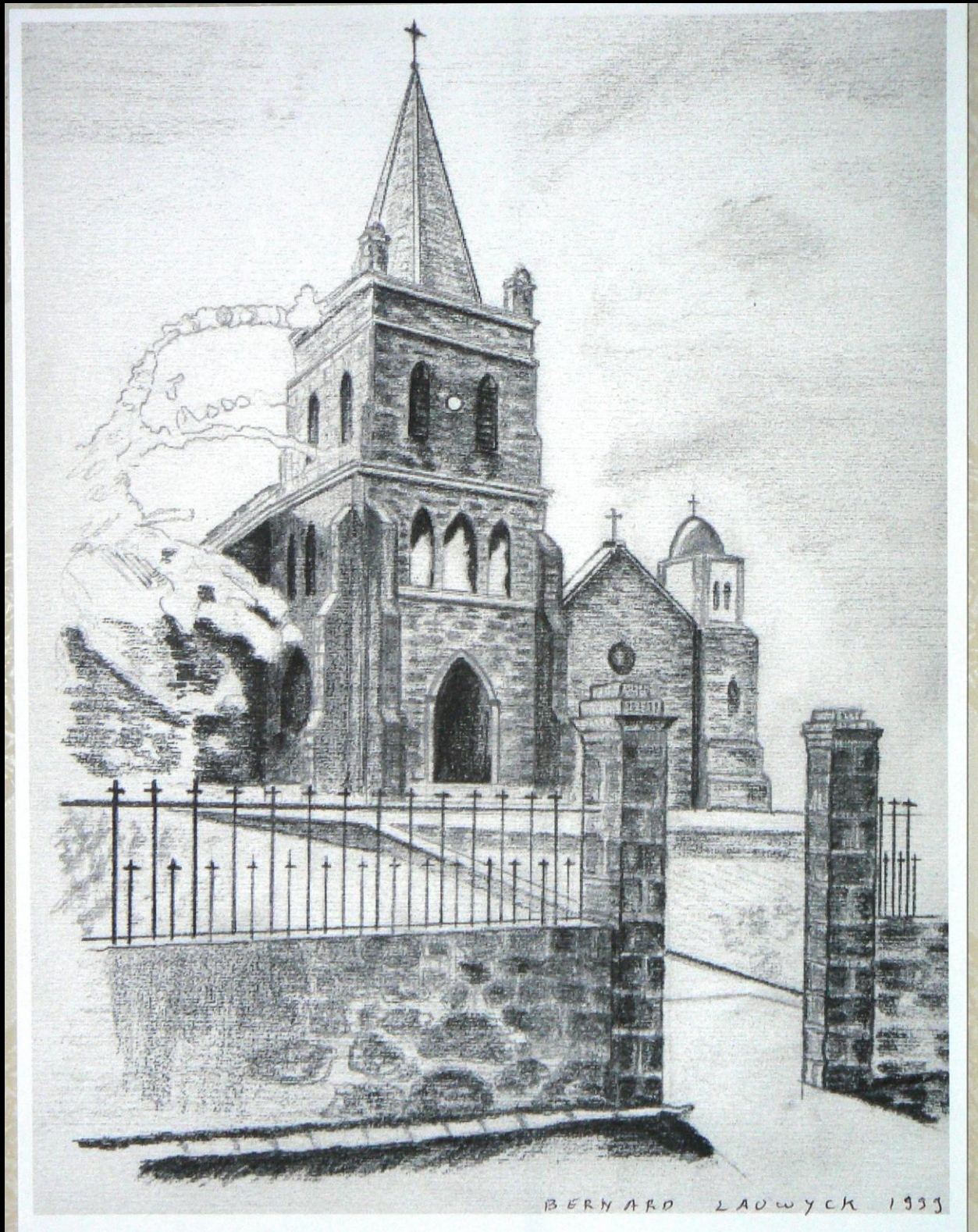


THE ROSEAU CATHEDRAL and the Kalinago people. by Bernard Lauwyck

So many contributions were made to the construction of the Roseau Cathedral in the past and I hope these articles will inspire you too to make your own personal contribution to the present works. In this article I want to dwell on the contribution of the Kalinago People, Dominica indigenous people, to the Roseau Cathedral.



