

Shepherd or Wolf? Joseph René Vilatte in Francophone Wisconsin

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Distinction in French Project

Spring, 2001

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Preface: Old Catholicism

“We are called Old Catholics because we have returned to the Catholicity of Scriptural and primitive times. But Catholicism is neither old nor new, or rather, it is ever old and ever new.

For us, the Pope of Rome is neither the source, nor the unique channel of authority in the Church of God. For, as Michaud says: The Pope holds his authority from the Church, not the Church from him. The Scriptures and the history of the Church show that the sovereignty resides, not in the will of the Christian community, and that the government of the Church ought to be democratic” [1]

In short, Old Catholicism retains the ritual and philosophy of Catholicism but rejects the Doctrine of Papal Infallibility of 1870.

As with all evolutions, it is difficult to determine exactly when the ecclesiastical changes began to occur and result in permanent change. But what is clear is that the Doctrine of Papal infallibility of 1870, where the Vatican Council decreed the Pope infallible in matters of faith and morals, caused an obvious split in the Catholic Church. The schismatic groups now needed to procure a hierarchy and, insisting on apostolic succession, turned to the non-papal, also known as Jansenist, Catholic Church in Utrecht, The Netherlands. [2]

The Old Catholic Movement took root in Utrecht where Edward Herzog was consecrated in 1876. In France, Loyson started the Gallican Movement. In Holland, the Jansenists united with the Old Catholics, and in England, A Mathew, founded an Old Catholic Benedictine community. [3]

Joseph René Vilatte

The Old Catholic Movement reached the United States, albeit fifteen years later. Joseph René Vilatte, a charismatic and dramatic type, was instrumental in bringing the Old Catholic movement from Europe to Belgian, Swiss, and Canadian settlers of Northeast Wisconsin.

Vilatte’s critics, principally the Roman Catholics and the Episcopalians, considered him frivolous, egotistical, an opportunist, an exaggerator and a “proselytiz[er] of the unsuspecting and guileless colonists into his strange brand of Catholicism” [4]. His followers saw him as honest, truthful, trustworthy with church funds, and loved him for his dedication and charisma. [5]

Joseph René Vilatte was born near Paris on January 24, 1854 to parents who were members of the *Petite Eglise*, a non-Papal Catholic Church in France.^[6] His parents died when he was young and he was raised in an orphanage in Paris run by the Brothers of the Christian Schools. He was re-baptized and confirmed at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris in 1867. Towards the end of the Franco-Prussian War he enlisted in the *Garde Nationale*.^[7]

The end of the Franco-Prussian War ushered in the bloody anti-Christian Paris Commune. The seeds of religious doubt were planted in young Vilatte's mind as he observed one religious faction massacring another.^[8] In an attempt to escape political and religious strife in France, he left for Canada, having been attracted by the advertisements for settlers in the rural areas. Soon after he landed he found a job as a teacher in a Catholic school near Ottawa. Anson reports that since there was no Catholic Church nearby, he "acted as a catechist and on Sundays when there was no chance of getting to Mass conducted services."^[9] One of the nearby priests was impressed with Vilatte and taught him Latin. He returned to France after two years. After he received notice for duty in the French military, he escaped to Namur, Belgium where he entered the Community of Christian Brothers. Not content and wanting to become a priest he emigrated to Canada.^[10]

In 1878 he entered St. Laurent College near Montreal where he spent three years. In 1878 he entered St. Laurent College near Montreal conducted by the Holy Cross Fathers where he spent three years. According to the Salesianists, critics of Vilatte, he was "no serious student, [but] his character seemed good. His forte was dramatic. This was his trump card throughout his life, for everyone admitted his charm and affability. Voluntarily he left the school in search of adventure. Thus he found himself in the realm of religion."^[11]

But Vilatte writes that "the teaching of the seminary was so rabidly Romanist that all other beliefs were condemned as heresies, which brought eternal damnation to all that accepted them."^[12] It was in Montreal that he heard of a famous French-Canadian former Roman Catholic priest, Charles Chiniquy, who now preached about the evils of Romanism.^[13] Vilatte writes that he attended several of Chiniquy's sermons "and returned to the seminary with my mind much disturbed...[because] I saw plainly that while on the one hand Romanism has added much error and corruption to the primitive faith, Protestantism had not only taken away Roman errors, but also a part of the primitive deposit of faith"^[14]

Charles Chiniquy was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church for his biblical and community based teaching. On April 11, 1858 Chiniquy's followers in St. Anne, Illinois turned their parish into a Community Church and appointed Chiniquy as Pastor. A year later on September 13, 1859 a church society was organized under the name Christian Catholic (Community) Church and Chiniquy was elected President of the Board of Directors. This new society made intercommunion agreements with other Christian churches, the first of which was with the Presbyterian Communion.^[15]

