

4-1-1937

Joseph Projectus Machebeuf

M. Lilliana Owens

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr>

Recommended Citation

Owens, M. Lilliana. "Joseph Projectus Machebeuf." *New Mexico Historical Review* 12, 2 (1937).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol12/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Historical Review* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu, lsloane@salud.unm.edu, sarahrk@unm.edu.

JOSEPH PROJECTUS MACHEBEUF

By SISTER M. LILLIANA OWENS

FIFTY YEARS ago Archbishop John B. Lamy signed the document¹ which placed the control of the vast diocese of Denver in the hands of his friend, Joseph Projectus Machebeuf.

Joseph Machebeuf was born in the heart of the sunny land of France in a little city called Riom. True, Riom is a small city, but it is girt about by ancient memories. Ricompagus or Ricomum was its name when Vercengetorix failed and the armies of Caesar held sway in Gaul. In the twelfth century Philip Augustus seized it for the crown. The modern tourist is struck by the appearance of Riom with its old, frowning houses built of lava stone. But he is also attracted by the peaceful scenery that surrounds it. There at the feet of the city flows the clear Ambene. Vineyard after vineyard, varied here and there by fields of grain, stretches away to the horizon's edge.

It was in this quaint old city, on August 11, 1812, that Joseph Projectus Machebeuf was born. The name Projectus was given him in honor of his grandfather who was his sponsor on this occasion.² It was also a mark of confidence in St. Projectus who was the patron saint of the parish of Volvic, the home of the Machebeuf family.

His parents were of the middle class and were pious people. His earliest education was begun by his mother aided by the Demoiselles Feuillercode, who kept a school for small children in the neighborhood. Young Machebeuf's mother died when he was but thirteen years of age. This was a heavy blow to the family. The father was now left with three orphaned children. Fortunately a young aunt, a sister of their mother, having no worldly cares of her own, offered to devote her life to the care and the education of

1. *Ms.* in the Archives Denver Diocese.

2. Rev. W. J. Howlett, *The Life of Bishop Machebeuf*, pp. 20-21.

these motherless children. This kind aunt did all she could to fill the place left vacant by the mother.

As soon as Joseph Projectus was old enough, he was sent to the Christian Brothers school. The succeeding years passed without any special incident to mark any portion of them. After his school days he made his classical studies in his native Riom.

In 1830, Algiers surrendered to the French, and the armies of France were covered with glory. All France was stirred up, and the praises of the army were sung on all sides. A grand review of the troops was held at Clermont, at which young Machebeuf was present. His admiration was boundless. He was moved almost to the point of volunteering. But the word that would have made a soldier of him was never spoken and he returned home. He had gone to the review without the permission of his father. Soon, however, word of his son's action reached his ears and the father was greatly displeased. He showed this displeasure by a stern silence. The young Joseph could not stand the breach that was widening between his father and himself and finally asked him for an interview. In this talk he told his father of his desire to join the French army. The father told him that he was free to go but he set down one condition: "Consider well what you are to do," he said, "And then do what you think is the will of God."³

The young man reflected seriously for awhile and then consulted Abbé Dolline, pastor of the church of St. Amable in Diom. The latter advised his young friend to enter the Seminary of Mont Ferrand, and he followed the advice of his spiritual guide. This was at the beginning of October 1831. During his course at the Seminary there were frequent visits paid to the seminary at Mont Ferrand by missionary priests and bishops. The stories they told of the life and work in far away countries kept alive in the heart of this young man the desire to be a light-bearer to the peoples sitting in darkness. He loved to speak especially of one missionary who visited

3. Howlett, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

the seminary during his course. This missionary was Father Odin, C. M.,⁴ who afterwards became Bishop of Galveston and Archbishop of New Orleans. He was eager to accompany Father Odin back to America but his superiors advised him to finish his course in Mont Ferrand and to await another opportunity.

On December 21, 1836 he received sacerdotal consecration at the hands of Bishop Feron and by the grace of God was made "a priest forever." After his ordination he was sent as assistant to the old pastor at Cendre. In the parish adjoining this was his old Sulpician director Father Garrigue. Frequent intercourse with this holy priest kept alive his early desire for the mission fields.

