

JANUARY 18, 1969

THE FASCINATING
**JOSEPH
RENE
VILATTE**



BISHOP MESSMER
SOLVED HIS PROBLEM
BY CALLING IN THE
NORBERTINES



HAROLD ELDER... GREEN BAY PRESS-GAZETTE

Ecclesiastical Trouble-Maker

Controversial 'Archbishop' Vilatte

By: Jack Rudolph - Green Bay Press Gazette - Jan 18, 1969

Green Bay has had its share of colorful, often controversial, characters since Jean Nicolet landed the Red Banks in his Chinese robe and fired off a couple of pistols to awe the natives. None, however, stirred up more trouble or left such a tangled skein of operations behind than Joseph Rene Vilatte.

Seventy-five years ago, Vilatte, "Archbishop and Primate of the Old Catholic Church in America," was riding high. He had just been consecrated in the Orient, he was defying the Episcopal Bishop of Fond du Lac and needling Bishop Sebastian Messmer of Green Bay to the point where the fiery, black-haired prelate was ready to flip his mitre.

Today he has been virtually forgotten. You won't find any plaques to his memory on the St. Norbert College campus but he had a lot to do with the founding of the institution. It was because of him that Bernard H. Pennings led the first contingent of Norbertines to Northeastern Wisconsin.

Nor the least of his fascinations is that nobody ever quite figured out what made him tick.

Born in Paris

Joseph Rene Vilatte was born in Paris Jan. 24, 1854. Left an orphan at an early age he was raised in a Catholic Parisian orphanage and emigrated to Canada in 1871. A footloose youngster, he flitted back and forth across the Atlantic for several years, returning first to France, then moving to Belgium and finally back to Canada.

In 1878 he entered a Catholic college near Montreal but left after three years. Abandoning the Catholic faith, he bounced from one denomination to another until 1884 when he was accepted by Bishop Hobert Brown of the Episcopal See of Fond du Lac as a seminarian at Nashotah.

After only a few months, however, he left the seminary and went to Switzerland where he was confirmed as a priest of the "Old Catholic" Church of that country. He shortly returned to Northeast Wisconsin and was posted by Bishop Brown to establish a parish among the Belgians of Door County.

Sat in the Middle

Vilatte built a small wooden church and rectory between two struggling Roman Catholic parishes and soon succeeded in talking a number of families from both into joining his own. He was successful because he was a charming, plausible man with considerable leadership ability. He could also communicate with the Belgian settlers and apparently had a real concern for their welfare, something that couldn't be said for very many others in the area.

By 1890 he had managed to establish about three parishes in the area and propositioned Episcopal Bishop Grafton, Bishop Brown's successor, to make him an auxiliary bishop. When Bishop Grafton was less than enthusiastic, Vilatte, embarked on a tortuous path of negotiations with other religions that lasted the rest of his life.

First, he offered to be reconciled to the Roman Catholic Church, a proposition that foundered on his insistence that he be accepted as a priest. Later he contacted the Old Catholics of Utrecht, Holland, and even the Russian Orthodox Bishop of Alaska.

Threw Him Out

When Bishop Grafton got wind of his shenanigans, he threw Vilatte out - whereupon Vilatte defiantly informed him he had no authority over an Old Catholic priest in the first place. His parishioners rallied to his defense and thumbed their congregational nose at the frustrated bishop.

Vilatte wasn't through yet. He had learned of an obscure schismatic group in the Orient, based on the island of Ceylon and shortly he talked his parishioners into giving him \$225 for fare to the Far East to become a bishop.

On May 29, 1892, Vilatte was consecrated a bishop by the Syrian Metropolitan of Malabar and Ceylon and invested with the title of Archbishop of Old Catholics in America. Shortly he was back in Green Bay flourishing his episcopal ring and crozier.

Top of the Pole

Vilatte seemed to be at the top of the pole, but his grip wasn't as secure as it appeared. The Roman Catholics would have nothing to do with him, the Dutch Old Catholics had turned thumbs down and Bishop Grafton had repudiated him. The latter was a stiff blow, since it deprived him of vital financial support.

About this time, too, Bishop Messmer appealed for help to the Norbertine Order in Holland and the result was the arrival of Father Pennings and the advance party of what eventually became the Norbertine Community in North America. By studiously ignoring Vilatte and using his own tactics of close communication with the disaffected Belgians of the Peninsula plus concern for their welfare, Vilatte's influence among them was completely destroyed by 1898.

Stripped of congregations and money, Vilatte lost what property he had in the area and about 1899 he left Green Bay, never to return. In June, 1900, Rome issued a hulk of excommunication against him.

Can't Be Unsnarled

For the next 25 years Vilatte's activities and movements were so involved they are virtually impossible to unsnarl today. From 1900 to 1904 he was apparently living off the island of St. Laurent in Canada, then he turned up in Paris where he was involved in an abortive attempt to establish a French National Catholic Church. There are rumors that he was in Chicago by 1908, in Mexico in 1910 and possibly back in Paris a couple of years later.

After several years of silence, Rome suddenly issued a second excommunication against him in 1925, although nobody seems to know why. That same year, accompanied by an American boy as a servant, he turned up at a Cistercian monastery in Paris where he applied for shelter, which was granted. In June of that same year he retracted all his previous activities and statements and the excommunication was lifted by the Papal nunciato Paris, Cardinal Ceretti.

Vilatte settled down quietly at the monastery, where he remained the rest of his life, living in his small house and attending services regularly in the monastery church. He was not permitted to say Mass nor was he

recognized as a bishop, although he wore episcopal robes minus the cross and was addressed as "monseigneur."

Died in 1929

He remained a source of tension for the prior of the monastery, who never quite knew how to handle him - not surprising since such a high Vatican official as Cardinal Merry del Val, Papal secretary of the state, was publicly on record that Vilatte was a legitimate bishop, regardless of his previous record. The prior's worries were suddenly removed in July of 1929 when the controversial figure died of a heart attack at the age of 75.

Vilatte was buried in the monastery but without the pomp and circumstance normal to the obsequies of a bishop.

A remarkable man, with much charm and force, Vilatte's actual convictions, because of his vacillations, are almost beyond scrutiny today. For all his maneuvering, he was apparently rigidly honest in financial matters and his personal life was beyond reproach.

Perhaps the late Msgr. Joseph A. Marx, who knew him in the old days at Green Bay and wrote a detailed and involved account of his career for the Catholic Register a decade ago, came closest to putting his finger on the man's secret a few years before his own death: "He just wanted to be a bishop."