

The Life of Bishop Frederic Baraga

Drawn from Bernard Lambert's
Shepherd of the Wilderness: A Biography of Bishop Frederic Baraga

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In Trebnje, Slovenia, John and Catherine Baraga baptized son Frederic on his birthday, June 29, 1797. His spiritual education was important to them, as was his general schooling. Napoleonic wars afflicted the region and impoverished the family's large estate. Both parents died before his 16th birthday. He boarded for four years in the capitol of Slovenia with a family who shared their rich religious, moral and social life which deepened and broadened Frederic's gifts. Thought was given to the possibility of marriage between their daughter, Anna, and Frederic.

Further education took Frederic to Vienna, Austria for five years where he studied law. His skill with languages grew also. He became acquainted with Fr. Clement Hofbauer who shared the spiritual writings of his Redemptorist founder, St. Alphonsus Liguori. Regular participation in the sacraments, a faithful practice of religion, patterning one's life after Christ, and regular prayer inspired Frederic's future pastoral work. More and more Frederic made decisions from a religious point of view.

Frederic grew strong in summer vacations which included weeks of walking tours. Living in the Lord's presence, he visited neighboring countries and experienced other cultures. These activities provided a readiness for physical labors and cultural differences so evident in his later years as a missionary.

Though Hofbauer died when Frederic was 19, his spiritual journey continued throughout law school. Drawn by grace to enter the seminary, Frederic gave up his inheritance. On September 21, 1823 the bishop of Ljubljana, Slovenia ordained Frederic Baraga.

The situation in Slovenia included not just Napoleonic aggressions. There were also religious practices and the sacraments). Frederic struggled against Jansenism, as experienced by the people. He encouraged ITACONID confessions and wrote devotional works for the laity. He battled for souls and embraced penance, poverty and service of the poor.

Frederic developed a prayer book written in Slovenian for the Catholic laity. It included instructions, sermons, and assistance to pray at Mass. Though against emperor's law, Baraga adopted from the Franciscans a Sodality of the Sacred Heart to share with zealous persons. For this zeal he was put into a remote and neglected parish as the least of three assistant priests. Yet Frederic applied Hofbauer's spirituality in the new setting. The discontented pastor and associates demeaned and hindered his efforts. But the people reacted favorably to his good purpose, manner, and service.

Baraga became discouraged. He prayed for deliverance from the rejection he experienced from the clergy in his parish. Having heard of the great needs of the diocese of Cincinnati in America, he thought of becoming a missionary and contacted Bishop Edward Fenwick. Fenwick sent an emissary who convinced the Austrian emperor to start a missionary society. Later, the emissary would support Frederic's missionary efforts and distribute his missionary letters describing the problems and progress of the gospel among the Indians. Baraga's bishop approved his request to go to America.

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The Atlantic crossing lasted all of December 1830. Upon his arrival in America Baraga began the study of the Ottawa language under the instruction of the son of an Ottawa chief who was attending the

Cincinnati seminary. He was assigned to Arbre Croche, Michigan (near present Harbor Springs), a journey of 800 miles. How happily the small community of new converts welcomed Bishop Fenwick and the new pastor, Fr. Baraga. In earlier days Fr. Dejean had planted the seed of faith among them. Their own Chief Assiginak: humbly and competently prepared them for baptism and confirmation. In his four days among them the bishop baptized 24 and confirmed 30. He left a happy missionary with them.

The Indians shared their many spiritual gifts with Fr. Baraga: deep religious faith and love, harmony, an unwritten order of life, a quiet and peaceful community, and affection and respect for their spiritual leader. He shared with them the devotional practices he used, and learned their different patterns of life and prayer.

The Catholic practice was to instruct and educate in the native language. From the start, Frederic would spend many nights on writing and studying the Ottawa language. He formulated some of the dialect's grammatical rules and 20 years of steady work went into his foundational dictionary of the language.

