From Rome to Montreal:
Importing Relics of Catacomb Saints
Through Ultramontane Networks,
1820-1914

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This article explores one of the most intriguing Catholic devotions of the nineteenth century: how relics of Roman catacomb saints came to occupy a significant place in the religious beliefs and practices of many Montreal Catholics. From 1820 to the early twentieth century, these ancient remains were brought from Rome to Montreal and placed under the altars of churches. The devotion to catacomb saints, this article argues, demonstrates how ultramontane piety developed and was experienced in Montreal. It also reveals how the belief in the miraculous power of these relics shaped Quebec’s Catholic culture.

Le présent article traite de l’une des plus curieuses dévotions du XIXe siècle chez les catholiques : la manière dont les reliques de saints provenant des catacombes de Rome en sont venues à occuper une place importante dans les croyances et les pratiques religieuses de nombreux catholiques montréalais. De 1820 jusqu’au début du XXe siècle, ces restes anciens ont été apportés de Rome à Montréal et placés sous les autels des églises. L’auteur fait valoir que la dévotion aux saints des catacombes témoigne du développement et de l’expression de la piété ultramontaine à Montréal. Il révèle aussi comment la croyance au pouvoir miraculeux de ces reliques a façonné la culture catholique québécoise.

A FEW YEARS AGO, while conducting an inventory for the Archdiocese of Montreal, I came across a relic of saint Asellus.1 The small piece of bone was

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1 A relic, from the Latin reliquae, is described in most encyclopedias as what remains of a saint, whether bones, ashes, or clothes and which is respectfully preserved to honor the saint’s memory. The devotion to relics of saints is rooted in the early church. Early Christian martyrs were automatically considered to be saints without having to undergo a formal canonization process and their relics were venerated. Rapidly, miracles were attributed to relics and contributed to their popularity. Relics of saints also held a significant place in Catholic liturgy and in the ritual space of churches as they were required to be placed under altars.
larger than most relics that I had previously seen there. In fact, the large majority of relics are barely visible to the naked eye. Surprisingly, no one I questioned had heard of this mysterious saint. No mention of his name could be found in the many long lists and works on saints. After some research, I discovered that Asellus’s remains had been extracted from the Roman catacombs and brought to Canada in 1892. To my surprise, this was not an isolated case. Throughout the nineteenth century, the remains of hundreds of other individuals, believed to have died as Christian martyrs, were removed from the catacombs surrounding the city of Rome. A number of them were sent across the Atlantic to meet the devotional demands of Montreal’s Catholics. These relics were placed under the altars of many churches and were referred to in sources as *corps saints*.

The devotion to the bodies of Roman catacomb saints has almost completely disappeared today. Yet, in the nineteenth century, it constituted a fundamental manifestation of ultramontane piety. Over the last fifty years, much has been written on the ultramontane movement. Canadian historians have approached it from a variety of perspectives, focusing on ideology, theology, or key actors. However, much remains to be written on the various devotional practices at the heart of this movement. Writing about them in 1991, historian Nive Voisine deplored the many approximations existing in historiography when it came to ultramontane devotions. Since then, little has been published on this subject.

Recent post-revisionist historiography has sought to come to terms with the importance of religion in Quebec’s history. Despite this, the cult of relics in modern and contemporary history has received little attention in Canadian historiography. In the nineteenth century, as the Western world was entering a time of rapid modernization, relics were occupying an increasingly important place in Quebec. Thus, the devotion to relics, in and of itself, does not easily enter the framework of an opposition between tradition and modernity. Relics are neither modern nor antiquated. They are rather a perennial element of the Catholic faith that, with fluctuating intensity, can consistently be observed in Catholic culture even to this day.


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1 Because it is systematically used in sources to refer to catacomb saints, I chose to use this expression in this article. *Corps saint* is the French translation of the Latin expression *corpus santi*. They were referred to as such because the relics of the saint constituted the remains of the whole body and were mostly preserved together.


5 In February 2016, the procession of the relics of Saint Padre Pio and Saint Leopold in the streets of
For a long time, the expansion of the Catholic Church in Quebec has been considered and explained from an internal perspective, as the result of political, ideological, and cultural changes. However, recent historiography has looked increasingly towards Europe, establishing valuable comparisons and allowing us to explain elements of the French Canadian Catholic culture. These studies have observed the cultural transfers that have characterized our history. Religious devotions must also be understood in a larger perspective. The development of modern means of transportation in the nineteenth century allowed French Canadian Catholics to be gradually immersed in the European church, where new ideas, rites, thoughts, and devotions were emerging and competing with one another. This article suggests an international reading of the development of the cultural experience of nineteenth-century Catholics. It mostly looks at the particular situation of what was Canada’s most important Catholic diocese. Because of its importance, the diocese of Montreal played a significant role in the construction of a distinct French Canadian Catholic culture. Roman catacomb saints have influenced Quebec’s toponymy, anthroponomy, and literature. They also contributed to expanding the place of Italy in the common cultural experience of a majority of French Canadians. The development of this particular devotion reveals the extent to which Quebec’s Catholics were aware of and attracted by the European devotional world.

In order to grasp the significance of these holy bones to culture, we must first understand how they came to occupy such a significant place in the experience of many French Canadians. Through the lenses of cultural history, this article seeks to understand not how religion was structured but how it was lived. It does not focus on the theological rationale of relics or on their authenticity but seeks to comprehend how individuals found meaning in this devotion. Behind these importations, one can easily perceive a genuine and widespread fascination for these Roman martyrs. Their relics were requested by individuals who not only valued them but also cultivated a belief in their healing and miraculous power.

Rome attracted thousands of Catholics. Closer to us, in 2001, the reliquary of Saint Therese of Lisieux is said to have gathered more than fifty thousand faithful at Montreal’s Saint Joseph’s Oratory, and in January 2018, the organizers of the pilgrimage of the relic of Saint Francis Xavier estimated that seventy thousand Canadians came to see the relic in fifteen different cities. For a discussion of the place of relics in modernity, see Philippe Boutry, Pierre Antoine Fabre, and Dominique Julia, Réliques modernes: cultes et usages chrétiens des corps saints des Réformes aux révolutions (Paris: Éditions de l’École des hautes études en science sociale, 2009), pp. 11-12.


Robert Orsi describes what he considers to be lived religion in the introduction of The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002). The devotion to catacomb saints is yet another example of how clerical and lay initiatives are interwoven in the development of devotional practices and in the complex construction of what becomes lived religion.

James Opp has observed during the same period comparable faith healings occurring in Canadian...
Historian René Hardy suggested that the importation of relics encouraged the pursuit of miraculous interventions.\textsuperscript{11} Behind this hope for miracles is the belief that God, through these relics, intervened in a tangible way in favor of the faithful.\textsuperscript{12} This belief, which we sometimes struggle to make sense of in our postsecular world, contributed to the multiplication of religious devotions and to the construction of Quebec’s Catholic culture.

