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FATHER JAMES BOUCHARD, SJ 1823-1889 The Eloquent Indian

By Father John McGloin, SJ, printed in the August 5, 1976 issue of the *Catholic Herald*

High up on the list of pioneer clerics who served well in the successive jurisdiction of the Vicariate of Marysville, the Diocese of Grass Valley and the Diocese of Sacramento is the name of James Chrysostom Bouchard, SJ who had the distinction of being the first American Indian ordained to the priesthood in the United States. Because his long continued apostolic wanderings included much of what we now know as the Diocese of Sacramento and because his eloquent voice was raised at the dedication of the Blessed Sacrament Cathedral in Sacramento in 1889, we present some details of a very interesting life.

The one to be known as the “Eloquent Indian” was born in a Delaware Indian village near Leavenworth, Kansas. His mother was of French ancestry who had been captured by some Delaware Indians and who had been married to a brave named Kistalwa (she had the name of Monotowan – White Fawn). Their son was given the name of Watomika – Swift Foot, and, in letters written to his tribal relatives many years after he was known as Father Bouchard, he signed himself as “Watomika, SJ!”

Taken to Marietta College in Ohio in 1834 to be educated, he was converted to the Presbyterian faith and eventually decided to study for the ministry there. While visiting St Louis as “Mr Beshor” (later changed to “Bouchard”) he was converted to Catholicism as a result of contact with a famous mid-West Jesuit, Arnold Damen, SJ. In 1848, he entered the Jesuit Order at Florissant, outside of St Louis and, on August 5, 1855, a Jesuit Bishop, James de Velde, raised him to priesthood in St Francis Xavier Church, St Louis.

As indicated, he was the first American Indian (half Indian blood is more than enough to qualify as an Indian) to be so ordained. After serving in the mid-West for several years Father Bouchard was happily assigned to California to help his Jesuit brethren there. He arrived in San Francisco via Panama on August 16, 1861.

This was to be the beginning of such an influential priestly career that Archbishop Riordan was to say of him at the time of the Indian priest’s death in San Francisco on December 27, 1889: “To no man in all the West is the Church of God more beholden than to Father James Bouchard of the Society of Jesus. He kept the faith in the mining districts; he sustained the dignity of God’s Holy Church in the midst of ignorance and misunderstanding and everywhere championed her rights. My debt to him, and I speak for my brother bishops, is incalculable.” High words of praise, indeed.

It was not long before the distinguished oratorical abilities possessed by Father Bouchard were brought into play. From 1861-1889, his eloquent voice was heard in cathedrals and smaller churches of the Mother and Comstock Lode as well as in churches and lecture halls as far south as Los Angeles and all through California and Oregon as well as in repeated visits to Victoria, British Columbia – indeed, he made two apostolic forays to Hawaii as well. He was in constant demand for such work and was called upon to preach, for example, in 1876 at the dedication of St Vibiana’s Cathedral, Los Angeles.

