

## The Early Efforts of the Oblate Missionaries in Western Canada

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**ABSTRACT.** The work of the Catholic Church in Western Canada began in 1818 but was limited in scope by a shortage of manpower and the vastness of the territory to be covered. Progress was slow until the arrival in 1845 of missionaries of the Oblate Order of Mary Immaculate, an Order which had committed itself strongly to working in the North West. The efforts of members of this Order on the prairies over the following thirty years or so are the subject of this paper. The establishment of missions throughout the area, the views of the Oblates on the Indians, their study of the Indian languages, their role as peace makers and their general contribution to the development of the West are each reviewed. In the process, a partial picture emerges of some of the personages involved, especially Taché and Lacombe.

### RESUME

L'Eglise Catholique commença son oeuvre dans l'Ouest du Canada en 1818 mais trouva son champ d'action limité, à cause d'un manque de main d'oeuvre et de l'étendue du territoire à couvrir. Les progrès furent lents jusqu'à l'arrivée, en 1845, de missionnaires de l'ordre des Oblats de Marie Immaculée, ordre qui s'était fortement engagé à travailler dans le Nord-Ouest. Cet exposé porte sur les efforts entrepris par les membres de cet Ordre dans les Prairies, durant les trente années suivantes. Y sont étudiés, tour à tour, l'établissement des missions dans la région, les opinions des Oblats sur les Indiens, leur étude des langues indiennes, leur rôle de pacificateurs et leur contribution générale au développement de l'Ouest. Durant cet exposé, on verra émerger un portrait partiel de quelques-uns des personnages en question, tout particulièrement Taché et Lacombe.

### INTRODUCTION

The work of the Catholic church in the West began in 1818, when Bishop Octave Plessis of Quebec appointed Father Norbert Provencher as the head of the new permanent mission in Red River.<sup>1</sup> Provencher, accompanied by Father Sévère Dumoulin and the young Guillaume Edge, left Montreal on May 19, 1818 and reached Red River on July 16. The instructions which they had received from Bishop Plessis on April 20 were very detailed,<sup>2</sup> and committed them to a very demanding and ambitious program of missionary work.

The first priority spelled out in the instructions was to work among the Indians, but Provencher was unable to do much in this direction for some years. He was plagued by a drastic shortage of manpower. Between 1818 and 1845, he received only twelve diocesan priests, most of whom returned within a few years to their Quebec diocese,<sup>3</sup> and never had more than four priests at the same time.<sup>4</sup> Yet he was expected to cover a territory extending from what is now Ontario to the Rockies and from the United States to the Arctic Ocean.

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Editor's note: In the previous issue of *Prairie Forum* for Fall, 1978 we published the translation by Father Carrière of a letter written in 1851 by Bishop Taché at Ile à la Crosse to his mother, concerning his work among the Chipewyans; we believe that this was the first time the letter had been published in English. The paper published here is a broad summary of the work of the Oblate missionaries in the North West which forms a useful accompaniment to the Taché letter.

With the few workers at his disposal, Provencher did his best to organize this vast territory, first at Red River itself where he established schools, for boys in 1818,<sup>5</sup> and for girls in 1829.<sup>6</sup> He also introduced weaving and founded a few settlements in the colony. Later he worked at Pembina, now in North Dakota, which had to be abandoned by order of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1823 when it became known that the mission was on the American side of the border.<sup>7</sup> Provencher thus transferred it to White Horse Plain or St. Francis Xavier.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of his sincere desire to work for the Indians which he had manifested in a letter to Bishop Plessis on the eve of his departure from Montreal,<sup>9</sup> Provencher had to wait until 1833 to establish a true Indian mission. In 1831 he received a new missionary in the person of Antoine Belcourt, who had studied the Algonkian language for some months in Oka, Quebec. Belcourt continued his studies at Red River before establishing in 1833 the Saint Paul Mission on the left bank of the Assiniboine River, at a place called Prairie à Fournier some 30 miles west of Red River. It was henceforth known as Saint Paul des Sauteux. This mission among the Saulteaux Indians was never very successful, despite the optimistic reports written by Belcourt and the relatively large outlay of money which had been required to establish an agricultural colony and erect the necessary buildings. The Saulteaux gave permission for the baptism of their children, but the conversion of adults was almost impossible.<sup>10</sup>

A second Indian mission was also organized by Belcourt at Wabassimong [White Dog], at the junction of the Winnipeg and English Rivers, in 1838. Founded on the same basis as Saint Paul des Sauteux, it had even less success, probably due to the fact that it had no resident priest. Brief visits were also made by various priests to Lake Manitoba, Duck Bay, Swan River, The Pas, Qu'Appelle, Fort Pelly, and Carlton, while Wabassimong and Rainy Lake were visited every year. Then came the mission of Lac Sainte Anne (near Edmonton), visited in 1842 and established as a residential mission in 1844.

These were the apparently meagre results of more than twenty-five years of hard labour on the part of Provencher and his priests. However, one must bear in mind the small number of priests and the lack of material support in those early years. Father Provencher was made a Bishop on February 1, 1820, and he saw his territory separated from the diocese of Quebec on April 16, 1844. He was thus left to his own resources. The diocese of Quebec was no longer responsible for the missions of the North West. Provencher now had four missions with resident priests (Saint Boniface or Red River, White Horse Plain or St. Francis Xavier, Saint Paul des Sauteux and Lac Sainte Anne). There were also four schools in the diocese with a total attendance of about 140 students.

Over the years, Provencher had made a number of requests to Quebec for missionaries other than priests of that diocese, for he contended that successful ministry to the enormous area which he administered from Red River could not be achieved through the diocesan priests. He felt that as long as these priests came to the North West with the intention of returning in the not too distant future to Quebec, they would "make little effort to learn the language."<sup>11</sup> In 1844, Provencher was at last successful with one of these pleas. After hearing of the death on June 4, 1844 of Father Edouard Darveau, drowned at Duck Bay on Lake Winnipegosis,<sup>12</sup> he asked Bishop Ignace Bourget of Montreal if Bourget would send some priests of the Oblate order to the Red River.

The Oblates at this time were working in Bourget's diocese; they had been founded as The Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate in France in 1816, had accepted Canada as their first mission field, and had arrived in Montreal on December 2, 1841. Provencher himself had been instrumental in introducing the Oblates into the diocese of Quebec early in 1844 to take care of the Indian missions of James Bay, Temiskaming, Labrador and the North Shore of the St. Lawrence. He felt, therefore, that he had some claim to their help. His request to Bishop Bourget met with success,<sup>13</sup> and in the fall of 1844 Bourget wrote on Provencher's behalf to Bishop Eugene de Mazenod, the founder of the Oblates, in Marseilles:

His Lordship the Bishop of Juliopolis [Provencher's episcopal title], to whom you owe, after God, the introduction of your Fathers in the Diocese of Quebec, by a letter dated July 30 last, tells me of the death of one of his missionaries. . . . The worthy Bishop, who has worked since 1818 for the establishment of the faith in the North West territories of America, begs me to convey his most sincere wishes to have some of your priests to help him cultivate the unproductive vine confided to him by the Head of the family. He tells you, with an accent of confidence, *Adjuva me*.<sup>14</sup> Your heart, like Saint Paul's, will not be able to resist such a pressing invitation. This good Bishop thinks that in order to treat the honourable Hudson's Bay Company, the master of this immense territory, with consideration, the first priests sent to him should be Canadians. I think it would be possible to give him satisfaction by making a few changes here with the priests you would send because vocations continue to blossom among the subjects of this diocese. . . .

In my mind, this is a beautiful mission and surely the opportunity should not be missed.<sup>15</sup>

Mazenod had already met Provencher in Paris in 1836 and was favourably disposed towards his work in the North West. He wrote a letter to Bishop Joseph Signay of Quebec on December 5, 1844,<sup>16</sup> authorizing Signay to send two Oblate priests (the Oblate Order had only fifty priests at the time) to Red River. Signay transmitted this good news to Provencher and expressed the hope that these two priests would soon be followed by other Oblates.<sup>17</sup>

The assignment was given to Father Pierre Aubert and Brother Alexandre Taché. Thus began the long association between the Oblates and the native peoples of the North West. Taché was at this time a novice and not an ordained priest, a fact which prompted some harsh remarks from Bishop Provencher on the arrival of Taché and Aubert at Red River on August 25, 1845. "If you are not a priest," he remarked "you should have stayed home!"<sup>18</sup> He also muttered, "They are sending children when men are required!"<sup>19</sup> No one, of course, could have foreseen Taché's long association with the North West nor the fact that he would eventually succeed Provencher and become indeed the most prolific Oblate writer on the Indians. Taché was in fact ordained on October 12 of that same year. With the arrival of these first two Oblates, the diocese of Red River was now assured of a constant flow of missionaries which, although inadequate for the gigantic task to be undertaken, was nevertheless sufficient to ensure the survival and development of the missions.

