

March 27, 1840 Fr. De Smet set out from St. Louis on his maiden trip to the Rocky Mountains. His assignment, based on the Indian delegation's request for a priest, was to determine whether or not it was feasible to establish permanent missions in the remote areas of the American west.

It was decided that one member of the delegation (Lefthand Peter - Peter Gaucher) would travel ahead to relay the good news to the Salish people that a "black robe" was coming. A second member, Young Ignace, would wait at Westport, Missouri Territory (to become Kansas City) and accompany the missionary.

Peter Gaucher arrived at the Salish camp on Eight Mile Creek in the Bitterroot Valley at about the time Fr. De Smet was departing St. Louis. The news he imparted that a "black robe" was coming created joy and excitement among the tribal members. A detail of ten warriors was sent to meet the priest and provide an escort. The chief and remaining tribal members were to follow.

Having met up with Ignace in Westport, Fr. De Smet obtained supplies and horses and then joined a caravan of the American Fur Company. The party of about 40 members left Westport on April 30, 1840 - their destination was the American Fur Company rendezvous on Green River (Wyoming). Two months later, on June 30th, the travelers arrived at their destination. Fr. De Smet was surprised to find the ten warriors awaiting him to act as guides to the main Salish camp. On Sunday, July 5, Fr. De Smet celebrated Mass for the gathering of trappers, traders and Indians which became known as "The Prairie of the Mass".

Following several days at the Green River Rendezvous, Fr. De Smet and his escort left to join the main camp of Salish and Pend d' Oreills at Pierre's Hole a valley below and west of the Tetons. At the end of this eight-day journey Fr. De Smet was greeted by an estimated 1,600 tribal members, some of whom had traveled over 800 miles to meet the "black robe". He was lead to the lodge of the great chief, Tjolzhitsay (whom Fr. De Smet called Big Face), and received the warmest of welcomes. After a brief stay at Pierre's Hole, the entire gathering began moving towards the country of the Salish.

A month later found the party at the headwaters of the Missouri (Three Forks, MT). It was here that Christianity was first preached in the State of Montana. Fr. De Smet baptized Chief Tjolzhitsay (Big Face) and Chief Walking Bear of the Pend d'Oreilles as well as some 350 tribal members.

The home of the Salish was still a long distance off, across the Divide in the Bitterroot Valley. Fr. De Smet decided that it would be best to return to St. Louis and get the necessary assistance to establish a permanent mission.

His instruction to the Indians upon his departure was to seek out a fertile tract of land where they could settle.

The return journey took four months and on December 31st Fr. De Smet found himself once again in St. Louis at the University. Disappointment was keen when he learned that funds were lacking for a new expedition and establishment of a mission. Undaunted, De Smet undertook a fund raising campaign which took him to Philadelphia and New Orleans, among other places, seeking help. Within a few months he had raised the necessary amount. Upon gaining final approval, Fathers De Smet, Point, and Mengarini along with coadjutor brothers, Specht, Claessens and Huet and three laborers departed Westport May 10, 1841.

On September 24, 1841, after an arduous four-month journey fraught with hunger, raging rivers, and treacherous trails, the party entered the valley chosen by the Salish to be their permanent home. The valley was named St. Mary's Valley (later changed to Bitterroot Valley) and De Smet described it as being, "from four to seven miles wide, and about two hundred long. It has but one defile, which serves as the entrance to and issue from the valley. The mountains which terminate it on both sides appear to be inaccessible." The tallest mountain to the west was named St. Mary's Peak.

Having established the base for a permanent mission, Fr. De Smet explored more of the territory and established additional missions. His trips to Europe continued in an effort to raise money for the missions and recruit missionaries. The respect afforded him by the natives led to his becoming a mediator for both the U.S. Government and the Native Americans. In 1846 he was recalled from active missionary work to serve as fund raiser and propagandist for the Native American missionary work as well as being a mediator. He continued in this role until his death in 1873.



The True Account of Prisoner Claude Newman (1944)

Claude Newman was a Negro man who worked the fields for a landowner. He had married when he was 17 years old to a woman of the same age. One day, two years later, he was out ploughing the fields. Another worker ran to tell Claude that his wife was screaming from the house. Immediately Claude ran into his house and found a man attacking his wife. Claude saw red, grabbed an axe and split the man's head open. When they rolled the man over, they discovered that it was the favorite employee of the landowner for whom Claude worked. Claude was arrested. He was later sentenced for murder and condemned to die in the electric chair.