Vilatte joined Chiniquy's new French-Canadian Community Movement. And at Chiniquy's suggestion, Vilatte entered the Presbyterian ministerial training program at McGill University and graduated in 1884.^[16] Upon his graduation, he became

pastor of a French Presbyterian parish which was located on Doty Street, today the site of the Brown County Court House in Green Bay, Wisconsin.^[17]

But other sources do not say that he graduated from McGill University. Peter Anson writes that “in an effort to obtain peace of mind about 1882 he abandoned his studies at McGill University and, having been reconciled with the Roman Church, retired to the house of the Clerics of St. Viator, at Bourbonnais, Illinois.”^[18] Stanley Green says that in 1883 Vilatte came to Green Bay because the Presbyterian Church needed a minister and that he had been a Methodist and Congregationalist before that.

Chiniquy advised Vilatte to contact Hyacinthe Loyson another unfrocked Roman priest. Loyson, founder of the Gallican Catholic Church, advised Vilatte to look to the Old Catholic movement that was popular in Europe at that time. This new movement appealed to Vilatte because he could keep the religion of his French heritage yet reject what he did not like about it.

Sources also differ on the circumstances under which Vilatte came to the Green Bay area. Anson says he was a “freelance Presbyterian missionary.” Melton and Preuter also say he was a “freelance Presbyterian missionary” and that he met with little success, quickly perceiving that the Belgians were not about to become Presbyterians.^[19] Stanley Green says that he came to Green Bay to fill a Presbyterian pastors position but then came into contact with the Episcopalian Bishop Brown of Fond du Lac.

According to Greene, Bishop Brown was concerned that the religious Europeans who came to America, like the Belgians, Germans, Dutch, and Bohemians, were giving away to atheism and the schismatic Spiritist sects. He was particularly concerned about the very sincere Belgian Catholics. They had been used to an urban setting with a nearby church in Europe. But now, they were in the wilderness of Door County with churches few and far between.

What made it worse was that the Belgians were not happy with the traveling priests Europe provided them with. They were the poorest of priests, drank heavily, misappropriated and ran off with church funds, and abused their positions. An Old Catholic publication writes that:

Facts of gross immorality and drunkenness on the part of these priests have come to my knowledge, facts so frequent and of such character that I no longer wonder that these poor people lost all respect and belief in religion and its representatives. As one young man observed to me: ‘These priests show plainly by their conduct that they have no fear of hell or future punishment; how could they make us believe in it?’ Fortunately for some of the priests the Canadian frontier was near enough to place them beyond the reach of law. Other Roman priests have made a traffic of their religion and of the Holy Sacraments, and so made religion itself hateful and odious to the people. They were accustomed to extort money in sums of ten and fifteen dollars before they would consent to administer the last Sacrament. Even Holy Baptism has been made a subject of traffic by these faithless priests. Not long ago a mother, in order to have her infant child buried, was requested to pay five dollars to the priest for his labor, and as she had not the money she was left to bury the child with her own hands in her own garden. About the same time, after a baptism, the godfather and godmother each presented the priest with half a dollar. The priest threw the money indignantly on the ground, reproaching them for their

scanty offering; but the godfather picking up the money and putting it in his pocket replied properly: 'If you do not judge it worth the trouble to receive a dollar in your hand, I think it worth the trouble to pick it up.' One of our poorest farmers called on a priest, living at a distance of some eighteen miles, requesting him to administer the last Sacraments to his dying wife. The priest told him to provide him with a carriage and pay first on the spot the sum of eight dollars for his labor. As the poor man had not with him the money required, the woman was left to die without the religious rites she implored.^[20]

Newspapers even ran warnings for parents to watch out for priests who would molest women and children. In short, the Belgians were devout Catholics but disliked the priests Europe provided them with.^[21]

So Vilatte contacted Bishop Brown and sold him his plan. Vilatte argued that a Protestant mission would not be well received by Catholics. But an Old Catholic Mission would offer the people something they could accept as Catholics. He persuaded Brown that the best thing to do was to send him to Bishop Herzog, the Old Catholic Bishop in Switzerland, and have him ordained as a priest. He would then lead the mission at Little Sturgeon.^[22]

Bishop Brown replied that he would be happy to help the Old Catholic Movement. He explained that this would promote good relations between the Protestant Episcopal and the Old Catholic Churches, which in Europe were working to break the power of the papacy.^[23]

Peter Anson provides the most complete account of what happened next to Vilatte. Loyson had already written to Vilatte, asking him to come to Europe so that he could possibly be ordained priest by Old Catholic Bishop Herzog in Berne, Switzerland. Vilatte had also heard that the Episcopalians of Fond du Lac Diocese believed that their "Anglican succession of Apostolic authority" was preferable to that of the Old Catholics. Vilatte, in other words, should be consecrated priest by Bishop Brown because: 1) it would add to the number of "Anglican" ordinations in the United States; 2) it would "save time and expense"; 3) it would assist in knitting together the Old Catholic and Episcopalian communities.

