

# L'Abbaye de Saint-Benoît- du-Lac : Dom Vannier, a founder

Adaptation of a presentation by Dom René Salvas,  
O.S.B., in the church of Austin, September 29, 2002



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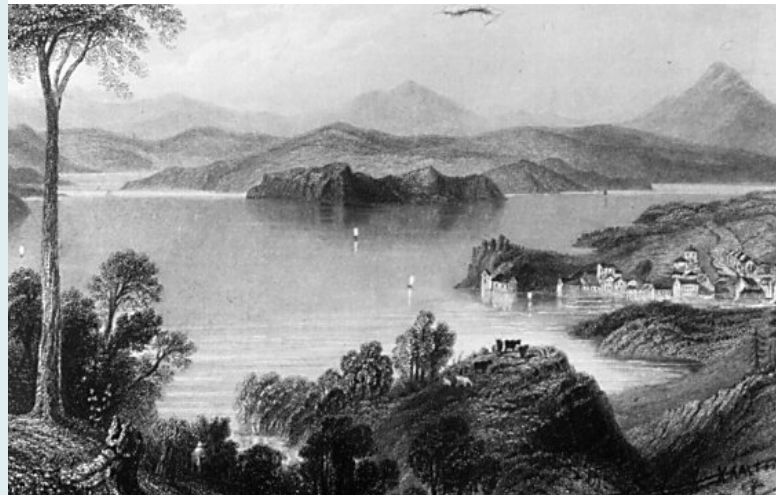
## The origins of the Abbey

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the French government was dominated by an anti-clerical and Masonic majority that enacted legislation which forced several religious communities to leave the country. The Benedictines of Saint-Wandrille, an abbey in Normandy, sought refuge in Belgium. Faced with difficult relocations and uneasy about the future of their community, they then looked for a more favourable place of asylum. They began to consider putting down roots in French Canada. Abbot Joseph Laferrière, a priest from Saint-Hyacinthe who studied in 1891 at the Université de Louvain and stayed at the hostel there, suggested that the Bishop of Sherbrooke, Msgr. Paul Larocque would gladly receive them in his diocese. The idea took hold; contacts were established and the Canadian foundation was approved by Abbot Dom Joseph Pothier. Dom Paul Vannier was called on to undertake this large-scale project.

**T**he Abbaye Saint-Benoît-du-Lac is set like a jewel between Mount Orford and Owl's Head, which stands in the distance. It is on a beautiful peninsula (named Gibraltar Point) on the west side of Lake Memphremagog.

*This exceptionally beautiful site was chosen and cleared in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the pioneer Quaker of Bolton Township, Nicholas Austin, and other pioneers. In 1912, the site would be preserved by the Benedictine monks who built the Abbey of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac there, an architectural masterpiece and the icon of Austin and the Eastern Townships.*

*The Austin Cultural Committee has chosen to publish the text of a presentation given at the Austin church in September, 2002, by Dom René Salvas, o.s.b., the Abbey's archivist, because the beginnings of the Abbey are deeply intertwined with the history of our municipality, of which it was actually part until 1939.*



*Gibraltar Point in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Dom Vannier chose this Abbaye de Saint-Benoît-du-Lac. Nicholas Austin had chosen to settle in about 1793.*



Dom Pierre-Paul Vannier, O.S.B., 1860-1914

## Dom Vannier, the founder

Paul Vannier, who was born in 1860, entered the Abbey of Saint-Pierre de Solesmes in 1879. He took his vows in 1881, and was ordained in 1885. He participated in the restoration of the monastery of Saint-Maur-de-Glanfeuil and directed the construction of the new abbey of Clervaux in Luxembourg. His business experience and his strength of character along with his deep religious convictions made him particularly well qualified for taking charge of the onerous task of founding a monastery in North America. The mission was made even more difficult since the Benedictines were facing a serious shortage of both personnel and funding. After several months of preparations, Dom Vannier left from Le Havre with a companion, a lay aspirant, and arrived in Montreal on July 4, 1912. He hastened to consult Dom Oger, the abbot (from Anjou, as he was) of the Trappist monastery at Oka. A few days later, he went to Sherbrooke to meet Msgr. Larocque. The welcome was cordial and the bishop claimed to be happy to authorize the foundation in his diocese of a Benedictine monastery, which would be, as in Europe, a centre of Christian life and civilization.