In the Dioc. Archives we read : *“The Roseau Cathedral, had been completed by Father Mignon in 1847 and enlarged by Father Capoulade in 1856, but neither the nave nor the aisles had a ceiling, and decorations were few... Works on the embellishment of the Cathedral started on February 5th, 1865, under the direction of Father Poujade, then Parish Priest of St. Sauveur and Salybia. He had all the required Simarouba trees cut and boards sawed by the Caribs in their own quarters. When all the timber was ready, the Caribs came in large numbers to Roseau and put a ceiling in the whole nave, with the help of some members of St. Joseph Society of Roseau. Thus the descendants of the original peoples of the island contributed to embellish the Cathedral of Notre Dame du Bon Port, erected on the very same spot where their forefathers had seen, early in the eighteen century, a small chapel built with reeds for an emergency by a passing missionary.”* It is useful to know that the Simarouba tree is harvested for its bright and lightweight timber.

Indeed, once Amerindians occupied the banks of the river Roseau, named after the 'roseaux' reeds that grew along the banks of the river. “ The Kalingo name for the Roseau area was “SAIRI”. (source Lennox Honychurch).

These reeds were used to build the first Roseau church as mentioned in Rev. Fr. Martel’s letter of 1737 “ I go 15 days to two areas, one called “La Savanne” and the other “Malalia”. The place where I live is called ROSEAU. The first time I arrived on Dominica was on the 15th September 1730, when I found as the church a small “case de roseaux, a demi couverte de paille, entr’ ouverte de tous côtés” or a hut of reeds, half covered with straw, open on all sides.. In this hut was a small altar with a crucifix and a few paper images.(« **Histoire générale des missions catholiques 1847 Paris** »)

The pioneer of Christianity in Dominica was Rev. Father Raymond Breton, O.P. O.P. stands for Order of Preachers or Dominicans, the order started by St. Dominic (+1221) , patron saint of the newly rededicated Atkinson chapel. Father Breton started his mission among the Kalinago people in Dominica in 1642. He became a good friend of the Kalinago people, because after he left for some time for Guadeloupe, early in 1646, “ Chief Le Baron went personally to the French Governor of Guadeloupe and begged him to send Fr. Breton once more to Dominica in order to teach his people to pray and serve the true God. “ (Dioc. Archives.)

Father Breton lived among the Kalinago in Dominica off and on till 1653 and wrote in his dictionary: “Callinago” is the real name of the Caribs of the Islands". It means "A good peaceful man". (ref. Lennox Honychurch).

“An interesting observation noted that in Fr. Breton’s days, the letter “K” did not exist in the French language, so the printers of his “Carib Dictionary” used “C” throughout. The word is better represented phonetically as ‘Kalinago’. Thanks to this new revelation, the Caribs no longer refer to their race as Caribs but as Kalinagos, which is more acceptable and accurate. As a result, in 2010 the Carib Chief and Council petitioned the Government of Dominica to officially accept and

change the name from Carib to Kalinago. ” see Rev. Fr. Vanty Auguste C.Ss.R. in his Master of Theology Thesis dated 2012.

Fr. Breton wrote several books, such as a Carib catechism, a Carib-French and a French-Carib Dictionary, and a Carib grammar. These four books were edited respectively in 1664,1665,1666 and 1667, thanks to the intelligent generosity of a gentleman Claude-Andre Leclerc”. (Diocesan Archives)

Some years after Fr. Breton’s death in 1679, we find Father Philippe de Beaumont O.P. among the Kalinago in Dominica.

