic parishes. Indeed, by Kwasniewski's appraisal, liturgical reformers (here Bugnini's name appeared) sought to eviscerate the old liturgy precisely *because* it had such solemnity. Moreover, the old liturgy, if adopted widely, could fix marriages, give vocations, and inspire children to retain the faith--an ambitious claim. Kwasniewski dismissed with contempt the progressives' fear about the old Latin compromising the dictum *lex orandi lex credendi* near the conclusion of his work: "It is not surprising to find a combination of social modernism and liturgical modernism in the same persons, nor is it any surprise that Pope Benedict's [*Summorum Pontificum*] on the two 'uses' of the Roman Rite has been so violently attacked by proponents of the 'Spirit of Vatican II'..." He closed *Resurgent* with the assertion that summed up the subjective state--for good or ill-- that the traditionalists found themselves in after Vatican II: "Was there something fatally flawed, all this time, with our central act of worship? Were all the

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<sup>113</sup> Peter Kwasniewski, *Resurgent in the Midst of Crisis: Sacred Liturgy, the Traditional Latin Mass, and Renewal in the Church* (Kettering, OH.: Angelico Press, 2014), 1-32.

popes of the past who lovingly cultivated this liturgy mistaken, were all the missionaries who brought it around the globe misguided? “<sup>114</sup>

And so from the Council’s conclusion through the first decade of the twenty-first century the traditional Latin mass fell out of practice in the United States—enough so that those attached to it in the years before John Paul and Benedict’s efforts made their way to the margins of the Catholic community in the United States; at odds with the direction that most American Catholic bishops wished for the church to take. Clear Creek Abbey, itself founded by Americans who fled to France in order to find a Catholic monastery that practiced liturgical traditionalism, gathered devotees of the old Latin mass to itself and offered itself as a “powerhouse of prayer” where such Catholics could gather and flourish.

### **Creating and Cultivating a Catholic Conservatism**

A professor from the University of Kansas, John Senior, bore the responsibility for the small exodus of students from his university to receive orders at Fontgombault Abbey in France. Of the thirteen monks who eventually founded Clear Creek, five were his pupils, including both the prior, Dom Philip Anderson (eventually abbot), and the sub-prior (eventually prior), Dom Francis Bethel. At the University of Kansas Senior built the Pierson Integrated Humanities Program, where he immersed students who

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 198-9.

enrolled in his program into the literary, philosophic, and (Catholic) theological “Canon of Western Civilization.” It was essential for students to learn the canon, and he wrote: “All the paraphernalia of our lives, intellectual, moral, social, psychological, and physical, has this end: Christian culture is the cultivation of saints.”<sup>115</sup>

Senior, at the University of Kansas, created a two-year program for students that focused on traditional texts from Western civilization. He built his program around the idea of an objective moral order that is accessible to human beings, and that was known by previous generations of Christian and Classical thinkers who bequeathed it to people living in the twentieth century. Although Senior thought this grand tradition existed, it faced destruction by the secularizing forces of the French Revolution, the Reformation, and the secular ethos that developed from them. His call to arms came in the book that gained him a large degree of recognition in traditionalist circles, where he advocated a complete withdraw from modern ways of life and modern ways of thinking, deriding them as “lazy” and “utterly helpless” and unable to confront a sense of meaninglessness. But, he argued, it was possible to find in the medieval past a way to live which corresponded to humanity’s ideal state. Because of this, it was necessary for students to

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<sup>115</sup> John Senior, *The Death of Christian Culture* (Norfolk, VA: IHS Press, 2008), 9-11.

acquaint themselves with this traditional knowledge that Western Civilization offered and live their lives in a way that comported with its teaching.<sup>116</sup>

As the capstone for their studies, students went to Fontgombault Abbey to live for several weeks to learn Senior's idea of a Christian culture as it should be. Senior had searched for a monastery where students would be exposed to the old Latin mass, which was by the early seventies several years past being normative in the great majority of monastic houses, and a monk from Gethemani monastery in Kentucky<sup>117</sup> guided him to Fontgombault as the ideal place for his students. For him the ancient monastic life and the Latin liturgy were the primary components of cultural renewal. He aired his prescription towards the end of *The Death of Christian Culture*: "At the present hour we are in a dark night of the Church.... The liturgy, set upon by thieves, is lying in the ditch; ...the greatest need in the Church today is the contemplative life of monks and nuns..."<sup>118</sup>