## Choice of a Site

The first order of business was to find a suitable site. The priest from Saint-Patrice in Magog, Abbot F.-X. Brassard offered to guide Father Vannier in his prospecting tours. Travelling through the Point Gibraltar area in Bolton Township, he pointed out an agricultural estate on the west side of Lake Memphremagog, which, in his opinion, would be most suitable for a monastic institution. They visited the site and the founder was easily persuaded, considering its many advantages, that he could not find a better place. Mr. Jean-Baptiste Lachapelle, the owner, was quite willing to sell under conditions that seemed entirely reasonable. For the sum of \$12,000, payable in 6 annual instalments of \$2,000, he would sell the entire estate: house, farm buildings, herd (some 50 head of cattle) and the 450 acres of land. Father Vannier immediately informed his superior about these developments and, on September 23, 1912, he obtained authorization to purchase the property. The sales contract was signed before a notary in Magog on October 8, 1912.

Dom Vannier wanted to take possession of his estate immediately, but a request from Msgr. Larocque changed his plans. He was asked to replace the priest in Notre-Dame-des Bois who had to be absent from September to November. His parish, situated 80 km from Sherbrooke, counted some 900 residents. Dom Vannier accepted willingly and confided to a friend, "I always thought I would like to be a priest in a Canadian village in the forest. Here I am; I am living my dream." For three months, the Benedictine lived among a population that was essentially French-speaking Canadian. Sometimes amused, sometimes stern, he observed the values, the way of thinking and the religious customs of his new parishioners. He enjoyed this experience of acculturation and acknowledged that he had greatly benefited from getting to know the country people and their way of life.

## Both Priest and Farmer

On November 27, 1912, after finding a replacement, Dom Vannier left Notre-Dame-des-Bois, "carrying with him, he said, the best wishes and regrets of his parishioners". From then on, he was able to devote himself entirely to the foundation of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac (this name had been adopted shortly before.) The inauguration took place on December 4 of that year. That evening, he noted in his journal: "I took possession of the property for the first service of vespers of the Illation of St. Benedict which I recited as I walked about the property on a magnificent day: the sun shone brightly, all the snow that had fallen in the previous days had melted the evening before. I prayed to God to help us and to bless this undertaking begun for his glory and the prosperity of the Order of St. Benedict."







The farm house which served as a monastery for a few decades.

Four days later, on December 8, the Feast day of the Immaculate Conception, the Saint-Luc-de-Millington mission which was administered by parish of Saint-Edouard-d'Eastman was entrusted to Dom Vannier and the Benedictines. Msgr. Larocque conferred on Dom Vannier the pastoral care of some 150 Catholics living in the area. These parishioners belonged to the Eastman parish, but it was in the little church of Saint-Luc-de-Millington near Lakes Gilbert and Peasley that the priest came to celebrate mass once a month. Dom Vannier became, from this moment on, the pastor of the Millington mission, but in his mind, the monastery was always the true centre of the parish. For the time being he had to preside over mass in two places every Sunday: at 8 am at Millington and at 10 am, at the monastery.

The pastoral duties would increase considerably during the summer months with the arrival of the seasonal residents. The Catholic owners of many cottages on the shores of Lake Memphremagog were very happy to have the Benedictines among them, because the proximity of the monastery made it easy for them to fulfil their religious obligations, particularly to attend Sunday mass.

As the small room laid out as a chapel quickly became too small, Father Vannier had an outdoor gallery, 12-feet wide, built on the south and east sides with a view of the lake. Outside, through the open windows, the faithful could hear the service. On some summer Sundays, 75 to 80 people attended. Some months later, the summer residents decided to build their own chapel by the water, on the condition that the monks would come to celebrate the Sunday mass for a fee of \$10. The cost of construction was initially estimated at \$1,000, then at \$2,000. A campaign was launched in the village at the instigation of Dr. Goyette, the promoter of the project, to raise this sum. While waiting for the chapel to be completed, the boathouse belonging to Mr. Gauvin, which was deemed "spacious and very suitable" was used for services. Attendance at mass was usually good, with a record of 110 in August 1913. To meet this demand, the founder applied some pressure on the Abbot of Saint-Wandrille and finally obtained reinforcements in the form of three new monk-priests: Father Boitard in 1913; and Fathers Allix and Brun in 1914.