Baraga's small log cabin with its birch bark roof was his home. Rain dampened some of his times of work and sleep. Yet he did not just stay home. He began with small trips, then with longer ones. Baraga grew strong in walking great distances and in his readiness to meet the spiritual needs of all. In one year 87 adults and 44 children were baptized, and a school was begun again. He felt free to spend himself for the Lord and souls. Wherever he located an Indian hut he entered. If they were not baptized, he told them of the necessity for embracing the Christian religion and of the way to eternal happiness. To baptize them was a privilege and a source of happiness to him.

These woodland Indians had lived a nomadic life, hunting, fishing and gathering sap and berries. Feast and famine alternated. The converts began to turn to agriculture and storage of the harvest to last the long winter. At Arbre Croche converts had a permanent residence while others went south for the winter.

Fur trading was at a peak: among the natives. Yet wildlife gradually would be depleted and bartered for a low price and for whiskey -- with little to show for the enterprise. John Jacob Astor's hold on trading posts and on licenses made a millionaire family and an opportunity for many shady traders. But at Arbre Croche two widows honestly and humbly conducted business with Indians. The community was sober, peaceful and held in good respect by the less fortunate members of the nation.

Winter's cold crept into Fr. Baraga's log cabin. He had to wear his one coat to keep warm. He had to break: newly formed ice then heat the wine and water for morning Mass. Loneliness visited too. His sister Amanda's letters came 15 months late but were to be read and reread often.

May of the second year opened with guides taking the missionary across 30 miles of open water to Beaver Island. Hospitality and remembered ancestral stories of the "blackrobes" disposed all to speak: welcoming words and listen at first. Yet the Beaver Island groups would prove to be resistant, hostile and contrary to converts. Some converts moved after his third year visit over to Arbre Croche. His first 22 converts were baptized before he crossed to the north shore.

On Lake Michigan's north shore, at Indian Lake, the resident Indian clan had already begun a church, for they were hopeful of baptism. All but one accepted baptism and began a zealous new life in Christ. Fr. Baraga and a happy community dedicated that first small wooden church in honor of the Blessed Virgin. Baraga's two yearly return journeys found them using his catechism and prayer book. He distributed religious articles and admonished them to visit the church often.

The Fall of 1832 Bishop Fenwick returned though weakened by exposure to cholera. He confirmed 141

and spoke to Baraga of a future work among the tribes around Lake Superior. He commended his plans to expand the school.

Fr. Baraga traveled to Detroit where he proofread his 200 page book written in Ottawa. He had 2,000 copies printed and about half were bound in Detroit. He then returned to Arbre Croche where nearly 1,000 converts lived. To the school were added blacksmith, carpentry, and book binding shops. That winter he started his travel by snow shoes. He found it demanding of strength and requiring skill and practice.

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One well remembered story was the spring trip which took Baraga and canoeists 30 miles directly across Lake Michigan to Little Detroit Island on Green Bay. Paddles and sail carried them forward, as all trusted the priest's faith and prayer. A storm broke suddenly around the five in the canoe, threw them around and threatened to end the trip. The storm passed quickly and they went forward to safety. For eight days he taught, baptized, and selected a church site on Detroit Island.

With few supplies left, the party then went along the north shore. They knew Fr. Baraga's willingness to sacrifice and share what little he had. His ways made them believe in him and the God he professed. His speech was kind, his approach gentle and a general reverence filled all he did. But what would happen on the second day as the supplies ran out? After rising and praying in the early hours, he pressed them on. By the end of the day a flock of birds drew their canoe to shore where Baraga and his companions gathered 130 eggs. These they carefully stored and then thanked God for his response to their need.

The Indian Lake band was visited and found to be prospering though the Beaver Island community was under persecution. Though his home mission was happy with his return, the natives encouraged him to winter 300 miles south at Grand River (Grand Rapids, Michigan). In a building belonging to a settler he held church services and instructed many. A faithful Christian native went before him as delegate to the various clans to prepare them for the missionary's visit. Because his report to his new bishop at Detroit spoke of the 86 converts and potential among the 900 natives of the area, the bishop directed him to transfer there. A Redemptorist priest and two brothers came to sustain the Arbre Croche mission.

