

St Peter (Slovak) Parish, Thunder Bay, ON. The Early Years, 1907-1914



Roy H. Piovesana

The thousands of European immigrants that entered Canada between 1891 and 1911 had a profound impact on the creation and complexion of Roman Catholic parishes. In Fort William's East End for example, (then part of the Sault Ste Marie Diocese) four national parishes were established from 1907-1921, namely, St Peter (Slovak), St Joseph (Italian), St Casimir (Polish), and the Ukrainian Catholic Church of the Transfiguration. From the early 1890s European immigrants were drawn to the East End or "coal docks" by seasonal employment opportunities as "dock labourers" and "coal heavers" at the Canadian Pacific Railway freight sheds and the James Murphy coal handling facilities along the northern banks of the Kaministiquia River.

Origins of Slovak Parish Community

A community of Slovaks with a desire to establish a parish and church of their own led by a Slovak-speaking pastor had been identified as part of St Patrick parish in Fort William as early as 1893. A perusal of the sacramental registers of this parish reveals the regular baptism and marriage of Slovak immigrants and their children to the end of 1907. Father Ludger Arpin, S.J., first pastor of St Patrick parish, invited a Slovak-speaking priest from Pennsylvania to give a six-day mission during the Lenten season of 1900. He delighted in the satisfaction and joy his Slovak-speaking parishioners took in hearing sermons in their language and in socializing among themselves.

Moreover, he purchased several lots in Fort William's East End knowing that they would eventually want to build a church of their own in that part of the city. An important step in the realization of this goal was the founding of the First Catholic Slovak Union, St Joseph's Lodge No. 402 ("Privá Slovenská Katolíka Jednota" spolok SV JOZEFA) in Fort William on 18 April 1902. As a fraternal mutual benefit society all thirty-five members provided leadership in fundraising and community formation. Recognizing the urgency of providing a church for the "foreign element" in Fort William, The Most Rev. David Scollard, Bishop of Sault Ste Marie, approved the purchase of several lots in the coal docks in the summer of 1906 from the Hudson's Bay Company which, together with those acquired by Father Arpin three years earlier, established the future site of St Peter church and parish (Osada Sv. Petra) on the corner of Connelly and McIntosh streets. Although the Bishop's intent was to have this church serve the entire Catholic immigrant population of Fort William's East End, it was mainly the Slovak community that provided the financial wherewithal for its creation.

Father François Maynard, S.J.

To find a suitable priest who would serve the spiritual needs of this ethnically diverse population, Bishop Scollard turned to the Society of Jesus. He appealed to Father Edward Lecompte, S.J., Provincial, Independent Mission of the Jesuits in Canada, hoping that a Slovak-speaking Austrian-Hungarian Jesuit might be persuaded to accept an apostolate among an immigrant population in a small frontier community in northwestern Ontario. Although Father Lecompte was unsuccessful in this regard, he offered the services of Father François Maynard, S.J. (1868-1956), who had already taken up residence at St Patrick's rectory to serve the missions west of Fort William.

Father François Maynard's remarkable facility in modern languages made him an ideal choice as the founding pastor of St Peter Parish. Born in La Présentation, Quebec, his early education and formation as a Jesuit took place in the Diocese of St Hyacinthe where he was ordained on 24 August 1901. When he arrived in Fort William on 5 July 1905, he had a halting fluency in English. With the help of French-Canadian and Irish families at St Agnes mission church in



St Peter (Slovak) Roman Catholic Church and School, c. 1924

(Courtesy St Peter Parish Archives)

To the left of the church is St Peter Roman Catholic Separate School which opened in September, 1911 with four classrooms. This photograph shows an enlarged school with eight classrooms. Prior to its opening, the school began as a one room classroom in the basement of St Peter Church which was rented to the Fort William Separate School Board in 1908-1909.

Westfort, he soon spoke and wrote English effectively. Two years later, when he began his apostolate among the immigrants of Fort William's East End, his first concern was to learn a language or languages that would allow him to communicate with the majority of his future parishioners. Initially, he strolled through the streets of the East End, visited immigrant families, and conversed with these people as best he could. He concluded that if he was to become an effective pastor in this neighbourhood fluency in Slovak and Italian would be essential. The Slovak language presented him with the greatest challenge. It was not until he acquired a Slovak grammar and a Slovak-Magyar dictionary that he was able to develop a facility in this language which eventually earned him the everlasting affection and confidence of the Slovak people. In the space of several months, Father Maynard had enough confidence to deliver his first sermon in Slovak and Italian on 28 July 1907 at the laying of the cornerstone of St Peter's Church.

The successful completion of St Peter parish church was interrupt-

ed by the tragedy of fire which destroyed the entire brick-veneered edifice on Saturday, 3 November 1907. According to Father Maynard, a homeless individual sought shelter in the unfinished church basement and started a fire for warmth. The fire ignited construction debris which in turn spread to the rest of the building. One can only imagine the sense of anguish and discouragement this tragedy brought to parishioners. Father Maynard, however, referred to it as a “happy accident”. He believed that the contractor, Joseph LeBrun, had built a church that would not have stood the test of time. Regrettably, the builder’s insurance policy did not cover the entire \$15,000 construction cost leaving the parishioners to make up the difference which was mainly owed to workers in unpaid wages. In the aftermath of the fire, Father Maynard rented the small Finnish Church on Christie Street between McLaughlin and McIntosh until the basement of St Peter’s could be renovated and made suitable for services. The parish prudently decided to postpone reconstruction until all debts were paid and additional funds raised.