In the « Histoire générale des missions catholiques depuis le 13e siècle jusqu’à nos jours » by M.R.A. Henrion (1847 Paris), we read that Friar de Beaumont, born in Paris in 1620 tried to follow « with humility and patience » the path that Raymond Breton had blazed with the evangelization of the Kalinago in Dominica.

The Diocesan Archives contain a section of the “*Lettre du Révérend Père Philippe de Beaumont, de l’ordre des Frères Prêcheurs, à Claude-André Leclerc*)- *un missionnaire auxerrois des caraïbes*” dated 1668. Fr. de Beaumont quotes from a earlier letter, written after 1658, by one of the oldest Kalinago of Dominica lamenting, like another Jeremiah, the fate of his people:

“We have been driven from everywhere. When the foreigners (French) came to our islands, we were living on the seashore on both banks of the Roseau River. On their taking possession of the island, we fled to Soufriere. Driven from there by those who occupied the western sea coast, we went over to Grand Bay; but there we could not remain because the place was already occupied. We continued our exile to Point Mulatre and La Plaine where we remained a considerable time. But harassed once more by planters and Negroes, we went as far as Petit Soufriere and the Marigot Bay, where our cemetery still exists. Colonists came and bought the land; and Castle Bruce being already in possession of a planter, there was no alternative left to us but to fix ourselves on the Gaulette River and at Bataca. We are still here, and have been for a considerable time; here we have our cemetery. Further we cannot go, for Pegoua and Lasoie bar our way to the north. If we have to leave this place, we are doomed.”” (Dioc. Arch.).

This made me remember a book I read ages ago “BURY MY HEART AT WOUNDED KNEE” by Dee Brown, an Indian History of the American West, wherein the author quoted chief Tecumseh who formed a great federacy of Amerindian tribes to protect their lands from invasion of the white man in the US. “ *Where are today ..the once powerful tribes of our people ? They have vanished before the avarice and the oppression of the White man, as snow before summer sun...Will we let ourselves be destroyed in our turn , give up our homes, our country bequeathed to us by the Great Spirit, the graves of our dead and everything that is dear to us ?*” Tecumseh died fighting in the war of 1812.

Similar sentiments, similar concern about burial grounds, similar fate... different places !!

Amerindians were looked upon as savages, infidels who did not know Christ, to be exploited and, if this was not possible, exterminated. They stood in the way of “progress”. In the Spanish empire, a strong voice rose up against these abuses, the conscience of a nation. This voice had a name, Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474-1566). This heroic champion of the Indians was probably the first man to receive holy orders in the Americas. Earlier Las Casas had tasted the life of a Conquistador and a large landowner with Indian slaves. One day in 1514 on his estate in Cuba when he was preparing a sermon he was suddenly illuminated : he read in Ecclesiasticus “ the gift of unjust men are not accepted”. Within days, repeating an experience of St. Paul, he was a changed man.(ref . “The Discoverers” by Daniel J. Boorstin.) Because of the efforts of Las Casas, Pope Paul III proclaimed in 1537 his Encyclical “Sublimis Deus” (Topic: the enslavement and evangelization of Indians), the first papal social thought on aboriginal rights . Las Casas remained spokesman for the rights of Indians against all vested interests. Due to his efforts, the Catholic Habsburgh King Charles V felt constrained to exhort all to obey the laws of just war.

Another different and very unique but powerful message was sent to the conquerors, colonists, abusers and authorities about the humanity and the dignity of the “lowclass” indians: between December 9 and 12, 1531 the Virgin Mary appeared in Guadalupe in Mexico to Juan Diego who was an Indian. This happened in the middle of huge tensions and struggles around race and class in Mexico. The Virgin Mary’s identification with the native population and with the downtrodden gave a very powerful message to the Amerindians .



“He has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.” (The Magnificat).

In Dominica we have a chapel in Bourne dedicated to Our Lady of Guadeloupe. Let me invite you to visit it and remember the suffering of all exploited people.

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