**Relics of Catacomb Saints in the Colonial Period**

Though a few relics were extracted from the catacombs in the early Middle Ages and placed in Roman churches, the catacombs themselves were eventually forgotten. In 1578, workers unexpectedly rediscovered them, beginning what historian Philippe Boutry calls the modern history of the catacombs.\textsuperscript{13} In 1667, in order to limit private extractions and avoid the circulation of fictitious relics, Pope Clement IX instituted the Sacred Congregation for Indulgences and Relics. Because these relics were more than a thousand years old and difficult to identify, the congregation stated that two indubitable signs of martyrdom would be recognized: the engraving of a palm on the loculi and the presence of an ampoule, a small vial which was thought to contain the blood of the martyr. After these fragments of bones were identified as the authentic relics of a martyr by the presence of a palm or of an ampoule, they were automatically considered the remains of a saint and therefore worthy of veneration. Only then could the remains of the newly discovered saints be transported to churches and placed in altar stones or reliquaries. Trevor Johnson, in an article on catacomb saints in Bavaria, asserts that the extractions from the catacombs reached a peak around 1700, long before the first significant relic was brought to Montreal.\textsuperscript{14}

Nonetheless, before the nineteenth century, a small number of corps saints had already reached the young colony. As early as 1666, in a letter to her son, Marie de l’Incarnation gave the account of a religious procession carrying the remains of saint Flavien and sainte Félicité in the streets of Quebec City. These relics were a gift of Pope Alexander VII to Bishop François de Laval for the Church of New France. They are the earliest instance of corps saints in the colony. The

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\textsuperscript{11} See René Hardy, “Regards sur la construction de la culture catholique québécoise,” \textit{Canadian Historical Review}, vol. 88, no. 1 (2007): p. 19. If it undoubtedly did, I believe that this pursuit was essentially at the origin of the development of the cult of relics. It is precisely when this pursuit of miraculous interventions gradually faded in the middle of the twentieth century that the devotion to relics was abandoned.

\textsuperscript{12} Marie-Aimée Cliche has observed that, under the French Regime, the belief in miracles was already firmly rooted in both culture and mentality. These miracles included physical healings, miraculous rescues, financial and material help, and other spiritual favours. See Marie-Aimée Cliche, \textit{Les pratiques de dévotion en Nouvelle-France: comportements populaires et encadrement ecclésial dans le gouvernement de Québec} (Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 1988), pp. 26-51.


translation of these relics, although isolated, was an important event in the life of the small colony. The procession was met with much interest and attended by colonial officials and ecclesiastics. It was described by Marie de l’Incarnation as unlike any other ceremony ever carried out in the colony. A number of years later, François de Laval’s successor would also attempt to bring back two corps saints from Rome. However, when the British captured the ship on which he was travelling back to Quebec City in 1704, the precious relics were thrown into the sea. Only portions of the two corps saints were saved and later kept in reliquaries, one of which can still be seen at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Under the French Regime, the vast majority of relics came through France. In the years following the conquest of 1760, as relationships with the French church were restrained, fewer relics could be imported into British Canada. Thirty years later, the French Revolution resulted in an almost complete rupture between clerical authorities on either side of the Atlantic Ocean. While the relationship with the French church would never be the same, networks were gradually restored with the end of the Napoleonic era.

Modeling Faith on the European Example
The end of the continental blockade and the European peace that followed made it possible for Canadian priests to travel back to continental Europe where they encountered a new devotion. In the 1820s, the cult of sainte Philomène began to spread around Europe. The remains of this unknown martyr had been extracted from the Catacomb of Priscilla in 1802, and, soon after, claims of miracles attributed to her relics circulated. In both France and Italy, the faithful and the clergy welcomed with great enthusiasm the story of this young martyr.

Rapidly, her renown reached Canada. Father Thomas Maguire, chaplain of Quebec City’s Ursulines, had visited her tomb in Mugnano and had been very impressed by the miracles he had witnessed there. He returned with the first relic of the saint in 1834. If Canadian Catholics had not been very exposed to saints of the catacombs, this changed with the importation of the devotion to this martyr. The laity quickly embraced sainte Philomène and her name was regularly given to newborn girls. In 1837, Bishop Lartigue received a letter from the pastor of Saint-Laurent’s parish asking him to consecrate a chapel to the young martyr in his newly built church. Unfamiliar with this catacomb saint, Lartigue refused

15 Translations are the removal of relics from one place to another, often in a religious procession.
16 Pierre-François Richaudeau, Lettres de la révère mère Marie de l’Incarnation (Tournai: Casterman, 1876), Lettre CLXXVI, pp. 322-323.
20 In Aspects du catholicisme canadien-français, Savard cites a letter written in January 1837 by Jean Holmes, a priest of the Seminary of Quebec, who expresses his surprise to see that, on average in his parish, for every ten girls baptized, nine were given the name Philomène. This given name was unheard of only a few decades before.
21 Archives de l’Archevêché de Montréal (hereafter AAM), Paroisse Saint-Laurent, 355.105/837-002, J.B.
to grant the priest’s request or even to authorize the veneration of her relics until he had obtained more information about this devotion from Rome. By 1839, confronted with the popularity of the martyr, Bishop Lartigue would officially recognize the cult of sainte Philomène in his diocese by allowing a special Mass to be celebrated on her feast day.

The Oblates and the Jesuits who arrived from France as the devotion was reaching new heights in Europe, did much to spread her fame. The Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary also nourished a vivid devotion to the Italian martyr. After one of their sisters had been healed by the saint’s intercession, the order strongly endorsed this devotion. As in Europe, claims of miracles attributed to sainte Philomène played a major role in the rapid spread of her devotion across Canada. Because of the popularity of this new intercessor, it was easier to justify the first importations of catacomb saints from Rome. If Philomène had brought about miracles, why would the remains of another martyr not be able to do the same in Montreal? Having carried out much research in Roman archives, Philippe Boutry notes that, between 1837 and 1850, as a result of the devotion to sainte Philomène, importations of catacomb saints reached significant numbers in the French-speaking world.

Catacomb saints had always been part of the devotional landscape of French Canadian Catholicism but they were a relatively marginal devotion until the nineteenth century and sainte Philomène. The young martyr paved the way for the introduction of other Roman martyrs. But more importantly, her example demonstrates that many Catholics were eager to adopt relics of new saints. These relics transformed their religious experience into something tangible and concrete. In Montreal, the Sulpicians were among the first to embrace this devotion. In fact, they acquired their first corps saint in 1826, a decade before the establishment of the diocese of Montreal. Jean-Henry-Auguste Roux, who was travelling in Europe, had encountered the devotion to catacomb saints and returned to Montreal with the remains of saint Maximin. In 1833, the reliquary was placed in one of the newly completed chapels of the new Notre-Dame church.

