Letter from Bishop Alexandre Taché to his Mother, Concerning his Life with the Chipewyan Nation

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Editor's Introduction

Alexandre Antonin Taché, the first Canadian Oblate to work in the missions of the North West, was born on July 23, 1823 and joined the Oblates in 1844. He left for Red River on June 24, 1845, and was ordained a priest in St. Boniface on October 12, 1845. He was sent to Île à la Crosse in 1846 and remained there until 1850, when he was summoned to return to Red River to be appointed coadjutor to Bishop Norbert Provencher. He reached St. Boniface on July 4, 1851 and then went to France where he was consecrated as Bishop in Viviers on November 23, 1851. He returned to Île à la Crosse in 1852 and stayed until after the death of Bishop Provencher in 1853. He left the mission in 1854 and went to St. Boniface to carry out his duties as Bishop.

This letter to his mother, dated January 4, 1851, has been published in French on several occasions, but we believe that this is the first time it has been published in English. Taché's interpretation of the Chipewyan nation, we believe, is of considerable interest, and Prairie Forum will publish in its next issue a paper by Father Carrière which discusses in a more general way the missionary efforts of the Oblates in the North West.

It must be noted that when Bishop Taché wrote this letter he was only 27, but had clearly already gained a valuable insight into the Chipewyan nation. It appears from his later writings that his ideas on the Chipewyans were never substantially altered.

THE LETTER

St. Jean-Baptiste Mission, Île à la Crosse,
January 4, 1851

My good and loving mother,

You have often asked me for a detailed account of the nation I have been sent to evangelize. In spite of the great pleasure I would have derived from satisfying your request sooner, nevertheless I thought it better to wait. If one has to live with a person for a long time
in order to know him well, this is even more necessary in the case of a people. It seems impossible to me to form within a few months an exact idea about a nation, to understand its character, its ideas and manners, and to become familiar with its customs and habits. The difficulty is even greater when we are speaking about a tribe whose language we are ignorant of, and which has never been understood by someone able to give a sound and considered opinion of it. This is why many of those who have written about the Indian peoples have, in my opinion, failed to reach the goal every writer should set for himself: to describe persons and things with accuracy. Some, forgetting all too easily the cruel scenes of which civilized people only too often offer an atrocious example, see nothing more in the Savages than monsters in human form who, accustomed to hunt wild beasts, have adopted the instincts and ferocity of their quarry. Others, at the opposite extreme, astonished to find these people exempt from the ambitions aroused by the demands of civilized life, persist in discovering in them the traces of the bliss enjoyed by man in his primitive state, of which one sees glimpses in the tranquil life of the patriarchs. In their poetic descriptions both groups present the inhabitants of the woods as an ideal people which does not exist in reality. I must avow to you something which perhaps will not plead very much in favour of my judgement, but which will at least be very true. Yes, I must admit that on my arrival among the Savages, I laboured under a profound delusion concerning them. My head was somewhat stuffed with the elegant descriptions and loving sympathies of the illustrious author of Atala, and some other ideas, and then... I expected something altogether different from what I found, and was truly astonished. Indeed, I could hardly believe my eyes. So much so that, having left Canada with the determination and the formal promise to write to you often and at length on the Savages, I withdrew my promise and said to myself: since one writes only to hide the truth, I shall not write. I could not pretend to do better than so many others more capable than myself. This is why I have kept silent for so long about the Indians in the numerous letters I have sent to satisfy your love and mine. Today, however, I bow to your pressing requests. I approach the matter with some reluctance, because I know how arduous and difficult it is. This letter, like the others, is written for the sole purpose of pleasing you and the small circle of relatives and friends who may happen to see it. I have but one objective, to be truthful.

