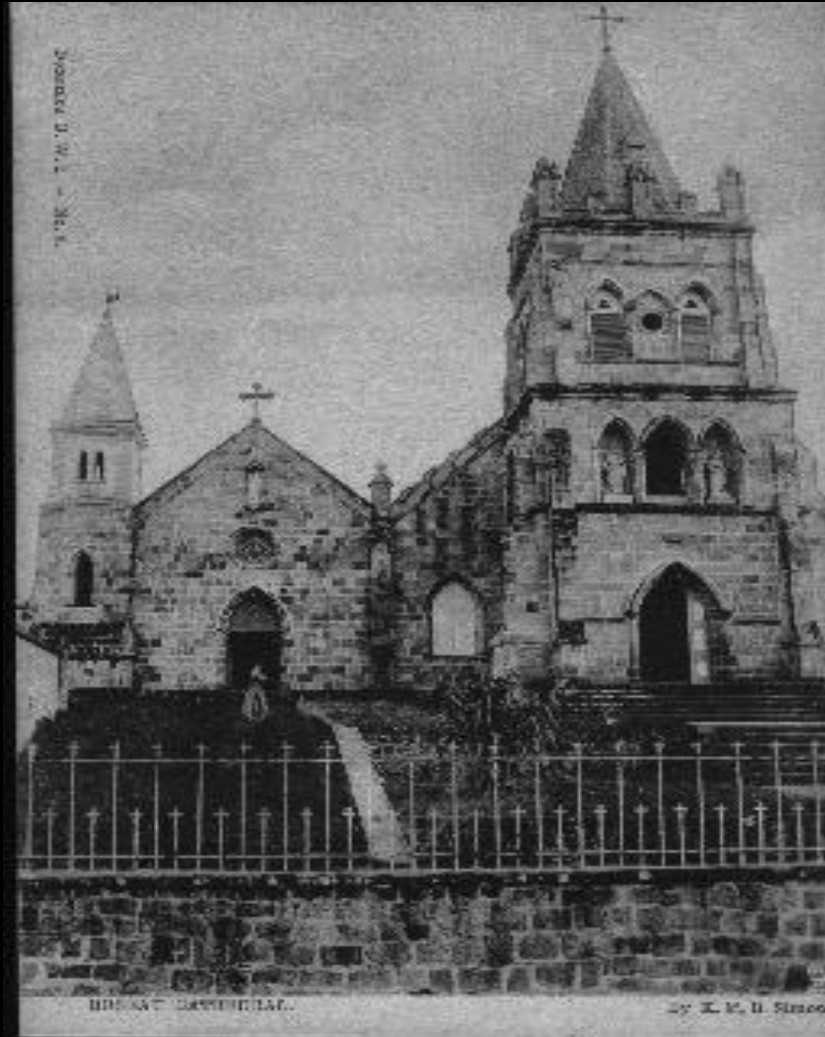


# THE ROSEAU CATHEDRAL: THE IMPOSING FRONT ELEVATION WITH STEEPLE

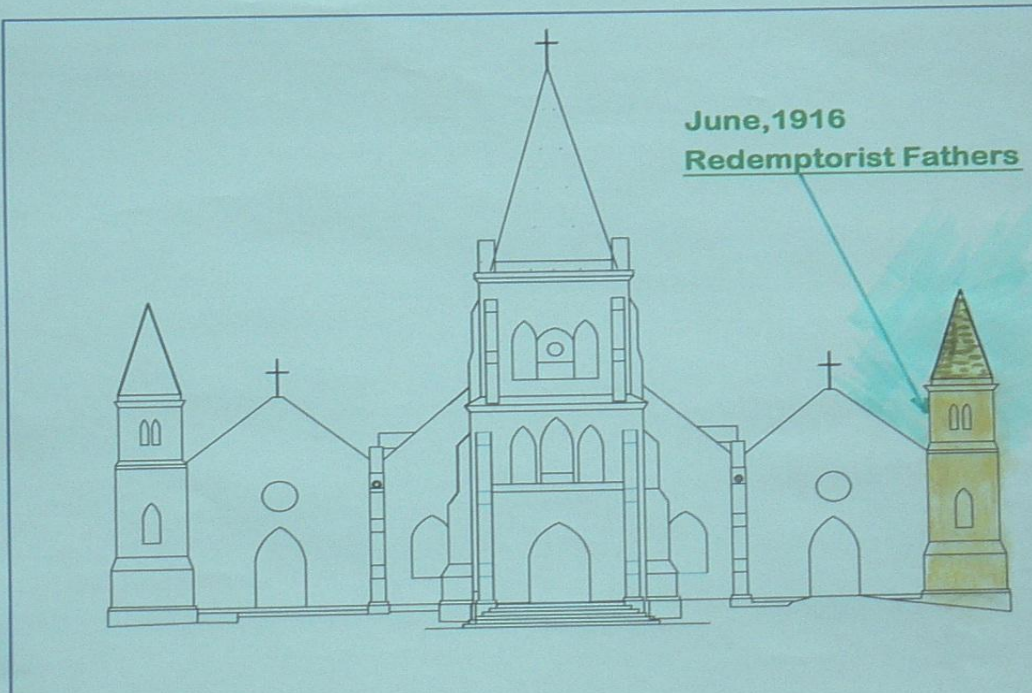
By Bernard Lauwyck



In my first article of this series, I mentioned the imposing Cathedral front elevation with bell tower and spire, which still after 157 years, dominates the skyline of Roseau, seen from the E.C. Loblack bridge. In my last week's article, I demonstrated the sacred geometry behind the floor plan of the Cathedral.

A natural response from architects would be that “they are not surprised that the plan is based on basic symbolic geometry as all houses of worship always were” In studying the history of this Cathedral, my first question was “Who designed this magnificent building? Who was God’s architect for this building ? “ I always assumed that this imposing Cathedral facade, quite an architectural feat, was a well designed, planned and executed- to- plan project.

The historical facts beg to differ.



Long before the parish church of Our Lady of Fair Haven became the Bishop 's church, wherein he has his Cathedra, presides, teaches, and conducts worship for the whole Catholic community, Father Mignon was at work. The Diocesan archives report: *“Father Mignon ... supervising when at Roseau the building of the church, which was progressing but slowly for want of funds. Once he became parish priest he resolved to complete the church by all means. On January 13th, 1838, he drew up and sealed an agreement with one Francis Giraud, in virtue of which the latter “bound himself to construct and put a roof on the church, to make and hang the doors and windows, ...” Early in 1839 the church was at long last completed after having been under construction for some 40 years. (Dioc.Arch.)*

But a lot had changed on the island in these 40 years. The church was too small!

*“To understand how a church could be too small before it was completed, one must only remember that the building was started about the beginning of the century, that is some 40 years previously, at a time when nobody could foresee that the Catholics would be emancipated in England (1829) and that slavery would be abolished (on August 1, 1838) and the slaves allowed to embrace the Catholic religion. At the time of the Emancipation all the slaves embraced the Faith of their owners, who were nearly all Catholics, and descendants of old French colonists. The sudden increase in numbers was the cause of the church becoming too small and having to be enlarged. (Dioc. Arch.)*

On December 21st, 1845, Father Capoulade set out to make the church larger and started a subscription to that effect. *“ Two side aisles were built in stone; then the walls of the church were pulled down and huge pillars in native iron-wood brought from Colihaut on a British ship of war, inserted between the nave and aisles. It was a huge undertaking, accompanied with some real danger. But thanks to the skill of Father Capoulade, it was carried out without accident. “(Dioc. Arch.)*

After the creation of the Diocese of Roseau by Papal Bull on 30 April 1850, Bishop Monaghan's priority was to turn this church into a building worthy of the seat of the Bishop of Roseau. He added *the central stone tower and spire.*

