

THE ROSEAU CATHEDRAL and Dominica's first Catholics. Part III by Bernard Lauwyck



Celebrating Dominica's culture (CHS mural)

Bishop James Moris wrote in his "History of the Diocese of Roseau" :

"Father Labat crossed the island from West to East and back, and visited the whole windward coast of the island, or the Cabesterre, as he calls it, very likely from the present village of Grand Bay up to Lasoie or possibly Vieille Case."
(*Nouveau voyage aux îles de l'Amérique* by JB Labat Volume 5.ch.14).

Father Labat's exploration of Dominica took 8 days and he seems to have left out a large part of Dominica in his description, as is noted by Bishop Moris :

"As Father Labat does not mention having met any Europeans, it seems certain that in 1700 the whole Windward side of the island was still occupied by the Caribs. He arrived on the island on the 9th of January 1700 at 2 p.m. and made a tour of exploration during eight days. Hence, until the 28th, the date of his departure from the island, some 10 or 11 days were at his disposal. Why did he not then avail himself of the opportunity to explore the rest of the island, the more so that he must have known that many Frenchmen were living on the Leeward coast? From old manuscripts we learn, indeed, that in 1692, namely 8 years before Father Labat's visit to Dominica, there were in the island 928 caribs and 349 French colonists, the latter occupying the leeward coast and cultivating land with the aid of 23 free coloured peoples and 338 slaves."

Father Labat, the French "priest-spy-military engineer" in the words of Matthew Parker (in "The Sugar Barons") may be, in my opinion, also the inventor of the present day "international consultants" who fly, at great cost for a very short stay,

into Dominica and afterwards publish expert reports on Dominican society and economy with great authority.

So the second group of early Catholics we will look at are the early French settlers.

Their history starts with the arrival of the French corsaire Pierre Bélain, Sieur d'Esnameuc (1585–1636), who was commissioned by Cardinal Richelieu (see *Généalogie et Histoire de la Caraïbe* - Mai 2008) to settle in St. Kitts, which he did in 1634 with as many as 322 men, mainly indentured Bretons. As he was a trader and adventurer, he also explored neighbouring islands for opportunities. On 15 September 1635, D'Esnameuc, French governor of St. Kitts, landed in the harbor of St. Pierre in Martinique with 150 French settlers after being driven off St. Kitts by the English. He claimed Martinique for the French King on November 17, 1637. He also sent to Dominica one Delavalee with 40 colonists, but unable to live in peace with the Caribs and fearing to be massacred by them, they returned to Martinique. (Précis d'Histoire de la Martinique, by J. Rennard).

DOMINICA ; THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

We read in Bishop James Moris' "History of the Diocese of Roseau" :

"Other French colonists, enticed by the fertility of Dominica's soil arrived in the island and were welcomed by the Caribs of the Leeward coast, thanks to presents offered in exchange for the privilege of tilling the soil. The new colonists, however, for fear of surprise attacks from the Caribs of the Windward side of the Island, who were much fiercer than those of the Leeward coast, and also on account of the greater facility for shipping produce, established themselves on the western coast in as close neighbourhood to one another as possible, and soon opened hundreds of acres of land, where sugar cane, coffee, tobacco and all kinds of spices grew with astounding luxuriance. "



Already "in the year 1727 Bishop Dom Gervaise landed at the village of Roseau, administered the sacrament of Confirmation to 82 new colonists and presided at the feasts of the season amidst the cheers and salutes of the inhabitants." (J. Moris).

On the 15th of September, 1730, Father Guillaume (William) Martel, O.P. landed in Roseau and stayed ten years. Besides the Roseau Parish church, he also erected small chapels in "La Savanne" and "Malalia" now called Toucary Bay", originally named "Le Trou Quarré" (see L. Honychurch) or "square hole".

Father Martel found that the French inhabitants, though reared in the Catholic religion, lived almost like their neighbours, the Kalinago: “ *For years they remained without priests, without instruction, without any spiritual help; as a result they have almost lost the faith. At present it is nearly impossible to call them back to the practice of religion. No doubt, some are not addicted to gross immorality like the rest, but the spiritual life is unknown to them*”. (J. Moris).

He also provide us with the background of some of the French settlers: “Some left Guadeloupe or Martinique , crippled by debt, running from their creditors, and looking for a second chance in life; others came to work out their destiny/fantasies in a place of complete freedom without shackles imposed by governments and laws, some indulged in their passions” (“Histoire Générale des Missions catholiques Vol. 3 page 625 by Baron Mathieu Henrion).

About one particular group of Catholic French settlers we know more as they left Martinique for southern Dominica after a revolt in Martinique, known as La Gaoulé. (see Lennox Honychurch’s Dominica Story). Members of this group have been pillars of the Catholic Church or “Poteaux Catholiques” up till the present and I hope to tell you more about them in the next article.

bernardlauw@yahoo.com PO Box 317 Roseau Dominica