St Peter (Slovak) Parish

During the four year interlude between the fire and the official dedication of the reconstructed church significant steps were taken in the spiritual and material development of the parish. From 3 November 1907 to 8 October 1911 500 baptisms (of which 129 were Italian) and 122 marriages (of which four were Italian) were celebrated by Father Maynard. In May 1908, he invited a young Italian-speaking Jesuit from Montreal to give a mission. Because the priest spoke a northern Italian dialect to Italian parishioners who were predominantly from southern Italy, the mission was not well attended. The mission demonstrated to Italian parishioners, however, that they too were an integral part of a growing parish community. A year later, the first Corpus Christi outdoor procession in Fort William and Port Arthur was organized at St Peter’s. The feast of Corpus Christi had been celebrated this way at the Church of the Immaculate Conception on the Fort William Mission. The Mission had the advantage of being separated from the town of Fort William and therefore had few concerns about possible interference from non-Catholic groups. In the

East End, Father Maynard saw little risk in carrying the Blessed Sacrament outside by restricting the procession to the perimeter of St Peter's church property. With the Corpus Christi procession, Father Maynard began a cherished religious tradition which was to continue until the late 1980s. Parishioners also participated in a celebration on 3 August 1910 for the blessing of the church bell by Bishop Scollard. Made in France specifically for St Peter's Parish with the inscription: "Pius X, Bishop Scollard, F. Maynard, S.J. 1910", the bell gave the genesis of the parish. In addition, as "the voice of the people", it was ready to be rung in welcome, rejoicing, and mourning. Those attending the ceremony anxiously awaited the day when the bell would be elevated to its proper position in the belfry of the completed church.

St Peter (Slovak) Church Reconstruction, 1911

Father Maynard approached this moment with some anxiety. By the spring of 1911 the parish had just paid off a debt of \$2,000 resulting from the 1907 church fire thus leaving little in parish coffers. Accordingly, he was inclined to wait another year or two to augment the building fund and to improve his fluency in Slovak. Notwithstanding the respect parishioners had for their pastor's sage advice, the majority opted to have the church reconstruction begin immediately. The decision was made easier by a fortuitous infusion of \$3,000 into the building fund with the sale of three lots of church property to the Fort William Separate School Board for the construction of St Peter's School. Reconstruction began on 19 June and all work was completed by 1 October 1911. A week later, on a bright, crisp Sunday morning, Bishop Scollard blessed and dedicated the new church under the patronage of St Peter. The church was filled to capacity and, in the presence of a 125 voice choir made up of parishioners, their sons and daughters, and children from St Peter's School, Bishop Scollard delivered his congratulatory remarks in English followed by Father Maynard's homily in Slovak. St Peter's Roman Catholic Church in Fort William's East End became home to one of the first Slovak parishes in Canada and the first of several to serve the spiritual needs of Fort William's immigrant population.

The formation of St Peter's parish and the reconstruction of its

church was a testament to the power of cultural loyalties, the deep commitment of the Slovak people to their faith, and the talented leadership of a caring, sensitive pastor. The church became the centre of the Slovak community's social and cultural life. Baptisms, first communions, confirmations, marriages, and funerals as rites of passage were celebrated from the parish church. By 1912, a parish council, altar and rosary societies were active. In addition, the church became the gathering place for the Slovak Catholic Sokol, branches of the First Catholic Slovak Union, and the Krivan dance and theatrical group.

Would the Slovak ethos of the parish endure? Bishop Scollard and his successor, Bishop Ralph Dignan had their doubts. These reservations were not shared by Father Maynard. So confident was he of its survival that he had the inscriptions on the Stations of the Cross etched in Slovak. Above all, the seriousness with which he approached the study of Slovak was a poignant reminder to parishioners of the esteem he had for their language and culture. As a member of a cultural minority himself, perhaps he was better able to empathize with a Slovak minority wanting to hear sermons and to receive the sacraments in their own language.

It was ironic that Father Maynard's departure from St Peter's parish revolved around language. Bishop Scollard lacked confidence in Father Maynard's fluency in Slovak and therefore wished to provide Fort William's Slovak people with "a priest who knew the Slovak language well." In his notebook, written sometime after 1914, Father Maynard viewed the Bishop's enigmatic judgement in this matter with some bitterness. To be sure, he was sufficiently fluent in Slovak to communicate effectively with his parishioners. Nevertheless, on 4 November 1914 he officially took his leave from St Peter's parish and was succeeded by a series of Slovak-speaking priests all of whom, for a variety of reasons, had serious misunderstandings with parishioners and whose tenure as pastor were relatively short. It was not until the Slovak Benedictine Order from St Andrew's Abbey, Cleveland, Ohio took charge of the parish in 1934 that the stability of Father Maynard's years was restored.

25 September 2005

Pastors, St Peter (Slovak) Parish, 1907-2005

Rev. François Maynard, S.J.	1907-1914
Rev. Ján Novotny	1914-1921
Rev. Karel Gross	1921-1922
Rev. Martin Pazurik	1922-1925
Rev. Michael Hudak	1925-1928
Rev. Emery Vodicka	1929-1933
Rev. George Lua, O.S.B.	1934-1935
Rev. Celestine Drexler, O.S.B.	1935-1940
Rev. Ivan Kramoris, O.S.B.	1940-1941
Rev. Gilbert Stopko, O.S.B.	1941-1947
Rev. Martin Vanecko, O.S.B.	1947-1948
Rev. Sylvester Prisc, O.S.B.	1948-1950
Rev. Joseph S. Reguly	1950-1988
Rev. Abraham Kappankunnel	1988-1993
Rev. Bernard Campbell	1993-2005
Rev. Gerald McDougall, S.J.	2 005-