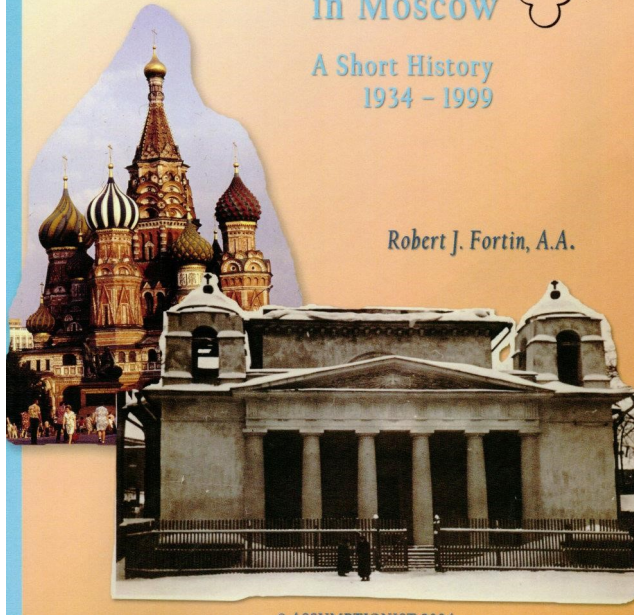


The Catholic Chaplaincy in Moscow

A Short History
1934 - 1999

Robert J. Fortin, A.A.



Father Georges Antonio Laberge **October 26, 1945 — January 28, 1949**

A successor rather than an assistant

During the summer of 1943, the Assumptionist superiors became very concerned about the well-being of Fr. Braun. He had been alone in Moscow for seven of his nine years under very trying circumstances. The superiors therefore decided to send him an assistant in the person of Fr. Georges-Antonio Laberge, A.A. In August 1943, Fr. Laberge applied for a passport. The State Department, without whose support nothing could be accomplished, apparently considered the time inopportune and consequently did not issue one until March 1944. For its part, the Soviet Union, which received Father's visa application the following month, never acted upon it.

Later in 1944, the US Embassy in Moscow did take up the question, only to be told by Mr. Andrei Vishinsky that the practical point was whether Fr. Laberge's presence in Moscow as assistant to Fr. Braun was really necessary. On November 20, 1944, Mr. George Kennan cabled the State Department from Moscow: "If it could be made clear to the Soviet authorities that the arrival of Fr. Laberge would be immediately followed by Fr. Braun's departure, the question of a visa might receive more prompt treatment here. I suspect that the reason for the hesitation in granting a visa is a desire on the part of the Soviet Authorities that there should be no more than one such official in Moscow."

By this time, Fr. Braun had been charged with assault. It seemed probable that his upcoming trial, whenever it took place, would make his position untenable. The visit to Moscow of Mr. Flynn and his subsequent report seemed to confirm the need for a change. Fr. Armanet's letter to Fr. Quénard in late April 1945 presumably suggested that something be done because, in early June, Fr. Laberge was told to make preparations for going to Moscow. At approximately the same time, i.e., just before Fr. Braun's trial in May, representatives at the French Embassy in Moscow had taken the precaution of sending for Fr. Charles Bourgeois, a French Jesuit of the Eastern Rite who was living in Tartu, Estonia.

Arrival of Father Laberge

Fr. Laberge re-applied for a visa in July 1945. It was granted on August 15. He therefore left for Moscow on October 13, traveling via Paris where he spoke with Bishop Neveu, then via Berlin where he boarded a Soviet plane for Moscow. He arrived in the Soviet capital on October 26 and was met by Fr. Braun who had no idea that he was being recalled. Said Fr. Braun to his confrere: "My permit to stay has been extended so I won't be leaving Moscow for another year."

A few days later, the two priests were invited to lunch with Ambassador William A. Harriman (1943-46) who afterwards informed Fr. Braun that, in negotiating the visa for Fr. Laberge, he had asked for a two-month extension of his permit so that he could initiate his successor. The ambassador advised him not to attempt to stay longer than that.

Father Charles Bourgeois, S.J.

On the morning of November 9, 1945, Frs. Braun and Laberge had a 45-minute interview with the French Ambassador, General Georges Catroux, during which the ambassador raised the question of the pastorate of Saint Louis-des-Français. After paying tribute to Fr. Braun's devotion for having accepted responsibility for the parish since 1936, General Catroux stated that there was now in Moscow a French-born priest, Fr. Charles Bourgeois, S.J. It would seem logical that he be the new pastor. Fr. Braun replied that, because of the suppression of the diocese of Mohilev and the disappearance of all the apostolic administrations except that of Moscow, it was for the Holy See to appoint a pastor for Saint Louis Church.

The Ambassador then complained that Rome had not consulted the French Government and asked Fr. Laberge how he came to be chosen. Fr. Laberge explained the recent history of the parish, adding that the pastorate of Saint Louis was only a secondary issue. Both Bishop Neveu and Fr. Braun were primarily Apostolic Administrators appointed by Rome and only secondarily pastors of Saint Louis. Rome, which had appointed him as their successor, was not so much concerned with national prestige as it was with ensuring canonical ecclesiastical succession. Both priests agreed that they could do nothing to modify the decision of the Holy See but assured the ambassador that Fr. Bourgeois was more than welcome to help in the parish, especially in matters concerning the French colony. And, on that note, the interview came to a close.

