


Ernest Gauthier, O.M.I.

1908 - 1983

ALPHONSE
NADEAU, O.M.I.



 OBLATE
HERITAGE

5

“Brother Church”

Brother Ernest Gauthier, O.M.I.
1908 -1983

Br. Alphonse Nadeau, O.M.I.

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Oblate Heritage Series
Oblate General Postulation
Rome, Italy
1992
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Cover Portrait by: Br. Kingsley Cooray, O.M.I.

Translation by: Fr. Claude Tardif, O.M.I.

Printed by: Marian Press Ltd.,
Battleford, SK, Canada

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A Wandering Life

Ernest Gauthier was born in the United States of America at Thorne, North Dakota, on July 3rd, 1908, the son of Joseph-Alfred Gauthier and Aurore Turcotte. When he was but a year old he caught Polio (Infantile Paralysis), and to add to his misery, he was also afflicted with Epilepsy, which at times threw him into convulsions leaving him more dead than alive. He had to live with these problems right through childhood and adolescence. When he was twenty-five, his mother anointed his atrophied leg with oil from the Basilica of Ste. Anne-de-Beaupre, praying for a cure. Her prayers were answered. Two nerves in the back of his leg came back to life, and Ernest regained his ability to walk, even if somewhat lamely. As he grew into manhood his epilepsy also subsided.

Schooling was difficult, as constant pain impeded his concentration, and the frequent moves of his family hindered scholastic progress. From the time of his birth until he joined the Oblates, Ernest had moved over twelve times, either following his family, or on his own in making his own living. With limited formal schooling and a physical handicap that so evidently held him back, Ernest had no choice but to make his way through life with undaunted courage and a great deal of faith if he was ever to succeed.



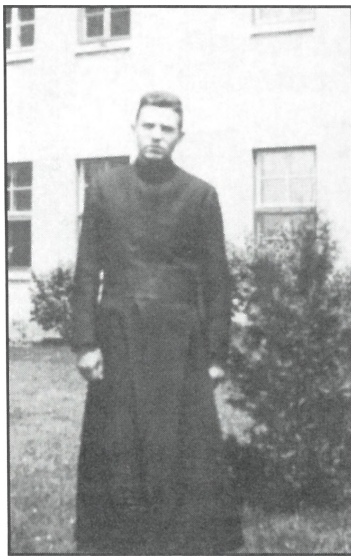
In the family garden
Saskatoon - 1931

A Seemingly
Impossible
Dream

—
To be an
Oblate
of Mary

As a young man, Ernest worked in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Here he was hired to work in the Rectory of St. Paul's Cathedral for three years, and it was there that his desire for the religious life began to take root. He had thoughts of entering the Jesuits as a student, but chose the Oblates of Mary Immaculate because they were dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Little did he know what difficulties this choice would entail. Over and over again he was refused entrance to the Oblate novitiate — first in Edmonton, Alberta, then in Orleans, Ontario, finally at Ville La Salle, Quebec. The reason was always his physical handicap. A man of lesser stuff would have given up, but Ernest persisted. Eventually he was accepted into the Oblate Novitiate at Richelieu, Quebec — but the priests insisted that he bring the fare for his eventual return home, which they saw as almost inevitable. But Ernest was to stay, to take his vows on the Feast of St. Joseph in 1937, and to remain an Oblate until his death forty-six years later.

Even though he was accustomed to having to struggle in life, the period of initial formation was very hard on the twenty-



A Novice — at last
Richelieu, 1936

seven year old postulant. He could no longer smoke, or drive a car; he spent his time restricted to the novitiate property. Richelieu, as well as being a place for religious formation, was also a training school for the young brothers. Ernest did not seem to fit in anywhere: he went from one job to the other. Finally, he was given the function of door-keeper (porter). He was somewhat taken aback as regards this job, as he was a person more given to silence and to self-effacement. But gradually,

To Become a Saint

he grew into this work which was to take up the rest of his life. He had found his niche, and it was to become a fruitful ministry.

Once he had entered religious life, Brother Ernest lived no half measures. He was direct in faith and down-to-earth in his spirituality. He collected spiritual maxims and made collections of thoughts to guide himself. After his death, among his papers, was found this one: *“One becomes a Saint by the power of one’s will and the response to God’s grace. One has to want it, want it, want it — to work, to suffer, to keep silent, never to complain, not to justify oneself”*. Ernest lived that as an ideal right from the beginning of his religious life. When he was accepted for vows, the Novice Master wrote of him, “Intelligent, a worker, conscientious, obliging, poor, humble, pious, charitable. He will make an excellent porter on account of his neatness, his politeness, his calm, his patience, his discretion”. Not a bad compliment concerning someone who had been previously rejected three times!