If the rise of the devotion to catacomb saints in Quebec can be traced back to sainte Philomène, other reasons also justified the importation of relics from Europe. At the head of Montreal’s Catholic Church from 1840 to 1876, Bishop Ignace Bourget was an essential actor in the introduction of new relics. His strong endorsement of catacomb saints was key to the development of this cult. Ignace Bourget was a fervent advocate of ultramontane ideas. Throughout his episcopacy, he promoted the emotional, expressive, external, and popular religiosity that

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23 Savard, Aspects du catholicisme canadien-français, p. 179.
24 Sylvain and Voisine, Histoire du Catholicisme Québécois, p. 122.
25 Boutry, Fabre, and Julia, Reliques modernes, p. 146.
importing relics of catacomb saints through ultramontane networks
new saints and during religious ceremonies around relics experienced the same religious emotions as many in the crowds.

The introduction of catacomb saints in Montreal was also motivated by very practical reasons. Having been appointed as head of the young diocese of Montreal at the death of Bishop Lartigue in 1840, Ignace Bourget immediately launched himself into a profound reorganization of the diocese. One of the most urgent needs was the construction of new churches in a city where the population was growing rapidly. Montreal’s population had almost doubled in just twenty-five years. The first years of Bourget’s episcopacy witnessed the multiplication of religious buildings of all kinds, from convents and monasteries to churches and religious schools. Each of these new institutions possessed several altars on which Masses were regularly celebrated. These altars required relics of saints in order for a valid Mass to be said. As North America did not yet have any canonized saints, these relics necessarily had to be imported from Europe. At the time of the establishment of the diocese of Montreal in 1836, only a small number of relics were in the possession of the new bishop. The large majority would have been in the hands of Montreal’s religious communities and had been imported mostly under the French Regime. Relics undoubtedly came to be lacking in Montreal. To fulfill liturgical requirements, the diocese turned to the world’s largest supply of relics: the Roman catacombs. In doing so, Montreal’s diocesan authorities were taking a path already well known by Catholic authorities in other countries.

What led Bourget to turn to the Roman catacombs to obtain relics for his diocese remains unclear. However, it is very likely that the idea came from a French ecclesiastic: Charles-Auguste-Marie-Joseph, Count of Forbin-Janson and bishop of Nancy. Forbin-Janson visited Montreal in the fall of 1840 and was hosted by Bourget. Nive Voisine asserts that Forbin-Janson ignited a religious renewal in Montreal and was key in spreading new ultramontane ideas in Canada. The bishop of Nancy had been profoundly influenced by the devotion to Roman martyrs and was an ardent advocate of this form of piety. In sermons given across Quebec, the prelate regularly evoked memories of his visits to Rome.

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36 Perin, *Ignace de Montréal*, p. 84.
37 For an overview of the institutions and churches founded under the impulse of Bishop Bourget, see: Perin, *Ignace de Montréal*, chapter 2.
38 The tradition of incrusting relics in altars is rooted in a verse from the Bible (Rev. 6:9). To this day, the ancient practice of incorporating relics of saints in the altars of churches and chapels continues to be a liturgical requirement (Code of Canon Law, c. 1237 §2).
39 The Canadian Martyrs, a group of Jesuit missionaries killed in the seventeenth century, would become the first canonized saints in 1930.
40 Because they were found in great number, relics of catacomb saints were more easily available to foreign priests visiting Rome than those of more famous saints whose remains were jealously kept by their guardians. As a result, relics of catacomb saints found their way to almost every country with a significant Catholic community. This explains why, in the past few years, scholars from across the world have turned their attention to relics of catacomb saints. See Stéphane Baciocchi and Christophe Duhamelle, eds., *Reliques romaines: Invention et circulation des corps saints des catacombes à l’époque moderne* (Rome: École française de Rome, 2016).
Returning Home with Roman Relics

In 1841, while Forbin-Janson was still preaching across North America, Ignace Bourget undertook his first journey to Europe. Before leaving, he enumerated the reasons that in his opinion justified his long absence. Among the objectives of his transatlantic journey was the acquisition of relics for the many churches of his diocese. He did not hesitate to share his hope to the pastor of Sainte-Geneviève parish, which stood on the shore of the Rivière des Prairies: “C’est bien mon dessein de revenir chargé de saintes reliques et comptez que vous et votre paroisse en aurez votre bonne part.”

A few months later, writing from Liverpool on his way back, he had not yet obtained “un saint martyr habillé” but had established good relationships in Rome. The bishop assigned to Father Jean-Baptiste Kelly the task of completing the acquisition. Two years later, Kelly returned to Montreal with the very first corps saint imported from Rome by the young diocese: sainte Janvière.

Much like sainte Philomène, the remains of sainte Janvière had been found in a Roman catacomb with her name and the traditional signs of martyrdom carved on her tomb. Discovered on January 28, 1843, it took several months before the box containing her precious remains arrived in Montreal. The reliquary was designed by the Grey nuns according to traditional French custom. The bones of the saint were placed on red cushions with mirrors surrounding the casket. However, Bishop Bourget was not pleased with this reliquary. He wanted to display the relics according to the Italian custom, as they could be seen in Rome. In the many Italian churches he had visited, it was not the bones themselves that were exposed to the public, as had been the case in the French tradition, but wax representations of the saints. This style of exposition broke away from the tradition of medieval reliquaries. To this day, in many Roman churches, the recumbent effigies of catacomb saints are still visible under many altars.

Because the use of wax for reliquaries was unheard of in Canada, the representations of martyrs would have had to be imported from Europe.

43 N-E Dionne, Mgr de Forbin-Janson, évêque de Nancy et de Toul, primat de Lorraine; sa vie-son oeuvre en Canada (Québec: Typ. Laflamme et Proulx, 1910), p. 166.
45 AAM, Mgr Bourget – 1er voyage en Europe, 901.054/841-003, “Mémoire de l’évêque de Montréal pour servir à son voyage en Europe en 1841,” 1841.
46 AAM, Registres de lettres de Bourget, vol. 2, I. Bourget to L. Lefebvre, April 24, 1841.
47 AAM, Mgr Bourget – 1er voyage en Europe, 901.054, folio 433, “Relation de voyage de Bourget,” 1841.
48 Les Mélanges Religieux, November 10, 1843 and November 21, 1843.
49 Among them, to cite only a few, are Santa Maria dei Miracoli, where one can still see the recumbent of Santa Candida, and in the Basilica Sant’Agostino in Campo Marzio, the reliquary of San Benedetto. Displayed in two frequently visited churches, these reliquaries would have been seen by almost any Canadian pilgrim visiting Rome in the second half of the nineteenth century.
The following year, in an exchange of letters, Bourget requested that Canon Hyacinthe Hudon bring back a catacomb saint with him when returning from Rome.50 Hudon, finding his request difficult to achieve, nevertheless brought back the body of saint Zotique.51 This time, the reliquary corresponded to the ones that could be seen in the churches of Rome. The wax representation of the martyr in which the relics were kept was dressed in Roman-like clothes and real hair was placed on his head. Made by an Italian artist, it was bought in Rome and shipped with the relics. The French-style reliquary of sainte Janvière and the Italian-style reliquary of saint Zotique were both placed in Montreal’s cathedral.

