

Letter from Rev. P. Chiniquy.  
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(Amateur) translation by Jean-Paul Hubert

Mr. Editor,

With the belief that a good number of your readers would find it as agreeable as useful to have exact ideas about Illinois and the numerous Canadian emigrants who have gone to that State over the past few years, I would be grateful if you could if you published some of the observations I have just made to those of my compatriots that have stopped in Chicago and Bourbonnais.

It is impossible to transmit to the souls of one's friends the emotions one experiences as one goes deeper and deeper into the immense plains of Illinois. It is a spectacle one has to see in order to understand it.

As one progresses through those boundless deserts where the eye, with the exception of the flow of rivers, endlessly meets prairies of unrivaled richness in the midst of a desolate emptiness, what one feels within oneself is something that cannot be described.

Is it joy, is it sadness that one experiences? One cannot tell, but something strange happens to your soul, that overwhelms you.

You look at the sky, and an hymn of gratefulness raises from your heart - tears of joy run from your eyes - you bless God that the land you are going through has not been hit by the lightning that struck the world after Adam's original sin: The land that you tread upon is bad; it shall yield but thorns and spines. All here is greenery, riches and magnificence. Yet, if your lower your sights upon that land so rich and so beautiful, you are filled with an indescribable feeling of sadness and you say to that land: Why are you so empty? Why is it that here there is only cattle and bird to celebrate my God's mercifulness? .

And then, as you progress on those prairies so rich which, as a shoreless sea, endlessly unfold before you, seem to long for the presence of man so as to become covered in the most beautiful of crops, you think about your friends in Canada. You bring to your mind, above all, those whose families barely survive in misery and whose sweat so often falls upon a merciless and desolate soil. Ah!, if only so and so were here, how their fate would be changed! What a future of prosperity they would bequeath their happy children!

Here, one would probably tell me: But, is it your desire to depopulate Canada? Is it your intention to invite your compatriots to massively migrate to Illinois? .

No, a thousand times no, that does not come to my mind. Here are my entire thoughts, and I do not believe I should either hide them or be ashamed of them.

A very large number (much larger than is generally believed) of our compatriots migrate to the United States every year. That is a reality no one deplures more than I do.

If it were possible for me to stop that migration and keep in Canada so many hearts, arms and so much intelligence that were are losing, yearly, for the benefit of our neighbors, I would spare no sacrifice, no matter how costly, to succeed.

But it is impossible to stop that migration, as long as our governments do not look any better than they have done so far after that vital situation.

I had entertained, together with the true friend of the country, the hope that the voices of our poor compatriots from the Eastern townships would be heard and that help would come their way. But that hope vanished like a nice dream. And there is every reason to believe that our unfortunate compatriots that had the courage to enter the Eastern forests will again be abandoned to their resources, or, better said, to their weakness. Without the possibility of communicating with the markets of Quebec and Montreal, for lack of roads and at the mercy of the tyranny of the large landowners, a large number, with anger in their heart, will be forced to abandon the fields they had started to clear to go and look in a foreign land the protection that is negated to them in their own homeland. Unless a remedy as urgent as energetic is applied, emigration will therefore forever increase, because of the unconceivable apathy of the government, instead of diminishing.

Well, since we cannot put an end to emigration, we have no choice but to regulate it so as to make it the least possible damaging to our compatriots.

Lets us, with all our strength, discourage Canadians from moving to cities in the United States. All too often America cities spell the death of all that must be dear to a Canadian: his religion, his language, his 'nationality'.

Generally, parents keep to their faith in American cities; but nothing is sadder than witnessing with what ease youth breathes the spread of heresy, impiety and indifference.

It is not uncommon to see Godless children, aged from 12 to 15, incapable of answering you in French and not knowing a single word from the catechism.

It is true that there is no country in the world where there is more space, peace and liberty than in the United States. But, as I have seen with my own eyes, and I say that to my Canada, with sadness in my heart, our Canadians living in United States cities, are far from getting the better part of those three things that are essential to family life. Most of them barely subsist in the deepest misery, most of them do not raise above the little enviable state of hand labourers and cannot raise above the position of poor day-workers.

But such is not the case of those of our migrants that head for Illinois, especially for Bourbonnais, to take up lands and dedicate themselves to agriculture.

Your readers would have difficulty in believing me if I told you how much happiness and prosperity I have found amongst the Canadians of Bourbonnais. One can hardly believe one's eyes.