Vilatte responded that he did not want to accept "Anglican" orders via the Episcopalian Diocese, simply because his Catholic Belgians would not support a mission that received orders from an "Anglican" hierarchy. He insisted that Bishop Brown write a letter on his behalf to Bishop Herzog. Brown relented and wrote the following letter:

My Dear Brother,

Permit me to introduce to your confidence and esteem the bearer of this letter, Mr. René Vilatte, a candidate for Holy Orders in the diocese of Fond du Lac. Mr. Vilatte is placed in peculiar circumstances. Educated for the priesthood of the Roman Catholic Church, he found himself unable to receive the recent Vatican Decrees, and for a short time associated himself with the Presbyterian communion, but, at last, by the mercy of God, was led into contact with this branch of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. He resided for a while at Green Bay, a city of this diocese. In the neighborhood of this place there are settled about 30,000 Belgians. Of these a large number, probably 8,000, are believed to be inclined to the principles of a pure and

primitive Catholicism. Several delegations of these Belgians have waited on Mr. Vilatte, and besought him to become their priest. Mr. Vilatte's character for piety, sobriety, purity, intelligence and prudence has been attested to the satisfaction of the authorities of this diocese. Our canons, however, require a longer probation as a Candidate than the exigency of the circumstances will bear. At the suggestion of Pere Hyacinthe [Loyson] approved by the Bishop of Connecticut and other Bishops, and by the Faculty of Nashotah Seminary, and by me, Mr. Vilatte approaches you, requesting you to ordain him to the priesthood, as speedily as you can find possible that he may enter upon the great work to which he seems specially summoned . It has been expedient to us to send him to you that he may learn personally something of the aims and spirit of the great movement of which you are a recognized leader and to be fitted to co-operate with you in some degree in this country. Mr. Vilatte's pecuniary means are limited and he desires to be absent from this diocese as short a time as possible. I ask you to ordain him to the priesthood and attest his character, briefly but sufficiently, by saying that I am willing to ordain him, if it should not seem expedient to you so to do.

Truly and lovingly your brother and servant,
in the Holy Church of our Lord,
J. H. HOBART BROWN,
Bishop of Fond du Lac^[24]

Brown also assured Vilatte that although he would receive funding from the Fond du Lac Diocese, he would never be subject to the Episcopalians.^[25] This promise to Vilatte was broken soon after Brown died, by his successor Bishop Grafton.

Joseph René Vilatte was ordained deacon and priest in Berne, Switzerland on June 6 and 7, 1885.

Anson and other sources claim that upon his return to Wisconsin, Vilatte opened a mission church for the Belgians in Little Sturgeon (Gardner)—The Church of the Precious Blood. But Stanley Green and an Old Catholic source describe Vilatte's initial struggle among the Belgians. According to Green, the Belgians, being a very close-knit community were not very receptive to a stranger coming into their midst preaching a Catholicism that was slightly different than what they were used to. The only thing he had going for him was the fact that he spoke their language. Otherwise he was threatened and ostracized.

He finally got a family to accept him and let him use a log cabin on a lake shore. However, according to the Old Catholics, when the woman who finally admitted him under her roof, when told by her husband that he was not a Roman priest, assigned him a couch of straw saying "that it was a bed good enough for a heretic."^[26]

His makeshift church consisted of an old log cabin with an altar made out of an old kitchen door supported by rough boards. He lived in one room where he used old wooden boxes and barrels for chairs and old carpets and hay for a bed. Here Vilatte lived for one winter on mainly bread and cheese.^[27]

Curiosity got the best of the local Belgians and slowly they trickled into Vilatte's church. The idea that they could be Catholics and not Roman was new to

them. But he and his message must have been very attractive because within a month he had nineteen families in his church and was “crowded to suffocation.”^[28]

Stanley Green describes how it was possible that Vilatte could attract so many people in a short period of time. Vilatte was a big and good-looking man. He drank but never got drunk. He was never known to be dishonest, untruthful, was not an appropriator of funds he should not have. When he ran out of money to build a church to replace his small chapel, he sold his only heirloom, his gold watch. Above all, he had extreme dedication and charisma. He had to have had, argues Green, in order to gain the acceptance of the very skeptical Belgians.