## THE OBLATES AND THE NORTH WEST MISSIONS

### *The Red River Area*

The Oblates spent their first winter at St. Boniface studying the *Saulteaux* language and ministering to the whites and *Metis* of the colony and of White Horse Plain. Father Aubert was the first Oblate to work among the Indians. He visited Wabassimong in June, 1846 but without success; the Indians were totally indifferent and no traces of Christianity were to be found among them. Not one individual could make the sign of the Cross, the most elementary Catholic practice. Agriculture, which some thought to be a preliminary step towards Christianization, was non-existent; the Indians had no use for it. Aubert contended that it was an error to begin civilizing the Indians through agriculture before establishing solid foundations of Christian teaching.<sup>20</sup> Bishop Provencher once said, "it would have been better to have a little less ploughing and a little more catechism."<sup>21</sup>

Aubert, accompanied by Father Henri Faraud, returned to Wabassimong the following year with the same result: their efforts were in vain. The indifference of the *Saulteaux* was almost complete. Greed, avarice and drunkenness—results of the contact with the whites—not only turned the Indians away from religion, but prompted many to convince others not to embrace Christianity.<sup>22</sup>

This new failure persuaded Aubert that nothing could be done at this time for the *Saulteaux*. Provencher thought likewise and, instead of working in vain, he preferred to send his missionaries to tribes living in the western part of his diocese who were asking for priests. The mission at Wabassimong was temporarily but reluctantly abandoned. According to Bishop Taché, writing many years later, the Protestants

who came after the Catholics met with the same lack of success.<sup>23</sup>

The mission at Duck Bay, on the west shore of Lake Winnipegosis, founded by Thibault in 1840 and later entrusted to the care of Darveau, experienced a similar fate. Father François Bermond established himself at the mission in 1847, but the Indians did not respond to the efforts of the priest and the mission was abandoned until 1861, although Christians settled in the area were visited more or less regularly from Saint Boniface.<sup>24</sup> Bermond wrote: "I think God does not want the Saulteaux since they want so little of Him and his priest."<sup>25</sup>

### *Ile à la Crosse*

After the failure of the missions around Red River, Bishop Provencher resolved to send his priests to a new field. Ile à la Crosse, in what is now northern Saskatchewan, became the first lasting mission of the Oblates in the North West. The place had been visited by Thibault as early as the spring of 1845; he stayed for three weeks and was very much pleased with the response of the Chipewyan Indians. Thibault met about eighty families extremely eager to learn about God, and the priest was of the opinion that it was impossible to find Indians better disposed to accept the teachings of Catholicism. His report to Red River was so enthusiastic that Provencher decided to establish a permanent mission at Ile à la Crosse as soon as feasible. With the arrival of the Oblates in the summer of 1845, he decided that the time had come, and the next spring he arranged for two missionaries to make the trip in a canoe offered by George Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Fathers Louis Laflèche, a diocesan priest and future Bishop of Trois-Rivières, Quebec, and Alexandre Taché, O.M.I. were appointed for the new venture. They left St. Boniface on July 8, 1846, with the order "to go as far as possible to bring the glad tidings of salvation to the Indian people of the North West."<sup>26</sup> They reached Ile à la Crosse on September 10 and were welcomed with great joy by the Indians while Roderick McKenzie, who was in charge of the Fort, provided generous hospitality and accommodation. During the course of the winter of 1846-47 Taché visited Green Lake and Reindeer Lake; he returned to the mission in June.<sup>27</sup> The summer was then spent in preparing a small garden and ministering to the Indians who came to the Fort. In August, Taché travelled to Portage La Loche and Athabasca.

← All this activity shows that the founding of the mission at Ile à la Crosse was an important stepping stone towards the North, the penetration of which was in accord with the orders of the Bishop to go "as far as possible." The work of the Catholic missionaries in the vast districts of Athabasca and Mackenzie had also begun, and soon a string of missions was established in these remote parts of the country: Fort Chipewyan (1847), Fort Resolution (1852), Fond du Lac [Saskat-

chewan] (1853), Fort Simpson (1858), Fort Providence (1858), Fort Norman (1859), Fort Good Hope (1859), Fort Rae (1859), Fort Liard (1860) and Peel River (1860). By 1870, many of these posts had a resident priest.<sup>28</sup>

The work at Ile à la Crosse seems to have progressed to Taché's satisfaction. He wrote to his mother on June 27, 1848:

Our Chipewyans are receptive to the instructions of Father Laflèche and appear to make rapid progress in virtue . . .

The Cree of this post seem to be softening a little. Some have already come to see us and have begun to receive instruction. It is possible that a visit among them would be successful in attracting a few more. It is among these infidels that we see the efforts of the father of lies to keep ensnared those who already belong to him. On our arrival here, some of these Cree, perhaps more wicked than the others, spread all sorts of rumours among their brothers, so that many were frightened and dreaded seeing us, regarding us as great sorcerers who, by the power of our magic, could bring all kinds of calamities upon them. These foolish prejudices have now partly disappeared. The relations we have had with some of them have shown that we are not man-eaters and that we have come so far only to do them good.

It is strange to hear the stories told about us. Among the Chipewyans these stories are all in our favour; they depict us as extraordinary men, just as Mohammed did in speaking of himself. The Cree, on the contrary, picture us as hideous monsters, if not in form, at least in character.<sup>29</sup>

From the same period, we have an interesting and external testimony concerning the two missionaries. Sir John Richardson, who passed through Ile à la Crosse on his way to the Arctic in 1848, wrote:

[The Catholic missionaries] applied themselves to the study of languages and were soon enabled to teach many of their converts to read and write. By sympathising with their people in all their distresses, taking a strong interest in every thing that concerns them, by acting as their physicians when sick, and advisers on all occasions, the priests of the Mission have gained their entire confidence.<sup>30</sup>

Richardson also said some things which Taché took exception to. He quotes Richardson as writing:

Canadian priests from the Red River colony went annually to Methy Portage [in the District of Ile à la Crosse]. . . . on these occasions, members of the Indians were baptized, a considerable inducement to submit to the rite being the present of a piece of tobacco. . . .<sup>31</sup>

Taché was displeased by this observation and denied it as emphatically as Richardson had affirmed it:

[this is the picture that Sir J.R. gives of the Catholic missionaries of Ile à la Crosse], that they would bribe the Indians with a piece of tobacco to agree to baptism. No, no, this is not so. If there are "Tobacco Christians" or "Pemmican Christians" in

this country, they are not our work. We gladly leave the honour and merit to whom it concerns; it would be injustice on our part to try and deprive them of it, because we have not the slightest right to it. Far from it, we have a rule never to give anything to those we instruct, so that they may not be misled on the nature of our ministry among them. Those who know us know it as well as myself. It would be unwise on our part to use such a means of winning over the Indians; we would have no chance of success; the battle would be too unequal and the victory would go to those who have more tobacco, pemmican, etc. than we have. Far from using tobacco to win over the Indians, in this respect, as in anything else, we have at once attacked prejudices, by refusing the pipe of tobacco, the universal sign of peace and friendship among them. As we brought them the peace "that the world does not give and which surpasses all understanding," we gave them the Cross as their standard, so that the sight of the sign of our redemption might remind them that the Son of God died on that Cross to bring us true peace.<sup>32</sup>

A little farther on, after quoting Richardson's favourable comment on the missionaries, Taché adds:

This is more reasonable, more just and more true than the "piece of tobacco" and nevertheless the two assertions are made by the same author and on the same page, So true is it that when one writes for a biased public, one must insinuate something unfavourable when it is necessary to speak in praise of those one knows the readers do not like.<sup>33</sup>

In 1849, although the mission received the help of the first brother, Louis Dubé, who spent the rest of his life at Ile à la Crosse, there were some sad moments. Abbé Lafèche was ill and was recalled to St. Boniface, and the revolution in France threatened to exhaust the ability of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith to support the Oblates. The life of the mission was in danger, but Taché and his new companion Faraud were determined to stay at all costs. They sent a letter to their immediate Oblate superior in St. Boniface, Father Pierre Aubert:

Reverend Father, the news contained in your letter afflicts us, but does not discourage us; we know that you have our mission at heart and, for ourselves, we cannot accept the idea of deserting our dear neophytes and numerous catechumens. We hope it will always be possible to secure altar bread and wine for the Holy Sacrifice. Besides this source of consolation and strength, we ask but one thing from you, that is, permission to carry on our mission. The fishes of the lake will suffice for our existence, the hides of the wild animals for our clothing. For pity's sake, do not recall us.<sup>34</sup>

The mission was kept up. Taché, who was in charge after the departure of Lafèche in 1849, had to leave for a while in 1851. He had been appointed Bishop on June 24, 1850, learned of this promotion in February, 1851 and was called to France for his consecration.<sup>35</sup> Taché stayed only a little while in the old country and was back at Red River

on June 27, 1852, leaving on July 8 for Ile à la Crosse where he remained until the death of Provencher in 1853, ministering to the Indians and visiting the various posts as an ordinary priest. Taché had also brought new men to Red River with him; by 1852, the Oblates had nine priests and two brothers in the diocese, besides four secular priests.