The vast territory of the Hudson’s Bay Company, including that of the North-West Company, is populated by four great families of Savages, quite distinct from one another, but whose various respective tribes show resemblances too striking to allow us to deny their affinity. Each of these families occupies a territorial zone, somewhat oblique, from the northwest to the southeast, and whose starting point is the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Firstly, to the south,
along the border of the United States, we find the Blackfoot, the Assiniboine, the Sioux, who seem to me of the same origin as the Iroquois with whom they share a warlike mien and a certain nobility of soul too often similar to cruelty. Secondly, upwards, between 50 and 56 degrees of latitude North, live the great Cree nation and the Saulteaux who, at the eastward extension of their zone, come in contact with the Algonkians and other tribes of Canadian Savages which have a similar language, suggesting unity of origin. Thirdly, on the shores of the Arctic Ocean, as on the coasts of Labrador, are the Eskimos, who are not found south of Churchill, at 59 degrees of latitude North and 94 degrees of longitude West. They do not come further south doubtless in fear of not finding the ice thick enough to pitch their dwellings, nor a temperature cold enough to satisfy their habits. These Eskimos, who live exclusively along the coast, almost run over into the lands of the Crees, leaving between their territory and that of the latter a triangular space, whose base is at the foot of the great [mountain] chain, from the 67th degree of latitude North down to the 56th, and whose vertex is at Churchill, the location of which I have already mentioned. Fourthly, this immense tract of country is inhabited by a fourth great family, which alone will be the object of this letter. Not satisfied to live on the eastern side of the great mountains, this nation also occupies the crests and even extends over the western slope, almost to the Pacific Ocean. The numerous tribes beyond the mountains seem to show differences from those on this side too marked to allow them to be considered of the same nation, but a more precise study will soon show that these differences are due solely to the circumstances in which these various tribes find themselves. Besides, the unity of language solves the whole question. Be that as it may, I intend to speak to you today only of those who are in the diocese I live in and who are so much alike that one can say with some accuracy: Ab uno disce omnes.

These various tribes are those of the Chipewyan, Caribou Eaters, Beavers, Sarcees, Dogribs, Yellowknives, Slaves, Hares and finally the Loucheux or Quarellers. The nation has no particular name; I will nevertheless call it after the tribe among which I live and whose members modestly translate their name by the word “people” (Dene). I fail to understand why our Canadians call it Montagnais, since the tribe which bears that name is precisely the farthest from the mountain chain, and there is not one important mountain in the territory it occupies. The English have adopted the name which the Crees gave them, the word Tchipewyan, the etymology of which I think is to be found in the two words Tchipaw (pointed) and Weyan (skin). The reason for this etymology would come from the fact that the Chipewyans, in the past, did not live so far south; finding no birch bark, they were forced to build their canoes with skins. Moreover, then as now, these canoes were very slim, and seeing them the Crees
may have said: *Tchipaw-weyan-oji* (pointed skin-canoe), and later *Oji* (canoe) *Tchipaw-weyan* or *Tchipeweyan*.

Distinguished scholars have unhesitatingly affirmed that all the natives of America are perfectly alike, with the exception of the Eskimos.\textsuperscript{11} This assertion may be true for the nations I do not know, but I think I can affirm, without temerity, that another exception is necessary for the nation I am speaking to you about. Its manners, its inclinations, many of its practices, its language and also its external profile would seem to indicate that it belongs to a stock different from the one which it is generally considered to come from. The Chipewyan nation is certainly one of the least known in America. Those who have spoken of it have done as they have for many other things: they judged it merely to be a part [of another nation],\textsuperscript{12} but as it has no resemblance to its neighbours, this judgment is therefore totally false. What Sir [Alexander] Mackenzie says is quite correct, but it is to be regretted that this intrepid traveler kept himself within such restricted limits while speaking of a people who deserve to be better known.

The confines of a letter will not allow me to describe the nation to you as fully as I would like to; I can outline only its principal characteristics. A word, at least, on the threefold situation of these Savages, at the time of the arrival of the missionaries, to give an idea of their intellectual, moral and physical needs.

1. *Intellectual situation.* — Those who pretend to the dubious honour of being nothing more than Orang-outangs, better combed and better shaved than their ancestors, would surely honour me with a smile of pity if they heard me speak of the intellectual state of Savages who, according to them, are at best monkeys or baboons. As for me, I see in these children of the woods only members of the great family whose chief was created “in the image and likeness” of the Supreme Intellect. Therefore our Chipewyans are intelligent.\textsuperscript{13} It is not necessary to do a lengthy study to become convinced of this fact: the ease with which they learn things of which they have never had the slightest idea proves that nature was as generous towards them as towards other peoples. It is true that we do not find among them those extraordinary geniuses who often owe their brilliance simply to the situation in which they find themselves; on the other hand, extreme mediocrities are no more common than elsewhere. All are endowed with an average share of intelligence.