The Canadians in Bourbonnais have had the good sense of leaving behind the old habits of cultivation [agriculture] that are paralyzing everything in Canada, and immediately raised to the level of the best American farmers. It is in their hands that you will find the most advanced husbandry implements in the United States: first class plows; sowing machinery; other machines to harvest grains that allow two men to cut 20 acres of wheat in a single day; mills to thresh wheat right in the field thereby dispensing with the need to carry the bails to the barns, etc.; nothing fails them.

It is in their magnificent prairies or at their plows that you will find the finest breeds of animals in Illinois.

Over the past five to six years already more than one thousand families have headed for those blessed areas, and I am told that every day new families, drawn by those that preceded them, go there to partake in their share of riches that the divine Providence gives with such ease and profusion to those who settle there.

What can a young man do in Canada who only disposes of £50 to £60? Generally speaking, it is impossible for him to make a future with such small amounts. He has to turn a day-laborer, or take on a sad trade.. Thus his lot becomes that of a life of misery and enslavement as well as that of his family, should he have enough courage to marry.

But if such a young man heads for Bourbonnais with £50 to £60, and if he has a little talent and fortitude, if he is sober and religious, he immediately finds himself well settled; after a year or two his condition will equal that of Canada's richest farmers.

Let us suppose he goes to Bourbonnais towards the beginning of September. He acquires a 100-acre piece of land, which only costs him 100 piasters [?] on a one-year credit.

Because his land is all done, and he does not have to cut a single tree nor to remove a single stone, since from one end to the other is a magnificent prairie, he tills and sows as much as he wants from the first autumn and ten months later the harvest will bring in nearly what he needs to pay for his land.. So his nice land will have only cost him his effort to toil and sow.

One may ask me how one can heat up, build and make fences in an area where wood seems so rare.

The divine Providence has provided everything to the benefit and the prosperity of the blessed people it invites to inhabit Illinois. That large country is crossed by many beautiful rivers, the shores of which are covered with trees to a depth of two miles.

Oak, maple, walnut-tree grow on the banks of those waterways with a power of growth much faster than in Canada.

And then, every farmer that so wishes plants or sow around his fields or in a corner of his land the splendid acacia, which within the short space of 6 or 7 years will be large enough for all uses.

Thus wood is less expensive in Illinois than it is in most of our largest parishes in Canada bordering on the river.(Note: he writes fleuve and therefore means the St-Lawrence).

Besides, vast mines of coal have just been discovered in the center of Illinois, which not only will cover the needs of the inhabitants of that State, but will become an inexhaustible source of riches and growth.

Work has presently started to build a railway from Chicago to St-Louis which goes right through the middle of the Canadian establishments in Bourbonnais. Thus the lands already so rich of our dear compatriots will double in value. Moreover, with that railway the Canadians of Bourbonnais will only be 4 to 5 days away from Montreal!

The divine Providence has sent to Bourbonnais a priest full of knowledge, zeal and pioussness. He stands in the midst of our compatriots like a father in the midst of his children. One has no idea of all the good he makes to them. He has already erected a splendid church in the center of Bourbonnais and soon a superb convent for little girls, not far from a nice and large school for the little boys, will bear witness before all of what the Canadians can do, in the United states as in Canada, when they are well led..

Mr. Courjault (that is the name of the esteemed and zealous parish priest of Bourbonnais) is already talking about building a second church ten miles away from the first one. That second church will be made of a marble which is found everywhere at a depth of 4 or six feet; it will be erected on a delightful site, overlooking the course of a river the banks of which are covering, with an incredible speed, with Canadians arriving from all parishes of Lower-Canada.

If the short confines of a letter did not make it impossible for me to do so, I would have liked to talk to you about the Canadian population of Chicago, of the generosity and dedication it evidences in its support for the zeal of its worthy priest, Mr. Lebel, in the construction of a church they are erecting in the center of one of the finest areas of that interesting city.

But I do not want to conclude without repaying my debt of gratefulness toward the venerable bishop of Chicago, Mgr Van de Velde. His charity for our compatriots of Illinois is boundless. He sacrifices himself in order to assist them; the assistance he lavishes everywhere is constantly keeping him in a state bordering on poverty. His Episcopal palace most certainly is the poorest house in Chicago. But he finds solace

from the discomfort he finds himself in, from the love and respect that protestants as well as Catholics surround him with.

I believe that the saintly bishop of Chicago is currently building no less than 25 churches in his vast diocese. And one imagines that he must constantly be without resources to face up to so many expenses.

But, Mr. Editor, in order not to abuse your kindness, I shall end by summarizing myself.