Door- keeper to the Semi- nary

Brother Gauthier came to St. Paul’s Seminary in Ottawa with the pioneering band of Oblates the day it opened, March 27th, 1937, and was put in charge of welcoming all who called, in person or by phone. He was to be almost obstinately faithful to this task, twenty-four hours a day for forty-six years. During the Christmas vacation in 1965 the House Diary (*Codex Historicus*) noted, “Brother Gauthier is the only Oblate in the house not absent from his post”. This wanderer by circumstance came to live a life of quasi-heroic immobility. The doorkeeper’s room, the place of his “voluntary detention” was tiny, just four by five meters, and it contained a desk on a platform, a straight chair, an upright metal-frame bed, a sink and a wardrobe. Its sole opening was a miniscule window. In summer it was transformed into a sweat-box, and was flooded with all the noises coming off the street. Now a workshop, now a sanctuary, it contained nothing superfluous. It was his home, and in it he was comfortable with his God.



In the porter's office, Seminary, 1944

The Constant Handy- man

A pioneer of the Seminary, Brother Gauthier became an integral part of the place through the thousand and one services he rendered the residents. He was a Good Samaritan, never refusing any demand made of him by the members of a very large house with an infinite variety of needs and caprices. He was able to say, at the end of his life, that he never missed a single day's work. He saw to the maintenance of the central corridor and waiting rooms, the vestibule, parlours and library. These he kept in spotless condition despite almost continual traffic. He sorted and distributed the large daily mail. He estimated that in one year alone he made over forty thousand copies of papers and notes for the professors on the hand-worked Gestetner printer. He looked after the mechanical maintenance of the hoist, and even found time to do some woodwork jobs. He negotiated the passage of books through Customs, and he was always ready to re-sew and bind books for the library, or for individuals. He turned his hand to whatever needed doing, and so often without prompting.

Seminary Barber

The job of barbering which he had learnt as a Novice enabled him to become useful, at a time when the residents of the Seminary had little personal money and rarely went into the city. He graciously offered his services, and this gave the seminarians many an opportunity to chat with him — often discussing their lives and problems. As for himself, Brother felt it a real honour to cut the hair of the senior members who became priests. Several would ask for this service only out of kindness, as he was a very “plain” barber — but it did give them a chance to have long conversations with him.



The barber at work

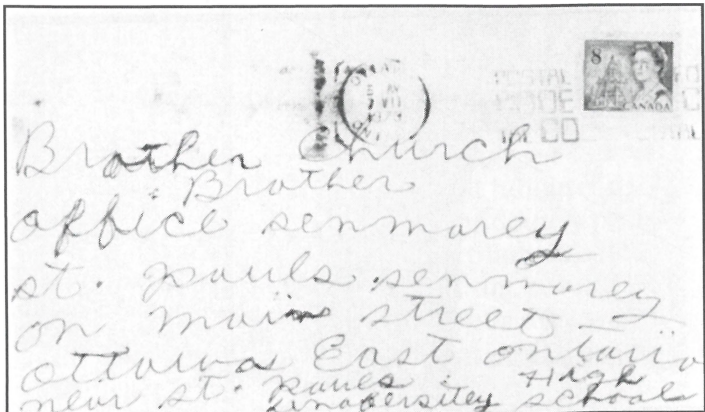
A Man of Many Chores

Apart from these domestic jobs, Brother Gauthier was also called upon to do heavy manual labour. In spite of the fact that he had only one fully-functioning leg, he took on the task of looking after the seminary furnaces. This meant shovelling three hundred tons of coal each winter season. During these months he had to get up before 4:00 a.m. to stoke the furnace, and the job was not over until late at the end of the day when he had to remove the slag from the fire and barrow it outside. Once he fell on the hot ashes and burned the palm of his hand, but he continued and completed his task before having his hand bandaged. Without complaint nor asking for special consideration, he continued this heavy work for five winters. Besides this, he was asked to keep mown the extensive lawns at the front and side of the house. In those days this had to be done by hand-mower, and this was an especially difficult task for him. He was called to hard work despite his health problems — and hard work he did, for he had promised “not to ask for anything nor refuse anything”. He proved himself to be a special kind of

“Brother Church”

religious, one who never could nor wanted to excuse himself from the task to be done, no matter the cost to himself. He was happy in his service of all others, and, unconsciously, taught those around him the lesson of devotion and perseverance in a way no words could express it.