Of the large number of Senior's students who made the trip to Fontgombault, a handful asked the abbot if they would be allowed to join the monastery. The abbot agreed, with the stipulation that the monks be sent back to the United States to found a

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<sup>116</sup> Bill Sherman, "New Monastery and Answered Prayer," *Tulsa World*, January 04, 2004, [http://www.tulsaworld.com/archives/new-monastery-an-answered-prayer/article\\_7464de63-4ad7-5269-9a9d-8e20f154312f.html](http://www.tulsaworld.com/archives/new-monastery-an-answered-prayer/article_7464de63-4ad7-5269-9a9d-8e20f154312f.html). See also John Senior, *The Death of Christian Culture*, 9-34.

<sup>117</sup> The Monks of Gethsemani and the entire Trappist Order adopted the new Roman liturgy after the Second Vatican Council and generally liberalized after the Council and the career of their most famous monk, Thomas Merton. Until the German Trappist of Mariawald monastery reverted to the older Roman liturgy in 2008, there was no Trappist traditionalist community analogous with the Benedictine's Fontgombault.

<sup>118</sup> Russell Hittinger, "Solesmes Monks Going to Tulsa," *Crises*, November 1999, accessed July 22, 2016, <http://www.crisismagazine.com/1999/solesmes-monks-coming-to-tulsa>. See also

monastery when the time appeared right. Of the students who took vows, only five stayed long enough to see the establishment of the monastery in the United States. Among these men was Dom Phillip Anderson. He became Clear Creek's first prior and later its first abbot. Although Americans by birth, these men had spent over twenty years as monks immersed in Fontgombault's spiritual and cultural traditions and now returned, ever loyal to their old professor, to establish a traditionalist monastery which would be a gathering point for the return of the old Latin liturgy.<sup>119</sup>

### **Bishop Slattery and the Diocese of Tulsa**

Philip Anderson and the other expatriates to Fontgombault always imagined that they would found their new monastery in their native Kansas— as a Midwestern state bordering Oklahoma it had broadly similar conservative religious character, hospitable to their conservative/traditionalist Catholicism. When their return to the United States to found their community was immanent, Abbot Antoine Forgeot and his monks from Fontgombault assessed property in several other states, most notably Oregon and California. A Tennessee landholder even offered to give them property, but they ended up instead outside Tulsa. The primary reason for this can be found in the promptings of both Bishop Edward Slattery and the Oklahoma Catholic community. Edward Slattery, elevated to Bishop of Tulsa in 1994, travelled to Fontgombault several times over the

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Phillip Anderson, interview by Mitch Pacwa, *EWTN Live; Living the Liturgy*, directed by David Biddle; Clear Creek Abbey Newsletter, September 2006, Newsletter Archive, CCA.

course of the 1990s to encourage them to establish their American monastery in Oklahoma. A commitment to counteract a secularizing culture motivated him. It caused him to convince the French monks to found the new monastery in his diocese. Particularly interested in Fontgombault's preservation of the old Latin liturgy, Slattery supported the monks after their arrival by hosting fundraisers and giving up jurisdiction over the land that they built their monastery upon.<sup>120</sup>

According to Slattery, he realized that something was missing from the new liturgy that emptied it of meaning. He claimed to have realized that it was the traditional plainsong chant, the vehicle for the traditional Latin liturgy that was missing. The music adopted for the use in the new liturgy in the United States tending to be either adaptations of Protestant hymns or newly written in the fashion of American pop music; the old Roman chants were largely ignored. The monks from Fontgombault brought this chant with them to Clear Creek and provided Slattery with a stronghold of the traditional chant in his diocese. Echoing John Senior, Slattery claimed that the church needed the monks to show Roman Catholics how to live in the modern world. For him it was an article of faith that the monks would influence the practice of faith and the development of culture not only in Oklahoma but in the entire United States. Lastly, like both the monks and their old professor John Senior, Slattery was enticed by the notion of the supposed

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<sup>120</sup> Rod Walton, "Priory Party," *Tulsa World*, February 12, 2000, accessed July 22, 2016, [http://www.tulsaworld.com/archives/priory-party/article\\_937471f6-00fc-5552-8cf3-315a265cb8a1.html](http://www.tulsaworld.com/archives/priory-party/article_937471f6-00fc-5552-8cf3-315a265cb8a1.html). See also Phillip Anderson, interview by Mitch Pacwa, *EWTN Live; Living the Liturgy*, directed by David Biddle.