His 10th Anniversary found Fr. Baraga at Grand River beginning again from nothing. With great efforts he funded and gathered workmen for the church and school. Fur traders resisted his ministry and continued their unscrupulous practices and provisions of whiskey to the native peoples. He challenged them on having their belly as their God. They threatened his life even as they promoted ignorance, poverty and drunken aggressiveness among the natives. A drunken crowd paid the missionary's small home a visit and threatened to burn it. Only the sheriff's visit finally ended their loud threats. Christians showed their faith. They knew they needed to come apart from brawling ways. Some even came back from sugar camp for Sunday Mass for their spiritual nourishment.

When Baraga made the difficult journey out to another small sugar camp, these too made their Easter duty and attended Mass each of these three days with them.

The Indians found joy in their servant, Frederic Baraga. It was a good day when their new church was dedicated. Others joined the native Catholics from up and down the river. It was the same spring that the Ottawa tribes gathered in council at Grand River. From their council came a resolve to deal with the national government. That government was steadily caught up in driving the Indians into the dust. Using his skills as a lawyer Baraga tried to protect the rights of the Indians in these negotiations. The Indian agent sought his removal. The government dealt with the bishop who drew Fr. Baraga into consenting to leave so that he could go to the Ojibway on Lake Superior, where French Jesuits had nurtured the faith 100 years ago. In obedience Baraga gave his work into the hands of another missionary.

Fr. Baraga arrived at LaPointe (on Madeline Island, near Bayfield, Wisconsin) in July 1835. Those who invited him cooperated well and in seven days built its first log church with a bell and steeple. Fifty Ojibway, some of whom were prepared beforehand, were baptized by the week's end. However, it was to be a long, hard winter for Baraga. His winter clothes had not arrived. The island became nearly empty of people in winter because most Indians went deep into the woods. For these, the priest crossed the ice almost daily despite the bitter cold. He realized the sacrifices needed to call these people to salvation. His prayer for courage and endurance was answered. With snow shoe travel, a cheerful attitude and prayer, he was able to prepare 20 adults and two small children for Christmas baptism.

In June Baraga traveled to Fond du Lac (near Duluth) where Pierre Cotte, a Catholic trader, instructed and led converts in prayer. Baraga baptized 51 members of the Ojibway band.

Given the extreme need, Baraga traveled to Europe in 1836. There he would solicit funds and recruit priests for the mission of Lake Superior. Baraga was welcomed to Europe. His book on Indian life, printed in French and German, sparked interest in the Lake Superior American Missions. While in Europe he had printed a prayer book and life of Christ written in Ojibway and Ottawa languages. He had an audience with Pope Pius IX at which he presented the Pope with copies of his book and told him of his priestly ministry.

Baraga, hoping to maintain a school at LaPointe, invited his sister Antonia to be a mission teacher there. She accompanied him to America. However, she was not able to deal with rigors of missionary life.

Coming home to LaPointe, Fr. Baraga found the flock steadily practicing the faith. A second and larger church was started and included a school building in where he could claim a small space for his needs. Its September 1838 dedication was just three days past when the bishop made a quick pastoral visit, confirmed 112 adults and left this same day.

LaPointe was especially important. It was at LaPointe that the Indians had to gather to receive the small annual payments given them under the Ojibway-United States treaty (1854). The payments were often months late and as a result the Indians were kept from hunting and other seasonal provisioning. The treaty also discriminated against full-blooded Indians, offering them far less payment than mixed bloods.

Yet all who traveled to LaPointe, often thousands of Ojibway, found a tireless, kindly and compassionate missionary. He went among them daily. Friends were made, converts were encouraged, all were invited to be catechized, then baptized. The Ojibway prayer book and visiting the sick were ways in which Father Baraga shared the good news of Jesus. He then prepared a 200 page book of sermons for the Sunday and holy day Gospels and Epistles. This included a short section teaching on the Old Testament and excerpts of the New Testament. In the parish a good spirit continued to grow.