The first use a man must make of his reason is, without doubt, to raise himself to the knowledge of his Maker: “Give me intelligence,” says the Prophet, “and I will apply myself to the knowledge of thy law.” Thus, our Chipewyans, without any other light than that of their own reason, came to the knowledge of God without that stupid combination of absurdities which captivated the most enlightened
people of antiquity. They believed in only one God, the creator and guardian of all; a rewarder of virtue and avenger of crime; and an eternal God whose providential care extends to all that exists. However, little accustomed to purely spiritual ideas, they imagined that God assumed a human form, whose gigantic proportions corresponded to his absolute power, and the perfection of whose organs allowed him to see and hear from heaven all that was done and said on Earth. This notion of divinity seems to me the most exact that any people deprived of the immense benefit of the Revelation has ever had. Our Savages had acquired this idea from the contemplation of nature.

“The heavens narrate the glory of God”: how, in their admirable language, could they fail to speak to the intellect of Whom they are the only shelter? The great book of creation is written in such prominent and such bright characters that the child of the woods can read it. Thus the contemplation of the sky, with the marvels of its worlds, the observation of the earth, the silent majesty of the forests, lead inevitably to the knowledge of the divine architect whose grand design gave birth to so many wonders. A great perversity is required in the viceroy of creation to forget the sovereign who, by an unceasing miracle of goodness, provides “daily bread” even to those who cannot foresee its need. Our Chipewyans had not associated with the madman who has said in his heart, “there is no God.” On the contrary, every leaf of the forest, every blade of grass on the prairie, every drop of water in the lakes, every one of the numerous inhabitants of the waters, the air and the earth repeated for them one of the letters forming the names of “Creator” (Ni-ottsi) and “powerful” (yeddariye) which they gave to God.

It is surprising that with these ideas of divinity, the Chipewyans had no special form of worship and no religious ceremonies whatsoever. Only during meetings, above all while feasting, one of the old men would exhort the assembly to recognize God’s beneficence and to avoid the evil which alone can stop the flow of the All-Powerful’s gifts. Then would follow a fervent prayer for health, success to the hunt, and other necessities of life. Then some mouthfuls of the food to be offered to the guests were thrown into the fire and buried under the fireplace. Some more considerable sacrifices also took place, but so infrequently that one could say that this is not common practice. This is absolutely all the public show of worship rendered to the Divinity by this nation. However, one finds some traces of magic, but they can be thought to be of foreign origin; indeed, they were nothing more than prayers, accompanied by more noise than the others. The magicians had, without doubt, the aura of passing for extraordinary men, but they addressed themselves exclusively to God, and these superstitions never had the regrettable results which
occurred all too often among the neighbouring peoples. Private worship was quite universal. Some persons prayed to God fervently every day; others did so only in critical circumstances. I have heard several accounts of how the prayers of these simple souls were answered by Him who said: “Ask and you shall receive.” Here is one instance among many. One day, I was looking at the hand of an old man who had lost his thumb. Noticing my attention, he told me in a tone of conviction which touched me strongly: “See this hand. One winter day I was out hunting, far from my hut. It was cold. I was walking. Suddenly I saw caribou. I went closer to them and shot, but my gun exploded and blew off my thumb. I had already lost a great amount of blood. I was trying in vain to stop the bleeding. I was slowly getting cold. I tried to kindle a fire, but it was impossible. Then I became afraid of death; but remembering about Him whom you call God and whom I did not know well, I said to Him: ‘Grandfather (Sétsiyé), it is said that you can do everything; look upon me, and since you are the Powerful, comfort me.’ Suddenly, no more blood; this allowed me to put on my mitten. I managed to get back to my hut, where I dropped with exhaustion upon entering. Then I understood,” he added with profound emotion, “then I understood the strength of the Powerful. From that moment, I have always desired to know Him. That is why, having learned that you were here, I came from a very long way so that you might teach me how to serve Him who saved me at that time and who alone makes us all live.”

Without having read St. Paul, our Savages believed in “a multitude of evil spirits, scattered in the air,” enemies of God and men; always at war with God, against whom they sometimes prevailed, and using their power only to harm man. They attributed to these evil spirits all their failures and illnesses, and especially death when it arrived before old age. They believed that these spirits were born only after the flood; and moreover that they had a very close relationship with those animals which are enemies of man or which, like serpents, inspire him with horror. Hence an extreme care to say nothing against these animals, for fear of provoking their anger. Although the word “blasphemy” is found in their language, this crime, so common among Christians, was unknown among them. They believed that imprecations against divinity could only add to their difficulties.