While he was in jail awaiting execution, he shared a cell-block of some sort with four other prisoners. One night, the five men were sitting around talking and they ran out of conversation. Claude noticed a medal on a string around another prisoner's neck. He asked what it was, and the Catholic boy told him that it was a medal. Claude said, "What is a medal?" The Catholic boy could not explain what a medal was or what its purpose was. At that point, and in anger, the Catholic boy snatched the medal from his own neck and threw it on the floor at Claude's feet with a curse and a cuss, telling him to take the thing.

Claude picked up the medal, and with permission from the prison attendants, placed it on a string around his own neck. To him it was simply a trinket, but he wanted to wear it.

During the night, sleeping on top of his cot, he was awakened with a touch on his wrist. And there stood, as Claude told the priest later, the most beautiful woman that God ever created. At first he was very frightened. The Lady calmed down Claude, and then said to him, "If you would like Me to be your Mother, and you would like to be My child, send for a priest of the Catholic Church." With that She disappeared.

Claude immediately became terrified, and started to scream, "a ghost, a ghost", and fled to the cell of one of the other prisoners. He then started screaming that he wanted a Catholic priest. Father O'Leary, the priest who tells the story, was called first thing the next morning. He arrived and found Claude who told him of what had happened the night before. Then Claude, along with the other four men in his cell-block, asked for religious instruction, for catechism.

Initially, Father O'Leary had difficulty believing the story. The other prisoners told the priest that everything in the story was true; but of course, they neither saw nor heard the vision of the Lady. Father O'Leary promised to teach them catechism, as they had requested. He went back to his parish, told the rector what had happened, and returned to the prison the next day to give instruction. It was then that the priest learned that Claude Newman could neither read nor write at all. The only way he could tell if a book was right-side-up was if the book contained a picture. Claude had never been to school. And his ignorance of religion was even more profound. He knew nothing at all about religion. He did not know who Jesus was. He did not know anything except that there was a God.

Claude began receiving instructions, and the other prisoners helped him with his studies. After a few days, two of the religious Sisters from Father O'Leary's parish-school obtained permission from the warden to come to the prison. They wanted to meet Claude, and they also wanted to visit the women in the prison. On another floor of the prison, the Sisters then started to teach some of the women-prisoners catechism as well. Several weeks passed, and it came time when Father O'Leary was going to give instructions about the Sacrament of Confession. The Sisters too sat in on the class. The priest said to the prisoners, "Okay, boys, today I'm going to teach you about the Sacrament of Confession." Claude said, "Oh, I know about that!" "The Lady told me," said Claude, "that when we go to confession we are kneeling down not before a priest, but we're kneeling down by the Cross of Her Son. And that when we are truly sorry for our sins, and we confess our sins, the Blood He shed flows down over us and washes us free from all sins."

Father O'Leary and the Sisters sat stunned with their mouths wide open. Claude thought they were angry and said, "Oh don't be angry, don't be angry, I didn't mean to blurt it out."

The priest said, "We're not angry. We're just amazed. You have seen Her again?"

Claude said, "Come around the cell-block away from the others."

When they were alone, Claude said to the priest, "She told me that if you doubted me or showed hesitancy, I was to remind you that lying in a ditch in Holland, in 1940, you made a vow to

