

Historical Insights

by Daria Sockey

Frontier Priest and Congressman: Father Gabriel Richard, S.S. (by Brother Alois, C.F.X.)

Certain incredulous thoughts might have occurred to Fr. Gabriel Richard at various moments in his life:

“My city and my parish church just burned down. I’m in charge of the relief effort and hold services in an old warehouse. You want me to start a girl’s school and a trade school for Indians? And to give Sunday afternoon sermons to Protestants who don’t have a clergyman? Please, not at a time like this.”

“I still have a huge parish and multiple missions and schools to oversee. I’m afraid founding a state university would be too much of a drain on my time at the moment.”

“Run for Congress?* You know I’m a priest, right?”

“Return to Congress? You realize I’ve just lost a lawsuit, am heavily in debt, and have spent time in jail, right?”

Father Gabriel Richard had all the reasons in the world to take it a tiny bit easier. If he’d only managed half, or even a third, of his many accomplishments, he should still have an honored place in the American Church and in the history of Michigan. And to think that all the while he was building up both church and community, he was laboring under the burden of ongoing legal challenges from those who should have been supporting him—it boggles the mind.

Reflections on Fr. Gabriel Richard would not be complete without mention of his religious community—the Sulpicians. Their place in American Catholic history is usually overshadowed by the more enterprising, jack-of-all-trades Jesuits. But it must not be underestimated. Although the chronicles of the early Jesuit presence in North America were written in martyrs’ blood (the seed of the Church, according to an ancient saying), martyrdom was equally a component of the Sulpician mission. Their blood was shed via guillotine in France rather than tomahawk in New York, but the result—saving grace for the New World—was the same. Unlike the Jesuits, whose charism has always been to be available for whatever task is most needed at the moment, the Sulpician order was established with a very defined focus. They were first and foremost educators, especially of priests, reforming existing seminaries and starting new ones. St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore and Mount St. Mary’s in Emmitsburg, both Sulpician projects, were crucial to the growth of an American diocesan clergy. This would complete what missionary orders had begun. That being said, Sulpician priests could, and did turn their hands to many tasks when circumstances called for it. Bishop Simon Bruté (of the Western Adventure) and Bishop Flaget (whose name comes up repeatedly in both Fr. Richard’s and Fr. Bruté’s stories) certainly proved that. But Fr. Richard, with his service from pulpit to congress, proved himself versatile beyond them all.

Frontier Priest and Congressman suggests many topics for additional study. It would be helpful to read at least a short summary of the War of 1812, in order for readers to understand

Detroit's surrender (and subsequent rescue by Commodore Perry) within the context of the entire conflict. Few pages are devoted to this short conflict in grade school history texts: one remembers little beyond the composition of "The Star-Spangled Banner" and Dolly Madison's rescue of Washington's portrait. But this war confirmed our young nation in its identity and increased its confidence and ability to defend itself. The multiple events that triggered this war, the many theaters of action, American courage under fire as well as American failures (such as General Hull's, in our story) are worth knowing and understanding.

If you are reading *Frontier Priest and Congressman* as part of a unit study on the Church in America, then gaining some understanding of **trusteeism** is a must. Father Richard's decades-long conflict with the lay trustees of St. Ann's church is only one rather minor manifestation of an ongoing problem for the Church in early America. It is difficult for us to grasp the situation that existed in those days. We take for granted that parish churches, schools, and the land they sit on are owned and controlled by the bishop of each diocese. Bishops are the ones who decide where priests work, and pay them from diocesan funds. But a very different situation existed in the early American colonies and later, states. Catholic migrants to northeastern America—from England, Ireland, Germany, and France—formed communities for mutual support long before there were sufficient priests to care for their spiritual needs. As these communities began to prosper, they would pool funds, buy land, and build chapels in anticipation of the day when permanent pastors would be sent to them. In the meantime, they would gather in these chapels for prayer on Sundays and/or host itinerant missionary priests when these made periodic visits. An elected board of trustees would make all necessary decisions about the use and maintenance of these chapels and land. So far, so good. Such ownership helped cement the attachment of tiny Catholic communities to their faith.

The problem came when bishops began to claim authority over their newly created dioceses, and pastors similarly tried to exercise their own authority over their flocks. Although many communities accepted the new chain of command and submitted with grace and obedience, a good many others did not do so. Perhaps they had been influenced by neighboring Protestant Congregational churches, where the independence of each congregation from any outside authority was established doctrine. Or perhaps they understood perfectly well how the Catholic Church governed, but stubbornly resisted and rationalized whenever they wished to go their own way. Other books in our *Portraits* series touch on a few of the more notable trustee disputes. *Priest, Patriot and Leader: John Carroll* recounted the tale of Irish New Yorkers who sent away a pastor whose preaching they did not approve and demanded another. *Mathew Carey* recalls the scandal in Philadelphia when a Fr. Hogan, backed by his trustees, kicked Bishop Conwell out of the cathedral and took charge of it himself. Excommunication, rioting, lawsuits, and a letter from Pope Pius VII condemning "trusteeism" followed, to no avail. The impasse only came to an end after Fr. Hogan left the priesthood, renounced the Catholic faith, and married a wealthy widow.

All of which shows that the effects of Original Sin and its tendency to respond "*Non serviam*" are always with us. We might also recall that our Fr. Richard got into trouble twice when he publicly asserted and defended the Church's teaching on the indissolubility of marriage—another area where faithful priests might find themselves under pressure these days. There is an illusion that Catholics of earlier generations were so much better than those today. Some shattering of that is in order. Sin has always been with us, of course! That is why we need our Savior and His Church so badly. But God's call to holiness is always with us, too. It is still answered today, as then, by those who hunger and thirst for God and for the good of His people.

The indefatigable zeal of Father Richard—and of Fathers DeSmet, Bishop Simon Bruté, and Joseph the Huron as well—resonate in the hearts of readers because *we* are capable of answering the call as well, each in accordance with the circumstances God has placed us in and the people he has given us to serve and love.

*Note: That fact of Fr. Richard's service in the US Congress raises the question of priestly involvement in political office. The Church did not explicitly forbid such activity until very recently. There have been two other priest-congressmen, Fr. Robert Drinan and Fr. Robert John Cornell, who both served in the 1970s. They both withdrew from politics when Pope John Paul II stated in 1980 that priests may no longer serve in political office. (This prohibition has now been codified in the 1983 Code of Canon Law.)