Baraga focused on his life and future in serving the Indian peoples at LaPointe. In a personal way he entered so many scenes of tragedy and suffering. The starving, poorly clothed, and sick people of his parish came to mind as he spoke on the Christmas scene of Christ in swaddling clothes or the suffering of Jesus in his death on the cross. Though his own flock were adding agriculture to their hunting, fishing and sugar making, and were slightly more comfortable than some others, they were still very poor despite eight years of struggle.

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Appeals came from 180 miles east that the L'Anse Ojibway band longed for a priest. On the Keweenaw peninsula, L'Anse was a temporary mission for Fr. Rene Menard in 1660. Only God knows how a small flame of faith brought several natives, seeking knowledge of God's Word, to fur trader Pierre Crebassa.

His prayers and letters urging Baraga to come to the Ojibway band there were finally answered in 1843. Baraga's arrival found the group embarrassed by a drunken revelry in the village. Yet they refused to listen if he would not stay with them! He agreed to stay two weeks and found the seeds of great good among those who received his words and desired information. Baraga felt a replacement could lead LaPointe community. He then should go to L' Anse for his main mission. He visited his three missions before retiring in late October to L' Anse.

Baraga prayed with great fervor for other shepherds to serve those who lived on the great lake where he now served alone. Pastoral burdens increased as the mines opened on the Keweenaw peninsula. European Catholic immigrants came in great numbers. Even as pressure increased against the natives around him, now others asked his assistance. Frederic drew upon his skills as a lawyer to defend the rights of his mission and of the Catholic Indians. Both the mission and its Catholic converts were persecuted intensely for about a year. Then peace was made.

Converts were many. When Baraga had assurance of funds from Europe, he quickly set to work helping them build log homes and a church. In nine months much was accomplished. The entire Catholic community canoed with him to LaPointe for the August annual allotment payments. He greeted the many who had gathered and encouraged interested ones to move closer to the established missions. The new bishop of Milwaukee visited and was delighted with all that was accomplished there. But as much as seemed well in LaPointe, L' ACSE looked more impoverished than ever. Frederic's sense of isolation grew. His need for contact with a spiritual counselor grew stronger.

Winters found Baraga snowshoeing hundreds of miles to visit LaPointe, Fond du Lac and Grand Portage missions. Summers found him traveling by water. When the Catholics returned that fall to L' ACSE, he found that several canoes needed to go the 400 miles round trip to Sault Ste. Marie to bring back supplies before winter. But each year his converts were a little better prepared in their log homes with winter provisions from their gardens because of their industry and sober living. They dedicated their new church on the bluffs above those first log homes in September of 1844.

Baraga continued to visit his mission by snowshoe in winter. That February of 1845 he made the 600 miles round trip in five weeks of exhausting labors. His journeys by water were equally difficult and dangerous.

One such trip was the 40 mile "short cut" across the open waters of Lake Superior from Sand Island (Apostle Islands) to Grand Portage. The alternative route took a month and 200 miles along the shore. However, a storm rose on the lake and Frederic and his single native companion, Lewis, struggled through the ever-higher waves. Frederic prayed on through several hours of buffeting wind and rain, before they came to the frightening sight of a craggy shore ahead. "We will be saved," he assured his companion. "Go straight on." And there ahead could be seen a small, calm river. The travelers disembarked and erected a small cross of thanksgiving. The river is still known as *Cross River*.

A second account was a trip east from LaPointe to Ontonagon in early spring, when the ice was deteriorating. His companion set out with trust in Baraga as he took a direct route. But they became alarmed as in short order they were adrift on a ice flow and a south east wind steadily pushed them away from the shore. Frederic walked on singing songs of faith. "We will be safe," he said. Suddenly the wind shifted and drove them ahead and shoreward. "See, we have traveled a great distance and have worked very little." And they stepped safely ashore not far from their destination. The Council of Baltimore (May 1852) petitioned the Pope for a bishop to serve the upper peninsula of Michigan and other areas of Lake Superior. By word of mouth Baraga heard that his name had been proposed for this appointment. However, fall came and he completed his 1,700 page Ojibway

dictionary, a labor of 20 years. He needed five months to oversee its printing. By year's end he resolved to go to Europe to beg for priests and funds for the missions.