“Death of Christian Culture,” alluding to it often when given the opportunity. At one event at the monastery, he proclaimed: “One should not imagine that St. Benedict's 5th century was much different than our 21st. Surely the suave corruption of Rome had not been completely replaced yet by the brutality of her new rulers ...” For Slattery, just as for the monks, the attachment to the traditional religious culture as practiced at Fontgombault and Clear Creek presupposed a fallen Western Culture that one had to resist by powerful means, in this case the traditional liturgy and its cultural attendants. This created the urgency of the alliance which brought the bishop and the monks into concert.<sup>121</sup>

Slattery’s solicitude for the monks to locate in his diocese did not end when Fontgombault founded Clear Creek in 1999. He was at all formal gatherings at the monastery and encouraged donations, both locally and nationally, for the monks. When the monks began construction on the new monastery cathedral in early 2003, it was Slattery who arrived to bless the first stone. Following that, he presented them with a formal charter welcoming the monks to Oklahoma. Almost ten years after the foundation, Slattery hosted such events as large diocesan fundraisers for the monks, bringing in such Catholic luminaries as Richard John Neuhaus (Founder and editor of *First Things*, a Conservative intellectual monthly) to offer gravitas for the events. He led pilgrimages of Oklahoma Catholics to Fontgombault, continually encouraging people in his diocese to

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid. See also Homily at Abbatial Blessing, April 10, 2010, Newsletter Archive, CCA.

take an interest in the traditional monastic life of Clear Creek. When Clear Creek gained abbatial status Bishop Slattery was there to celebrate with the monks and give blessing to the new abbey and its first abbot, Dom Phillip Anderson.<sup>122</sup>

If Slattery was an enthusiast, so too were members of the local Catholic community. As the nascent community took root, Dom Anderson, then prior, was quick to note the generosity of local Catholics, remarking once “so many people have brought us so many gifts and services!”—articulating a theme that he would return to time and again—the generosity of locals, “despite the relative seclusion of our location, here in rural Oklahoma.” Not only were ordinary Catholics in the area supportive, but many moved to farms adjacent to the monastery to raise their families around the bric-a-brac of traditionalist Roman Catholicism, creating a would-be village of enthusiastic monastic devotees. Elevated after Slattery had lured the French monks to his diocese, fellow graduates of Senior’s Integrated Humanities program, Paul Coakley and James Conley became the bishops of the nearby dioceses of Oklahoma City and Lincoln, respectively. Moreover, the Oklahoma Labor Commissioner, Mark Costello, was a fellow pupil of Senior’s and proved instrumental to Slattery’s wooing the monks from Fontgombault to his diocese.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Clear Creek Abbey Newsletter, Lent 2003, Advent 2004, Summer 2000, Newsletter Archive, CCA.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., September 2000, Lent 2001, January 2015.

Beyond just the Catholic population, however, Oklahoma proved to be a hospitable place for Clear Creek to flourish. The monks took pride in their relationships with non-Catholic Oklahomans. Their newsletter often pointed out that at major monastic events, the local fire department would always show up, or that the construction crew showed up when the new building was blessed— “Although none of the engineers is Catholic, we experienced a unique spirit of collaboration”—and unabashed when the monks asked that they not smoke on the building site. Slattery, the local Catholics, and the people of Oklahoma at large, far from being a hostile Protestant culture for traditional Catholicism to endure, created a hospitable climate where the monastery could flourish.<sup>124</sup>

### **Our Lady of Clear Creek Monastery**

From the monastery’s inception, it relied on the financial support of Catholics outside of Oklahoma. In Washington D.C., prominent Catholics attended a fundraiser for the erection of Clear Creek’s New Church and monastery. Although contributions from the United States were essential, the monastery still relied on financial support from Fontgombault and other French Catholics much as Robot had relied on the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. For a long time, Clear Creek’s website for donations was not even published in English---it was written in French and asked for donations of Euros.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., Lent 2005, January 2005.