Though sainte Janvière and saint Zotique were imported as a result of the direct initiative of Bishop Bourget, parishes and religious communities rapidly became interested in acquiring a corps saint for themselves. Soon, nuns and priests from all over the diocese would request the intervention of the bishop to facilitate the acquisition of new relics. The demands were such that in 1846, Bourget left for Rome with a list of over eighty different relics requested by the parishes of his diocese.52 Writing to Bishop Bourget, who had inquired about the needs of her community in 1860, soeur Marie Pagé of the Religious Hospitallers of Saint Joseph asked if it was too late to request that the prelate return with a Roman martyr for her community.53 Receiving a request from Father Avila Valois while in Rome in 1865, Bourget answered that he was willing to try but could make no promises: “Quant à un corps saint, je vais faire une tentative; mais comme j’en ai déjà obtenu plusieurs, je ne sais pas si l’on ne finira pas par me dire que je veux cette fois emporter toutes les catacombes.”54 Bourget was successful in obtaining new relics because he had Roman intermediaries. No other Canadian prelate had traveled to Rome as often or developed the relationships that he had with members of the Curia.55 When in Rome, he would personally visit the Vicegerent secretary to obtain corps saints.56 These private visits were successful in assuring that more relics would be granted for his diocese. After one of these visits on May 5, 1865, originally to obtain three martyrs, he wrote to his secretary later that day that he was confident that he would obtain a fourth corps saint.57 When he could not travel personally to Europe, he would delegate a priest. In 1860, he provided Father

50 AAM, Chanoine Hyacinthe Hudon, 901.117/844-006, H. Hudon to I. Bourget, June 21, 1844.
53 AAM, Religieuses Hospitalières de Saint-Joseph (hereafter RHSJ), 525.102/860-014, Soeur M. Pagé to I. Bourget, March 12, 1860.
54 AAM, Mgr Bourget – 5e voyage en Europe, 901.058, 97 (173), 1864-1865”.
55 Ignace Bourget travelled seven times to Europe, often spending several months abroad. During his travels he would arrange to personally meet bishops in Great Britain, France, and Italy and was able to develop an impressive network of relationships. His participation at the First Vatican Council also allowed him to meet priests and bishops from around the world. Léon Pouliot estimated that over the course of his episcopacy, Bourget had spent a total of more than three years in Rome. See Léon Pouliot, Les dernières années (1876-1885) et la survie de Mgr Bourget (Montréal: Éditions Beauchemin, 1960), p. 23.
57 AAM, Mgr Bourget – 5e voyage en Europe, 901.058/865-034, I. Bourget to J.-O. Paré, May 6, 1865.
Beaudry with advice for his journey, a list of individuals to meet once in Rome, and introductory letters to bishops and cardinals.58

The demands for relics even came from outside Bourget’s own diocese. In 1847, Basile Moreau of Le Mans in France, the founder of the Congregation of the Holy Cross, obtained a corps saint from Montreal’s bishop.59 In 1869, a monastery in New York wrote to Bourget reminding him of his promise to facilitate the acquisition of relics from Rome.60 More often than not, what motivated Bishop Bourget to return to Montreal with Roman martyrs were the requests of religious communities, priests, and institutions.

Starting in the 1860s, the number of Canadian priests visiting Rome or sojourning there for longer periods of time greatly increased. The development of the railway network connecting Montreal to American ports in the winter and the increase in number and efficiency of steamboats crossing the Atlantic allowed more French Canadians to undertake this journey. Moreover, the expedition of the Canadian Zouaves in 1868-1870 and the inauguration of the Canadian pontifical College in 1888 ensured a steady Canadian presence in the Eternal City. A greater number of priests were also sent to study in Rome. The Italian piety and devotions that they encountered greatly impressed many of them.61 Although the bishops of Montreal remained significant importers of catacomb saints, these priests obtained relics for Canadian parishes and institutions, sometimes being able to return with up to four martyrs at a time.62 Among them was Monseigneur Joseph Desautels, who sojourned in Rome in 1867 and again from 1871 to 1874. Through his numerous relationships, the prelate became an intermediary for other priests interested in obtaining catacomb saints.63 Another priest, Father Nazaire Piché, also took advantage of his stay in Rome to secure a corps saint for his parish in Lachine.64 As for Father Maréchal, the pastor of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce parish, he returned home with saint Victor.65

The Sulpicians also had their connections in the Roman Curia. They imported two corps saints that found their place in Notre-Dame of Montreal, probably in the 1860s. The remains of saint Félix and sainte Irène were placed under two side altars of the church.66 Every year, on All Saints’ Day, the curtain that hid the reliquaries was removed and the faithful were able to pray in front of the wax...
Catacomb saints had the ability to attract a notable number of faithful to church. The Sulpicians noted that a novena organized in Notre-Dame in 1869 gathered more people than in previous years. The presence of the two reliquaries in the church had much to do with the popularity of the event. This led the Sulpicians to request and obtain two more catacomb saints for their institutions. Saint Vital was intended for the seminary and saint Clement was placed in the chapel of the Collège de Montréal. If the Sulpicians avoided using the bishop of Montreal as an intermediary for obtaining relics, they nonetheless acquired several martyrs for their institutions.

Transporting a wood crate containing the remains of a catacomb saint from Rome to Montreal was particularly expensive. A parish or religious community that sought to obtain a martyr in the second half of the nineteenth century had to be ready to spend several hundred dollars. Even if the church officially condemned the commerce of relics, it was customary to offer a donation. But the price paid by Catholic Canadians also included custom and transportation fees. The boxes containing the precious relics had to be sealed and the assurance that custom officers would not break the seals was needed. A broken seal meant that the content of the box could have been changed and raised questions about the authenticity of the relics it contained. This small detail made importations more costly. In 1869, Father Piché, seeking to obtain a corps saint for his parish and its neighboring convent, went through multiple difficulties to acquire these relics. He was willing to spend a considerable amount of money to obtain them. Having paid a deposit of one hundred dollars, he was ready to pay a balance of two hundred dollars to obtain both the relics and the wax effigy of the saint, which had arrived from Europe. Despite the cost, religious communities considered the acquisition of catacomb saints worth the expenditure. “Nos Soeurs de la Congrégation et de Longueuil voudraient avoir quelques Corps saints tout habillés. Tâchez d’en obtenir, et elles vous tiendront compte de vos dépoussés” wrote Bourget to Father Beaudry in 1860.

The amounts paid for relics were justified by the great spiritual value they bore. Catacomb saints were a source of pride, blessing, and spiritual power for many Catholics. In 1852, when a fire destroyed the newly built Montreal cathedral as well as a significant portion of the city, two large reliquaries were saved from the flames. It is significant that those present in the cathedral at the time chose...
to save the very large reliquaries of sainte Janvière and saint Zotique rather than other objects contained in the church. The mere fact that these relics were removed from the burning cathedral testifies to the importance that they bore in the eyes of many.\textsuperscript{74} Similarly, when their motherhouse was destroyed by fire on June 8, 1893, the nuns of the Congrégation Notre-Dame were able to save the casket containing the relics of sainte Fortunata which had been in the chapel of their convent since 1880.\textsuperscript{75}

Obtaining a corps saint was much more difficult to do for the laity. Though the distance and cost of travel were significant obstacles, the requirements of the Congregation of Indulgences and Sacred Relics, which oversaw the circulation of relics, were the primary factors that limited lay individuals from obtaining them. Corps saints were able to reach their final destination essentially through ecclesiastic networks. Lay Canadians could hardly obtain relics from the Holy See without an influential intermediary who had connections with the Roman Curia. This explains why these importations remained largely clerical initiatives.