Although extremely limited in their historical knowledge, our Savages had nevertheless retained an awareness of some of the important events in the history of mankind. Besides a vague legend of the creation and fall of man through woman, their tradition agrees with the account of Moses, saying in the same words: “There were giants on the Earth”; “the waters flooded everything and covered all the surface of the Earth”; mankind was scattered “then through all the regions of the world”; “fire fell from heaven” and burned the Earth.
In their history of the flood, they replace the ark by a small floating island on which four people, some animals and some birds found their salvation and escaped the general ruin. Such a tradition, found in the nineteenth century among an infidel people would, I suppose, stun the ignorant incredulity of the eighteenth-century philosophers.\textsuperscript{15}

You might be interested to learn the story of one of their tales which may appear ridiculous, but which seems to me to contain a strong proof supporting those who claim that America was populated by migrations from Asia. Here is the legend: At the time of the giants, one of them was walking on the shores of the great frozen lake (Arctic Ocean). He was so big that an ordinary man lodged in the thumb of his mitten, without bothering him at all. This giant met another giant and engaged him in hand-to-hand combat. Feeling that he was about to succumb in the fight, he told the little man in his mitten: "my little son, cut the legs of my adversary because he is stronger than I." The little man obeyed, and the colossus fell backwards across the great lake, so that his head touched the other bank, forming a bridge on which the caribou crossed over to this side. Later, a woman attempted the same journey and succeeded after walking several days. She brought iron and copper and was well received by the Chipewyans, to whom she gave the iron. She made several more trips, but after being insulted by some men she sank into the ground and took all the iron with her. Since then, says the story, the migrations have come to an end. The Eskimos, who have the same tradition, contend that the caribou continue to cross to this side. The fact is that these animals sometimes disappear suddenly, and then reappear in equal or even greater numbers. Another fact, no less relevant, is that before the arrival of the Europeans among the Chipewyans, the latter had no metal utensils but they recall having lost the use of them in relatively recent times. They also explain by the fall of their giant their numerous unsuccessful efforts to discover the North-West Passage. This last statement shows clearly that the body of their giant is nothing but an ice bridge over which they once crossed. This woman's trips would seem to indicate that migrations have taken place at different times and that, unable to explain why they ceased, they attributed it to her disappearance. Other traditions and explanations of the preceding story might perhaps be of interest, but I must remember that I am writing a letter and not a book. The principal fault of these stories lies in the lack of chronology; something which is not surprising in a people where every individual ignores his own age and that of his children.

Another proof of the intelligence of our Chipewyans would be found in their occupations and their way of satisfying the needs of life; but since all this is common to the other Savages of the country, I shall not pursue this point; I will simply make an observation I have
often made before. All the Indians are better naturalists, not only
than our country people, but even than the most learned elements of
our populations. They have been initiated into this knowledge since
childhood. A 14-year-old Indian knows the names of all the animals,
birds, fishes of his country, and also their instincts, food and habits.
The smallest insect does not escape his watchful eye. I must humbly
confess that I was often very glad to take refuge in my ignorance of
their language to avoid explanations I would have been hard pressed to
give in French. Our Chipewyans are not such good botanists as the
other Indians; they know very little about the properties of plants,
although they know their names and forms. In this, again, they are
more knowledgeable than I. I hear you, good mother, giving me a
gentle but well deserved reproach at this point. If, during my vacation
as a school boy, instead of spending my time solely in frivolous amuse­
ments, I had heeded your wise advice and taken advantage of the
botany lessons you wanted to give me, I would not have to blush today
in seeing that I am more ignorant than a young Savage. Why should
one have to become wise when regrets are the only remedy one can
offer for one’s folly? You would not have much difficulty now in per­
suading me to become your student, if I had the opportunity.