As Baraga prepared to leave for Europe, he received official notice of his appointment as bishop. This took place in Cincinnati on November 1, 1853. Before leaving the city for his begging trip to Europe he wrote his first pastoral letter in English and Ojibway. His message was: stand firm in the faith, adore, respect, obey and love God all the days of your life. (N.B. Baraga's pastoral letter is the only such letter ever printed in a language of the native peoples of America.)

While in Europe Bishop Baraga recruited five priests, though only two actually came to the diocese. Now the mission societies and crowds of Catholics, who had read his informative letters over 20 years, saw him face to face. Wherever he stopped huge church crowds saw his small, frail frame and a face deeply tanned, lined and creased in his years of suffering and burdensome responsibilities. But sweet and pastoral was the challenging message of the penitential life he exemplified. All of this showed in the "Indians' bishop," as he said of himself, in a portrait painted during the year long begging trip in Europe.

Sault Ste. Marie, 200 years earlier, had seen French voyageurs and missionaries. Now in 1853, she saw its first locks under construction for shipping the growing bounty of copper and iron ore. From Sault Ste. Marie Baraga led Catholic life for 12 years. That year was important too because he ordained Henry Thiele to a life time of priestly ministry in the new diocese. He continued to visit all the missions regularly during these years. He traveled by horse and sleigh, by steamer or on foot.

In 1855 a sickness left him temporarily deaf. He felt isolated and alone. He was unable to hear confessions or to hear the children and adults who wanted to talk to him. He missed the compassionate sharing which sometimes had come to him from his few priests.

Still other burdens were the long and lonely hours of over-whelming tasks to find resources for the church and for his Indians. There were mean-spirited men who opposed him, continuing shortage of funds and harshness from some who had lent him money. Some criticized him for his "spoiling" of the Indians with "too much" generosity. Others thought him too solicitous in his defense of poor people's rights.

In his sixtieth year his stamina started to fail. For 10 more years he showed these effects in a slower and more painful manner for his work. But he still made mid-winter trips to accommodate Indians. Steadily the invading white men brought corrupting ways to his beloved native peoples. Meanwhile, despite nature's extreme ways, he continued to serve the dying and those who sought him for confession and God's forgiveness.

In 1865, after 12 years at Sault Ste. Marie, Bishop Baraga moved the cathedral to Marquette, which was now the center of area's population and activity. The Second Council of Baltimore (1866) required his attendance as bishop. As he was getting ready to attend, he had a slight stroke. He had another stroke during the opening ceremonies. He was very ill but Baraga wanted to die among his people. He left the council quietly and without ceremony to travel to Marquette.

Baraga was very ill during his last months of life. Many said his features appeared to be those of his adopted people. So, too, he was as poor as they were. At 70 years of age his work was limited by illness but he prayed and trusted up to the hour of his death.

Bishop Frederic Baraga died in Marquette, Michigan on January 19, 1868. He was in the 37th year of ministry to the native peoples of the Great Lakes. In the end Baraga gave all he had to the Indians. He died full of faith in the merciful love of God our Father and hope in the welcome of his' saving Son.

Divine love had developed a son's life in God's own image and spirit. Generations of new spiritual children were left to continue his work.

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Frederic Baraga, bishop of the northern vicariate and first bishop of the Diocese of Marquette, is buried in the crypt of St. Peter Cathedral, Marquette, Michigan.

CREDITS

The Life of Bishop Baraga, a reflection on the life of Bishop Baraga, is drawn from *Shepherd of the Wilderness: A Biography of Bishop Baraga*, by Bernard I. Lambert (Bishop Baraga Association, Inc.). *Shepherd of the Wilderness* was first published in 1967 (L' ACSE) and again in 1974.

In his introduction Lambert states that he found "a truly remarkable, exceptional man... He cast aside his wealth and life in upper European society to make the Indians his greatest concern. He acted with courage and skill to stand up and fight that they receive justice and mercy... He traveled far and wide to serve them... He cared for their wants and shared his skill with languages... a man who had a mission... who gave what he had to the poor

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