In the fall of 1838, Bishop Purcell, then recently consecrated to the See of Cincinnati, made his first visit to Rome. Bishop Purcell had been a student under the Sulpicians at Paris and Father Comfé, his former spiritual director, was now superior at Mont Ferrand. On his way through Paris, Bishop Purcell wrote to Father Comfé asking him to procure some missionaries for his new diocese. This was the opportunity for which the young Father Machebeuf had been looking. He eagerly seized upon it and was among the first to offer himself. Accompanying him was his life-long friend, Father Lamy,⁵ afterwards the great Archbishop of Santa Fé. Fathers Machebeuf and Lamy hid their purpose from their family and in disguise went to Paris to give themselves to Bishop Purcell. They embarked on the *Havre*, May 21, 1839.⁶ Their party consisted of fifteen: Bishop Flaget, Bishop Purcell, Father McGill (later Bishop of Richmond), and twelve from Clermont.

4. O'Ryan, *Cathedral Diamond Jubilee*, "A Sketch of the Life of Bishop Machebeuf," p. 15.

5. Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* gives a splendid sketch of the life of these two men as missionaries in the Southwest.

6. Thirty years later, upon his first visit to his native diocese after he had been made bishop, the *Semaine Religieuse* of Clermont in its issue of Sept. 13, 1869 described his departure. Copy in French *apud* Archives Denver Diocese.

They were forty-four days at sea. This we learn from a letter written by Machebeuf to his father dated August 8, 1839:⁷

... We are all now in New York, in good health after forty-four days of navigation, August 21, 1839...

A few weeks after his arrival Father Machebeuf was appointed assistant to a zealous Irish priest, Father McNamee, pastor of Tiffin, Ohio.⁸ From Father McNamee the young French missionary learned the English language. On January 28, 1840 Father Machebeuf wrote to his father telling him of this appointment. This letter⁹ and many of the succeeding letters which he wrote to his family in France give a picture of Ohio which no historian, written at the present day, could paint with similar exactitude. A careful examination of the map of eight or nine counties that circle around Tiffin will give us an idea of the territory under the care of Fathers McNamee and Machebeuf. The health of Father McNamee was never good hence most of the outside mission work fell to the lot of the younger priest.¹⁰ From house to house and from village to village he traveled with his little bundle of sacred vessels and vestments. The peace of God and the fruits of his grace followed in the youthful missionary's footsteps. He was welcomed in every home, Catholic and non-Catholic alike.

The year of 1841 opened for Father Machebeuf under circumstances somewhat changed. He had been appointed pastor of Lower Sandusky and the surrounding missions, and, while this was a less extensive field than he had formerly had, his responsibilities were heavier. Lower Sandusky was then but a village on the Sandusky river. In 1850, when Sandusky City, on Lake Erie, began to forge rapidly ahead and overshadow its partial namesake, the name Lower

7. Ms. *apud* Archives of Denver Diocese.

8. See Machebeuf Collection *apud* Archives Denver Diocese.

9. This letter and all the correspondence (in French) are on file *apud* Archives Denver Diocese.

10. Howlett, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

Sandusky was changed to Fremont. The manner of his appointment, and a description of the place with its prospects are best given by Father Machebeuf in a letter ¹¹ written to his sister under date of May 10, 1841. Another letter ¹² written at this time gives further details of his missionary work, and a fuller description of the early settlements on the border of the Western Reserve. The early Church in North America kept pace with the progress of early civilization. This is shown in a letter ¹³ from Father Machebeuf to his father dated March 26, 1841.

In 1844 Father Machebeuf visited his home in France. On his return he brought with him several priests and ten Ursuline Sisters who were to devote themselves to missionary work in America. As the years went on, the work of Machebeuf increased. Every year brought new settlements and settlers. As a result new churches had to be built, but the brave heart of the French priests never quailed.

As the year 1849 advanced, the affairs of Father Machebeuf assumed better shape. On May 10, 1849 he wrote a letter ¹⁴ to his brother in a more cheerful vein. He remarked that religion in the western country was flourishing and that at that moment the bishops were assembled in a national council at Baltimore to confer for the good of the Church in America. A great change was being prepared for Machebeuf in that gathering of bishops. On May 11, the day after he wrote his letter, the bishops formulated their petition to the Propaganda for the erection of the Vicariate Apostolic of New Mexico, and recommended the life-long friend of Machebeuf, Father Lamy, as the first vicar apostolic. Father Machebeuf rejoiced that his friend was thus honored. It would mean definite separation for them but his own work was sufficient to keep his mind and body occupied. With all his energy he set himself to work to leave no time for lamentation.