However, more often than not, lay individuals had more faith in the power of these saints than members of the clergy. Many believed that these martyrs were powerful intercessors and went so far as to encourage their own parish priests to turn to them for help. In 1925, Notre-Dame-de-Grâce Parish had great plans to build a Bell tower but not enough money to fund its construction. An individual persuaded his pastor to turn to saint Victor for help.

En effet, relevant le défi d’une personne très dévouée au culte du saint martyr, le Père Curé fit la promesse de lui consacrer la chapelle qu’il avait l’intention de construire, attenant au campanile, si ce jeune saint venait à son secours. Une semaine après, jour pour jour, l’approbation de l’Archevêque et du Père Provincial était donnée au mode d’emprunt sur billets, et par un geste de générosité…. M.S.D. Vallières offrait à la Fabrique un prêt très avantageux de $30,000.\textsuperscript{76}

Two years later, as a result of this financial miracle, the parish inaugurated a chapel to house the remains of saint Victor. This event demonstrates that in a few instances, lay Catholics played a crucial role in promoting the devotion to catacomb saints. Similarly, in Trois-Rivières, a rich young woman, Élisabeth Normand, was able to raise enough money to fund the acquisition of the remains of sainte Bibiane.\textsuperscript{77} Even less wealthy individuals were willing to contribute financially to allow the importation of a catacomb saint. In 1865, a group of elderly women living in the Grey Nuns General Hospital offered to do additional work to help fund the acquisition of a Roman martyr.\textsuperscript{78} Another group of lay individuals

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{74} The relics were removed from the Cathedral by the Soeurs de la Providence in the morning of July 8, 1852. At noon they were forced to leave the building because the fire was spreading to the church. See Archives des Sœurs de la Providence (hereafter ASP), \textit{L’Institut de la Providence}, tome 2, p. 404.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Archives de la Congrégation de Notre-Dame, Fiches reliques, 200.100/56, pp. 57-58.
\item \textsuperscript{76} AAM, A-3, Album de la paroisse Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, 75 ans de vie paroissiale 1853-1928, Notre-Dame-de-Grâce.
\item \textsuperscript{77} ASP, Chroniques M34 de l’hôpital Saint-Joseph de Trois-Rivières 1864-1890.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Bettina Bradbury, “Mourir chrétiennement : la vie et la mort dans les établissements catholiques pour personnes âgées à Montréal au XIXe siècle,” \textit{Revue d’histoire de l’Amérique française}, vol. 46, no 1 (1992),
\end{itemize}
also played an important role in the acquisition of sainte Aurélie. More often than not, lay Catholics would assume the financial burden of the importations. These examples demonstrate that, even if they did not personally bring back these relics from Rome, the laity had a greater role than we might be led to believe in the importation and the promotion of this devotion.

The Pinnacle of the Devotion

By the end of the 1860s, the devotion to catacomb saints had been widely adopted in Montreal. Demands for new martyrs and for relics of all sorts were regularly made to Bishop Bourget and more Canadian priests travelled to Rome in the hope of returning with a corps saint. Despite the important diplomatic efforts, the cost and the paperwork required, the number of importations continued to increase. Because of this interest, the relics that had been imported to Montreal were not sufficient to satisfy the demands of all the faithful. In 1869, while staying in Rome for the sixth time, Bishop Bourget discovered in a church an ossuary containing the remains of saint Zénon, a Roman soldier and his 10,203 companions. The bishop immediately saw the potential that this common grave of martyrs had for his diocese.

Following the discovery of these forgotten relics and after obtaining the required authorizations, Bishop Bourget was able to send to Montreal several boxes containing the remains of saint Zénon and his companions. The crates included ashes, skulls, teeth, ribs, jaws, and numerous other relics extracted from the common grave. Behind this was Bourget’s desire that the ashes be put in small portable reliquaries that could be distributed to the faithful to wear around their necks. The larger relics, however, were to be distributed to parishes and

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79 La Minerve, June 24, 1878.
80 Historian Nadia Fahmy-Eid has suggested that devotions such as the one to relics were mostly defined from the top, largely under Ignace Bourget’s impulse. See Nadia Fahmy-Eid, “Ultramontanisme, idéologie et classes sociales,” Revue d’histoire de l’Amérique française, vol. 29, n° 1 (1975): p. 53. However, the various sources found in this article underlie how other actors also shaped religious practices around relics in ways that eluded the authority of local bishops.
81 According to an ancient tradition, Zénon had been martyred with 10,203 Christian soldiers of the Roman legions (his companions) who had refused to offer sacrifices to the gods of the Empire. The relics imported by Bourget in 1869 were therefore considered to be the combined remains of more than 10,000 men. See Ignace Bourget, Neuvième de Saint Zénon et de ses compagnons martyrs (Montréal: J.B. Roland et Fils Libraires-Éditeurs, 1869). An interesting parallel could be drawn with the devotion to Saint Ursula and the 11,000 virgins of Cologne. The relics found under the Basilica of Saint Ursula were distributed across Europe in the medieval period and found their way into the altars of many churches. With saint Zénon and his companions, they constitute another example of group sanctity. See Scott B. Montgomery, St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne: Relics, Reliquaries and the Visual Culture of Group Sanctity in Late Medieval Europe (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009).
82 The practice of wearing a small reliquary around the neck was widespread in Catholic culture. Many Catholics believed that the relic would ensure their protection. This practice existed under the French Regime. See Cliche, Les pratiques de dévotion en Nouvelle-France, p. 47. The difficulties in obtaining relics can explain, in part, the popularity of other devotional practices such as wearing the scapular or religious medals. The practice of using relics for protection continued in the twentieth century. Relics were not only worn by individuals but inserted in the walls and foundations of religious buildings. In 1907, the Grey Nuns placed relics in the foundations of the modern elevator they were building to protect themselves against danger and possible tragedies. See Tania Martin, “Housing the Grey Nuns: Power, Religion and Women in fin-de-siècle Montréal” (master’s thesis, McGill University, 1995), p. 72.
It was decided that the next parish to be erected would be named after saint Zénon and a chapel of the future cathedral was to be dedicated to the new martyrs. Moreover, every parish was invited to receive a parcel of these new relics. Soon after, Bourget acknowledged with great satisfaction that demands to obtain these relics were made not only by priests and parishes, but also by many pious families. These requests were so important that the following year more relics were brought back from the same ossuary in Rome. The successful reception of saint Zénon and his companions resulted in further importations of corps saints.

