

# THE ATTITUDE OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CLERGY TOWARDS THE REBELLIONS IN 1870 AND 1885

by Dr. A.N. Lalonde  
University of Regina  
Regina, Saskatchewan

The purpose of this brief exposé is not to describe in detail the role of the Roman Catholic clergy during the Rebellions. Stanley and others have partly covered this area in their major studies although more exhaustive research is still required. The use of a few examples will suffice to demonstrate the contrasting attitude of the Church during both Rebellions. This analysis will focus more on a series of hypotheses, which will attempt to explain the Church's tacit endorsement of Riel's activities in 1869-70, as opposed to its outright condemnation of the use of violence in 1884-85.

## Rebellion or Resistance in 1869-70

The Roman Catholic clergy of the Red River area did not oppose the annexation of Rupert's Land. What Bishop Taché and his colleagues feared most was the negative impact annexation would have on their protégés, the Métis. The Church required a minimum of fifteen more years to reach and solidify its objectives: convince the Métis to abandon the hunt and opt for a more sedentary way of life by cultivating the soil; educate and Frenchify the members of their flock; and imbue them with the precepts of the Roman Catholic faith. Then and only then could the clergy risk exposing its flock to the different concepts and values brought in by the anticipated influx of materialistically orientated Anglo-Saxon Protestant settlers from Ontario.

This fear was clearly expressed by Bishop Taché in a letter to G.E. Cartier on October 7, 1869.

I have always feared the entry of the North-West in Confederation because I have always believed that the French Catholic element would be sacrificed ... The new system is of such a nature that it will ruin everything that has cost us so dearly.

The Métis were sensitive to the apprehensions felt and voiced by their pastors who were recommending that they occupy as much land as possible prior to the Canadian takeover. While Mgr. Taché and his colleagues preferred to resolve the anticipated problems by negotiating with Canadian politicians, the Métis decided to have recourse to the force of arms.

Although the clergy did not endorse the use of violence, it did not intervene to discourage the Métis from holding to their adopted course of action. On the contrary, as the Abbé Georges Dugas wrote to Taché:

Father Ritchot lets them have their say and thinks they are right; for my part, I do not think



The Attitudes of the Roman Catholic Clergy Towards  
The Rebellions in 1870 and 1875

they are in the wrong. When they consult us, it is not easy to answer without compromising ourselves.

Father Lestanc, the Abbé Dugas and the Abbé Ritchot were all heavily involved in the Rebellion. During a meeting held in Saint-Norbert, Ritchot told the Métis that as a priest, he could not bear arms, but he emphasized that he was with them all the way because their cause was just. The next day, he confided to Father Lestanc and his assistants.

I cannot leave my flock without a leader. I joined the movement to contain it within constitutional and legitimate limits. I am totally committed to their cause.

During the Convention held in Fort Garry, Father Lestanc and the Abbé Ritchot addressed the delegates specifying that as residents of the area, they insisted on attending the meeting to protect the rights and interests of the region. Stanley mentions that Father Lestanc toyed with the list of rights prepared by the Convention and forwarded a number of suggestions to Riel. Mgr. Taché himself added a series of clauses to the list of rights. (Clause 22-23-31). Furthermore, the clergy, in the person of the Abbé Ritchot, spearheaded the negotiations held with the government in Ottawa.

Thus Riel and the Métis were solidly supported by Mgr. Taché and his colleagues. A Grey Nun, Sister Mary A. Curran, described Riel in her diary in the following terms:

Louis Riel est visiblement l'éclu de Dieu pour sauver son pays; il se regarde comme le faible instrument de la providence et fait l'admiration de tous.

#### North-West Rebellion

Although the clergy of the Saskatchewan district had through the years voiced the Métis fears and anxieties to government authorities in the form of petitions, from the time of Riel's arrival in the area, in June 1884, Métis-clergy relations became somewhat strained. Bishop Grandin had reacted by distributing a circular letter in which he had written:

Our poor Métis... have made a terrible blunder... They are going to compromise everybody, give themselves a bad name, and will be unable in the future to obtain anything from the government.

Father André had echoed these sentiments: "... je suis loin d'être un ami de Riel."

Riel tried to foster good relations with the clergy but without much success. The clergy's cool attitudes towards Riel and its reticence to



## The Attitude of the Roman Catholic Clergy Towards The Rebellions In 1870 and 1885

support the Métis movement led to mistrust and dissatisfaction on the part of the Métis. While the clergy increasingly regarded Riel as a mad man, the Métis viewed him as a father, an able leader, a prophet, a saint, a kind of God capable of performing miracles.