Vilatte is described as flamboyant and overly dramatic. But this was what the very poor, hardworking, and dispirited Belgians were hungry for. He provided leadership, courage, zest, pomp and drama. For example, when the Bishop came to town, Vilatte would lead the people out to meet him. The bishop would then be led into town by a procession of farmers with wagons, along with the waving of flags, banners, and the discharging of shotguns.^[29]

But, besides his effusive personality, as the Old Catholics point out, Vilatte also attracted the francophone settlers with church services in their native tongue. While the Roman Catholic Churches still conducted services in Latin, a language the common people did not understand, Vilatte used the French version of the Swiss Catholic liturgy, issued by Bishop Herzog in 1880.^[30]

The initial plan Vilatte proposed to Bishop Brown proved a successful one. Vilatte catered to the settlers spiritual and national preferences and the Episcopalians were happy to gain religious control, although indirectly, of the area. The following letter, written by Bishop Brown to *The Church Eclectic* provides a summary of and insight into Vilatte’s work in the area as of 1885.

My Dear Brother: -- For some time a movement of an important character has been going on in this Diocese, some of the features of which have just become public. I am anxious that it should not be misunderstood, and so write to you that you may have accurate information about it, as a Church editor ought to have. This is it, in brief. In this Diocese English speaking people are in a minority. We have masses of Germans, Belgians, Hollanders, Welsh, Danes, Swedes, Poles and Norwegians. In some districts English is hardly known. This state of affairs is very trying to the Diocese, as missions and parishes succumb to the foreigner and new work is difficult. I have long felt that the Church ought to meet the stranger and be his guide and friend, and that then his children would naturally become hers. Near Green Bay are 30,000 Belgians, French-speaking, of course. Many of these—I am told six or eight thousand—are somewhat affected by the Alt Katholik movement. An unusually intelligent and sagacious young Frenchman offered himself to me as a missionary to these people. His acquirements being sufficient and the exigency great, I determined, after consulting with some of our Bishops to send the young gentleman to Bishop Herzog. The object was two-fold. First, to save discussion as to authority. We had reason to think that all Alt Katholik ministrations would be welcomed. Ours would be questioned. Next, we wished to win the immigrants of mature age, men and women with religious habits formed and with prejudices fixed, and not likely to even learn the English language. This class are the leaders of new communities. If they

become indifferent or irreligious, their children are likely to be worse than themselves. If we get them, the next generation will be with us thoroughly. It is too much to ask these people to set aside the tastes and sentiments of a lifetime. Hence I am seeking to say to them: "Accept the Church's authority, her ministers and Sacraments, but keep your ritual, so long as you keep your nationality and native language. Sing your grand old hymns, light your candles, burn your incense, but have a pure faith and maintain Catholic unity." You see how the plan would take in its scope Scandinavians as well as Germans and French.

Bishop Herzog kindly assented to my request. Mr. Vilatte is back and at work. I send you a copy of our Diocesan paper, with a letter in it from Dr. Hale which is both interesting and important. You will infer, I think, the rest that I might say. Faithfully yours,

J.H. Hobart Brown^[31]

But Joseph René Vilatte was a troublemaker and a menace as far as the Catholic church was concerned. One day, for instance, he visited the Catholic Church in nearby Dykesville. There he confronted the priest and created a big public controversy. The result? Half of the congregation decided to leave the Catholic Church and build a church for Vilatte in Dykesville.^[32]

The Roman Catholic Bishop then decided that it was not enough to excommunicate Vilatte, but he also took it upon himself to write to contact a few of Vilatte's parishioners personally. Here is one of his letters.

DIOCESE OF GREEN BAY,
GREEN BAY, WIS, SEP. 3, 1886.

Mr. N--, Little Sturgeon, Wis.:

DEAR DIR,--I am sorry indeed to hear of you that you have really turned your back to the Church of your fathers and follow a man who is an apostate from his Church. Who would have thought this of you, whom I would have trusted more than anyone! Listen now to me, your bishop; learn the wrong way, the way that leads to perdition. One day sure you will be sorry for what you have done, but perhaps too late, alas! The wrong you do is greater yet because you have some influence, and thereby draw many others into ruin. You ought to know your holy religion better than to be deluded and seduced by a man who, within the space of a few years has professed three or four kinds of religion. You ought to esteem the faith of your ancestors higher than to sacrifice it for a farce, for this Old Catholicism or Christian Catholicism is but the latest religious farce. There is but one Catholicism, the Roman, the true one. If I find it worth while to write you, please find it worth while to listen to me and to think about your eternal salvation; for a Catholic who falls away from his Church cannot be saved. You will find it out—but no; I hope you will return before you find it out.

