

Church organist marks 49th anniversary July 9

By: Dan Rosenberg

Friday, July 9 will mark the beginning of Bernardin Houle's 50th year as organist of the St. Francis Xavier Mission. He's been accompanying the church choir at funerals, weddings and Sunday High Mass since July 9, 1950.

When Father Louis Cyr, at the funeral of Father Leon Lajoie last May 19, announced that Houle would soon be starting his 50th year in the church's choir loft, Houle received a stunning ovation that lasted all of three minutes.

"Bernardin is part of the furniture here," said Father Cyr in a recent interview with *The Eastern Door*. "He's near the end of his career now but the warm-hearted spontaneous reception he received on May 19 is proof of the regard in which he is held."

Father Cyr calls Houle "one of the most honest men I know. If he were overpaid \$1, he would refund it." Father Cyr said that no date has been set for Houle's retirement. "He'll decide that on his own. There's nothing statutory around here."

As an example of Houle's unflagging devotion, Father Cyr points out that the organist takes close to two hours to bus and hitch-hike his way from Montreal's Lafontaine Park area to arrive in Kahnawake in time for High Mass every Sunday.

Father Cyr describes Houle as "a shy man" who was "flattered" at this newspaper's offer to interview him. But because of his intense modesty, Houle graciously declined the offer, preferring to relay the highlights of his career through Father Cyr instead.

Asked to single out the

most memorable moments of his career in Kahnawake, Houle chose three. The first one that came to mind was the performance in Mohawk of "The Seven Last Days of Christ" as accompaniment to Father Albert Burns' dramatization in the church of the Passion Drama in the early 1950s.

His second most cherished memory was accompanying the Mohawk mixed choir's plane trip to Piqua (pronounced Pikway), Ohio on March 12-13, 1966 for two concerts and an early Mass.

Finally, he recalls with relish the televised Sunday Mass by the CBC in French and English in April 1988. The Mass was broadcast live from St. Francis Xavier Church for Blessed Kateri's Feast Day.

Another annual highlight worth remembering began in the late 1940s when Houle accompanied the Mohawk mixed choir to the shrine in Auriesville, N.Y., 50 miles west of Albany. The significance of that is that Auriesville, situated along the Mohawk River, is the birthplace of the beatified Kateri Tekakwitha.

Houle was trained at the Montreal Conservatory in piano (winning second prize) and harmony (first prize). He performed as a solo pianist quite often during his lengthy career as a piano teacher and accompanist. Up until recently he still made private recordings of the romantic 19th century repertoire (Chopin, etc.) he enjoyed playing most.

Among his most important contributions here, Houle considers the sorting out and classifying of all the singing materials (scores and accompaniments) that he painstakingly undertook after the last Jesuit

director, Father Henri Lalonde, left (circa 1972). This labor of love lasted several years.

Houle took extensive organ lessons from Georges-Emile Tanguay, composer and organist at the Jesuit Immaculate Conception Church in Montreal. In fact, Tanguay considered him his assistant just before Houle began substituting for Edouard Piche at St. Francis Xavier Church in 1949. When Piche bowed out to ill health, Houle took over.

The thing Houle has loved the most since he began coming to Kahnawake is the beauty and stability of the repertoire he was called on to accompany.

"In his own unassuming, humorous and unthreatening way, Bernardin has enjoyed the people he has met here," Father Cyr relates.

Does Houle have any regrets down through the years?

The choir's unfortunate gradual demise is one of his main concerns. As a perfectionist and demanding educator, he also regrets those occasional moments of subpar renditions he has witnessed. But he is especially upset about his own increasing hearing difficulties which make it harder for him to monitor his own organ pedal playing, which becomes erratic at times.

In addition to his organ accompaniment, Houle has also been the choir's conductor since the early 1970s when Henri Lalonde died of a heart attack. In that function Houle says he only feels the need to use his left hand to mark the rhythm and beat when the choir misses a cue or lags behind.

A significant milestone

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Organist Bernardin Houle has been a mainstay accompanying St. Francis Xavier Mission choir for nigh unto 49 years.

Bernardin Houle: Part of the furniture

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was reached in 1978 when the church acquired a 30-stop Casavant organ from the Misericorde Hospital in Montreal. "Our old five-stop

organ was very small and was giving up the ghost," Father Cyr recalls. "It needed to be replaced.

"So my predecessor,

Father Lajoie, approached the Sisters of Providence and managed to obtain it. It was overhauled and enriched by vintage stops, a long-term investment that the Mission couldn't really afford at the time. "Bernardin didn't agree with the restorations at first, but the organ is there to be enjoyed." ■



St. Francis Xavier Mission, Winter 1977-78. Mr. Houle using old harmonium while new organ was being installed