In 1854, he left the mission and went to St. Boniface to assume his new duties. But he came back soon afterwards, with Father Vital Grandin, O.M.I., future Bishop of St. Albert, in the course of an extensive tour of the missions of the North West. The mission at Ile à la Crosse continued to flourish, and the missionaries were always satisfied with the conduct of their flock, especially of the Chipewyans. Material and spiritual development went hand in hand. A beautiful little church was built, as well as a house for the priests and another one for the Grey Nuns of Montreal who arrived in 1860 and opened a school attended by some fifteen children, a small hospital and a home for the crippled and aged.<sup>36</sup> Ile à la Crosse became known as the "Cradle of the Bishops of the West," since Bishop Laflèche, Taché, Grandin and Faraud all began their missionary life there.

#### *Portage La Loche and Reindeer Lake*

Thibault, the first missionary at Ile à la Crosse, was also the first Catholic priest to visit Portage La Loche, in 1845. Taché became the first Oblate to visit the post on his way to Athabasca in 1847 and 1848. He was most impressed by the attitude of the Indians. Several other priests passed through the Portage at various intervals, but the mission was not established as a residency until 1895. It is difficult to accurately assess the success of this mission in the early years, for its records were lost in the fire which destroyed the mission building at Ile à la Crosse in 1867. All we know is that there were three hundred Chipewyans visiting the post in 1883.<sup>37</sup>

Laflèche and Taché passed through Fort Charly [Reindeer Lake] in August, 1846 on their way to Ile à la Crosse and gathered information which gave them hope for the establishment of a mission. Roderick McKenzie of Ile à la Crosse urged Taché to spend some time among the Indians of Reindeer Lake, but due to his inexperience at the time, the priest declined to do so until 1847. He was encouraged by the attitude of the natives and spent two months with them.<sup>38</sup> He returned again in 1848, but as the only priest in Ile à la Crosse in 1849 he was unable to visit the post at Reindeer Lake that year and it was abandoned until 1860, when Father Végreville was sent there for fear that the Protestants might decide to open a residential mission. He was able to reopen the mission in 1861, but it was a very poor mission. The fact that the Indians never came in large groups and that they stayed for only a short while was another source of difficulty in instructing

them properly. In order to overcome this obstacle, the missionaries decided to visit the Indians in their camps to begin or pursue their religious instruction. Progress was slow, but a school was established under the care of Brother Guillet in 1862, and by the end of 1865 the mission was beginning to show some promise. By 1876, about eight hundred Chipewyans were visiting the post and Father Gasté, then in charge, confirmed that the attitude of his Catholics was improving and the practice of religion was almost general.

### *Fort Qu'Appelle—Lebret*

The Fort Qu'Appelle area was not visited frequently by the Catholics in the early part of the nineteenth century. We know that Provencher went there in 1819 but apparently without too much success.<sup>39</sup> Other short visits were made after that date, but it was not until 1864, when Taché passed through the Qu'Appelle Valley and found the place enchanting,<sup>40</sup> that any significant efforts were made. Although a Protestant mission had been in operation between 1842 and 1859, Taché decided to send a priest, for he saw the ravages caused by liquor. He promised the few Catholic families that he would come back the following year and establish the mission. On October 6, 1865, the Bishop was back. He found a certain number of Metis families and took possession of the place.<sup>41</sup>

James Settee, of the Church Missionary Society, did not approve of this decision and wrote in his *Journal* on November 13, 1865:

I was sadly grieved to hear from the Qu'Appelle people, that Bishop Taché, the papist Bishop of these parts, had availed himself of the vacancy of this place mentioned and had selected a spot [at Lebret] below the Company's Fort. This place belongs to the C.M. Society; our Church opened this place early in 1842 and it has been kept up since then, in a spiritual way, and no doubt the place would have been advanced in temporal things, had not the young Boys expelled me in 1859, much to my regret. Since then I have constantly visited the place once a year. I hope something may be done for the place.<sup>42</sup>

Taché sent Father Ritchot on a mission to Lebret in 1866 and 1867; and, since the Qu'Appelle Valley was considered important enough for a resident priest, Father Jules Decorby was stationed there in 1868. The mission became the headquarters of this western district of the diocese of St. Boniface. The priests ministered to the Metis and the Indians and followed them in their summer and winter hunts.<sup>43</sup> The mission became very important, especially because of the Indian residential school established in 1884 under the guidance of Father Joseph Hugonnard, O.M.I.<sup>44</sup>

### *Lac Sainte Anne*

Although the first residential mission of the Oblates was located in

what is now Saskatchewan, the first permanent mission outside the territory of Red River was that of Lac Sainte Anne, near Edmonton. Edmonton was first visited by Fathers Norbert Blanchet and Modeste Demers, on their way to Oregon in 1838. The following year, John Rowand, Chief Factor at Edmonton, invited the priests to come to Edmonton; but George Simpson, the Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, was not in favour of such an enterprise, probably because he had already entered into an understanding with the Wesleyans, whose Rev. Robert Terrill Rundle arrived at the *Big House* on Sunday, October 18, 1840.<sup>45</sup>

Rowand was firm in his plan and renewed his request in 1841. A Metis called Picher travelled to Red River to insist on the necessity of a priest for his compatriots.<sup>46</sup> Provencher agreed, and Father Thibault made an exploratory visit in 1842. Upon his favourable report, he was sent back in 1843 and laid the foundations of two missions: Frog River and Devil's Lake. Then in 1844 Thibault, who was shy with the whites, established himself at Lake Manitou or Devil's Lake and changed the name to Lac Sainte Anne. From there Catholicism spread over a large area since the missionaries went as far as Lac La Biche, Ile à la Crosse, Portage La Loche, Slave Lake, and the Peace River district, besides ministering to the population of Fort des Prairies (Fort Augustus) or Edmonton.<sup>47</sup>

The mission proved a success, even among the flock of the Reverend Rundle who, one can imagine, was not at all happy with the result.<sup>48</sup> In 1852, Thibault left for Red River and was replaced by Albert Lacombe, soon to become an Oblate, who worked most usefully in the Canadian West for fifty-four years. Lacombe spent the winter of 1852-53 in the Fort at Edmonton, studying the Cree language. From the Lac Sainte Anne mission, already a fairly comfortable one with a beautiful chapel and a small house, Lacombe began his work in the western prairies. He went as far as Slave Lake, called at Fort Jasper and ministered to the population of Edmonton. During his visits to the hunting grounds of the Cree, he met with the Blackfoot, Piegan and Blood Indians, who received him well but were in no haste to accept Christianity; nevertheless he was soon to acquire great influence among them.

In 1859, Lacombe sent his companion, Father Rémas, to Red River to bring the Grey Nuns to the mission. The sisters began their work without delay. After their arrival in September,<sup>49</sup> they started learning the Indian language under the guidance of Lacombe,<sup>50</sup> opened a school,<sup>51</sup> visited the sick, and undertook various other endeavours. The school continued to function under the sisters until their transfer to St. Albert.

As for the Indians around Lac Sainte Anne, we have an idea of their character from a letter of Father Caer in 1862.<sup>52</sup> He described

them as very numerous and of a frightening ferocity. Their implacable and endless wars were an obstacle to conversion. Laziness was also a great source of vice. They easily obtained the necessities of life, the millions of buffalo on the immense prairies giving them delicate and abundant food. The goal of the missionaries was to help them relinquish their idleness and encourage them to take up agriculture. The difficulties, however, were great. Love of life in the woods and prairies had given the Indians an independence which constituted an almost insurmountable obstacle to civilization. They lived exclusively by hunting and fishing. Nevertheless several Indians had built houses and cultivated some land, but on a very small scale. Nor did the fifteen hundred Halfbreeds within the limits of the mission show any great inclination to farming; the missionaries therefore tried to set a good example of hard work and manual labour.