So, upon ending this letter I will say to the young Canadian who absolutely wants to migrate:

My friend, in my opinion to be forced to leave the country where he was born is one of the greatest misfortune that can happen to a young Canadian.

Therefore, young Canadian, stay in your homeland; save your heart to cherish it; give it your intelligence so as to embellish it and make it progress; save your arm to defend it.

Young and very dear compatriot, stay in your beautiful homeland. There is nothing as beautiful, as rich, as sublime in the world as the waters and the two shores of the St-Lawrence.

It is on the deep and majestic waters of the St-Lawrence that in a near future Europe and America will shake hands and exchange the kiss of peace; it is on its shores that they will exchange and pour their incalculable treasures.

Stay in your beautiful homeland, my son, do not turn your back on it, do not break its heart I beg of you; fertilize it with your sweat, sanctify it with the perfume of your virtues. Stay with us to pray to God that he cast a merciful eye on Canada, that he bless it, that he save it. Pray to god, who hold the hearts of all men in his hand, so that those he has chosen to lead the destiny of Canada waste no more time with ridiculous and infantile disputes. Ask God that he gives to the leaders of the nation the intelligence to comprehend great things; that he make them understand the necessity to enlarge the too narrow basis upon which the population is currently resting. That he instill in them the will to neglect nothing to open, right and left, the immense forests that are choking the population, so that those forests, fallen by the ax of our robust settlers, soon can be turned into fertile fields and be covered by a numerous and prosperous people.

But, my son, if there is no place for you on the shores of the big river (St-Lawrence); and if, because of the carelessness of the leaders of the people, you cannot enter the forest without running the risk of dying of hunger, or of sinking into the silt of marshlands, or of drowning in the rivers, or to be crushed under the feet of a tyrant, it is not my hand which will push you toward those forests. It is not my hand which will invite you to tire yourself out, and to shed your sweat to fatten the few strangers to whom one had the

inconceivable perversity or the unbelievable folly of granting one of Canada's most beautiful parts.

Young friend, rather than watching you vegetating here miserably and without a future; rather than watching you getting deeper into the forest to perish therein or shedding your sweat to the benefit of some impudent foreigners, I will say to you: leave, my son - the world is large - God wants you elsewhere; submit to his holy will. But before crossing the border, lock in and engrave well into your heart, so as never to lose it, love for your religion, your beautiful language, your unfortunate homeland.

While on the road, stop as little as possible in the cities - and immediately join your brothers in Bourbonnais. Yes, go and assist the Canadians who preceded you to erect the cross in the center of those immense plains; go help them to secure Catholicism in those areas which, given their location and their riches, are destined more than is believed to weigh heavily in the balance of peoples. Go to Illinois; there you will not quite find yourselves in a foreign land. It is your ancestors who were the first to reveal to the world the incalculable treasures that God had prepared for mankind in those faraway lands. It is your ancestors who were the first to redden that Illinois land with their blood, to wrench it from untamable savages. With each step you will take in Illinois you will find the indelible traces of the perseverance, heroism and piety of your ancestors. The names of Bourbonnais, Joliette, Dubuque, St-Louis, St-Charles that you will come across at each step will, better than my words, tell you that you only go to Illinois to reap the legacy of your ancestors.

Once more, I repeat, for I want to be understood: I am not recommending to anyone to migrate; I consider emigration as a misfortune for the country. And I fail to understand by virtue of which moral blindness our law-makers are so slow in taking the only recourse to stop emigration, by facilitating the creation of the Townships.

But when to migrate will be a sad necessity, for one reason or another, my one piece of advice is to invite that poor emigrant to immediately head for Bourbonnais. Provided he disposes of £50 to £60 once he gets there, that he is courageous and has good morals, that he be sober and a good Christian, his future and that of his family will be ensured; and moreover he will have the advantage, not be found anywhere else, of having priests uniquely devoted to his salvation, of hearing his language being spoken, of being besides his compatriots, of having schools where his children will not be forced to forget that they are catholic and French-Canadians. What destroys Canadians in the United States, it is the sad isolation in which he finds himself. I wish the 100,000 Canadians that are like drowned and lost in the midst of the American population could hear my voice and go and enlarge the people of Bourbonnais. Before too many years they would constitute there a numerous population, rich with the produce of the land, just like blessings from the heavens.

C. Chiniqy, Priest

Longueil, August [Note: I am not sure I can read the month] 1851

PS I would take the liberty of recommending to Canadians traveling to Illinois, who must go through Chicago, the hotels kept one by Mr F.N. Malboeuf, the other by F.N. Martin.