Yours,

Fred. Katzer, Bishop-elect^[33]

This tactic apparently did not work. When they found out that Vilatte was planning to build a college or seminary in Sturgeon Bay, they considered this even more of a threat. According to the Old Catholics, the Bishop decided to come from Green Bay to Sturgeon Bay and preach against the heresy of Vilatte and the Old Catholics, as well as freely announcing excommunications. But then he made the mistake of telling Vilatte's followers that Vilatte had never been ordained priest and had no spiritual power or right to administer the Holy Sacraments, but that he was only an "imposter sent by the enemies of the Church to destroy the work of God and scatter the flock of the Lord."^[34]

This further alienated Vilatte's followers from the mainstream Catholic Church as they knew these accusations and others against Vilatte were unfounded. Vilatte responded by publishing the translations of his ordinations by Bishop Herzog, in Sturgeon Bay's two newspapers with the following introduction:

To Whom it May Concern:

Inasmuch as Father Vilatte thinks of establishing himself in the city of Sturgeon Bay, he has concluded, in answer to certain rumors against the fact of his ordination to the Priesthood, to publish the following translations of his Letters of Orders, for the quieting of those persons who have been made to doubt his ordination, and in order that henceforth all persons may have evidence in regard to Father Vilatte's ordination, and my know that the objector is liable to legal proceedings.^[35]

Aside from being the Catholic "menace" all seemed to go well for Vilatte for the first few years. In 1887, the Fond du Lac diocesan magazine referred to Vilatte as "the young pioneer priest of the Old Catholic work in America, tall, with a winsome countenance and enthusiastic manner, a model of a priest and pastor. A young man of energy and dignity, culture and education, he has sacrificed his life to the cause of the Old Catholic reform. We pray God to open the hearts and hands of Churchmen all over the land to the aid of his noble work."^[36]

That same year, Jean-Baptist Gauthier, a friend of Vilatte's from Chiniquy's French-Canadian movement, joined him in Gardner during the summer. He had also attended McGill University and had been working as a teacher and catechist in Illinois since 1885. On July 7, 1887 Vilatte and Gauthier, together with a missionary who had come to work with Vilatte, Marcel Pelletier, formed a religious order called the Society of the Precious Blood. In 1888, the Belgian Independent Catholic parish in the Kewaunee area joined Vilatte's movement, and a permanent church and rectory was built in Dykesville, also known as Duvall, the Church of St. Mary. A seminary was established in Sturgeon Bay September of that year. Gauthier was ordained a priest in Berne and became pastor of the Church of the Precious Blood in Gardner in 1889.^[37]

Bishop Brown died on 2 May, 1888 and was succeeded by Charles Chapman Grafton. Though he approved of the Old Catholic Missions, he decided that they were "free-lance affairs" and decided that it was best that he have them under his Episcopal command. Grafton persuaded Vilatte to legally transfer his missions to the Trustees of the Diocese of Fond du Lac, to be held in trust for the Old Catholics. In return, the Trustees agreed to pay stipends to the Old Catholic clergy and finance their work.^[38] Vilatte would soon realize he made a big mistake.

When Mgr Heykamp, Old Catholic Archbishop of Utrecht, heard about Vilatte's new funding arrangements he wrote to Vilatte on September 19, 1889 telling him to break ties with the Protestant Episcopal Church, Anglicans, "who at bottom are not Catholics but Protestants." [39] As the following letter to Vilatte by Pastor Harderwyk of Delft, Holland on September 11, 1889 illustrates, the question of apostolic succession was of prime importance to the Old Catholics. That is, could the Episcopalians legitimately trace their succession of ecclesiastical power to Peter, the first apostle, like the Old Catholics could?

"You must disentangle yourself from the American Episcopal Church. For that reason you have acted prudently in not having Mr. Gauthier ordained priest by Dr. Grafton, who has, to say the least, a doubtful, if not *invalid*, consecration.... It is impossible for you who are a Catholic to remain under the jurisdiction of a bishop (?) who is, seriously speaking, Protestant, and whose apostolic succession is very doubtful. For this reason I counsel you to separate yourself totally from the Episcopal Church. You will say then that it is absolutely necessary for you to have a truly Catholic bishop and *sine dubio valide necnon legitime consecratus*, and this is very true.... Unite yourself with the Catholic Church of Holland. I do not doubt but that our bishops will participate with you as soon as you seriously *ex toto corde* subscribe to her Catholic doctrine. Your churches, or rather the Catholic Church of America, would then be a daughter of the Church of Holland." (Vilatte, *Ecclesiastical Relations* p.4)

What this letter also illustrates is that the Dutch Old Catholics planted in Vilatte's mind the possibility of becoming the Old Catholic Bishop of North America