The arrival of the relics of saint Zénon and his companions coincided with a widespread fascination with Rome. This interest for the Eternal City was something that could be easily perceived across Quebec. Newspapers, books, and works of art constantly fueled this fascination. This interest for Rome and the early Christian church certainly encouraged the importation of Roman martyrs. Through these relics, individuals who could not afford the journey to Italy were able to concretely experience something of the Holy City. Upon learning that Bishop Bourget had obtained the relics of saint Félix for her order, Sister Mance wrote to her bishop that this corps saint would bring her community “une abondance de paix, de bonheur et puis aussi un parfum de la ville sainte” (italics added). This expression is almost certainly an allusion to Louis Veuillot’s book *Le parfum de Rome* (1862), which contains many references to martyrs and the catacombs. Veuillot’s ultramontane works circulated greatly in the province, nourishing the interest for the Eternal City. Roman martyrs not only connected French Canadian Catholics to the primitive church of the persecutions but also federated the Universal Church around Rome and the papacy precisely when the Pope’s authority was openly contested.

It is therefore not surprising that the spread of the devotion to saint Zénon and his companions was closely connected with the Zouaves expedition. In 1868, many young Canadian Catholics volunteered to travel to Rome to defend the pope against the Italian patriots. The arrival of the relics of saint Zénon and his companions in Montreal was timely and coincided with this military expedition.
Bourget, held in Rome by the First Vatican Council, arranged for the relics to be sent to Montreal and presented to the faithful as soon as possible to foster support of the Papal States and encourage the recruitment of the Papal Zouaves. The relics of these Roman soldiers served to mobilize Montreal’s Catholics and to strengthen the relationship between the local church and the Holy See. In his widely distributed *Circulaire*, Bishop Bourget emphasized the military virtues of the martyrs and declared Zénon and his companions protectors of the Zouaves. A relic was to be distributed to each volunteer so that they may be protected from any harm.\(^90\) The safe return of the Canadian volunteers was certainly perceived by many as the result of the miraculous protection of saint Zénon and his companions.

**Adopting Foreign Saints**

It remains difficult to know precisely what percentage of the Catholic population would regularly stop by these reliquaries to pray, adopting the devotion to catacomb saints as an element of their own personal piety. A number of documents preserved by the Archives of the Archdiocese of Montreal allege that many came to venerate these martyrs. Bishop Bourget frequently expressed his satisfaction at seeing many praying at the reliquaries of these saints. Writing after the translation of saint Zotique in the cathedral, he enthused: “Depuis ce jour heureux, nous avons eu le bonheur de voir souvent accourir au tombeau de ce nouveau patron, de pieux fidèles de toutes les parties de notre diocèse et même des diocèses voisins.”\(^91\)

Similarly, Sister Philomène wrote in 1864 to Bishop Bourget that many came to visit and pray in front of the corps saint belonging to the Sisters of Providence.\(^92\)

Several reasons can explain why individuals would regularly stop to pray in front of these reliquaries. It was certainly easier for many Catholics to identify themselves with these Roman martyrs who were rare examples of lay sanctity in a church that mainly suggested clerical models of virtue. They were also human intercessors and perhaps could be seen as more accessible by some Catholics than God himself. Their martyrdom and sacrifice also spoke to many in a time when life was difficult. However, a significant factor in bringing together large crowds around these relics was that those who would come and pray in front them could obtain indulgences. René Hardy agrees with Philippe Boutry in qualifying indulgences as being the engine of devotional life.\(^93\) The promise of indulgences was granted to anyone who would come and pray for the pope’s intentions in front of specific reliquaries. When obtained, an indulgence would give the assurance that one would not have to suffer in purgatory for sins which he had already confessed. This certainly encouraged many to turn to these new intercessors in a society in which the fear of suffering in the afterlife was prevalent. Importers of corps saints would make every effort to ensure that their relics were attributed an indulgence by the Holy See. This formality would make the holy remains much more valuable.

\(^{90}\) Bourget, *Neuvaine de Saint Zénon et de ses compagnons martyrs*, p. 32.

\(^{91}\) AAM, MLC, Mandement de Mgr l’évêque de Montréal pour l’institution de la fête et de l’office de St. Zotique, martyr, dans son église cathédrale de St. Jacques, April 18, 1846.

\(^{92}\) AAM, SP, 525.106/864-009, Sr Philomène to I. Bourget, February 5, 1864.

\(^{93}\) Hardy, *Contrôle social et mutation de la culture religieuse au Québec*, p. 77.
in the eyes of the faithful. Obtaining an indulgence in North America was less common than in Europe, where more opportunities were available. They were therefore sought-after by Catholics in Quebec.

Yet, the fundamental element behind the spread and endurance of the devotion to catacomb saints is the belief in the healing power of these new intercessors. Many Catholics trusted that they could bring about miracles. Confronted with a possible risk of cholera, the sisters of the Congregation Notre-Dame turned to sainte Fortunata for protection.94 Similarly, Father Avila Valois claimed that everyday the intercession of sainte Justine could be felt. “Une des petites pensionnaires affligée d’un mal de yeux tout à fait incurable […] a été guérie en allant faire un pieux pèlerinage au tombeau de la sainte.” Impressed by the power of the saint, he asked Ignace Bourget if it would be possible for him to return with yet another corps saint for his church.95 Evidently, like many of his contemporaries, he desired relics that were capable of producing these miraculous healings.

Figure 1: The reliquary of sainte Justine in the chapel of the Congregational House of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary.
Source: Photo by Michel Dahan, 2018.

In a long letter written two days after the solemn translation of saint Zénon and his companions, Father Gaudet explained at length how a young nun was miraculously healed. She had decided to ask the new catacomb saints for their intercession while on her deathbed and recovered completely from her illness in a few hours. Because her wishes had been granted and she had recovered her health,

94 AAM, Registres de lettres de Mgr Bourget, vol. 15, I. Bourget to Sr St-Paul, May 6, 1866.
95 AAM, 525.105/865-002, A. Valois to I. Bourget, 1865.
she became determined to travel from Vaudreuil to Montreal to light a candle in front of the reliquary of the saints. She also wanted to obtain a small relic of the martyrs that she had resolved to wear around her neck for the rest of her life.96

The hope of miracles encouraged the recitation of prayers to the saints. In the 1870s, when the eldest daughter of Marie-Louise and Alexandre Lacoste became severely ill, the family turned to sainte Justine for help. After the young Marie Lacoste was miraculously healed in 1877, her parents, grateful, decided to name their newborn daughter after the catacomb saint.97 Much like Alexandre and Marie-Louise Lacoste, many Catholic families throughout the nineteenth century named children after catacomb saints. One of the most popular names given across the province in honour of a Roman martyr was that of saint Zotique. Those who named their children after these new saints often lived in the region in which their reliquary was kept. Canadian and Quebec politicians Azellus Lavallée (1894-1976) and Azellus Denis (1907-1991) were both born in Lanaudière, a few kilometers from Joliette where the remains of saint Asellus had been brought in 1892. Several members of their families had attended the Collège Joliette, the most prestigious institution in the area, where the saint’s wax recumbent could be seen.98 Families who adopted the name Azellus for their children almost always had a connection with this institution and had roots in the region of Lanaudière. Similarly, the name Abondius was given to many children baptized in Saint-Vincent-de-Paul’s parish where saint Abondius was exposed. A simple visit of the parish cemetery in Laval allows us to see this name on several tombstones. Among them are those of Abondius Bastien and Abondius Lortie, both born in 1861, the year of the translation of saint Abondius’s relics.