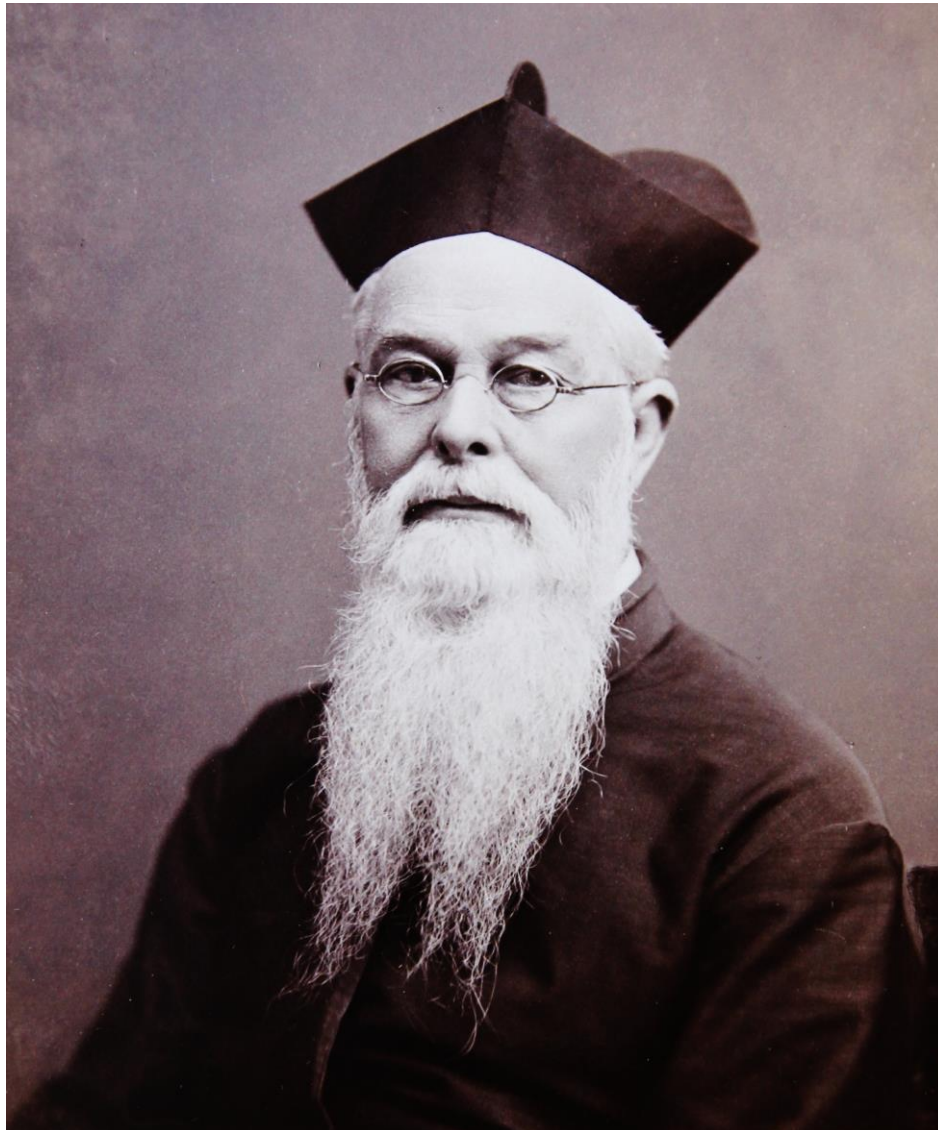


Photo from Diocesan Archives

Father James Chrysostom Bouchard, SJ
1823 - 1889

He also became part of Sacramento history when, in 1887, he preached at the dedication of the cornerstone of the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament, returning in July 1889 to preach at the

dedication of the completed cathedral. This was to be the last important sermon of his life for his death came in a few months.

For our purposes here, it may be of interest to mention that, in 1861, the year of his arrival in California, Father Bouchard gave a parish mission in Grass Valley as well as in Nevada City. The following year saw him at St Rose Church, Sacramento. In 1864, he gave a mission at St John's, Folsom while returning on demand to St Patrick's, Grass Valley. His first mission in the Mother Lode mining area (Grass Valley and Nevada City are, more properly, part of the "Northern Mines") was in 1865 at St Anne's Columbia. While in the area, he also gave a mission in nearby Sonora.



Photo from Diocesan Archives

St Patrick Church, Grass Valley
Where Father Bouchard, SJ Preached Parish Missions in the 1860's

The indefatigable missionary also went to the Comstock Lode in Nevada in that same year where he preached at Gold Hill near Virginia City. He became a very close friend of Father Patrick Manogue, pastor of Virginia City, and this was to result in that great day when, on January 16, 1881, he preached at the consecration of Manogue as Coadjutor Bishop of Grass Valley. The ceremony took place in San Francisco's first cathedral, now known as Old St Mary's Church on the edge of Chinatown.

And so this distinguished career went on-and-on. Small churches like Downieville were visited in 1866 and it would be difficult to think of any significant area of the present Sacramento diocese which was left unvisited. (Remember that this was in the time of pioneer transportation. Undoubtedly the Eloquent Indian frequently knew the inconveniences that such travel meant.)

Among the churches at whose dedication he preached were those in Yreka, Chico, Willows and Eureka. Bouchard was known, too, as a controversialist, (a fact referred to by Archbishop Riordan in the words quoted above) and he was extremely successful in this phase of his career. On occasion, as in his lectures on the Chinese Question in California, he appears to have yielded more to the unwise prejudices of his day (on one occasion, he was properly rebuked for this by the Rev Otis Gibson, a Presbyterian divine with missionary experience in China). However, in the main, his presentation and defense of the Catholic Faith was outstanding.

Even Eloquent Indians have to die and James Bouchard was no exception. His long years of service as indicated give him genuine stature in the history of the American Period of the California Catholic Church. He died in San Francisco in his 67th year as a result of an overstrained heart. His funeral was held in the Saint Ignatius Church then located at Hayes Street and Van Ness Avenue, the largest funeral ever given to any priest in San Francisco up to that time. Quite an interesting story, indeed: starting in a Kansas wigwam and finishing in the City by the Golden Gate!

