



*Living our Faith Without Regret nor Without Friends
What We Owe Fr. Lucien Galtier*

Almost twenty years before Minnesota was granted statehood, and some fifty years before our diocese was erected, a young priest not far from here learned that his bishop intended to transfer him from the parish he founded and the church he built. It was not the first time a priest was transferred from a parish nor was it to be this young priest's last. But if the letter he wrote to the Bishop of Dubuque on May 25, 1844 attests to his true state of mind and the sentiments then in his heart, it was a bittersweet transfer to be sure. Resigned to the decision, the young priest wrote to his bishop conceding that he was "leaving to better hands the yet barren fields of my first mission;" but he added, he would leave neither "without regret nor without friends." The young priest who authored the letter was Fr. Lucien Galtier.

Lucien Galtier was born a world away from the parish from which he wrote his letter that morning in May. Perhaps, as he looked out over the waters of the Mississippi, his mind wondered back to the streams and rivers of his native department of Ardèche, in the *Rhone-Alpes* region of France. It was in that prosperous region, known even then for its Beaujolais and Côte du Rhone wines, that Lucien was born in 1811. As a young man he showed a propensity for adventure, study and the sacred, and by his early twenties he had decided upon a life as a missionary priest. In 1838, a year from his ordination, Lucien Galtier arrived in New York to complete his final year of seminary formation and to learn the language of his new land. Incidentally, or better yet providentially, Galtier completed that year of study at Mount St. Mary's in Emmittsburg, MD where our own Archbishop Flynn was once rector. When, however, the day of his ordination arrived, it was not in the urban splendor of an eastern Cathedral where Galtier was ordained, but rather in the unassuming Cathedral of Dubuque, St. Raphael's. On January 5th, 1840, two other ordinandi –



Jacques Causse and Augustine Ravoux – were prostrate with Galtier on the Cathedral’s pine floor joining him in making of themselves an offering to God. As the Litany of the Saints was slowly chanted, the elegant Latin must have provided a stark contrast to the elementary surrounding. Still, I suspect it was a source of great consolation to Galtier as he heard the heroic men and women saints that had nurtured his vocation invoked on his behalf. Perhaps he offered a silent prayer in that humble moment bidding God to be permitted to add his future parishioners to their number.

Following a short stint of four months at St. Raphaels, just time enough for the new priest to learn the habits and rule of his new life as well as a few talents he could use for survival, Fr. Lucien Galtier set sail upon the first riverboat of the season leaving St. Louis and destined for its final call: the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers. There, since 1820, on the bluffs overlooking the river valley, Fort Snelling had stood command; the earliest and most northern outpost established by President Thomas Jefferson after he purchased the Louisiana Territory from France. Gradually over the years, a community had settled near the fort: trappers, traders, lumbermen, Native Americans and explorers joined the soldiers to ease the privation of frontier life with, among other things, drink, card playing and, one can be sure, the occasional fight. By the spring of 1840, over twenty years since the fort’s founding, a generation had called the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi its home. Moreover, Bishop Loras the first bishop of the newly created diocese of Dubuque – established only three years earlier by the Vatican and comprising all of Iowa, Minnesota, and parts of North and South Dakota – desired to meet the needs of his people and his times. During a pastoral visit to the area in 1839, Bishop Loras offered mass and, struck by the welcome he received and the evident need of the faithful, promised a priest and the construction of a church within the year. Recounting his stay in a letter to his sister, Bishop Loras remarked of the joy of the area’s Catholic faithful - 185 in all, “fifty-six of whom,” he wrote “we baptized,



administered confirmation to eight, communion to thirty three adults, and gave the nuptial blessing to four couples.” Galtier, as it turned out, was the promised priest and among his many responsibilities the primary order of business was the construction of a parish church

Descending onto the Fort Snelling Landing for the first time, Fr. Galtier must have made quite an impression for it was said of him that he bore the look of a scholar and a saint, of one who was better fit to serve in the quiet order of a monastery than in the often raucous and unpredictable choir of frontier life. It did not take long for Galtier to survey his surroundings for there were but a few houses on the Minnesota side of the river and still less on the side of the Fort. Still, to his good fortune, one of those houses belonged to Scott Campbell, an Indian interpreter, and his Catholic wife and they and their seven children were quick to offer him hospitality as they had Bishop Loras the year before.