The monks later added an English section, but it was over a decade after the foundation of the monastery.<sup>125</sup>

The monks practiced a contemplative monastic life and had no missionary activity. Set outside the town of Hulbert, Oklahoma, they were removed from an urban area and spent over eight hours every day in prayer. They woke early and recited the old 1962 version of the Liturgy of the Hours, the church's traditional prayer regimen, seven times per day. Not only was the prayer schedule rigorous, but they ate their meals in silence and focused on speaking only when necessary to one another. This focus on silence and prayer to the exclusion of all other types of typical clerical activities was unique among Benedictine monasteries in the United States. Beginning with Boniface Wimmer in the middle of the nineteenth century, American Benedictines practiced a dual role as missionaries and contemplatives much like Sacred Heart (and later Saint Gregory's) had done. The monks at Clear Creek were aware of this precedent, referring to the earlier cohort as "the First Wave," and avoided living in a similar way, opting for a more traditional monastic way of life. It was easier to maintain the integrity of their contemplative lifestyle because they were a daughter house of a French monastery which

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid; "D.C. Catholics Join Effort for Oklahoma Monastery," *Washington Times*, October 31, 2003, accessed July 22, 2016, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2003/oct/31/20031031-111410-3008r/>.

also lived this way. A life of prayer and contemplation was the only way these monks learned how to live and why they had left Kansas in the first place.<sup>126</sup>

Fontgombault established Our Lady of Clear Creek with the original nine monks, but the monastic foundation began to expand rapidly. More often than not, the wait list to join the monastery was larger than available beds. At a time when the older monastic houses experienced a drastic period of decline in postulants, Clear Creek grew to thirty monks within several years. Dom Anderson's goal was to have a continuous number of sixty to sixty five monks. The monastery was set up originally in a barn, with an old hunting lodge as the residence for the monks. Although this was to be their home for several years, an aggressive fundraising campaign was underway to raise 35 million dollars in order to build a large, gothic-style church that would last "for a thousand years." In addition to the church was the cloister and gatehouse, built for the monk's residence. Thomas Gordon Smith, professor of classical architecture at Notre Dame, designed the proposed monastery with the goal of creating a medieval, French monastery in the hills of Oklahoma. This was not to be a warehouse church that became popular among low-church Protestants, but a construction that expressed the belief and faith of the church through the architecture. In this design, according to Anderson, every choice

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<sup>126</sup> Joel Ripinger, *The Benedictine Order in the United States* (Collegeville, MN.: 1980), 19-31. See also Phillip Anderson, interview by Mitch Pacwa, *EWTN Live*.

had meaning. This was to be a piece of *la France éternelle* providing guidance for Oklahoma.<sup>127</sup>

The monks from Fontgombault were a part of the Congregation of Solesmes, a French congregation with monasteries all over the world. Prosper Guéranger founded the Congregation of Solesmes in the middle of the nineteenth century to revive Benedictine monasticism to France. Fontgombault, originally founded in the eleventh century, was restored to monastic life in the 1940s by the monks of Solesmes.<sup>128</sup> Guéranger and the Solesmes congregation stressed the importance of liturgy to the renewal of the church. He was different than his contemporaries in the French Catholic Church because he believed that the church should focus on this renewal not in political battles regarding the church's material rights but on renewing its traditional forms of prayer and liturgy, which he believed was supremely encapsulated in the Roman liturgical books. From this movement was reborn the idea that Benedictines should be secluded from the world, although open to those who would come to pray with them.<sup>129</sup>

Although consciously rejecting ideas of becoming missionaries, the monks extended traditional French culture to rural Oklahoma with their agricultural practices, building fruitful and hospitable relationships with a markedly different society. Brother

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<sup>127</sup> "Day of Independence," *Tulsa World*, February 20, 2010. See also *Eastern Oklahoma Catholic*, April 2010, July 2012.

<sup>128</sup> Hittinger, "Solesmes Monks Going to Tulsa"; Hatsy Shields, "Deep in the Spiritual Heart of France," *New York Times*, September 26, 1999.