Caer was of the opinion that the Oblates did a great deal of good in the country, but could win many more souls for the Lord if they were more numerous and could live among the Indians. He had met one Indian, baptized eight years earlier, who had not seen a priest since then. Caer was saddened by the fact that many Indians lived and died without seeing the "man of prayer." In conclusion to his letter, he added a vehement prayer: "Reverend and most beloved Father, have pity on your most abandoned children." This was his way of asking for more missionaries.

From Lac Sainte Anne, the Oblates went to Edmonton and St. Albert.

### *Edmonton*

Fort Edmonton was visited by Blanchet and Demers in 1836 and by Thibault in 1842, as we have seen, and by De Smet, S.J. in December 1845.<sup>53</sup> The work was not easy in the beginning. Thibault wrote on April 5, 1846 that alcohol turned his neophytes of Edmonton into brutes.<sup>54</sup> After this, the sources are almost silent on Edmonton until 1860. We know that William Christie, in charge of the Fort, had authorized the erection of a Catholic chapel within its confines in 1859,<sup>55</sup> while the same privilege had been refused the Wesleyans.

The arrival of gold seekers on the Saskatchewan River near Edmonton,<sup>56</sup> of which the missionaries speak for the first time in September 1862,<sup>57</sup> does not seem to have had any influence on the mission. The priests insisted on several occasions that the reports of the gold mining had been exaggerated. In 1864, Lacombe stated that the miners were leaving and had found nothing but hardships.<sup>58</sup>

The main work at the Fort, besides the administration of the sacraments, seems to have been the school, which was run by Father Rémas and especially Brother Constantine Scollen from 1860 to 1868. The number of children, both Protestant and Catholic, attending this

English school was never great, but reached about thirty in 1860.<sup>59</sup> Scollen seems to have had great success teaching the various subjects until 1866, when he wrote that Christie was losing his interest in the school.<sup>60</sup> The next year, Scollen stated that the school was now very small,<sup>61</sup> and finally, on February 2, 1868, he reported that he had left the school and was now working in the prairies. The school, which according to Morice was the first for both Protestants and Catholics west of Red River, had been in operation for at least eight years.<sup>62</sup>

### *St. Albert*

Considering Lac Sainte Anne unsuitable for agriculture, Taché decided during a visit in 1860 that a more convenient site should be selected. He and Lacombe chose the place where St. Albert now stands, naming the mission after Lacombe's patron saint. Lacombe prepared the site on the Sturgeon River, building a bridge, houses and a grist-mill. Everything seemed to be in good order as early as 1862, and Lacombe boasted of his bridge, the first west of Hudson Bay, which had "not moved one inch"<sup>63</sup> and commented that the crop looked very good. The hamlet was sufficiently developed in 1863 for the transfer of the Grey Nuns from Lac Sainte Anne to St. Albert. It has been said that the arrival of the Sisters in the region marked "a milestone in the opening of the West" and that they were "the first educated women to come to the area."<sup>64</sup> The mission developed satisfactorily and continued to prosper.

### *Lac La Biche*

This can be considered as the last mission to be established in the early days. It was first visited by Thibault in 1844 and attended from Lac Sainte Anne until 1853, when Lacombe decided that the presence of a resident priest was urgently needed,<sup>65</sup> since a Methodist minister had been there several times and had appointed a schoolmaster, Henry Steinhur, to act as a minister. When Taché visited Lac La Biche in 1854, he ruled that it would become a residential mission.<sup>66</sup>

It was to be a kind of warehouse for the missions to the North, and the area also seemed suitable for agriculture. Up to that time all transportation had been done by the Hudson's Bay Company, but it was easy to foresee that the increasing number of missions and the exigencies of commerce would some day be a source of difficulties. Navigation between Lac La Biche and Lake Athabasca was relatively easy, and it was possible to reach the prairie by building a road for about 100 miles through the forest between Lac La Biche and Fort Pitt. By September 1856, the first cart road reached Fort Pitt, and the road from Lac La Biche which had at first been considered an impossible dream was now a realistic proposition.<sup>67</sup>

The mission was attended by Saulteaux, Cree and Chipewyans.

The task of the missionary was not an easy one, because the Métis apparently thought that they could teach theology to the pastor. Besides, the Indians were by no means constant in their faith. Father Rémas wrote that "the words of the priest bore fruit while he was present, but as soon as he left, the enemy sowed the cockle of oblivion, routine and vice."<sup>68</sup> Moreover, the Indians hoped to derive material advantage from his presence and their motto was: "We do nothing for nothing and we want everything for nothing." Nonetheless, through patience and hard work the mission grew to be reasonably prosperous. In 1862, the Grey Nuns came to Lac La Biche, but they also encountered difficulties. The parents did not care to send their children to school and when they did so they considered it as a service to the mission. They also went as far as to complain about the food, the clothing and the alleged ill-treatment received by the children. The number of pupils varied between 18 and 36 and the parents often complained that their offspring were becoming lazy.<sup>69</sup>

### *Saint Paul des Cris*

The final mission established before 1870 was that of Saint Paul des Cris (Brosseau-Saddle Lake). When Lacombe was relieved of his post as Superior of St. Albert in 1864, he devoted his life to the welfare of the Indians of the prairies. He was convinced that the Indians would make more rapid and serious progress if they were united in villages. This was the idea behind his agricultural venture at Brosseau on the banks of the Saskatchewan River, a hundred miles or so downstream from Edmonton.

During his regular visit to the Cree in 1865, Lacombe invited them for the next spring to a place where they liked to assemble. On the first days of May 1866, more than one thousand Indians were faithful to the rendezvous. He offered to settle them on farms in order that they could be self-supporting should the buffalo disappear. They agreed, and the priest gave them the first lesson in agriculture. He ploughed furrows in which the Indians sowed barley and potatoes. He then divided the land into small plots which he allotted to each family. While the parents were working on the farm, the missionary gathered the children to teach them catechism.

Lacombe spent a great deal of his time on the prairie with the hunters, and stayed at the mission only in the intervals between the hunts. However, a companion missionary was soon allocated to him. As long as war continued between the Crees and the Blackfoot, there was always a good number of huts around the mission site where the Indians felt more secure; their enemies would never come near that holy place. As soon as the wars between the various nations ended, the colony suffered a serious set-back. Hunters preferred to live in bands and run the prairie for buffalo. Thus it was decided to abandon the

experiment in 1873, and the mission was transferred to Saddle Lake, considered a more advantageous location, in 1876.<sup>70</sup> Although the experiment in agriculture had not been a success, the gathering of large groups of Indians over a prolonged period brought them Christian education, and according to the baptismal records a great number of them were baptized and many marriages were solemnized.

Irrespective of the location of the mission, the work of the Oblate priests was similar throughout the West. In a *Directory for Foreign Missions* in 1853, the founder of the Oblates issued guidelines on the conduct of the missionaries. Some of the more important directions, probably inspired by de Mazenod's consultations with Taché during the latter's visit to Marseilles in 1851-52, were: that the younger missionaries must be put under the guidance of more experienced men; that baptism must be administered only to those sufficiently instructed and giving guarantee of perseverance; that catechisms must be prepared in the language of each nation; that the teaching of religion would be helped by the singing of hymns; that the missionaries must try to change the nomadic life of the population to a more sedentary one. To that end they were to use, among others, the following means: to show their neophytes how to build houses and till the land, to teach the most elementary crafts of civilization and to establish schools in every mission whenever possible. Finally the zeal of the missionary was to cover everything which related to the temporal welfare of his flock.<sup>71</sup>

## THE OBLATES AND THE INDIAN LANGUAGES

The Oblate fathers understood from the outset that their missionary endeavours would be sterile without a knowledge of the local languages. Their efforts to master them did not bring equal success to all of them but, in general, they were soon able to carry out their ministry without the help of interpreters.

Taché himself had great difficulty with this aspect of his work. In a letter to Louis, his brother, on June 15, 1846, he complained:<sup>72</sup>

Of all studies, I think that of the Indian languages is the most disagreeable. It contains nothing that can nourish the mind and the heart; all is so dry and arid that one resigns himself to their study only for the love of God. This is one of the true miseries of the missionary and very certainly the most laborious part of our life. If only the gift of the gab could give that of the tongues or languages;<sup>73</sup> but it is not so, and like all others, I have to overcome great difficulties.

Taché also added that he was studying under the direction of Belcourt and that he had to go to Saint Paul des Sauteurs with his mentor. Unfortunately the Indians at Ile à la Crosse, where he was to be sent the following summer, were mainly Chipewyans and the remainder were Cree; thus the lessons of the winter were almost in vain. He was some-

what consoled by his view that "Saulteaux will not be useless because I believe that the grammatical parts of all these languages are almost alike." Nevertheless he experienced great difficulty at first at Ile à la Crosse, neither he nor Lafleche knowing a single word of either Chipewyan or Cree. Writing to his mother on January 6, 1847, Taché mentioned that a month or so after his arrival a certain number of Indians began to come to the fort. Ignorant of the language and lacking an interpreter, his instruction of them was limited to teaching the prayers in French. But he soon began to learn the languages.