Departure of Father Braun

Though Fr. Braun thought that Fr. Laberge was entitled to the apartment occupied by Fr. Bourgeois, he nevertheless accepted to share with Fr. Laberge his apartment at Borisoglebsky which had been obtained through the French Embassy. Fr. Laberge found Fr. Braun an excellent company at first but discovered that he was becoming more morose as the time for his departure drew near.

In the remaining two months, Fr. Braun briefed his successor on many aspects of life in the Soviet Union. Both agreed that it would be highly desirable not to be dependent on any embassy for lodging and that, at the end of the year, Fr. Laberge should assume responsibility for the rent of the apartment and should have the lease transferred to his name.

Fr. Braun was scheduled to leave the Soviet Union on December 26, 1945, but bad weather delayed the departure to the following day. He left on the same plane as Secretary of State James F. Byrnes.

Predicament over the apartment

On January 4, 1946, French Ambassador Catroux wrote to Fr. Laberge saying that, as he had need of the accommodation currently occupied by Fr. Bourgeois, he was assigning him Fr. Laberge's apartment but that Fr. Laberge was welcome to stay until he found another residence. Fr. Laberge went at once to Burobin where he arranged to assume payment of the rent as of January 1, 1946. He also notified the ambassador, saying that he felt free to take this action because of the nature of the mission entrusted to him by the Holy See and because both US and French law provided for the separation of Church and State.

There followed an exchange of letters in which the ambassador claimed that Fr. Laberge occupied the apartment only as a guest of the French Embassy and that he had no right in conscience to take such a step. Fr. Laberge felt that, as the representative of the Holy See, he should not be ordered around by the French ambassador and felt too that nobody had the right to impose another resident on him against his will, even though he had no objection personally to Fr. Bourgeois. He did, however, offer to vacate the apartment if Burobin found him alternative accommodations.

At the same time, he mentioned his predicament to Mr. Kennan, US Chargé d'Affaires in the absence of Ambassador Harriman. Without exerting any pressure, Mr. Kennan supported him and the issue was dropped. Burobin, incidentally, collected rent from both Fr. Laberge and the French Embassy during the period of the misunderstanding.

Ministry to Soviet citizens

Fr. Laberge was agreeably surprised and encouraged to see the church of Saint Louis filled at each of the three Sunday Masses. True, the building was small, but the average Sunday attendance was about 1,100, 95% of whom were Soviet citizens, most of whom were former parishioners of the closed churches of Saint Peter and Paul and Immaculate Conception. Like Fr. Braun, Fr. Laberge preached each Sunday in Russian, French and English. Upwards of 150 would receive Holy Communion. At weekday Masses, the congregation seldom numbered fewer than 40 persons.

Fr. Laberge's apartment was about two miles from the church. Because the car left him by Fr. Braun was almost completely worn out, he usually traveled by trolley, a ride of 20 minutes. After daily Mass at 8:30 A.M., he continued the practice of his predecessor of receiving visitors in the sacristy. He would then visit the sick and the dying, either at home or in the hospital, which sometimes involved a journey of several miles outside the city. On such out-of-town calls, a relative or friend of the sick person would often accompany him. However, the situation was very

inconvenient, particularly for funerals. When the body could not be brought to the church because of the distance, the funeral service had to be held either in the home of the deceased or in the cemetery. In April 1946, Fr. Laberge decided to buy himself a second-hand Chevrolet which greatly facilitated his movements.

Leningrad

Fr. Laberge tells us that he enjoyed even more freedom than diplomats and that he was allowed to travel three times to Leningrad in the summer and autumn of 1946 to hold services in the French National church of Notre Dame de France. Although Fr. Bourgeois, on visit to Leningrad in September 1945, had been able to say Mass there, the church had had no resident priest since 1941. Fr. Bourgeois would have liked to take charge of Notre Dame de France, but the fact that he continued to say Mass in the Eastern Rite was sufficient to make him *persona non grata*. He was expelled from the Soviet Union during Holy Week of 1946.

The situation of the Leningrad Catholics, estimated at 30,000, was truly pathetic. No wonder then that, during Fr Laberge's visits, the people attended Mass and received the Sacraments with such eagerness and joy. In the absence of a priest, groups of faithful would assemble in church on Sundays and Holy Days to pray in common. Baptism was administered privately by a Madame Souchal, an 84 year-old French lady who was custodian of Notre Dame de France. She had distinguished herself in that capacity during the siege of Leningrad by her total disregard of personal safety, defense regulations, air raid warnings and bombs.

In November 1946, the Catholics of Leningrad had the consolation of again having a resident priest who was sent, with the agreement of Soviet authorities, by the Archbishop of Riga (Latvia).

Turning point: 1947 Conference of Foreign Ministers

Fr. Laberge perceived a change for the worse in the religious situation in Moscow soon after the Conference of Foreign Ministers held in Moscow in March - April 1947. The common consensus of opinion was that Eastern Europe was lost to the West both politically and socially. During December 1946 and January 1947, an optimistic note was evident in the Soviet press and radio broadcasts, but it disappeared by mid-February, probably as a result of a speech by US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles which warned that any policy of appeasement towards the Soviet Union would have dire consequences.

During the first six weeks of 1947, the US Government sent five formal notes to the Soviet Government. On March 12, two days after the opening of the Conference of Foreign Ministries, there came the proclamation of the *Truman Doctrine* stating that it was the policy of the United States "to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressure." Although the