## The Quest for Subsistence

In addition to his pastoral obligations, Dom Vannier had to spend a great deal of time managing the property he had acquired. Right away, he wanted to ensure that the young monastery was on solid economic ground and could be financially self-sufficient. The main source of income was the farm and in particular the 27 dairy cows. Selling their milk provided the most substantial benefits at first; every day their milk fetched 6 or 7 cents per quart, and was taken to a cheese factory 4 km away. During his first visits as owner of the property, one fact struck DomVannier: the waste of wood. The sight of all that wood rotting was a sad thing to behold. Soon, he began to anticipate the profit that could be made by cutting up this wood and selling it by the cord. In December, 1912, he noted, "I have 1000 cords of logs stacked in the park... I have just sold 100 at \$2 that we will roll down to the edge of the lake." Starting that winter, work went ahead, despite the hardships of the weather and inadequate tools.

The workload was very heavy in all seasons. The founder knew this; he and his companions, two or three lay brothers, were overworked. In March 1913, he wrote to the abbot: "We work like mercenaries from 4 in the morning until 9 or 10 o'clock at night." The pace worried him and he wrote, "I am even afraid that our brothers will abandon me." He thought about hiring staff, but quickly abandoned the idea because he deemed the salaries to be exorbitant. "You cannot imagine how expensive everything is here; the cost of labour is ruinous..." This was a hard time for him, as he dealt with all the difficulties of running the place and the lack of means. "Failure is staring me in the face... Our situation is impossible... My back is not yet to the wall, but I am facing disaster." But these periods of despondency were rare and lasted only a short time. He quickly took hold of himself. "Everything is to be done here – I would feel overwhelmed – frightened and discouraged if it were in me."



Front row, from left to right: Brother Raphaël, Father Boitard, Brother Hilaire and Father Vannier.

The monastery and its outbuildings in 1913





Even if he obtained the maximum return from the farm and the forest, he realized that they could only generate limited income. Of course, one would balance the budget, but the profit margin was tight. Looking for additional sources of income he thought of the lucrative cheese industry, the Trappist monastery at Oka took in \$40,000 per year from cheesemaking. He remembered that one day the abbot had declared of his monastery, "Look at this abbey; it was built with cheese!" Unfortunately, the project would require a significant investment and staff which he did not have. He looked for another solution. When he learned that the provincial government gave grants to poultry farmers and arboriculturists he obtained subsidies for the construction of a model hen house and for planting an orchard. While the additional revenues were significant, there was a deficit in 1913. The founder, however, remained optimistic. "This year (1913), the first of our new life here has been difficult, full of problems and worries, and the results have not been comforting... It could not be otherwise, for us, as we begin, with land on which nothing has been done. It was very difficult, but now it is behind us."»

## 1914, A year of Tragedy

Like the preceding year, 1914 got off to a difficult start for the small community of Saint-Benoît which was well aware of its precarious situation. There were some hopeful signs, however. To the abbot's great joy, the recruitment of monks for the choir proceeded without any problem. Already, two Canadian postulants had begun their novitiate overseas at the Abbey of Saint-Wandrille. However, the case of the lay brothers was less successful. Father Vannier was counting heavily on them. He felt they were essential to ensure the economic self-sufficiency of the foundation. Several (five in March 1914, three in June) presented themselves but none stayed. These failures were due, not to the "inconstancy of Canadians" as the founder thought, but to an imbalance between the excessive amount of manual labour and the religious exercises, which discouraged those with the best intentions.

On August 1, 1914, newspapers announced that war had broken out. The conflict lasted until 1918 and took its toll on the small community in the Eastern Townships. Without news of their country, their families and their monastery, the monks endured five years of great anguish.



## Death of Dom Vannier

On Monday, November 30, 1914, Dom Vannier had wished to go to Sherbrooke to take part in a celebration in honour of Msgr. Larocque. Early that morning, after the celebration of mass and his breakfast, he left with Charles Collot in his motor boat heading for Magog. From there, he planned to take the train to Sherbrooke. The two travellers had almost reached Magog when tragedy struck. Their craft hit a piece of ice floating in the lake. Within a few seconds, the front of the boat had sunk to the bottom after it was literally cut in two by the ice. A lakefront resident tried to rescue Father Vannier and his companion, but he couldn't reach them in time; he was some 30 metres from the victims when he saw them disappear. Father Vannier's body was found later that same day, while Mr. Collot's would not be found until the following spring.