For the past three months we have been studying Chipewyan and Cree. Our only help is a blind man who does not understand one word of French; you can easily guess the delight of such an occupation. With time and perseverance we shall succeed, I hope. Cree is not very difficult, but Chipewyan, as far as pronunciation is concerned, surpasses all I had imagined in difficulties of this sort.<sup>74</sup>

Taché's feelings on the Chipewyan tongue were expressed at greater length in the letter to his mother dated January 4, 1851.<sup>75</sup> Faraud expressed similar views when writing to a confrère in Oregon in 1849. After speaking of the Cree language, he added the following:

The language of the Chipewyans is less agreeable, although bearing the marks of an ancient type; it offers almost insurmountable difficulties. After nine months of intensive study, I have succeeded in understanding them a little, and I can make myself understood with difficulty. Nevertheless, I hope that with a little patience I will succeed in overcoming the greatest obstacles. I am convinced that I will never speak this language perfectly.<sup>76</sup>

Faraud was being modest, because he became an authority on Chipewyan and trained many young missionaries in that difficult language. Several years later he remarked that the missionaries had used the syllabic characters with great success in teaching the Chipewyans. Without printed books, the missionaries copied hymns as the best means of teaching the natives to read. After frequent repetition of the words, they soon recognized the signs and in less than a year they could read and write. Their zeal replaced the lack of schools, and each person became his brother's teacher.

The Cree language was another matter. Faraud found it one of the most pleasant and most ingenious of languages, and moreover offering no difficulty in pronunciation.<sup>77</sup> As for the Blackfoot language, Lacombe found it poorer than Cree, but apparently more lyrical and suited to the character of those who spoke it. He thought it to be derived from the Algonkian language.<sup>78</sup>

Finally the day came when the first printed book appeared in the missions. In 1857, Taché supervised the production of a small book printed in Montreal, *Prières cantiques et catechisme en langue montagnaise ou Chipewyan*, of which three thousand copies were pub-

lished. The book had only 144 pages, and Taché explained the difficulties of such an undertaking to Faraud on December 4, 1857:

One has to have done such a work to know what difficulties it has and how time consuming it is. You can easily imagine what the first proofs written in such a language and with such a writing are like.<sup>79</sup>

In the same year of 1857, Taché supervised the printing of a prayer book in the Cree language, a much easier task. Three thousand copies of this 288-page book were published.<sup>80</sup>

Besides writing books, each missionary made it a strict rule for himself to copy the works of his predecessors as a means of learning the language before composing his own dictionary. This work of preparing manuscripts and printing grammars, dictionaries and prayer books in the Indian languages continues to this day. In a recent but certainly incomplete survey covering only grammars and dictionaries,<sup>81</sup> I found 257 manuscripts and 23 printed books in 26 different languages of the Canadian West and Oregon, which was then considered as a Western mission. A bibliography of all the other manuscripts—sermons, catechisms, prayer books, even medicinal terms—would be much more impressive and would show that the Oblate missionaries made every effort to learn and use the Indian language in their daily relations with the Indians and in their church ministry.

### THE MISSIONARIES AS PEACE MAKERS

Besides their work of evangelizing the Indians and Métis, the Oblates, like the other missionaries, always tried to maintain peace among the various elements of the population. In 1857, when the Hudson's Bay Company had some difficulty in maintaining its authority, the missionaries were an instrument of peace as Sir George Simpson himself acknowledged:

The whole population of Red River, with very few exceptions, is unfriendly to us, and I regret to say the protestant Clergy have frequently taken part with the malcontented. The Roman Catholic Clergy have been more disposed to uphold the Company, probably under the impression that any change in the government of the Colony, especially its transfer to Canada, would weaken their influence.<sup>82</sup>

Whatever the motives of the Catholic clergy, the fact remains that the priests were trying to keep the peace. Simpson had already written to the Governor and Committee of the Company on June 30 of the same year:

The Roman Catholic portion of the population, guided I believe by the advice of their priests, did not join in the movement, which was principally confined to the Halfbreed, Scotch and Orkney settlers who acted upon the advice of their clergy.<sup>83</sup>

After 1859 especially, the missionaries used their influence among the Indians to help them live in peace among themselves and with the white settlers. From a letter of Sister Lamy dated at Lac Sainte Anne, December 20, 1860, we find that a party of Métis accompanied by Father Rémas was attacked by the Blackfoot Indians. The priest went to the enemy camp with a few of his companions who spoke Blackfoot and convinced the chief to make peace. The Indians shook hands with the priest and the fighting ceased.<sup>84</sup> In January 1861 Lacombe, learning that Cree and Blackfoot were fighting, sent letters to the warriors and the combat was ended.<sup>85</sup> This was only one of the numerous occasions when Lacombe intervened to bring about a cessation of hostilities. The following year, Father Alexis André of Pembina, who was attached to the diocese of St. Boniface, was commissioned by the American Government to act as an official agent of peace between the Sioux and the United States.<sup>86</sup>

In December 1862, Father Caer succeeded in bringing about peace between the Cree, Blackfoot, Sarcees and Bloods.<sup>87</sup> In the winter of 1865, when Lacombe was among the Cree, the Blackfoot fell upon them and the missionary's tent was hit by bullets. The priest later said: "The assailants did not know that the priest was in the camp. Otherwise they would not have attacked, they respect him too much."<sup>88</sup> Lacombe was thus preparing himself for his peace missions, at Blackfoot Crossing in 1883,<sup>89</sup> and during the Métis uprising of 1885.<sup>90</sup> Bishop Taché was asked in 1867, by a correspondent whose identity is unknown, to use his influence or that of his clergymen to induce Standing Buffalo to submit to the United States. The bishop replied that he was told that the Chief was at Moose Mountain, far from Red River, but that he thought one of his priests would go in that direction in the course of the winter, and that he would give the man instructions to try to influence the Chief.<sup>91</sup>

During the difficulties of 1870, the Government beseeched Taché, then in Rome to attend the first Vatican Council, to return to Canada and use his influence to pacify the inhabitants of Red River. Taché left Rome on January 31 and reached Red River on March 3. On April 2, he wrote to Bishop Faraud that everyone regarded it as a true miracle that the colony had not seen all the horrors of a civil war.<sup>92</sup> The respect in which Taché was held is also indicated by the words written by the Anglican bishop Robert Macray two days before Taché arrived at Red River:

Bishop Taché, the Roman Catholic Bishop, is daily looked for from Rome. We hope for much from his influence and sense. We trust that by his help a proper settlement may be made.<sup>93</sup>

As a final example of the value of the missionaries as peace makers among both Indians and whites, we may recall that in 1870 the Blackfoot were ready to attack Fort Edmonton when Lacombe was called by

Chief Factor W.J. Christie. The priest spoke to the Blackfoot, and by the next morning they had all dispersed.<sup>94</sup>

### THE MISSIONARIES' VIEWS OF THE INDIANS

The writings of the missionaries offer interesting insights into the way the Oblates saw the Indian peoples to whom they devoted their lives. Taché's detailed description of the Chipewyans is contained in a letter to his mother which was included in full in English translation in the Fall, 1978 issue of *Prairie Forum*.<sup>95</sup> It is therefore not reviewed here; we will restrict ourselves to the Cree and the Blackfoot.

#### *The Cree*

The first missionaries do not seem to have left much information about the Cree. As early as 1845, Thibault noted that the Cree of the prairies were corrupted by liquor and stealing, and engaged in war with their neighbours which occupied them part of the year.<sup>96</sup>

Speaking of the Cree of Ile à la Crosse in 1849, Faraud wrote that they were fully persuaded that religion was a good thing, but remained attached to their old superstitions and were reluctant to relinquish their dissolute ways.<sup>97</sup> They never had a good reputation among the first priests. Taché, who spoke so highly of the Chipewyans, wrote to de Mazenod in 1854 that among the Cree he encountered at Fort Pitt he found the evils of stealing, murder and drunkenness, and the most profound moral degradation. He also stressed their ferocity in their wars against the Blackfoot.<sup>98</sup>

An insight into the religious beliefs of the Cree is found in a report by Faraud in 1864:

Real religious principles are to be found among the Cree; they have forms of worship and ceremonies to which they are strongly attached. We have not observed real idolatry among them; they could be called deists. Their elders, whom they call medicine-men or those "who act as God"<sup>99</sup> have these two titles: doctor and sacrificer. They prove by their deeds that they act under the influence of the devils even if they are not possessed by them. As doctors, they pretend to cure all kinds of illness by natural drugs administered with the accompaniment of the beating of the drum and magic invocations.