Within a month of his arrival Galtier established his own lodging and therein constructed a simple altar upon which he might offer the Sacrifice of the Mass for his people. At that time his parish consisted of eleven families who bore, respectively, the names: Bruce, Resike, Quinn, Papin, Resh, Faribault, Martin, Lord, Turbin – of whom there were two families – and of course the Campbells. There were also a few soldiers and trappers to speak of, as well as several families in St. Croix Lake whom Galtier visited periodically, but that was all. And so the first year proved difficult for Galtier, there were no prospects for a church and the numbers of his faithful were few and new converts were not easily won. What’s more, the comforts of home – a sturdy roof and insulated walls, not to mention wine, bread and cheese – were no where to be found. All of this took its toll on his body and spirit and for two months of that first year he was sick in bed with a fever that threatened his life. What, I wonder, must have passed through his mind about the providence of



God? Did his heart trouble him about the choice he had made? Was it worth it and what, after all, did his life have to do with strangers such as these?

But, thanks God, the illness passed and a new year came. And after Galtier's convalescence he set out with renewed vigour to secure a site for the church which Bishop Loras had promised. After inquiry – and no doubt some discreet solicitation – Galtier accepted the offer of land sufficient for a church, a garden and a graveyard by Vital Guerin and Benjamin Gervais, two farmers. A young laborer at the time, Isaac Labisoniere, who worked on the church recounted: “The logs for the chapel were cut on the spot, and the tamarack swamp in the rear was made to contribute rafters and roof pieces...the logs, rough and undressed, prepared merely by the axe, were made secure by wooden pins. The roof was made of steeply slanting bark covered slabs...[and the] slaps were likewise put to good use in the construction of the floor and the benches. The chapel, as I remember it, was about twenty-five feet long, eighteen feet wide and ten feet high. It had a single window on each side and it faced the river. It was completed in a few days, and could not have represented an expenditure ... of more than \$65.00.” Despite the relative inexpensive cost, the simple cross which was placed over the front door increased in-es-tim-ab-ly, the value and beauty of that structure. For once again, as of old, God had made his dwelling among men. This simple truth which goes to the heart of our faith was not lost on Galtier and remained with him throughout his life, and whenever he spoke of that first log church he added that it reminded him of the stable at Bethlehem where the immensity of God's love in Christ overwhelmed the world.

The log chapel was consecrated on the feast of All Saints, November 1st of 1841 to St. Paul – the Apostle to the Gentiles. Whether it was due to the encouragement of their pastor or the generous protection of their heavenly patron, the inhabitants soon found Pig's Eye – the name of the local rum maker – a bit of embarrassment. To his credit, Fr. Galtier did not take issue with the enterprising



chemist Pierre Parrant or his product, it was only the nickname which the entrepreneur had lent to the settlement in order to increase his sales which Galtier questioned. And so rum continued to be brewed, bottled and enjoyed long after Pig's Eye became St. Paul.

After the construction of the chapel in St. Paul, Galtier built a log chapel at St. Peter's in Mendota and continued his priestly work in an area ranging East to Chippewa Falls and south to Lake Pepin for he was the only priest within 200 square miles. Thus did the days of his priestly mission pass. By the beginning of 1844, Galtier's Catholic flock numbered 584 men, women and children in all and 454 of these resided in St. Paul. How or when he received news that he would not see the year of 1844 out among his people we do not know. We do, however, know by his letter of May 25th to Bishop Loras that he left his mission with mixed emotion. He knew his replacement was Augustine Ravoux who, though his junior, had been ordained with him three years before. Aware of Ravoux's superior pioneer qualities and his own limitations, Galtier conceded in his letter that he was "leaving to better hands the yet barren fields of my first mission." Still, he left neither without regret nor without friends and this provides for us the question. What's left of Galtier's life after his time as St. Paul's first pastor ends is mostly lived at St. Gabriels in Prarie du Chien, where he served nearly 20 years until his death. On his tomb, near the western front of St. Gabriels church, a simple line follows the dates of his birth and death: "Pray for a sinner." On eulogizing the first pastor of St. Paul some years later Archbishop John Ireland – the first Archbishop of St. Paul – would say: "He loved our city and our state dearly; nothing in his old age used to afford him more pleasure than to meet with persons from St. Paul, and enquire of them how our city was progressing."

I suspect that our first pastor would be pleased to know that the church he founded has flourished in the years since his death; that now it is known as an Archdiocese with well over



800,000 Catholics. He might even take just pride in the fact that there is now a group of young professionals meeting in his name. But if we would honor his name we must consider well his example, and thus the question of this talk which pretends an answer: *What we owe Lucien Galtier: Living our Faith without Regret nor without Friends*. Whether Galtier's regret was leaving friends or actions which hindered the harvest in the fields of his first mission, we do not know. Nevertheless, his words provide a point of departure for our reflection and suggest an initial question.