Himself wounded by life, Brother Gauthier saw God with great clarity among the street people who came to see him at St. Paul's Seminary. They were his special God-given friends. The down-and-outs who walked Main Street in Ottawa knew that, at the Seminary, they could find someone for whom they were never a bother, and by whom they were welcomed and loved. Brother took the time to talk to them. Whether he shared pennies from his small jar with them, or his bus tickets, or the sandwiches he fetched from the depths of the cafeteria, he always wrapped his gift with a pleasant smile from the heart. Now and again, seminarians who witnessed these meetings were invited by Brother to pray for the spiritual welfare of these people. These less fortunate ones, whether through their own fault or not, were close to him body and soul. Perhaps without realizing its full significance, these people of the street gave to



“Brother Church”

A letter from one of the Ottawa street-people, July 1973

A Man of Calm

Brother Gauthier the highest title he could have. They called him “Brother Church”. In him they saw all that the Church was in their hopes and expectations. For them, he was its embodiment — not the mitred bishop or the vested priest, but this ordinary brother, as ready with a sandwich and a coffee as with a smile and a prayer.

Of medium build, with a thin and expressive face, Brother Gauthier never failed to make an impression. His clear eyes were striking, as if he saw beyond what he was looking at. “I could never have lied to him,” a former student once said, “he would have noticed it.” His heavy limp struck those who saw him for the first time, but he bore it lightly. With single-mindedness, Brother was a resolute man. He knew what he wanted — no need to shout — he made his way. His imperturbable calm revealed the harmony of his life. He so much placed good humour at the top of his list of duties that he never seemed to have a bad day. This calm flowed over into others he met each day.

His Silence: His Listening

Brother Gauthier’s guarded conversation might have given the impression that he was limited intellectually. Not so. Was he quiet because of strength of character, or because he had little to say? Perhaps both. Even if most of the time he remained quiet, he did not think less about what was being said. That silence which was one of his strong points could not mask his true level of interest, which was of a different order. His moderation in speech manifested a particular value in a house of higher learning where, sometimes, words could be over-valued. His hesitancy betokened peace, for his was a special wisdom.

All found in Brother Gauthier a welcoming ear. His listening was a companion-virtue to his silence. He never seemed to be out of time, or too busy: listening was a part of his service. He kept those who confided in him in his mobile gaze, intense at the edge of their confidences. He lowered his head now and again in reflection. Once he had decided to say something,

A Man at Peace

Brother would smile, then intervene briefly. One had to read between the words he weighed, measured and spaced with his silence. These words allowed the depth of his convictions to show, even if his vocabulary expressed them poorly. Calling on his own experience, he exhorted to prayer: “Don’t you think God wants you to do this or that?” And all confidences remained safe with him.

Reserved as he was, Brother Gauthier rarely initiated a conversation or was given to banter. Thrust into a university milieu with an ordinary schooling, Brother must have felt his limitations, but he did not show it. He had enough common sense and appreciation of reality, not to compare himself to his surroundings. In fact, he felt no need to do so. In expressing his humble feelings about himself, Brother Gauthier progressed in the style of the saints. That he could not only function calmly, but also exercise such a telling influence on his milieu, indicates his remarkable psychological health. He had himself well together. And this was not learnt from books.

A Man of Self- Denial

Brother Gauthier made few concessions to himself. On the job even during meals, he would get up at the first sound of the doorbell without losing patience, or his smile. He gave away as gifts the delicacies he received. He would feel all kinds of discomfort throughout his life — suffering from his atrophied and weakened leg, from hemorrhages and heart problems. Confident in the Blessed Virgin Mary, he confided to her any problems. He did not beg for a cure for his illnesses by way of a miracle, nor from doctors, unless obliged to. For his holidays, he would go to Notre Dame du Cap, the busy Oblate shrine, and fill in as a receptionist, where his bilingual (French and English) ability was highly appreciated. Because of the numerous alms he received, Brother became an unparalleled benefactor of Notre Dame du Cap, directing many thousands of dollars towards the construction of the Basilica.

Along
the Way
to Per-
fection

As far as his family was concerned, he led a very private life. He would say, “I would like to do something for my poor sick parents: I place them in the Hands of God.” He visited his father and mother in Sudbury, Ontario, twelve years after his arrival in the seminary, and saw his two brothers, who lived in Windsor, Ontario, and in Vancouver, B.C., only twenty years later. But his mother in her old age came to live in Ottawa, and he was very close to her.