As sacrificers, they offer the sacrifice of a dog to the demon to prevent him from harming them; to God they offer a nobler animal such as a deer, in order that He may do them good. The good they desire is very limited; they ask for a good hunt and good fishing. In the few prayers they make to God and whose formula we have in our hands I have up to now made useless efforts to discover some trace of their faith in the immortality of the soul; a more profound study might permit us to discover this fundamental dogma among their beliefs.<sup>100</sup>

Faraud commented that the Cree had a somewhat confused idea of

the creation of man, of his downfall, and especially of the flood. He added that they were intelligent and that they easily understood teachings about God. They were active and energetic, but unfortunately they were also vindictive and inclined to steal. They had great courage and would rarely retreat before the enemy, taking a barbarous pleasure in scalping their victims and devouring their bleeding hearts. According to Faraud, the Cree were obstinate in their beliefs and had many vices; they thus had difficulty in accepting the Christian religion because they would have had to change their lives.

### *The Blackfoot*

In 1866, Father Albert Lacombe sent a long letter to his Superior-General in which he spoke at length of the Blackfoot Indians. He stated that the information given mostly concerned the Blackfoot but was also almost equally true of the Cree and Stoney (Assiniboine) Indians.

The moral standards of the Prairie Indians were described as very bad, due to two problems which are difficult to solve:

1) idleness: living from day to day by the spoils of their hunt, the Indians think of nothing other than playing and smoking unless hunger presses them to chase the buffalo; 2) the crowded state in which so many persons bound by no feelings of religion, modesty or fear are gathered. Indians who live in small groups are certainly much more moral and of a more gentle character than those who are used to living in large camps. Among the Blackfoot conversations are licentious, and this applies equally among men and women and even children. The most daring conversations are quite normal for them. On this count, at least, moral sense is totally lacking among them.

Lacombe said that the women were modestly dressed while men, and children especially, seemed to ignore the obligation of clothing themselves. Women, he said, were in the most abject state; indeed they were slaves, but did not seem to realize it. Polygamy was a common practice among all the tribes of the prairies; it was not only one of the greatest obstacles to conversion to Christianity, but also a source of much quarreling and suffering.

Lacombe felt that one of the main vices of the Blackfoot was their inability to forget an insult: "A Blackfoot can wait years to avenge himself without giving any external sign of his state of mind, but when the occasion arises, woe to the man who insulted him." He also described the Blackfoot as being prone to stealing and very fond of alcoholic beverages. They also had much free time to gamble, which was a source of disagreements and fights, even murders. Nevertheless they were not without good qualities:

. . . they are hospitable: it is a glory to receive, as well as they can, any stranger who visits them. Besides they have a great respect for the priest, the man of prayer, whom they consider as powerful with God. They also have great regard for all the whites. I

remember on that account what an old chief told me one day: "God has completed his task of making the whites . . . they are a fully finished work; as for us, we have been made only in part, we are just half-finished.

Chiefs were chiefs in name only; they had no authority. Although there was no real government among the Blackfoot, there was a certain military hierarchy with seven different classes of soldiers and including a type of priest as well as the warriors. Initiation into a given level of the hierarchy involved a great deal of ceremony, some of which, Lacombe said, strangely resembled the ceremonies "of our holy religion." He explained that these various institutions seemed to exist to keep alive the nation's love for war and its very complicated polytheism which in no way resembled the religion of other Indian nations of the country.

Concerning religion, it seems certain that the Blackfoot had no concept of God or the Supreme Being. Contrary to other languages, there is no word for God in Blackfoot. The only divinity they know is *Natus*, the material and visible sun, "their father and founder." After the arrival of the missionaries the Blackfoot knew of God and called Him "Our Father who is above," but their first divinity has always been *Natus*, the sun, or *Napi*, the Old, to whom they offer bloody sacrifices and sacred offerings. Lying, anger and murder or stealing among relatives and allies were the only sins they recognized. Lust, revenge and pride were things which they boasted about. They had no knowledge of the rewards or punishments of the life hereafter; they regarded death as simply the passage from this land to another hunting ground where they would be happier. In closing, Lacombe described the funeral ceremonies and the Sun Dance.<sup>101</sup>

Mission work was always very difficult and, many years later, writing in his *Journal* in 1890, Lacombe remarked that the Indians were still not Christians. Although less nomadic than in the past, they were perhaps farther than ever from the faith. Their only Christianity consisted in being friends with the missionary, and having confidence in him, but nothing more.<sup>102</sup>

### THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE OBLATES TO THE NORTH WEST

In concluding this broad description of the work of the Oblate missionaries in the North West from 1845 to 1870, it is necessary to examine their achievements, which were indeed significant in view of the difficulties under which the Church worked in those early days. As Taché put it in 1888: ". . . nowhere in the world have priests been so badly lodged, so poorly clothed or ill-fed as those who planted the Cross on the shores of Red River or along the rivers of the North West."<sup>103</sup> Isolation was another difficulty, and a more dreadful one. News from the outer world came but twice a year and some of the

priests went years without seeing a confrère. It is impossible to understand the bitterness of this solitude without having experienced it; it was one of the greatest sufferings of the missionaries. Mastery of the languages was another problem, as we have seen. But the greatest frustration was the feeling of failure which sometimes gripped the missionaries despite the advancement that stemmed from their efforts.

From the point of view of the Catholic Church, considerable progress had been made. There had been one bishop and four priests at Red River in 1818, but by 1870 there were three dioceses, St. Boniface, St. Albert and Mackenzie, with four bishops, more than forty Oblate priests and fifteen brothers.<sup>104</sup> Education was prospering, with a college at St. Boniface and a number of schools throughout the North West, run by the Grey Nuns of Montreal or by the Oblate brothers. There were also a convent and an orphanage.<sup>105</sup> The missionaries had worked with some success among the Indians, the prime object of their activities in the West, converting some to Christianity, imbuing them with Christian morals, obliterating some of the barbaric acts directed against the elderly, the women and the children, and attempting to increase respect for human life and to instil the habit of temperance.

From the point of view of others in the North West, the Oblates had played an important role because the development of the Catholic Church in the West had coincided with the development of the country.<sup>106</sup> The Oblates introduced agriculture to many of the Indians, erected gristmills in several places and were the first to show the Indians how to "bake stones" or make lime. Lacombe built the first bridge in the North West, at St. Albert, while Faraud opened navigation between Lac La Biche and Athabasca. Others built a road from Lac La Biche to Fort Pitt and crossed the prairies with their carts. Some of the mission schools were expanded and transformed into Indian residential schools. The role of the priest as peace maker became more important, especially during the difficult period of the 1880s; the missionaries saw to it that the Indians were justly treated at the time of the Treaties and that their rights were safeguarded against the encroachments of the whites.

Thus we may support Bishop Taché's conclusion to his long letter to the Propagation of the Faith in Paris in 1888, in which he outlined the seventy years of missionary work in the North West:

The results are not all that Christian ambition might desire, but I can affirm unhesitatingly that these results have exceeded the hopes of those who assured them.

The light of the Gospel does not shine everywhere; nevertheless it has shone on all points of this immense territory. The knowledge of God was offered to the various tribes of these regions, even unto the most inhospitable extremities. Well-disposed hearts opened themselves to the inspiration of grace and no-one was found obstinate enough to elude completely the influence of Christianity.