<sup>129</sup> Ripinger, *The Benedictine Order in the United States*, 16.

Joseph Marie, one of the men who had gone to Fontgombault from John Senior's program, learned traditional shepherding as a monk in France. When he came as one of the original monks to establish Clear Creek, he brought these skills with him. The terrain of Clear Creek confounded hopes of sizeable agriculture, but the sheep that Brother Joseph grazed there could well adapt to the circumstance and thrived in that climate. As agriculturalists took notice of the innovative use of sheep on land otherwise of little use, people began emulating the monks, and traditional French shepherding spread to Northeastern Oklahoma. Brother Joseph's agricultural pursuits became the point of contact between the monastery and their non-Catholic neighbors. Often the monks met with uncomprehending bewilderment by the local population in Hulbert and Lost City, but Brother Joseph's activities included something that many could relate to: ranching and agriculture. They had no experience with French monasticism or its foreign routines, but farming they understood.<sup>130</sup>

Clear Creek was the only Benedictine monastery in the United States that prayed with the old Tridentine liturgy, and the Catholics who settled close by came with the expectation of being a part of a counter-cultural refutation of Western culture. At Clear Creek, they believed, they would have an active role in shaping the world that would come after civilization tore itself apart because of its radical secularism. In time they were the prevalent population in a rural pocket of northeastern Oklahoma. The land

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<sup>130</sup> "The Good Shepherd," *Oklahoma Living*, September 2011.

around the monastery became the gathering place for traditionally-minded Catholics who sought to raise their families withdrawn from the world. One such person was George Carpenter, a blacksmith who worked on the building of the monastery. He brought his wife and seven children to live outside the monastery in order to live a simpler life. Attending a Latin mass parish in Dallas before coming to Oklahoma, the Carpenters sought a place where they could raise their children with no outside influence and in the presence of the traditional Latin liturgy. Andrew Pudewa, whose family owns and operates the “Institute for Excellence in Writing,” a conservative/traditionalist homeschooling curriculum company, relocated his family and his business to Clear Creek to join the small community. Pudewa connected Clear Creek with the larger movement within conservative American Christianity focused on what they call the “Benedict Option,” a term coined by journalist Rod Dreher to describe an inward turn by Christians as they contemplate losing the cultural battles that stemmed from the Sexual Revolution. Pudewa’s Institute for Excellence in Writing attracted still more to the community and provided jobs to many of the families who moved to Clear Creek, allowing the community to become isolated from neighbors who were not monastery-inspired transplants. In the summer of 2016, Clear Creek Monastery and the Institute for Excellence in Writing co-hosted a conference on the Benedict Option, called “the Idea of



a Village,” and which drew conservative/traditionalist Christians from across the country.<sup>131</sup>

Clear Creek, founded in 1999 by the monks of Fontgombault, currently enjoys a growing reputation among conservative Christians as a center of “The Benedict Option,” a phrase coined by journalist Rod Dreher (currently writing a book on the topic) to encapsulate how Christians should respond to what they believe is immanent persecution by a Western Society no longer rooted in traditional culture. The Benedict Option, its proponents explain, describes a plan for coping with a hostile culture through turning inward instead of attempting to affect social developments through political action. During the summer of 2016, the abbot of Clear Creek, Rod Dreher, and the traditionalist community of families surrounding the monastery hosted a conference on the Benedict Option which gathered conservatives (and even some Catholic Workers) from across the United States to hear lectures by Dreher, the abbot, and others to declaim contemporary cultural trends and suggest concrete ways to execute the Benedict Option. Although not a large portion of the American Catholic Church, Conservative/Traditionalist projects such as Clear Creek seem poised to have an outsized voice in the American Catholic Church.

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<sup>131</sup> “Leaving the Rat Race for God,” *Eastern Oklahoma Catholic*, June 2009. See also “Spirituality of Monks Draws Families of Monastery,” *Tahlequah Daily Press*, April 14, 2008; “Idea of a Village,” Institute for Excellence in Writing, 2016, accessed July 22, 2016, <http://www.theideaofavillage.com/>; Charles Beard, “The Best and the Worst of the Benedict Option: Reflections from Clear Creek,” *Christian Democracy*, July 2016, accessed July 22, 2016, <http://www.christiandemocracymagazine.com/2016/07/the-best-and-worst-of-benedict-option.html>.