At first sight, Brother Gauthier’s spirituality might seem too severe. But he was a man of his time, when physical asceticism was supreme. He strove to amass merits, to gain heaven — such he saw as his way to God. He had a great devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, under the national title of Notre Dame du Cap, and he considered his days at the Shrine privileged time, especially the many hours passed at the foot of the miraculous statue there.



Resolutely committed to the road to perfection and wishing at all costs to become a saint, Brother never reneged on his promises in the practice of virtue. “I never surprised him in a state of impatience or irritation”, an Oblate who was twenty-five years his confrere affirms. Two years before his death, Brother said: *“I hope I can perform blind obedience till the end. Those to whom I confide this say to me that this is out of fashion. I have never asked for anything nor refused.”* In a world with a voracious appetite to possess and consume, Ernest Gau-

thier was a person with the heart of the poor, with the attitude of one who does not need — one who gets his vitality from God. His closet was always bare, for he profited by any occasion to get rid of the gifts given to him. To get him to speak of himself, he had to be questioned.

Brother Gauthier chose as models of life those religious brothers who incarnated for him his own aspirations for holiness. This meant Brother Anthony Kowalczyk, O.M.I., a Polish Oblate brother who laboured in much the same type of life as did Brother Gauthier, and whose Cause for canonization had been introduced in Rome. He also had as a model Brother André Bessette of Montréal, now beatified. Br. Gauthier started his work two weeks after Br. André ended his — picking up, so to speak, where his blessed predecessor had left off.

If a number of religious are unable to remember all their different postings, Brother Gauthier's task was simple. He has only one — the Seminary at Ottawa. If one wishes to look for the marvels of his life, one has to go back to the regular daily living of those forty-six years at the seminary entrance. Nothing spectacular — but always there. *"He was part of the furniture,"* a former student used to say, *"like a crucifix hung on the wall, twenty four hours a day, seven days a week."* — surely an apt description. It took death to remove him from the job.

Brother Gauthier seemed to have received the gift of piety from childhood. His devotion went beyond the ordinary. Imbued with a vivid sense of the supernatural, his work predisposed him to prayer. This he took to without seeming effort, so much was his life lived out in God's presence. Each morning at 4:00 a.m. he went to the chapel, and daybreak would find him at his prayer spot. Carrying with him all the intentions confided to him, he saw his prayer as a service to the community. A student of the time recalls, "This was the only time Brother Gauthier was not physically available." Stations of the Cross and Rosary included, he spent three good hours in prayer before breakfast. The fact that he prayed when nobody saw him

Building Voca- tions

attests to the fact that his piety had nothing superficial or spectacular about it. During examination time, students were heard to say: “We are going to confide this to Brother Gauthier, and everything will go well.” One seminarian wrote: “As we hurried to the Chapel, we happened to go by Brother, totally recollected already. His attitude inspired us to better dispose ourselves to prayer.”

Born with an inclination to the priesthood which he never dared express, Brother Gauthier exercised a deep and full-time ministry for priests and those who aspired to the priesthood. He did not consider seminarians as mere college students: he addressed them all by the respectful French plural form of “vous”, and generally remained standing in their presence. In his letters he wrote that he was “responsible for vocations”. Bishop Bernard Hubert, who had been a student at St. Paul’s Seminary during Brother’s time, said: “That Brother Gauthier showed the same respect and love for the priesthood for forty-six years signifies that he did not grow old, did not become blasé . . .” With him, conversations all turned towards the serious, revolved around vocations, devotion to Mary, and perseverance. “*Don’t give up,*” he would repeat, “*I’ll pray for you.*”

Certainly, the question can be asked as to whether the job of porter was not just a pretext which hid the real motivation for Brother’s presence at the Seminary — the influence he exercised. No one came away from him without feeling better. A priest who had studied at the seminary wrote later to him: “You symbolize what I came looking for in the seminary, in study and prayer. Seeing you give yourself to your daily tasks counts among the most precious influences that supported me while I stayed there.”