The clergy's indifference and disenchantment resulted in a serious breach of trust between the clergy and the Métis. Mgr. Grandin's declaration, "Mais jamais nous ne pourrions appuyer une révolution," and the threat made by members of the clergy that they would withhold the sacraments from anyone who had recourse to violence against the government, created a wide gulf of misunderstanding and disapprobation. This rift finally culminated in a complete break in March of 1885.

This estrangement prompted Fathers André, Touze, Moulin, Fourmond, Vegreville and Lecoq to dispatch to their colleagues in Québec a letter, part of which read as follows:

Louis David Riel ne mérite pas les sympathies de l'Eglise catholique romaine et des membres de cette église, ayant usurpé notre mission de prêtre et privé notre population des avantages que nous aurons pu lui offrir. Il a fait cela dans son intérêt personnel.

### Hypotheses to Explain the Contrast in Attitude

What follows are a series of hypotheses which attempt to explain the contrasting attitude of the clergy between 1870 and 1885:

1. The behaviour of Louis Riel. In 1869-70, the clergy had confidence in Riel's leadership. He consulted clerics, confided in them, looked up to them, accepted their recommendations and advice. The nuns even referred to him "as the individual selected by God to save the country; the instrument of Providence." However, Riel's erratic behaviour and mental problems had led the clergy to conclude as early as 1879 that he was too mentally unstable to ever be trusted. For example, one priest had written to Mgr. Taché: "His role is finished, he is completely crazy."
2. The Roman Catholic Church tended to be ultra-conservative. It abhorred violence and tended to be law and order oriented.

Accordingly, it preached to its followers that they must always have recourse to constitutional means to secure from the proper legal authority a redress of their grievances. For example, the clergy officially denounced the rebels and sided with the government during the Rebellion of 1837-38. Papineau had led the people astray.

In 1869-70, there was no legally constituted authority. The government of Canada had no jurisdiction in the Red River area. Before the



## The Attitude of the Roman Catholic Clergy Towards The Rebellions of 1870 and 1885

government of Canada took over, the people had the legal right to negotiated terms of annexation. In 1884-85, the Canadian government constituted the legal authority in the Saskatchewan District. People had to respect authority and have recourse to constitutional means only. The use of violence amounted to an act of treason or rebellion, not resistance.

3. During the 1870 resistance, the Church became actively involved. As a result, the clergy played the role of intermediary between Canadian government authorities and the Métis. Having secured a promise of amnesty from Ottawa, the Métis tended to blame the clergy when this promise failed to become a reality. The Métis blamed the priests when their leaders were arrested, forced into exile, or died mysteriously. As a result of this scenario, the Church learned its lesson well: It is best not to become directly involved.
4. In 1869-70, the great majority of priests in the Red River district were of French-Canadian origin - Ritchot, Taché, Belcourt, etc... In 1884-85, the priests in the Saskatchewan district were from France. André, Moulin, Fourmond, Grandin and others did not have the same appreciation of French-Canadian nationalism. They did not view the evolution of Canadian history as being a perpetual struggle between the French and the English with the French constantly fighting for survival.
5. Following the rebellion of 1869-70, Mgr. Taché and his colleagues had been shocked by the strength of the backlash and the severity of the racial dispute which had ensued. The clergy had been particularly disturbed by the accusations, formulated by the Anglo-Saxon majority, that the Roman Catholic Church had hatched the entire plot and was responsible for the execution of Thomas Scott in order to ensure that the West remain a French Catholic preserve.

No doubt, Taché and his foot-soldiers recognized that the constitutional guarantees secured by the Métis (separate schools and equality of French and English) would survive only if substantial reinforcements were brought in to counter the anticipated influx of Ontarians. The ambitious colonization project nurtured by the Roman Catholic Church would suffer a severe setback if the Métis had recourse to violence. If colonization failed, the constitutional guarantees would become vulnerable according to Mgr. Taché

The preceding are but a series of hypotheses, that is, food for thought. More research is required to test and substantiate these theories. The diaries kept by missionaries, correspondence between priests in the field and their superiors will have to be studied in detail. We have here a good potential thesis topic for someone who has a good reading knowledge of French.