So permit me the question before I offer a brief reflection and the question is this: If this very night you were to receive, like Galtier, a transfer of sorts, news that this very night your spouse, your family and friends, your work would no longer be yours – how would you weigh the time you were given and the harvest? Would you have regret? I ask this question to you not to embarrass but rather to encourage. This very day in the gospel at Mass: “Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour when the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come.’” And to these words Our Lord adds: “Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more.” Surely Galtier knew these words and wanted to be prepared, but how do we make an accounting of what we have been given and what we must give if prepared for such a transfer we would be?

As most of you know with every debt there is a value which determines what is owed. The question, however, is who measures what is owed, myself or another? Am I the measure of all things or am I, myself, measured by another? The Christian claim is clear on this point, there is an answer, a Word has taken flesh. If, however, I live as if were the former, if I am the measure of what is owed, then the standard is hopelessly subjective; indeed it is forever subject to my whims



and my woes. Would not every debtor prefer to be weighed in such scales for how much easier it is to dispense the debt by pretending it does not exist. Perhaps there was a time when you like me lived by excusing the debts you incurred - weighing the world and your friends and your career in your own fixed scales. But surely by now we see the emptiness of such a ledger and have come at last to understand that there is only true wealth, true value, true meaning, in acknowledging our debt and in being weighed by another.

What we owe Galtier then – and for that matter every man and woman who has gone before us in faith – is nothing more or less than what they themselves owed and were prepared to give: the awareness that God has given us this time, this place, our families and friends, our toil in the office or at home, to share the truth of His kingdom and the charity which is the coin of his realm. For His love has weighed us all and his love has paid our debts; as he has done so we must do. I – and hear I speak with and for you – must live therefore as he has lived and yet to do so I must acknowledge – and so commit my life to this truth: that I must live for more than just myself and more than just this time which God has given me. In truth, we are bound intimately to the lives of others and we either adding to our regrets or finding true friends and a rich harvest. That you or I may not have the skills to bring forth a great harvest is not in the end for us to decide. It is, rather, for us like Galtier, to be mindful that as sons and daughters in Christ it is to the harvest that we have been sent. And where most immediately is the fruit for the harvest meant to be found in our lives if not with our spouse and families and friends, if not at our work, and in the stranger so seemingly unlike us that we pass on the street. It is here that we find our mission – but do we have here our regret?

With this summation of our lives in balance let me give the outlines of a response, one which I hope the Galtier Society might help develop. First, we must know the one who has weighed us and paid our debt, each of us must know more intimately this communion of persons who is love. We



have been created in God's image and what's more redeemed by Christ's love. If you would be the husband or wife or brother or sister or friend or colleague that your neighbor deserves you must be mindful of your debt to Our Father. Far from one who unjustly or selfishly demands payment our Father waits for us to call to him in petition, praise, adoration and thanksgiving for in doing so we witness to who we are. God desires to deepen our relationship with him but you and I must choose that relationship for as our own. And this I must do each day in prayer, acknowledging that I am not my own measure. Five minutes, ten minutes, are enough to begin. But begin I must and then I will truly live. For God alone gives the true measure of man, of every place, and situation and time. And if I don't know him – even if I have chosen him – I will tend to measure everything by my own weight. As a most excellent form of prayer I want to commend to you most especially the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation. [Say More].

A second truth follows from the first: I can only know what I love. If I do not know him I cannot love Him nor can I love like Him.. And if He is love knowing him can never be a detriment to all my other loves. Rather he is the source of their meaning. Reading the Scriptures or studying the faith will only assist you in becoming aware of the magnitude of your blessed debt. [Say More]

Finally, as I have said, this debt we owe is unlike any other for where other debts might impoverish and paralyze us this debt can only help our gratitude grow. And if our hearts are filled with gratitude will we not be more mindful of others, especially those who are least and last. Perhaps you may need radically to change your life but I suspect what might be needed more is that you and I make room for others. For no matter their skin or creed or tongue they are our sisters and brothers; they are, ultimately, the ones to whom we are in debt for did not our Lord say: “what you have done to others you have done to me.”



The truth is that each of us has a debt that is owed. Tonight I merely mean to acknowledge the fact – for to do so is already to begin repayment and our debt to Galtier whole.