11. Ms. *apud* Archives Denver Diocese.

12. Ms. *apud* Archives Denver Diocese.

13. Ms. *apud* Archives Denver Diocese.

14. Ms. *apud* Archives Denver Diocese.

The official news of the appointment of his old friend came from the pen of Father Lamy, himself, but with it came a proposition which upset his mind and threw him into a state of doubt, hesitation, and fear. In a letter¹⁵ to his sister written "On board the *Peytona*, January 1851," he says:

... [Father Lamy] said to me "they wish that I should be Vicar Apostolic and I wish you to be my Vicar General and from these two vicars we shall try to make one good pastor" At first I did not know what kind of an answer to give ... The other clergy whom I consulted told me that they had expected Bishop Lamy to ask me to go with him, and they thought it clear that Providence designed that I should go ...

At length he made up his mind to accompany his old friend, Father Lamy, to Santa Fé. His people in Sandusky loved him and it was with a struggle on both sides that he left them. Bishop Lamy was consecrated on November 1850¹⁶ and immediately set out for Santa Fé. Father Machebeuf, once his decision had been made, lost no time in useless preparations. He met Bishop Lamy in New Orleans. They found in San Antonio that it would be unsafe for them, on account of Indians, to proceed alone, so they awaited a government train which would soon be on its way west. They arrived in Santa Fé in 1851, only to find affairs in New Mexico in a very sad plight. There was much to dishearten these zealous missionaries. But, never despairing, they set to work, traveling up and down, visiting all the valleys and pueblos of the country. Until the end of 1858, Father Machebeuf, though attending many outside missions, was pastor of the cathedral in Santa Fé.

But the missions in Arizona needed a capable man and Bishop Lamy found none so fit as Father Machebeuf. For this reason he sent Father Machebeuf to several missions among the Mexicans in Arizona, and to some missions among the Indians. His chief mission in Arizona was Tucson.

15. Ms. *apud* Archives Denver Diocese.

16. O'Ryan, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

In the midst of his work in Arizona, a letter came from Bishop Lamy calling him home. He little suspected the fate to which that letter destined him. Arriving in Santa Fé towards the end of 1859, weak and weary after the toilsome journey from Tucson, he found that he was destined now to leave New Mexico and to go to work under the shadow of Pike's Peak in Colorado. Up to this date little was known in Santa Fé of the district of Colorado. A lonely inhospitable land it seemed, with its grim mountains standing like huge sentinels. Yet that desolate land was to bloom. Father Joseph Projectus Machebeuf was the one destined by God to raise here the cross of Christ and to preach the faith of Christ.

Bishop Lamy sent him to care for the Catholics of Colorado and gave him John Baptist Raverdy, a young French priest, as his companion. The mission had come about in this way. In the spring of 1860 Bishop Miede of Leavenworth arrived in Auraria, the little village on the banks of Cherry Creek that has since blossomed into the beautiful Denver of today. Bishop Miede returned home, and, thinking it better to have Colorado annexed to Santa Fé and thus placed under the jurisdiction of Bishop Lamy, he wrote to Rome requesting the transfer of dominion. Rome acceded to his request. Hence it was that Father Machebeuf was sent to the new district.

Father Machebeuf and his companion set out for their strange new mission at the end of September, 1860 and reached the little town of Denver about October 20, 1860.¹⁷ The two missionaries set to work to build the first little Catholic church in the district. This was later to be the first cathedral of the Diocese of Denver. It was fifty feet by forty when completed. Later, aisles and a tower were added. Mass was celebrated in it for the first time on Christmas morning 1860.¹⁸

17. Howlett, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

18. O'Ryan, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

Up and down through the mountains to the various mining centers the two priests went finding here and there a few Catholics whose needs were attended. There was wealth enough in Colorado, in those pioneer days, but the mountains held it close to themselves. Hard work and poor fare were the lot of the pioneer priest and people. Hope held her shining wings over them and visions of future happiness consoled and comforted them.