This entirely unexpected death threw the young community into complete disarray. Father Vannier had been its heart and soul, and almost everything depended on him. In addition, the loss of contact with the mother abbey made the situation even more difficult. Everything came together to give a prophetic resonance to the words of the founder, written to the Prior of Saint-Wandrille on April 11 of the preceding year: "You should know that if this experiment succeeds, it is not of our doing at all. The difficulties are too immense to be overcome by humans, without divine assistance. It would be foolish to think otherwise."

Motor boat used by the monks, it was called the St.Benoit yacht



## The aftermath of the Tragedy

From 1914 to 1919, the community lived through precarious times. By common agreement, the role of Superior fell to Father Boitard, the most senior of the monks. He and Father Allix, both excellent preachers, took on the external ministry, while Father Brun and Brother Hilaire looked after the monastery and the management of the agricultural operations. Contact with Saint-Wandrille was only re-established in February 1919. In response to their cry for reinforcements, the Abbot, after consulting his community, ordered Father Boitard, by telegraph, to "liquidate the situation in our best interests and those of the Order, and return home". To understand this decision, one must remember that Saint-Wandrille had suffered greatly during the war and had come out of it poverty-stricken, to the point that it was only able to look after itself with great difficulty. At Saint-Benoît-du-Lac, such a harsh decision had not been expected. Fathers Boitard and Brun decided to go to Europe to defend their small monastery. They made their case so well that the order to close was put off. The Canadian foundation was saved.

And so Dom Vannier had not worked in vain. After him, generations of monks continued his work and continued to keep the traditions of prayer and work of the Order of St. Benedict alive on the shores of Lake Memphremagog.

# Historical Timeline

**17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries**, presence of Aborigines, particularly the Abenaki Indians;

**1783** The Quaker Nicholas Austin explores the western shoreline of Lake Memphremagog, starting in Vermont. He is very taken by the beautiful peninsula (which he will later call Gibraltar Point);

**1792** Nicholas Austin and 54 associates obtain plots of land in Bolton Township in the new Eastern Townships;

**1793-1794** Nicholas Austin brings his wife and family from New Hampshire and settles, with other American colonists, in the area of Gibraltar Point;

**1797** Official establishment of Bolton Township;

**1821** Nicholas Austin is buried at Gibraltar Point, as he wished, and his wife, Phebe, is buried beside him in 1841;

**1876** Official establishment, under two names of the Municipality of East Bolton- Bolton-Est;

**1912** The Benedictines purchase Jean-Baptiste Lachapelle's farm and turn the residence into a monastery;

**1929** The monastery is raised to the rank of conventual priory (an autonomous house, but under the authority of an abbey);

**1938** The territory of Austin is recognized as an autonomous municipality separate from the Municipality of East Bolton;

**1938** The territory of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac is recognized as a municipality separate from the Municipality of East Bolton;

**1939** Saint-Benoît-du-Lac is split off from Austin and becomes an autonomous municipality;

**1939-1941** Construction of the present monastery designed by the French Benedictine architect, Dom Paul Bellot;

**1952** The monastery of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac is elevated to the status of abbey;

**1955** Construction of the hostel designed by Dom Claude-Marie Côté;

**1990-1994** Construction of the abbey church designed by Montreal architect Daniel S. Haganu.

# Other sources of information

## Useful websites

The official site of the Abbey: [www.abbaye.ca](http://www.abbaye.ca)

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# Glossary

**Monastery:** A building which houses a community of monks whether cloistered or not, who live together under a specific set of rules for prayer and work. The most renowned rule is that of St. Benedict.

**Abbey:** A monastery headed by an abbot or an abbess. It is legally autonomous.

**Abbot:** A man who is the head of an abbey of monks. A curé or parish priest, on the other hand, is in charge of a parish.

**Abbey Church:** A church specifically built as part of an abbey.

**Priory:** A monastery, whether attached or not to an Abbey, led by a prior or prioress. Usually refers to an establishment occupied by some monks.

**Clergy:** The body of all people ordained to perform religious duties. The secular clergy live amongst lay persons whereas the regular clergy follow a religious rule and live within an abbey, a convent or a priory.

**Curé:** A priest responsible for the spiritual well-being and the administration of a parish. Must remain celibate.

**Profès:** A religious man or woman who has made solemn vows.

**Monk:** A religious man who has made solemn vows, lives in a cloister and follows the rule of his order.

**Lay brother:** A monk who is not a priest, who engages in domestic or agricultural tasks.

**Illation:** A religious feast day celebrated by Benedictine monks on 4 December.

Additional information: <http://medieval.mrugala.net/Religion/Glossaire%20religieux.htm>



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