Since Grafton, after their ecclesiastical deal, now considered Vilatte his subject, he did not react too kindly to Vilatte's request to become an Old Catholic bishop. He also was angry at the sudden rebuff by the Dutch bishops and blamed it on Vilatte. [40] He began a long and vicious attack on Vilatte. In September 1890 he circulated warnings in all the Episcopalian newspapers. He asked readers not to send any more contributions to the Old Catholic mission of Dykesville because Vilatte had "been, during the past year, seeking to obtain the Episcopate at the hands of the Church of Holland. Failing this he applied to Bishop Vladimir, asking to be admitted into the Orthodox Eastern Church. Lately I discovered that he was making proposals to the Roman Catholic Bishop at Green Bay, with a view to return to Rome." [41]

Grafton also demanded that Vilatte relinquish his Old Catholic missions to the Episcopal Diocese. Although the deeds to Vilatte's churches stated that they were Episcopalian churches *for the Old Catholics*, Vilatte lost his churches. He did not have the money to legally defend himself against the Episcopalians. The lawyer for the Episcopalians even told the Episcopalians that it was fortunate that Vilatte did not have the money because there was a good possibility the Episcopalians would have lost the case. [42]

Grafton continued on the warpath. He railed against the establishment of a "third" Catholic Church in America, garnishing support from the Episcopal and Old Catholic bishops in Europe. Grafton's efforts in attacking and harassing Vilatte paid off. In September 1890, Bishops of Utrecht decided in a Congress in Cologne, to abandon Vilatte and his efforts in the Church of Utrecht. Bishop Holman adds, "As had happened in England, the initiator of Old Catholicism in America was abandoned

as the Synod of Utrecht jettisoned principle to establish a curious partnership with the Anglican Church. It would appear that Utrecht was impressed with ‘numbers’ and power to say nothing of income. Revenue had been cut off, of course, by the Episcopal Diocese. The separation now which has occurred between Utrecht and the Episcopal Church adds a touch of irony to the whole picture.”^[43]

Vilatte did not let the Old Catholic and the Episcopalians stop him. He looked to the East for jurisdiction in order to carry on his mission. He asked Archbishop Vladimir, the Russian Orthodox Bishop of Alaska and the Aleutians, living in San Francisco, to raise him to the episcopacy. Although Vladimir approved of Vilatte’s missions in Wisconsin, he did not reply to Vilatte’s request. So eventually Vilatte made contact with Alvarez, also known as Mar Julius I Metropolitan, of the Independent Catholic Church, the Jacobite Church, of Ceylon, Goa, and India. Alvarez agreed to consecrate Vilatte. Vilatte then left his Old Catholic missions in the care of a Brother Augustine and left for the Far East citing the following reasons, as reported by Anson, for his long trip:

1. Because the Old Catholics in America were forbidden by the Archbishop and the Bishops in Holland to present their candidates to the Anglican Bishops for confirmation, or to use holy oils blessed by them;
2. the fear that in the case of his death, his people would be responsible should they be compelled to submit to the Roman Catholic bishops;
3. the long silence of the Holy Synod of Moscow, and the apparent indifference of the Orthodox Church towards the Old Catholic Movement in North America;
4. the expressed Orthodoxy of the Independent Catholic Church of Ceylon, together with the urgent invitation to go there and receive the Apostolic Succession.^[44]

Anson writes that although Vilatte sailed from New York on July 15, 1891 it was not until May 29, 1892 that Alvarez felt justified in consecrating a “free-lance French priest”. Apparently Patriarch Ignatius Peter III of Antioch was consulted first. But the ceremony finally took place in the former Portuguese Catholic Church of Our Lady of Good Death in Colombo, Ceylon.^[45]

Vilatte returned to the United States to realize that he had lost his religious footing in Wisconsin. The Roman Catholics despised him, the Old Catholics in Europe had abandoned him, and Bishop Grafton had stolen many of his missions.

Around this time, the Roman Catholic Bishop Messmer of Green Bay was becoming increasingly disturbed that Vilatte was converting Roman Catholic Belgians to Old Catholicism. To counteract Vilatte, Messmer asked the Canons of Premontre from the Abbey of Berne in Holland to send over French-speaking Norbertines. In 1893, Father Pennings and two other Norbertines arrived in Wisconsin.^[46] Using Vilatte’s tactics of close communication with the Belgians, they nearly destroyed. These Norbertines eventually created the first Premonstratensian abbot in the United States. This was soon to become today’s St. Norbert’s College in De Pere, Wisconsin.

Stripped of money and congregations, soon left Green Bay around 1899. For the next twenty-five years Vilatte’s activities and movements were so involved they are difficult to untangle today. He spent time working with the Polish immigrants in

Wisconsin, returned to Canada for a while, there are rumors he was in Chicago and Mexico.