The first years in Colorado held little material comfort for Fathers Machebeuf and Raverdy. During the winter of 1862-1863 the two priests shared one overcoat and on the coldest days when one went out the other must needs stay at home. The spirit of faith, that spirit that led the Master out into the desert, upheld them.

For years Fathers Machebeuf and Raverdy were alone. Their lives were as purely missionary as was that of St. Paul. In 1864 Father Raverdy went to visit Utah and Montana, leaving Father Machebeuf alone in Colorado. In 1863 and 1864 priests from Santa Fé were looking after the southern Colorado missions near the New Mexican line.

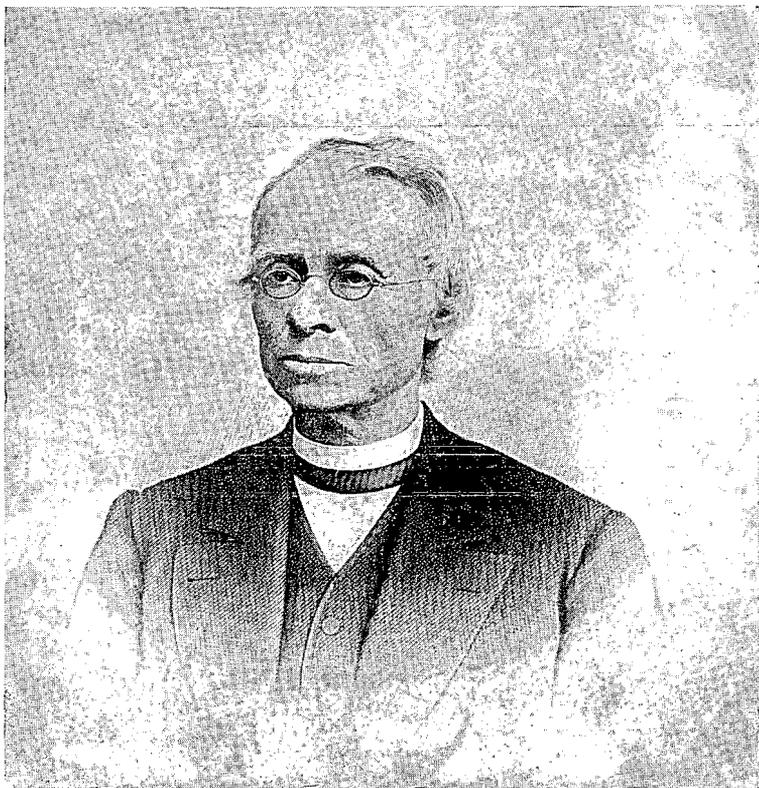
Meanwhile, Catholics were pouring in with the tide of immigration. Children were growing up and teachers were needed. Father Machebeuf saw the need of a Catholic school; accordingly he secured a colony of Sisters of Loretto¹⁹ from Santa Fé to undertake the work. He purchased for them a neat frame house on Fourteenth and California streets and here they opened what later became the splendid St. Mary Academy.²⁰

In 1867 Bishop Lamy saw that Colorado was now too large for his jurisdiction and on his recommendation Colorado and Utah were erected into one vicariate apostolic by decree of the Sacred Congregation of Feb. 15, 1868. Father Machebeuf was appointed its vicar apostolic²¹ and conse-

19. See letter to his sister, dated July 22, 1864 *apud* Archive Denver Diocese.

20. Sr. M. Lilliana Owens, S. L., Ph.D. *History of the Sisters of Loretto in the Trans-Mississippi West*, ch. VIII, St. Louis University library, St. Louis, Missouri.

21. The document in which Bishop Lamy hands over the custody of the Denver district is on file in the *Machebeuf Collection apud* Archives Denver Diocese.



JOSEPH PROJECTUS MACHEBEUF, FIRST BISHOP OF DENVER
(Read, *Illustrated History*, 519)

crated bishop in St. Peter's Cathedral, Cincinnati, on August 16, 1868, by his old friend, Archbishop Purcell. On his return to Denver that fall he appointed the Reverend J. B. Raverty as his vicar general.