*“Bishop Monaghan did not shrink from taking up personally collections in the church. He writes: “Sunday, September 11th, 1854 and Rosary Sunday, I made the collection in the Church myself for the new steeple. I did the same on November 2nd. “ (Dioc. Arch.)*

The stone tower was completed in 1854. The work was going on so fast that on



January 30th, 1855, Bishop Monaghan could write: “Today the wall-plate was placed on the new tower”, and add on March 1<sup>st</sup>. 1855: “The cross was placed on the belfry to the great delight of the whole community. We are all very thankful to God to see the work brought to completion in such a short time and in such beautiful style.” (Diocesan Archives). Bishop Monaghan died a few months later.

Bishop Moris, the writer of these unpublished diocesan chronicles continues : “ Indeed it is astounding that so solid, so high and so elegant a tower was built, so to say, in the twinkling of an eye. If it is to the credit of the bishop to have conceived the plan, it is no less creditable to Mr Thomassin Aubrey, an ordinary stone mason of Roseau, to have carried it out in exquisite style.”

Mr. Thomassin Aubrey was indeed an extraordinary stone mason as the following details show:





Bishop Moris' history reads like the creation story in Genesis, where things were created by God's word of mouth only. But a steeple (= tower + spire) like the one we still admire today in Roseau was not constructed without proper planning, detailed designs, proper measurements & proportions put on paper. There also had to be an abundant timely supply of stones to be cut and shaped and sufficient Lime mortar or "La chaux". One stone cutter could not handle a job as this. We know

from the records that Bishop Monaghan was constantly travelling during his 5 years in office. In Fr. Smith he had an energetic man who was the Parish priest, helped by Fr. Guillet and Fr. Rames. Did they have an overall design ready-to-go and detailed stone work plans for this “ordinary stone mason of Roseau”? May I also point out that the spire, 30 ft high on top of a 50 feet high stone tower, has withstood several devastating hurricanes. This timber spire is one marvellous strong piece of craftsmanship .

After Bishop Monaghan’s death, his successors had their hands full in the Diocese of Roseau which at that time stretched from the Virgin Islands to Dominica. So the central steeple stood alone for almost 24 years, when Father August Fort, F.M.I, one of the Pères de Chavagne, started and completed the eastern side tower and spire. He was attached upon arrival in 1872 to the Cathedral by Bishop Poirier and became Vicar-General and Administrator of the Diocese after the death of Bishop Poirier. The 30 feet tall stone work tower had a spire, now gone as it fell into the cathedral during hurricane David in 1979 . It was dedicated to the Jubilee of Pope Leo XIII in 1879, as is engraved on an oval stone on the tower.



The Catholic Encyclopaedia states: *“Our society owes much to Pope Leo for his stand on the social question. As early as 1878, in his encyclical on the equality of all men, he attacked Communism and Socialism. His Encyclical "Rerum novarum" (18 May, 1891) set forth with profound erudition the Christian principles bearing on the relations between capital and labour, and it gave a vigorous impulse to a Christian social labour movement.”*

It was only in the time of Bishop Philip Schelfhaut , who came to Dominica with a group of Belgian Redemptorist brothers and priests, that the absence of a western tower was considered an eyesore. The ceremony of the laying and blessing of the corner- stone took place on Sunday February 27, 1916. The hope was to set an inscription “ 1916, year of the glorious victory of the British Empire”. Cut and

squared stones of an old church tower of Pointe Michel were brought to Roseau by boat, in order to build the tower to match the one erected in 1879. Work was completed in June 1916.

This imposing Cathedral facade , as built by three different group of priests, stands as a beautiful testimony and metaphor in stone to the work, sacrifices, dedication and lives put into the evangelisation of Dominica by diocesan priests and Bishops, the French Pères de Chavagne or F.M.I 's and Belgian Redemptorists .

The natural stones that built the church are evoking the living stones that built the Catholic Church in Dominica.