He spent his last days in a Roman Catholic monastery the Cistercian Abbey of Port-Colbert, France, having been reconciled with the Church—upon one condition—that he be recognized as Bishop. Although the Holy See granted him a pension of 22,000 francs annually in recognition of his Episcopal status, [47] the Roman bishop in the Abbey saw him as competition. When the bishop failed to respect his status, Vilatte retaliated and started consecrating Old Catholic bishops in the Roman Catholic monastery. This would have created an enormous controversy, but before the Roman Bishop could take action, [48] Joseph René Vilatte died of heart failure on July 8, 1929. He was buried without his Episcopal vestments in a cemetery in Versailles. Shortly after his death his private papers vanished. [49]

The Legacy of Joseph René Vilatte

Peter Anson writes that after Vilatte left Wisconsin, some of his followers returned to the Roman Catholic Church, some joined spiritist movements, and the rest remained under Bishop Grafton's jurisdiction. [50] According to Bishop Weeks, this was not only the end of the Old Catholic Missions in Wisconsin, but also the end of any real Old Catholic Church in the United States that was associated with the Old Catholic bishops of Holland. [51]

But physical evidence of Vilatte's presence in Northeast Wisconsin still exists. As a 1960's press Gazette article points out, although there are no plaques to his memory on the St. Norbert College campus, he certainly had a lot to do with the founding of the institution. [52] Churches that were, at one time or another, in the Old Catholic tradition are still standing. They include: the Church of the Precious Blood on County Road C in the township of Gardner, WI which was founded by Vilatte in 1886; the Church of the Blessed Sacrament on 825 N. Webster in Green Bay, WI; the Robinsonville Presbyterian Church on Reiner Road in New Franken, WI. In Duvall, WI on Duvall Rd, one can find an Old Catholic Cemetery, [53] informally known among the local Belgians as the Vilatte Cemetery.

This is not to say that the Old Catholic or Christian Catholic faith does not exist in North America. One can visit the Christian Catholic Website, <http://www.ccrcc.ca>, and find the movement is still alive. According to this website, the present Christian Catholic Church Society was founded by Charles Chiniquy, as I mentioned earlier. This Society today consists of three other Boards and Societies:

1. The Society of the Precious Blood, which was first organized in Little Sturgeon, by Vilatte in 1886.
2. The American Catholic (Community) Church, also founded by Vilatte in Duvall, WI in 1889
3. Quebec Religious Corporation & the Canadian Section of the International Council of Community Churches, founded by Bishop Cote in 1980.

Conclusion

In many of the sources I came across, Vilatte is described as an egotist, an opportunist, and insincere, to say the least. It is clear that Joseph René Vilatte has been a controversial figure. What is also very clear to me is that Vilatte found himself in a three-way power struggle. While the Roman Catholics and the Episcopalians had the money and resources to attack him, the Old Catholics in Europe did not keep their promises to Vilatte and abandoned him. Vilatte, having only a small band of Belgian farmers on his side, was bound to lose this struggle.

[1] (Vilatte, *A Sketch of the Belief of the Old Catholics*, p. 7)

[2] Marx, Monsignor Joseph and Blied, rev Benjamin J. "The Old Catholics in America, Joseph René Vilatte, Archbishop Vilatte, Vilatte and the Catholic Church." *The Salesianum*, vol. 36, no. 4 (October 1941), and vol. 37, nos 1,2,3 (January, April and July 1942). p. 156

[3] Marx and Blied, p. 156

[4] Dominica, Sister M. *The Chapel: Our Lady of Good Help*. The Sisters of St. Francis of Bay Settlement. Green Bay. 1955. p. 25

[5] Greene, Stanley. *Belgian Tapes*. Area Research Center, UW-Green Bay. Interviewed by Leigh Krueger in 1976.
Greene was a radio commentator for WDOR Radio Station in Sturgeon Bay and had a great interest in Belgian religion.

[6] *The Old Catholic Church of America*. 1977 p. 89

[7] Anson, Peter F. *Bishops at Large*. Faber and Faber. London p. 91

[8] Greene, Stanley. Interviewed by Leigh Krueger. *Belgian Tapes*. Area Research Center, UW-Green Bay.

[9] Anson, 91

[10] Anson, 92

[11] Marx and Blied, p. 1

[12] Vilatte, J. *My Relations with the Protestant Episcopal Church* edited by Mar Georgius, Glastonbury, 1960, p.4 as cited in Anson, Peter F. *Bishops at Large*. Faber and Faber. London p. 92
Footnote in Anson p. 92 “This interesting autobiography covers Vilatte’s career as far as his consecration as a bishop in 1892, and contains the full text of numerous letters which are quoted in this chapter. It appears to have been written about 1910, but remained unpublished until thirty years after his death.”

[13] Chiniquy is also famous for his book *Fifty Years in the Church of Rome* in which he explains how his Roman Catholic superiors falsely accused him but Abraham Lincoln, a young lawyer from Illinois defended him. Chiniquy argues that it was the Jesuits who later killed Lincoln and explains why.