The name Zénon was also given to many newborns soon after the arrival of his relics. Two priests, Zénon Therien and Zénon Decary, were born soon after the translation of saint Zénon and his companions. Father Zénon Therien was born in L’Assomption on August 6, 1870 exactly nine months after the arrival of his patron’s relics in Montreal.99 Why did his parents choose to name him after the saint? Although it is difficult to know, it could be that his mother had wanted a child for a long time and that her pregnancy was understood to be an answer to the prayers she had addressed to the new saint.

Individuals also chose the name Zénon when they entered religious orders. Laurent Meunier who had been a Papal Zouave adopted the name Zénon when he joined the Brothers of Charity in 1875.100 Similarly, making her vows in 1890, a young novice, Eugénie Lemire, took the name of Soeur Victor, a few months after the arrival of the saint’s reliquary in the Sisters of Providence motherhouse.101

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96 AAM, 525.110/869-005, Abbé Gaudet to J.-O. Paré, October 19, 1869.
100 Bulletin de l’Union-Allet, March 25, 1875.
101 Soeurs de la Providence, Notes historiques sur l’Institut des Soeurs de Charité de la Providence (Montreal, 1893), p. 166.
The adoption of the names of Roman catacomb saints constitutes the best indication that many lay Catholics wholeheartedly embraced the new devotion. Priests could stress the importance of being named after a recognized Catholic saint, but they did not have the authority to impose a particular given name on a newborn child. The recurrence of the names of catacomb saints was therefore something entirely left to parents. This phenomenon demonstrates that the collective devotions introduced with the importations of Roman relics profoundly shaped individual piety. The development of these forms of private piety and the infatuation of the laity for catacomb saints should not therefore be considered the unilateral enterprise of the clergy. They demonstrate, in parallel to collective devotions, the existence of personal devotions to these obscure saints, something that Nive Voisine had qualified as a terra incognita in nineteenth-century Canadian historiography. Ultimately, they express the belief of French Canadian Catholics in the intercessory power of these saints and their relics. They are expressions of lived religion.

The Late Decline of the Devotion
In 1881, archaeological controversies led Pope Leo XIII to solemnly prohibit any new extraction from the Roman catacombs. As early as the 1850s, archaeological questions had been raised in both the scientific and the Catholic world regarding the significance of the ampoule of blood as firm proof of martyrdom. A Jesuit, Victor de Buck, and a French archeologist, Edmond Le Blant, concluded that the ampoule was not in itself proper evidence of martyrdom. No assurance could be given that the hundreds of catacomb saints sent to dioceses around the world were really those of Christian martyrs. These conclusions led to the end of official excavations. While the church officially remained silent, catacomb saints were gradually met with indifference. Across Europe, many ecclesiastics gradually abandoned the cult of Roman martyrs, and when they were not removed from churches their reliquaries were soon covered with dust and forgotten.

Surprisingly, while the devotion to catacomb saints was in decline in Europe, it continued to be of importance in Quebec. More than thirty years after the controversy which had shaken Rome and put an end to public demonstrations of piety towards these relics, the translation of saint Asellus occurred in Joliette. The remains of the martyr were solemnly installed in the chapel of the Collège Joliette in the presence of the archbishop of Montreal. In his sermon delivered for the occasion on November 3, 1892, Father Corcoran disregarded the European revelations around the authenticity of catacomb saints and continued to view the presence of an ampoule of blood as unquestionable evidence of martyrdom. If they continued to officially promote the devotion to catacomb saints, Montreal’s diocesan authorities could not recognize all relics as authentic. Roman

102 Sylvain and Voisine, Histoire du Catholicisme Québécois, pp. 2; 364.
104 Boutry, Fabre, and Julia, Reliques modernes, p. 168.
authorities more closely regulated the circulation of catacomb saints, sometimes forcing bishops to remove inauthentic ones. Writing to Rome in 1881 on behalf of the Sisters of Providence, who ran the Saint-Jean-de-Dieu hospital, Archbishop Fabre requested, as customary, an authorization of the Holy See to solemnly celebrate the annual feast of saint Arcade with special prayers. The archbishop of Montreal had personally presided over the translation of the saint’s relics on May 17, 1880. The answer that came from Cardinal Simeone in Rome was firm and clear. The research that was carried out concluded that the relics of saint Arcade were undeniably false ones. “Comme donc on ne peut accorder aucune estime à ces mêmes reliques, il était enjoint à Votre Grandeur de les soustraire à la vénération publique et de les détruire entièrement avec la prudence nécessaire pour éviter le scandale.”

Upon reception of the letter, Archbishop Fabre personally informed the hospital’s chaplain that the reliquary was to be immediately removed from the chapel where it had been placed. It appears, however, that the wax reliquary was not destroyed at once. A Canadian priest who was in Rome was able to obtain a new and authentic relic of saint Arcade the following year. The new relic would replace the forged ones in the wax reliquary in order to avoid any scandal. Whether the new relic belonged to a martyr effectively named Arcade or to an unidentified catacomb saint remains uncertain.

The confusion around the authenticity of saint Arcade undoubtedly led to a tightening of the regulations surrounding the importation and official recognition of catacomb saints in Montreal. Writing to the Assistante générale du Monastère du Précieux-Sang de Notre-Dame-de-Grâce in 1898, the vice-chancellor of the diocese firmly forbade that any public cult be offered to the relics of sainte Valérie. In spite of the fact that these relics were offered by a Catholic priest to the religious community, the archdiocese judged that there were too many doubts regarding their authenticity. Consequently, the casket containing a wax representation of the young martyr could not be kept in the convent’s chapel and no public veneration could take place around it. The questions raised in Europe regarding the devotion to catacomb saints did not put an end to the devotion in Quebec. These questions, however, seem to have at least led clerical authorities in Montreal to oversee the circulation of relics more closely. Yet, they did not abandon the devotion in part because a condemnation of the devotion to catacomb saints was ultimately a condemnation of the former bishops, and particularly of Ignace Bourget, who had publicly encouraged this form of piety.