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The most savage and barbarous customs have been softened. The most ferocious nations have given up their cruel habits. Traditional wars among the enemy tribes have ceased. There is no more fighting, no more scalping, no more enemy whose blood is desired.<sup>107</sup>

Many would consider that this in itself is enough to justify the existence of the missions and the hard work of the missionaries. Only a full study of the history of the Oblates from the time of their arrival on the prairies to the present day would give a complete picture. One Catholic from the early twentieth century went so far as to say that two influences had made the Canadian West, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and the Canadian Pacific Railway.<sup>108</sup> Notwithstanding his exaggeration, his comment shows that some Canadians held the Oblates in very high esteem. This esteem must certainly extend to Bishop Taché himself, of whom Beckles Willson wrote:

Monseigneur Alexandre Taché was a prelate of unusual sagacity, ability, and enlightenment, and exerted a special influence upon his coreligionists throughout the whole of Rupert's Land and the far North.<sup>109</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1 Two earlier attempts to establish the Catholic Church in Red River, by the Earl of Selkirk himself in 1811 and by Bishop Plessis in 1816, had come to naught.  
The difficulties of a historical study of this early period are accentuated by the disastrous fire at the Bishop's residence in St. Boniface on December 14, 1860 which destroyed the diocesan archives. The only general work on the subject is Morice, Adrian Gabriel, O.M.I., *History of the Catholic Church in Western Canada*, Toronto, Musson Book Company, 1910, 2 volumes; it is by no means comprehensive since Morice made little use of archival material. Thus in order to gather the information presented in this paper, I have been forced to visit document collections scattered across Canada and even abroad.
- 2 Archives of the Diocese of Quebec, *Registre des Lettres*, Vol. 4, pp. 190-191; Nute, Grace Lee, *Documents Relating to North-west Missions, 1815-1827*, St. Paul, Minnesota Historical Society, 1942, pp. 60-61.
- 3 Benoit, Paul, C.R.I.C., *Vie de Monseigneur Taché, Archevêque de St. Boniface . . .*, Montreal, Librairie Beauchemin, 1904, Vol. 1, p. 53.
- 4 Morice, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 303. There was an exception for a few months in 1844 when Fathers Thibault, Belcourt, Laflèche, Bourassa and Mayrand were in Red River at the same time, but Laflèche and Bourassa had arrived that same year.
- 5 On January 5, 1819 Dumoulin wrote from Pembina that Edge was teaching sixty students (Dumoulin to Plessis, Archives of the Diocese of Quebec, RR. II-117), Provencher also wrote of the school to Bishop Bernard Panet on November 24, 1819 (Provencher to Panet, Archives of the Diocese of Quebec, RR. I-20,21).
- 6 The school started in January 1829 (Provencher to Panet, June 6, 1829, Archives of the Diocese of Quebec, RR. I-68; *Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 12, 1913, p. 307; *Bulletin de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface*, 3, 1913, p. 127).
- 7 Provencher to Plessis, July 16, 1823 (Archives of the Diocese of Quebec, RR. I-49, 50; *Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 12, 1913, p. 223; *Bulletin de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface*, 3, 1913, p. 89).
- 8 Provencher to Plessis, June 1, 1824 (Archives of the Diocese of Quebec, RR. I-51; *Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 12, 1913, p. 227; *Bulletin de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface*, 3, 1913, p. 93).
- 9 Provencher to Plessis, May 18, 1818 (*Bulletin de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface*, 3, 1913, p. 8; *Les Cloches de Saint Boniface*, 12, 1913, p. 53; Nute, *op. cit.*, p. 101; Archives of the Diocese of Quebec, RR. I-4).
- 10 On the Saint Paul des Sautaux mission, see Provencher's pamphlet *Memoire ou notice sur l'établissement de la mission de la Rivière Rouge et ses progrès depuis 1818, présenté à la Propagande le 12 mars 1836*. It is in the Archives of the Propagation de la Foi, Paris, File F.193; St. Boniface; the full text, with minor variations, is available in *Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 29, 1930, p. 233.

- <sup>11</sup> Provencher to Plessis, March 28, 1822 (Archives of the Diocese of Quebec, RR 1-35). See also *Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 12, 1913, p. 158 and *Bulletin de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface*, 3, 1913, p. 62.
- <sup>12</sup> *Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 18, 1919, p. 264.
- <sup>13</sup> Bishop Bourget had already demonstrated his sympathy for Provencher's cause, but earlier efforts had been frustrated by a lack of resources and by the refusal of Sir George Simpson, Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, to allow the introduction of foreign priests into the North West.
- <sup>14</sup> "Help me."
- <sup>15</sup> Bourget to de Mazenod, October 10, 1844 (Archives of the Diocese of Montreal, *Registre des Lettres*, Vol. 3, p. 432).
- <sup>16</sup> Oblate General Archives, Rome, File: de Mazenod.
- <sup>17</sup> Signay to Provencher, April 16, 1845 (Archives of the Diocese of Quebec, *Registre des Lettres*, Vol. 21, p. 215).
- <sup>18</sup> *Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 38, 1939, p. 158.
- <sup>19</sup> Benoit, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
- <sup>20</sup> Ortolan, Théophile, O.M.I., *Les Oblats de Marie Immaculée durant le premier siècle de leur existence*, Paris, Librairie des Annales, Vol. 2, 1915, pp. 166-167. On the Wabassimong mission, see the letters of Provencher to Turgeon, June 14, 1847 and December 4, 1847 (Archives of the Diocese of Quebec, RR. 1-151, 152, 155 and *Bulletin de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface*, 3, 1913, pp. 261-265).
- <sup>21</sup> Ortolan, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 167.
- <sup>22</sup> Provencher, Norbert, *Aux Conseils Centraux de l'oeuvre de la Propagation de la Foi, à Lyon et à Paris, 5 octobre 1846* (Archives of the Diocese of Quebec, RR. I-146).
- <sup>23</sup> Taché, Alexandre, O.M.I., *Vingt années de missions dans le Nord-Ouest de l'Amérique*, Montreal, Eusèbe Sénécal, 1866, pp. 19-20.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-17, 26, 35.
- <sup>25</sup> Bermond to Father Henri Faraud, O.M.I., September 25, 1850 (Oblate General Archives, Rome, File: Bermond). See also Provencher to Bourget, August 5, 1850, in *Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 20, 1921, p. 172.
- <sup>26</sup> Taché, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
- <sup>27</sup> His signature is found on the baptismal records at Reindeer Lake between March 28 and June 8, 1847 (Archives of the Diocese of The Pas, Manitoba).
- <sup>28</sup> A short study of these missions can be found in Carrière, Gaston, O.M.I., "The Oblates and the North West: 1845-1861," *The Canadian Catholic Historical Association, Study Sessions*, 37, 1970, pp. 35-65.
- <sup>29</sup> *Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 2, 1903, pp. 370, 380-381.
- <sup>30</sup> *Arctic Searching Expedition*, London, 1851, Vol. 1, p. 104. Sir John Richardson was at Ile à la Crosse on June 25, 1848.
- <sup>31</sup> Taché to Simon James Dawson, February 7, 1859, in *Missions de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, 2, 1863, p. 176.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- <sup>34</sup> Taché, *Vingt années de missions . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
- <sup>35</sup> Carrière, Gaston, O.M.I., "Monseigneur Provencher à la recherche d'un coadjuteur," *La Société canadienne d'Histoire de l'Église catholique, Sessions d'étude*, 37, 1970, pp. 86ff.
- <sup>36</sup> Sister Pépin to Superior General of the Grey Nuns, December 6, 1860 (General Archives of the Grey Nuns of Montreal).
- <sup>37</sup> Grandin, Vital, O.M.I., *Missions de Saint-Albert: Portage La Loche, 1883* (Oblate Provincial Archives, Edmonton). See also Taché, *Vingt années de missions . . .*, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.
- <sup>38</sup> Taché, *Vingt années de missions . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
- <sup>39</sup> He had nevertheless baptized forty-one children: Provencher to Plessis, July 27, 1819 (Archives of the Diocese of Quebec, RR. 1-19; *Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 12, 1913, p. 122; *Bulletin de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface*, 3, 1913, p. 39).
- <sup>40</sup> See the *Journal* of James Settee of the Church Missionary Society, November 13, 1865 (Public Archives of Canada, Microfilm A.95) and Taché, *Vingt années de missions: . . .*, *op. cit.*, pp. 208-209.
- <sup>41</sup> See Carrière, Gaston, O.M.I., *L'apôtre des Prairies, Joseph Hugonnard, O.M.I., 1848-1917*, Montreal, Rayonnement, [1966], p. 20.
- <sup>42</sup> *Journal* of James Settee, *op. cit.*
- <sup>43</sup> Carrière, *L'apôtre des Prairies . . .*, *op. cit.*, pp. 24 ff.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37 ff.
- <sup>45</sup> Carter, Alfred, *The Life and Labors of the Rev. Robert Terrill Rundle, Pioneer Missionary to the Saskatchewan, Canada*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Boston University, 1942, pp. 72, 82.
- <sup>46</sup> Champagne, Joseph-Étienne, O.M.I., *Les missions catholiques dans l'Ouest canadienne (1818-1875)*, Ottawa, Éditions de l'Université-Éditions des Études Oblats, 1949, p. 64. Additional notes on the Lac Sainte Anne mission can be found in Carrière, "The Oblates and the North West: 1845-1861," *op. cit.*, pp. 39-43.
- <sup>47</sup> See Carrière, "The Oblates and the North West: 1845-1861," *op. cit.*, p. 42.