A
Profes-
sional in
the Art of
Welcoming

Brother Gauthier had the most delicate consideration for his companions. “The first impression that he gave us of himself and of the seminary remain unforgettable. It cannot be fully appreciated how at the door of the seminary there was someone who accepted being disturbed at any old time” a past student wrote. He ‘gathered’ visitors in the profound sense of the term. He so insisted on carrying visitors’ suitcases that one just had to give them up to him. Returning to the seminary after several years away, these former seminarians, now priests, found that the only one survivor from times past was Brother Gauthier. “When he saw us, he smiled, his face beamed and his warm handshake impressed upon us that we were not mere past pupils, but still members of the family.”

Living
in a
New
Church

In the face of the cultural evolution of the 1960’s and the outcomes of Vatican II, Brother Gauthier was clearly confused. A change came over the formation scene. Hardly involved in the reflections behind the various decisions, Brother mani-



25th Anniversary - 1962

festated some reservations to changes he regarded as concessions to permissiveness. The Provincial thought of transferring him from his work at the seminary. Two confreres got wind of this and intervened, going to the Provincial and pointing out that the moving of Brother would be disastrous from every point of view. If his devoted pres-

The Seminary's Ambassador

ence and example of living was ever needed, it was needed even more so at this time. As a consequence, the obedience already given verbally was revoked. Brother had just missed what would have been the trial of his life, and the seminary was saved losing one of its most influential models. From then on Brother strove for greater openness, and understanding was granted to him. He gained a more confident outlook towards the future.

After many years of hidden life, the seminary's hermit, enclosed it would seem until the end in the narrow confines of the porter's office, was coaxed out on occasion to represent the Seminary. This was due to the perspicacity of Fr. Jacques Gagne, O.M.I., the Rector, who unveiled Brother's charism — the prestige he enjoyed among their present seminarians, and the respect and love of former students. In the secret of their hearts many hoped to see him at their ordination. Between 1971 and 1982 Br. Gauthier took part in over thirty such events — priestly and episcopal ordinations, celebrations and funerals. Several times he had to speak in public, in French and English, and this he did with simplicity and to the point. He was bewildered by the deference shown him by priests and bishops, and always believed that they were mistaken about him. And yet his presence was a type of spiritual event.

Beyond the Porter's Office

The Church is always on the lookout for authentic witnesses, and Brother Gauthier was clearly such a person who should be exposed to a wider audience. He was the subject of an article in the "Annals of Notre Dame du Cap" in 1978, in French and English. The following year he was interviewed on "Second Look", on Radio Canada. In 1981, in a audio-visual made at the seminary, Brother was asked about his work, his spirituality, his devotion to Mary. In Caribou, Maine, at a highly emotional ordination, the brief talk given by Brother was the cause of a standing, almost endless, ovation. "Something I've never seen in seventeen years", commented the pastor. The Oblate review,

Testimonies of Esteem

“Apostolat”, the seminary publication the “Vinculum”, the “Monitor” of St. John’s, Newfoundland, “La Croix”, the Paris daily — and so on and on — all carried something on Brother Gauthier. He was cooperative, but genuinely puzzled at all the fuss.

On December 8th, 1976, Archbishop Plourde of Ottawa chose Brother Gauthier as representative of all the religious of the Archdiocese who were in the service of others, to be presented with a Marian triptych in the overflowing Basilica. In 1978, through the mediation of Bishop G. Caprio, Deputy to the Vatican Secretariate of State, Pope Paul VI sent Brother Gauthier a gold medal with a blessing and a word of thanks. In 1979, it was Pope John Paul II’s turn to have sent to him a large picture signed by his own hand. The seminarians themselves were farseeing enough to show Brother “while he was still alive” their feelings. Especially on the anniversaries of his profession, Bishops would preside over the celebration. Brother accepted quietly the speeches, the special songs, the gifts, the letters.

The Brother Ernest Gauthier Founda- tion

The Past Pupils Reunion held at St. Paul’s Seminary in 1982 was the last honorific gesture to Brother whilst he was alive. There were seventy-five present, and they all supported the suggestion to create a foundation to help the residents of the Seminary at every level. It would bear the name “The Brother E. Gauthier Foundation”. This was an especially fitting gesture since Brother had devoted his whole religious life to an active role in the formation of priests.