By the twentieth century, new importations became unusual. Religious persecutions affecting the church in Europe sometimes led to further importations. A French priest, Monseigneur Albert Battandier, who was living in Rome, arranged for the remains of sainte Gaudent to be transferred to Canada. The

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106 AAM, Hôpital Saint-Jean-de-Dieu (hereafter HSJD), 778.867/885-001, Cardinal Simeone to E.-C. Fabre, February 28, 1885.
107 AAM, HSJD, 778.867/886-010, F.-X. Leclerc to E.-C. Fabre, June 8, 1886.
relics of the saint had been in a monastery from which the nuns had been driven out and all their belongings sold at auction. In 1906, the remains were for sale. Montreal’s Sisters of Providence paid eight hundred francs to acquire the precious box containing the remains. 109 As late as 1951, Archbishop Léger granted them the right to publicly display the relics they had obtained forty years earlier and to spread the devotion to sainte Gaudence.110 By then, an authorization such as this one had become quite uncommon.

It is difficult to determine precisely the causes behind the gradual decline of catacomb saints. In his Histoire du Catholicisme Québécois, Jean Hamelin quotes the testimony of Claire Guillemette published in Le Devoir in 1968.111 This mother expressed her disillusionment with the church. How can we, in the twentieth century, continue to believe in miracles, she declares. Perhaps, it is precisely in the erosion of the belief in miraculous interventions and faith healings that an explanation for the end of the devotion to catacomb saints should be sought. When individuals ceased to believe that relics and the saints they represent could heal and help them, they stopped praying to them.112

Certainly, the year 1961 altered forever the devotion to catacomb saints in Quebec. In April, in a desire for historical accuracy, the Vatican announced that the feast of sainte Philomène should be removed from the liturgical calendar.113 The news shocked many Catholics and was discussed in newspapers. As sainte Philomène had marked the rise of the devotion to catacomb saints in Quebec, she also announced its end. To the question of what should be done with her relics, a representative of the Commission de liturgie du diocèse de Montréal answered that the law of the church requires that unauthentic relics be removed from the cult of the faithful.114 As a result, many relics of catacomb saints were gradually withdrawn from churches. In Montreal, saint Victor’s relics were removed from the chapel that had been built especially for them. The chapel itself was later renamed Saint-Dominique’s chapel by the Dominicans who were responsible for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce parish.115

Surprisingly, the abandonment of this form of piety came primarily from within the Catholic Church. The decision to remove the wax reliquaries of catacomb saints from churches appears to have been the result of clerical initiatives

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109 ASP, Mgr Battandier to Sr Vincent de la Providence, February 26, 1907.
112 Beyond this hides an even greater transformation: a profound redefinition of the idea of God himself. In the minds of many Catholics, the notion of a more distant God superseded the expectant belief that God could miraculously act in their life. This gradual transformation is not unrelated to the rupture created by Catholic Action movements as described by Michael Gauvreau. The social activism of these movements indicates a desire to bring about changes in areas in which God was no longer expected to act. Breaking with orthodoxy, their theology understood humans to be self-sufficient rather than weak and in need of salvation. See Michael Gauvreau, The Catholic Origins of Quebec’s Quiet Revolution, 1931-1970 (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), pp. 46-48.
115 AAM, Album de la paroisse Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, “Notre-Dame-de-Grâce.”
rather than motivated by requests from the faithful. One of the consequences of the Second Vatican Council was a shift away from popular devotions. The vast majority of diocesan priests adopted the documents of the council, sometimes taking them a lot further than what the conciliar fathers had imagined. 116 In the years after the council, when the devotion to relics was not completely abandoned, it was considerably neglected in favor of other elements. Consequently, relics lost their importance in the eyes of many, including Catholic priests. The last visible corps saints of Montreal, saint Innocent and saint Zotique, were removed from the cathedral in 2005 when the chapel of relics was abolished in order to make room for a new funerary chapel. While reliquaries of catacomb saints can still be viewed in Ottawa’s cathedral and Saint-Hyacinthe’s seminary, they are no longer displayed publicly in the diocese of Montreal. These decisions can lead us to believe, perhaps, that Montreal’s clergy was more inclined to radically break with traditional forms of piety in the wake of the Second Vatican Council than their counterparts in other dioceses, though this assertion would have to be tested with more research.

Conclusion
If the devotion to catacomb saints had not been thoroughly examined, it is not because it was insignificant to the religious beliefs of Montreal’s Catholics. Rather, it is because few signs of it have survived to this day outside religious archives. It remains difficult to know precisely how many catacomb saints were imported to the region of Montreal. Despite the cost, the distance, and the diplomatic difficulties involved in the acquisition of a corps saint, over twenty Roman martyrs found their way to the diocese of Montreal. A thorough examination of the archives of the different religious communities and parishes of the city would certainly demonstrate that this number was higher than those uncovered in this research. Corps saints did not only appeal to Montreal’s Catholics. Archival documents have demonstrated that these catacomb saints were found across the country. 117 However, in many regards, Montreal was the leading Canadian diocese in the importation of these relics.

Because of their connection to Rome, catacomb saints constituted one of the most conspicuous expression of ultramontane piety. In many ways, the rise and fall of this devotion paralleled the progression of ultramontanism in Quebec. Catacomb saints reached their pinnacle in the same period as the ultramontane movement. By exploring this devotion, we can reach a better understanding of the reasons behind the success of the implementation of ultramontanism in Montreal’s Catholic Church. In many ways, Roman catacomb saints appealed successfully to French Canadian Catholics and opened the way to a greater acceptance of

116 Michael Gauvreau describes the effort of Catholic elites and members of the upper clergy to modernize the Church by reforming what they considered to be traditional Catholicism. The consequence, according to Gauvreau, was a schism that led the Church to lose a significant number of followers. See Gauvreau, The Catholic Origins of Quebec’s Quiet Revolution, pp. 310-311.

117 My doctoral dissertation in progress seeks to understand the importance of this devotion across the country. My research has allowed me to identify more than seventy corps saints found in Canadian churches, from British Columbia to Nova Scotia.
the principles behind ultramontanism. They fueled an interest for Rome and the papacy in a way that other devotions could not do.

The relics of these saints circulated through transatlantic networks existing within the Catholic Church regardless of international borders. These networks allowed the circulations of more than relics. Liturgical practices, expressions of piety, prayers, and hagiographies circulated through them and were significant in modeling a French Canadian Catholic culture. The Catholic faithful in Montreal were attentive to the European devotional world and attracted to it. They found pride and comfort in these martyrs and brought their petitions to them. More importantly, they believed that their intercessory powers could bring about divine healings and miracles.

Many parallels can be observed in the various expressions of the devotion to catacomb saints on both sides of the Atlantic. What is specific to Montreal’s Catholic church, however, is the survival of this form of piety long after it had been abandoned in Europe. Another important difference was the prompt rejection of catacomb saints in Montreal in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council. Carried by the euphoria and liturgical reorganization that affected the diocese, these relics were removed from churches and chapels. Behind this reaction was a strong desire within Quebec’s Catholic church to turn the page on its past. The Second Vatican Council provided an opportunity to once and for all do away with ultramontane piety. This sudden rupture with what had been the ordinary expression of piety in Quebec for over three generations provoked an identity crisis within the church, which, combined with the societal changes of the Quiet Revolution, profoundly unsettled the institution and its faithful.