- 48 Carter, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-122.
- 49 *Chronique du couvent d'Youville fondé au Lac Sainte Anne en 1859*, (General Archives of the Grey Nuns of Montreal).
- 50 Sister Alphonse to Sister Deschamps, December 29, 1861 (General Archives of the Grey Nuns of Montreal).
- 51 Sister Emery wrote on November 4, 1859 that they had forty-two children in the school (*Rapport de l'Association de la Propagation de la Foi pour le district de Montréal*, 13, 1861, p. 26).
- 52 Caer to Father Joseph Fabre, O.M.I., Superior General, April 27, 1862 (Oblate General Archives, Rome, File: Caer).
- 53 De Smet to Father Jean Roothan, S.J., Superior General (Jesuit General Archives, Rome).
- 54 Thibault to Provencher, April 5, 1846 in *Rapport sur les Missions du Diocèse de Québec*, 7, 1847, p. 56.
- 55 Le Chevallier, Jules, O.M.I., *La Paroisse St. Joachim d'Edmonton* (Oblate Provincial Archives, Edmonton).
- 56 *The Nor'Wester*, September 14, 1861.
- 57 Lacombe to Father Ritchot (Parochial Archives, St. Norbert, Manitoba).
- 58 Lacombe to Taché, March 28, 1864 (Archives of the Diocese of St. Boniface).
- 59 Rémas to Taché, May 3, 1861 (Archives of the Diocese of St. Boniface).
- 60 Scollen to Taché, May 11, 1866 (Archives of the Diocese of St. Boniface).
- 61 Scollen to Taché, January 1, 1867 (Archives of the Diocese of St. Boniface).
- 62 MacGregor, J.C., *A History of Alberta*, Edmonton, Hurtig Publishers, [c. 1972], writes that the school lasted until 1871.
- 63 Lacombe to Taché, August 30, 1862 (Archives of the Diocese of St. Boniface).
- 64 MacGregor, *op. cit.*, p. 80.
- 65 D'Armor, Philippe [Aristide Philippot, O.M.I.], *Histoire de Notre-Dame-des-Victoires au Lac La Biche, Alberta*, ms. in the Archives of the Diocese of McLennan, Alberta, p. 14.
- 66 Taché, *Vingt années de missions . . . op. cit.*, p. 67.
- 67 Morice, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 66; Ortolan, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 201.
- 68 "Le R.P. René Rémas, 1823-1901," in *Missions de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, 64, 1930, p. 512.
- 69 Sister Guenette to Taché, December 22, 1864 (Archives of the Diocese of St. Boniface).
- 70 Lacombe to Fabre, January 6 and March 31, 1866, in *Missions de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, 7, 1868, pp. 224-233 and 262-273.
- 71 The *Directory for Foreign Missions* was printed in English under the title of *Instructions of our Venerated Founder on Foreign Missions*, Rome, General House, 1936, 16 pp.
- 72 Taché to Louis Taché, in *Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 1, 1902, pp. 385, 401-402.
- 73 It would appear from this comment that Taché was a talkative person.
- 74 Taché to his mother, January 6, 1847, in *Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 2, 1903, pp. 191-192.
- 75 Taché to his mother, January 4, 1851. See Carrière, Gaston, O.M.I., *Prairie Forum*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Fall 1978, pp. 131-156 for the English translation of this letter, which was first published in *Rapport de l'Association de la Propagation de la Foi pour le District de Montréal*, 8, 1852, pp. 67-93. It was also published in *Rapport sur les Missions du Diocèse de Québec*, 10, 1853, pp. 1-43; *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi* [Lyon], 24, 1852, pp. 329-354, and more recently in *Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 32, 1933, pp. 186-192, 235-240, 261-264, 283-286; 33, 1934, pp. 24-26, 47-51.
- 76 Faraud to Father Pascal Ricard, O.M.I., May 22, 1849 (Archives Deschâtelets, Ottawa, Record Group: Oregon).
- 77 *Ibid.*
- 78 *Journal* of Lacombe, February 28, 1890 (Oblate Provincial Archives, Edmonton).
- 79 Taché to Faraud, December 4, 1857 (Oblate General Archives, Rome, File: Taché).
- 80 Taché to Faraud, *loc. cit.*
- 81 Carrière, Gaston, O.M.I., "Contributions des missionnaires à la sauvegarde de la culture indienne," *Études Oblates*, 31, 1972, pp. 165-204.
- 82 Simpson to J. Shepherd, August 8, 1857 (Hudson's Bay Company Archives, D.4/84a, p. 893, by permission of the Governor and Committee).
- 83 Simpson to Governor and Committee, H.B.C., June 30, 1857 (Hudson's Bay Company Archives, D.4/77, p. 967).
- 84 General Archives of the Grey Nuns of Montreal.
- 85 Sister Emery to Sister Deschamps, April 20, 1861 (General Archives of the Grey Nuns of Montreal).
- 86 For an account of this, see Carrière, Gaston, O.M.I., "Une mission de paix: Le père Alexis André, O.M.I., et les Sioux (1863-1865)," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa*, 39, 1969, pp. 24-93; and Pfaller, Louis, O.S.B., "The Peace Mission of 1863-1864," *North Dakota History*, 37, 1970, pp. 293-313.
- 87 Jean-Marie Caer to Taché, January 6, 1863 (Archives of the Diocese of St. Boniface; Oblate Provincial Archives, Edmonton).
- 88 Lacombe to Bishop Bourget, May 1, 1866 (Archives of the Diocese of Montreal). See also MacGregor, *op. cit.*, p. 9f.

- <sup>89</sup> Carrière, Gaston, O.M.I. "Le père Albert Lacombe, O.M.I., et le Pacifique Canadien," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa*, 37, 1967, pp. 519-528; Dempsey, Hugh H., *Crowfoot, Chief of the Blackfeet*, Edmonton, Hurtig Publishers, 1972, p. 148.
- <sup>90</sup> Dempsey, *op. cit.*, p. 190.
- <sup>91</sup> Taché to an unknown correspondent, October 29, 1867 (Archives of the Diocese of St. Boniface).
- <sup>92</sup> Taché to Faraud, April 2, 1870 (Oblate General Archives, Rome, File: Taché).
- <sup>93</sup> Church Missionary Society Archives (Public Archives of Canada, Microfilm A.98); see also Dorge, Lionel, "Bishop Taché and the Confederation of Manitoba," *Transactions, Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba*, Series III, 26, 1969-70, pp. 93-109.
- <sup>94</sup> Lacombe to Father Augustine Maisonneuve, May 16, 1870 (Oblate Provincial Archives, Winnipeg).
- <sup>95</sup> See footnote 75.
- <sup>96</sup> *Bulletin de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface*, 3, 1913, p. 249.
- <sup>97</sup> Faraud to Ricard, *op. cit.*
- <sup>98</sup> Taché to de Mazenod, July 7, 1854 (Oblate General Archives, Rome, File: Taché).
- <sup>99</sup> The French text says "qui fait de Dieu."
- <sup>100</sup> *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi*, Lyon, 36, 1864, pp. 386-388.
- <sup>101</sup> Lacombe to Superior General, January 6, 1866, in *Missions de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, 7, 1868, pp. 245-257.
- <sup>102</sup> *Journal of Lacombe*, February 28, 1890 (Oblate Provincial Archives, Edmonton).
- <sup>103</sup> Taché to the directors of the Propagation de la Foi, July 16, 1888 (Archives of the Propagation de la Foi, Paris, File F.193a: St. Boniface).
- <sup>104</sup> There were two bishops, Henri Faraud and Isidore Clut, in the Diocese of Mackenzie. See also Taché, *Esquisse sur le Nord-Ouest de l'Amérique*, Montreal, Typographie du Nouveau Monde, 1869, pp. 60-61.
- <sup>105</sup> Taché to Dawson, February 7, 1859, in *Missions de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, 2, 1863, pp. 149-150.
- <sup>106</sup> It is a mark of recognition of the role played by the Oblates in the development of the North West that many geographical features, streets, buildings and so on were named after them. The people of Regina kept alive the memory of the pioneer Oblates by erecting a small monument on Cameron Street, on which the names of Taché, Lacombe, Grandin and Hugonnard were inscribed. See Carrière, Gaston, O.M.I., "Essai de toponymie oblate canadienne," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa*, 28, 1958, pp. 364-394, 522-531, and 29, 1959, pp. 92-108, 233-246; "De quelques monuments historiques," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa*, 32, 1962, pp. 69-80; "Quelques nouveaux toponymes oblats," *Études Oblates*, 22, 1963, pp. 285-287; "Le cinquantenaire de la mort du père Albert Lacombe," *Études Oblates*, 26, 1967, pp. 89-94.
- <sup>107</sup> Taché to the directors of the Propagation de la Foi, *op. cit.*
- <sup>108</sup> *The Western Catholic*, Vancouver, March 20, 1914.
- <sup>109</sup> Willson, Beckles, *The Life of Lord Strathcona and Mount Royal, G.C.M.G., G.C.V.O., 1820-1914*, London, Cassell and Co. Ltd., 1915, p. 159.