In 2010, Clear Creek became an abbey. Monasteries transition from priories to abbeys when they achieve a steady number of men seeking to join the monastery in addition to a degree of financial self-sufficiency from its motherhouse. Dom Antoine Forgeot, abbot of Fontgombault and head of Clear Creek Abbey, returned once or twice a year to his monastery in Oklahoma to superintend its development under Prior Phillip Anderson. At Forgeot's recommendation, Clear Creek became an Abbey in February and in April Dom Anderson became Clear Creek's first Abbot. Although this would be the end of its dependent status to Fontgombault, Clear Creek remained a thoroughly French institution as a member of the Congregation of Solesmes. Alone among the Solesmes male communities, Fontgombault and its daughter houses retained the Latin liturgy as the Modern world looked to its activities with growing interest. By September of 2013, Clear Creek reached 40 monks and continued to build its impressive church. Continuing into the beginnings of the twenty-first century, it was a vibrant community that served as a center for traditionalist/conservative Catholic life in the United States, well-suited to the cultural climate of Oklahoma.<sup>132</sup>

Clear Creek did not have an ecclesiastical relationship with Saint Gregory's. It is a curious note about the structure of Benedictine life that two monasteries less than one hundred miles apart had so little to do with one another. Clear Creek was a French Abbey, with traditions and priorities that were uniquely French. They belonged to the

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<sup>132</sup> *Eastern Oklahoma Catholic*, July 2012. See also Carla Hilton, "A Witness to the Existence of God," *Oklahoman*, March 31, 2013.

Congregation of Solesmes, a French congregation, and they had café au lait with a baguette for breakfast. Their cook was a militant Francophile. Most importantly, Clear Creek was a contemplative monastery occupied with pursuing a vocation withdrawn from the world. Saint Gregory's Abbey engaged the world around it as they had since the monks came over from Pierre-qui-Vire. Operating a four-year university in addition to a collection of parishes that they staffed, the monks at Saint Gregory's integrated in the mainstream of Benedictine life within the United States. They belonged to an American congregation and their activities mirrored the goals of other Benedictines across the United States.



The monks of Pierre-qui-Vire founded Sacred Heart in Indian Territory because it matched founder Jean-Baptiste Muard's vision for his community of monks: an overseas apostolate whereat a monastery could be established that served the disenfranchised and stood autonomous from local bishops. The monks of Fontgombault founded Clear Creek in Oklahoma one hundred and twenty-four years later because it offered the monks the opportunity to strengthen Catholic conservatism/traditionalism while founding a monastery that was autonomous from the local bishop's authority. Oklahoma proved for both communities a hospitable climate to establish monasteries that were autonomous and provided access to a disaffected or disenfranchised group of people, Native Americans and Traditionalist Catholics. For the Catholic Church in the United States, the

transmission of French Catholic Culture to the monasteries of Sacred Heart and Clear Creek provides further evidence that a single historical model for interpreting the American Church is insufficient, because French contributions to Catholicism in the United States in Oklahoma show a unique European culture at the service of a unique American culture.

*New York Times* journalist Ross Douthat once wrote that in spite of the narrative of decline surrounding the nation since World War Two, France's cultural, religious, and political choices in the twenty-first century will reverberate throughout the world. As I write this conclusion, the French are in the throes of their third terrorist crisis in the past year and a half as the eyes of the world look on. Douthat's argument about the continuing relevance of France in the world arena seems to comport with the experience of monasticism in France: reviving despite a declining role for the church in the public square and still carrying missionary apostolates across the world into places such as Oklahoma. The proliferation of French monasteries the world over, especially those built in the past fifty years, are a contradiction to the notion that French religiosity is in decay. Were it not for the French Benedictines, the supposedly more religious United States would not enjoy access to traditionalist monasticism. At a time when religious scholars such as Phillip Jenkins have begun to examine "global Christianity," it is timelier now than ever to example the communities that were international in scope before many others: the religious orders, including the Benedictines. With global Christianity in mind,

research into the spread of the French congregations, of which Oklahoma would be a case study, is in order.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/opinion/sunday/ross-douthat-france-the-crucible-of-europe.html>.



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