[14] Vilatte, *My Relations with the Protestant Episcopal Church* p. 4 as cited in Anson., p 92-93

[15] Christian Catholic Church of Canada web site “Rev. Charles Chiniquy, D.D. (1809-1899)”
http://ccrcc.ca/en/episcopal_committee/cccc/mem_c_chiniquy.html

[16] Christian Catholic Church of Canada web site “Most Reverend J. René Vilatte (1854-1929)”
http://ccrcc.ca/en/episcopal_committee/cccc/mem_jr_vilatte.html

[17] The Premonstratensian Fathers. *The Canons of St. Norbert Abbey*. West De Pere, Wisconsin. 1936

[18] Anson, 93

[19] Preuter, Karl and Melton, J Gordon. *The Old Catholic Sourcebook*. Garland Publishing. New York. 1983 p. 54

[20] Old Catholic Mission. *An Account of the Old Catholic Work in the Diocese of Fond du Lac*. Burleson Bros. Pewaukee. 1887

[21] Greene, Stanley. Interviewed by Leigh Krueger. Belgian Tapes. Area Research Center, UW-Green Bay

[22] Greene, Stanley. Interviewed by Leigh Krueger. Belgian Tapes. Area Research Center, UW-Green Bay

[23] Greene, Stanley. Interviewed by Leigh Krueger. Belgian Tapes. Area Research Center, UW-Green Bay

[24] Vilatte, Joseph René. *My Relations with the Protestant Episcopal Church*. As cited in Anson, Peter F. *Bishops at Large*. Faber and Faber. London p. 92

[25] Anson, p. 97

[26] Old Catholic Mission. *An Account of the Old Catholic Work in the Diocese of Fond du Lac*. Burleson Bros. Pewaukee. 1887 p. 8

[27] Old Catholic Mission., p.8

[28] Old Catholic Mission., p.9

- [29] Greene, Stanley. Interviewed by Leigh Krueger. Belgian Tapes. Area Research Center, UW-Green Bay
- [30] *Liturgie et Cantiques en usage dans l'Eglise Catholique Chretienne de la Suisse*. As cited in Anson, p. 97
- [31] Old Catholic Mission. *An Account of the Old Catholic Work in the Diocese of Fond du Lac*. Burleson Bros. Pewaukee. 1887
- [32] Greene, Stanley. Interviewed by Leigh Krueger. Belgian Tapes. Area Research Center, UW-Green Bay
- [33] Old Catholic Mission. *An Account of the Old Catholic Work in the Diocese of Fond du Lac*. Burleson Bros. Pewaukee. 1887
- [34] Old Catholic Mission., p. 13
- [35] Old Catholic Mission., p. 14
- [36] Anson, Peter F. *Bishops at Large*. Faber and Faber. London p. 98
- [37] Most Reverend J. René Vilatte (1854-1929)
http://ccrcc.ca/en/episcopal_committee/cccc/mem_jr_vilatte.html
- [38] Anson, Peter F. *Bishops at Large*. Faber and Faber. London p. 98
- [39] Marx, Joseph and Blied, Benjamin. *The Old Catholics In America: Joseph René Vilatte, Archbishop Vilatte, Vilatte and the Catholic Church*. The Salesianum, vol. 36, no. 4 (October 1941), and vol. 37, nos. 1,2,3 (January, April and July 1942)
- [40] Holman, Bishop John E. The Old Catholic Church [n.p.] Old Catholic Church of America, 1977
- [41] Vilatte, *My Relations with the Protestant Episcopal Church*, p. 35 as cited in Anson, p. 100
- [42] Greene, Stanley. Interviewed by Leigh Krueger. Belgian Tapes. Area Research Center, UW-Green Bay
- [43] Holman, p. 90
- [44] Anson, p. 102
- [45] Anson, p. 107
- [46] [No author cited] History of the Order of Canons regular of Premontre, 1120-1936. West De Pere, WI." The Premonstratensian Fathers, 1936 p. 61
- [47] Weeks, Bishop Donald P. "Joseph René Vilatte—First Independent Catholic Prelate in North America." <http://www7.concentric.net/~Cosmas/vilatte.htm> p. 17 date accessed: 3/19/01

[48] Greene, Stanley. Interviewed by Leigh Krueger. Belgian Tapes. Area Research Center, UW-Green Bay

[49] Anson, 128

[50] Anson, 112

[51] Weeks, p. 11

[52] Rudolph, Jack “The Fascinating Joseph René Vilatte” Press Gazette [n.d]

[53] “The Christian (Old) Catholic Church in Wisconsin”
<http://www.uwgb.edu/wisfrench/library/history/oldcatholic.htm> date accessed 1/21/01