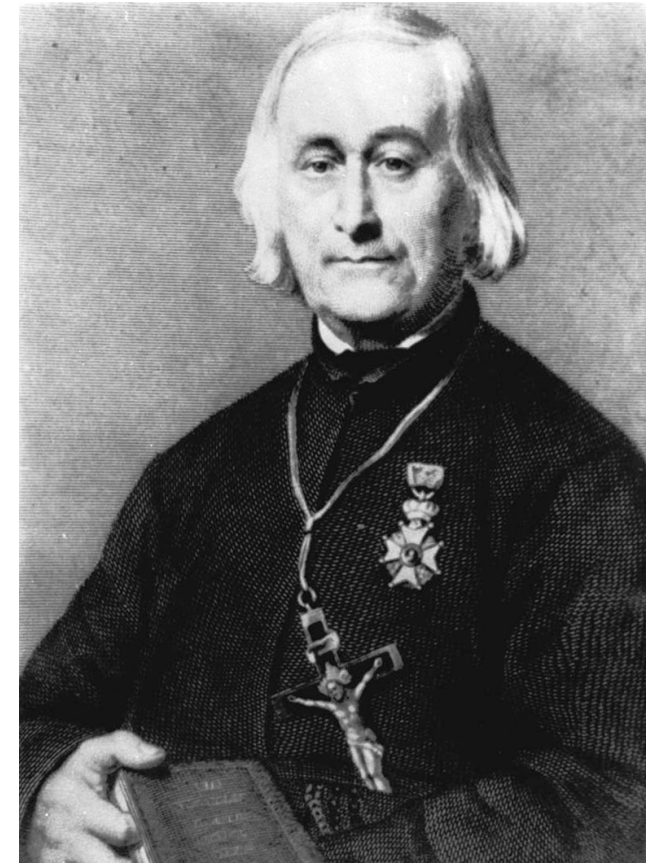
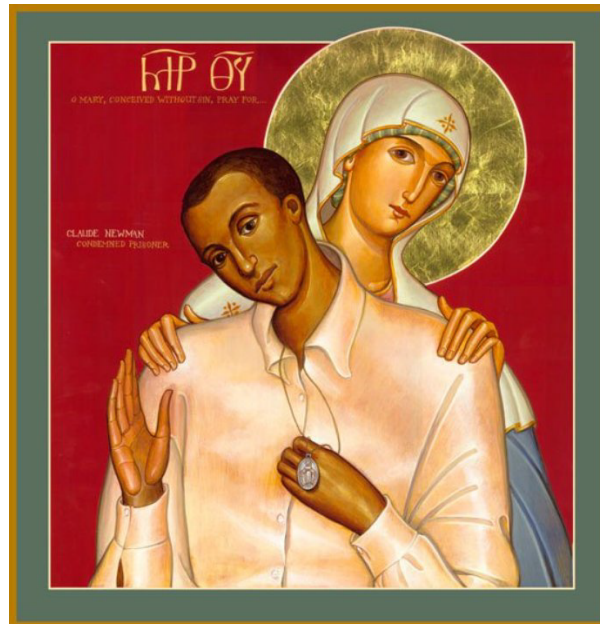
Her which She's still waiting for you to keep." And, Father O'Leary recalls, "Claude told me exactly what the vow was."

This convinced Father O'Leary that Claude was telling the truth about his visions of Our Lady.

They then returned to the catechism class on Confession. And Claude kept telling the other prisoners, "You should not be afraid to go to confession. You're really telling God your sins, not this priest, or any priest. We're telling God our sins." Then Claude said, "You know, the Lady said [that Confession is] something like a telephone. We talk through the priest to God and God talks back to us through the priest."

About a week later, Father O'Leary was preparing to teach the class about the Blessed Sacrament. The Sisters were present for this too. Claude indicated that the Lady had also taught him about Holy Communion, and he asked if he could tell the priest what She said. The priest agreed immediately. Claude related, "The Lady told me that in Communion, I will only see what looks like a piece of bread. But She told me that THAT is really and truly Her Son. And that He will be with me just for a few moments as He was with Her before He was born in Bethlehem. And that I should spend my time like She did, in all Her time with Him, in loving Him, adoring Him, thanking Him, praising Him and asking Him for blessings. I shouldn't be bothered by anybody else or anything else. But I should spend those few minutes with Him."

*Read the rest of this amazing story by searching online for the following:
"The True Account of Prisoner Claude Newman (1944)"*



Fr. De Smet & Historic St. Mary's Mission

Fr. De Smet's involvement with what was to become St. Mary's Mission began during the 1823-24 trapping season when several Iroquois trappers for the Hudson Bay Company remained among the Salish (Flathead) tribe. They were adopted into the tribe and married the Salish women.

The Iroquois, having been introduced to Christianity some two hundred years earlier, told stories about the white men who wore long robes and taught about God.

Between 1831 and 1839 the Salish and the neighboring Nez Perce sent four delegations to St. Louis to obtain a "black robe" to live among them and teach the things which the Iroquois had referred to. The last delegation, comprised of two Iroquois adopted into the Salish tribe was successful and the Indians were promised that a "black robe" would be sent to them.