“I Feel Very Small”

So much praise and public appreciation could have been enough to derail a virtue less solidly anchored than that of Brother Gauthier. He was referred to as a ‘saint’ — and he took this without flinching. He let others feast him, he went along with it, without apparent vanity, only to resume afterwards

what he saw as his proper place — the last. He wrote to a confrere, *“It is really beautiful, all these people having confidence in a little brother, in a tiny corner of the seminary. I feel really small before all these congratulations. So much the better if this gives confidence in the Blessed Virgin.”*

His Last Day

Brother Gauthier had once said, *“Each day must be lived as if it were our last.”* In early January 1983, the body of Fr. J. C. Laframboise, O.M.I. was carried back in its coffin to the seminary chapel for the funeral. It was a day of great emotional stress for Brother since Fr. Laframboise had been his Superior on two occasions, and the loss had really affected him. About half-way through the following night, Brother called the Rector and told him that he did not feel well. Taken to hospital, he died shortly thereafter, as quietly as he had lived. It was January 7th, 1983: he was seventy-five years old. The news of the unexpected death threw the seminary into confusion. As soon as the news broke, telephone calls and telegrams of condolence poured in. The loss was wide and personal.

Humility's Victory

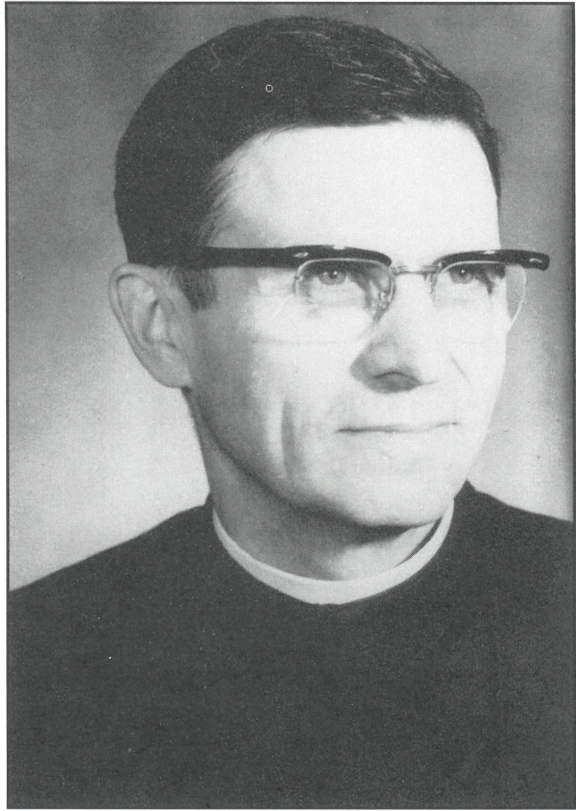
Brother Gauthier would have been the first to have been puzzled by the splendour of his burial. The seminary chapel overflowed with people — from Bishops to his beloved down-and-outs. Archbishop Plourde presided over the Eucharistic celebration, assisted by three Bishops and some hundred concelebrating priests. In his homily, Fr. Francis Morrissey, O.M.I., Dean of the Faculty of Canon Law at St. Paul's University, echoed what was in many hearts when he said, *“I would like to make the suggestion that we begin immediately a closer examination into Brother's life of holiness, so that the eventual beatification of the servant of God be encouraged, God willing that is, and our estimation is seen as objective in the judgement of the Church.”* Stirring words — and maybe prophetic.

“What
is a
Saint?”

From the Chancery Offices of the Diocese of Burlington in Vermont, U.S.A., a secretary was asked to telephone all the priests of the Diocese who had been former seminarians at St. Paul’s to inform them of Brother Gauthier’s death. When she had finished, she asked the Bishop, “Who was this Brother Gauthier? They all told me he was a saint.”

So many telegrams received at his death said the same — “He is the greatest saint that has gone through the seminary. His memory and good deeds follow him” — “Truly, a saint lived among us . . . I would not hesitate to say, Saint Ernest Gauthier, pray for us.” Bishop Bernard Huber adds: “It’s amazing that after forty years and more, priests still admit to having been profoundly touched by him. . . . We should become interested in Causes and have devotion to those humble people among us, without having to wait for them to come and wake us up by some spectacular signs. Brother Gauthier is an unpretentious witness to holiness. The heroism of his virtue shines through in intense spiritual radiance, perhaps more visible than some miracle.”

Some have said that they have received various favours through his intercession, while alive and after his death. A former student gives Brother Gauthier the titles of “spiritual miracle-worker, a maker of calmness and peace. We used to leave him feeling restored, at peace, freed. He worked true interior healings. Never have I met a person through whom God showed Himself more visibly. I said once to myself, ‘What is a saint?’ — I instinctively answered: ‘It’s a person like him’.”



Ernest Gauthier, O.M.I.
1908 - 1983

OBLATE HERITAGE SERIES

1992

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