After 1868 things took on a more progressive appearance in Colorado. The Catholic population was less floating. Here and there, in Central City, Georgetown, Conejos, and several other places, missions changed into fixed parishes. Churches, unpretentious to be sure, started up. In all the work Bishop Machebeuf shared. No church or chapel was built without his care. This energetic little priest was a familiar figure to every coach driver in Colorado, as he was later to the railroad men. The old pioneers especially loved him. Bishop Machebeuf through his heroic charity and deep self-sacrifice laid the foundations of Christianity in Colorado. He was, indeed, Colorado's Apostle. He rarely left his diocese, and never except when there was great need. The needs of his growing diocese kept him at home.

In 1884 he attended the Plenary Council at Baltimore. During the council he asked Cardinal Gibbons if it might be possible to create him a plenary bishop. Later in 1886 he wrote a letter to the cardinal asking the same thing. Cardinal Gibbons advised him to petition Rome for this favor, adding that since he was old and crippled in the cause of Christ he should accept a coadjutor. His petition was granted and on June 22, 1887 he received word from Rome that the Reverend Nicholas Matz had been appointed as his coadjutor with the right of succession. This news was an indication that the Vicariate of Colorado was to give way to the Diocese of Denver, and that the title which Machebeuf had borne for nineteen years as its vicar apostolic would be changed for the newer and more regular title of Bishop of Denver. By Brief of August 16, 1887 (the anniversary of his consecration) these changes were made, and on August 19, 1887 the Bulls were issued, constituting the Reverend Nicholas Matz "Bishop of Telmessa *in part. inf.* and coad-

jutor with the right of succession to the Right Reverend Joseph P. Machebeuf." 22

For ten years, despite his coadjutor, Bishop Machebeuf went up and down his diocese as of old, laying a cornerstone here, blessing a church there, preparing plans for a school or giving the sacrament of confirmation. On Easter Eve, 1889, he met with a serious accident on Fifteenth street in Denver. This shock left his system weakened. His indomitable will fortified his body, which was in the habit of finding its "rest in action," but at least he was forced to yield. Returning to Denver from a pastoral trip on July 3, 1889 he went to his favorite retreat, St. Vincent's Orphanage, and here on the morning of July 10, 1889, surrounded by the Sisters of Charity and the priests of the Denver diocese, he died. His body lay in state in the chapel of St. Mary Academy until the evening of July 15, when it was taken to his humble cathedral to lie in state until the funeral the next day. He was buried temporarily under the altar in the chapel of the Sisters of Loretto at old St. Mary Academy on California street. Later, his body was removed to Mount Olivet where it remains at present.

Monsignor William O'Ryan 23 says:

... Many who think they knew Bishop Machebeuf, yet who merely knew him as he appeared to them in his later years, a simple grey-haired man, small of stature, limping painfully, will never know the greatness of the man. Bishop Machebeuf was no orator, but he preached instructive and substantial sermons that satisfied his people. His greatest affection was for the Mexicans.²⁴

Bishop Machebeuf had to build up the Church of Colorado from nothing. He was not content to establish it for the present alone, but looked far into the future. Whenever he saw that a town or settlement showed signs of being perma-

22. Howlett, *op. cit.*, p. 403.

23. O'Ryan, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

24. A manuscript *apud* Archives Denver Diocese "Bishop Machebeuf's love of the Mexicans and Conejos," testifies to Monsignor O'Ryan's statement. This manuscript was written by the Reverend Aloysius Brucker, S. J.

ment, he was on the spot to secure locations for churches and schools. He did not wait for the people to pay for their construction. When he found the people impoverished, he would pay for the new churches out of his own funds. Bishop Machebeuf was embarrassed financially during his own lifetime and his successors were embarrassed for years afterwards, but in the end it all turned out well and Colorado has reason to thank Bishop Machebeuf for his far reaching and enthusiastic foresight. There is an honored list of pioneer bishops of America, who did the work of the pioneer and lived the life of the pioneer. Bishop Flaget of Kentucky heads this list, and then come Bruté, Rosati, Fenwick, Loras, Cretin, Lamy and others. The list did not close until it had, inscribed upon it, the name of Joseph Projectus Machebeuf—the Apostle of Colorado.

Denver, Colorado.