Our Chipewyans have no knowledge whatsoever of the exact
sciences; their language cannot express a number above the hundreds.
The experimental sciences are also absolutely unknown to them.
Their astronomical observations would not amaze the fathers of
the science, but they are as good as those of the uneducated portion
of our compatriots. The sun, the moon, the constellations of the Great
Bear and Orion are their chronometers. Like so many others, they be­
lieve that the sun rotates daily around our planet, and that the latter,
which they suppose motionless, is nothing less than spherical. Con­
stantly exposed to the inclemency of the seasons, they know how to
forecast the variations of the atmosphere and estimate air tempera­
tures; nature serves as a barometer and a thermometer. One is often
astonished to find them in accord with these instruments.

It might now be the time to say a word on the language of the
Savages in general, and on Chipewyan in particular. I am well aware
of the fact that the language in which a loving mother utters the first
expression of her tenderness is always that which sounds most har­
monious to the ear of man and which produces the sweetest impres­
sion on his heart. Hence the claims of so many people who always
believe their maternal tongue preferable to all others. This feeling,
however natural it may be, must not lead us to excessive overstate­
ments. There really are some peculiar people. I have seen even edu­
cated people, otherwise endowed with sound judgment, decide ex
cathedra that Indian languages say nothing; that without the help
of signs the Indian could not communicate the few thoughts origi-
nating in his dull brain. And why such a statement? Very simply, because those who make it do not know a single word of these languages. What a beautiful reason! One should remember that if it is blasphemous to deny a holy truth because one does not understand it, it is also absurd to adopt the same attitude to truths of secondary importance. He who has given man the ability to perceive objects and to speak to himself through thought, has also given him the ability to communicate his ideas to his fellow men and to speak to them through language. This priceless gift, God gave to the Indians as to others, even if this is not altogether to the liking of those who claim the contrary. I would even go farther: there are some Indian dialects, such as Saulteaux, Cree and others, which, in many a situation, show a vitality, a variety and a clarity of expression which we certainly do not find in the European languages. This is due to the very character of these languages, which one can appreciate only after serious study and when familiarity allows one to exploit the wealth of expression which surprises both those who use them and those who hear them. I know what I say here might seem ridiculous to many people, but it is nonetheless true. To those people, I will say, remember that the first condition for a reasonable statement is to know what one is talking about.

As for the language of our Chipewyans, I must confess that at first sight it appears to have little in its favour. One must have faith in what they are, to divine that they are expressing thoughts and feelings. It is impossible to imagine such a combination of bizarre, raucous and strange sounds; sudden interruptions in the middle of the words, excessive aspirates, gutturals equalled only by the accompanying sibilants, litanies of consonants, between which a few almost imperceptible vowels are lost: in a word, a system of pronunciation which provokes laughter from all those who hear it for the first time. Therein lies the great difficulty of the Chipewyan dialect, a difficulty almost insurmountable for a stranger, and which, up to now, has confounded the bravest. One finds documents on the other Indian languages; but none on this one, except for those we have prepared ourselves. We had to develop nearly twenty arbitrary signs to express sounds which cannot be conveyed by the possible combinations of our alphabet. This language is the object of my constant attention, and I might be tempted to speak of it at greater length; but as I know that grammatical aridities are not your favourite subject for study and that you have no intention of becoming a polyglot, I suppose that you will be grateful to me if I pass quickly over a topic of so little attraction. I will content myself by saying that this dialect also has its merits, that a Chipewyan woman knows very well how to tell her son that she loves him in a way that will be understood. Some of our new Christians pray and sing in their language with an expression of happiness which shows clearly that, though a stranger might find nothing but ridicule in it,
their hearts are moved in thinking about the sentiments they express.

2. Moral situation. — If our Chipewyans have so many reasons to envy civilized people from the intellectual point of view, one must admit that their moral condition, in the midst of the most profound ignorance, can offer a lesson of true wisdom to those who so criminally abuse their education. This is the bright side of the tribe. I know that all is far from being perfect here, especially when one judges according to the sublime teachings derived from the evangelical morality, but it is nonetheless true that their conduct constitutes an agreeable contrast with that of most infidel peoples. To say savage is to say ferocious and barbarian; in this respect our good Chipewyans are not Savages. There is probably no nation which more strongly abhors bloodshed and acts of violent cruelty. Murder is unknown among them and inspires an extreme aversion. Undoubtedly, the spirit of revenge is to be found whenever the divine teachings originating from the Cross do not suppress natural inclination; nevertheless the Chipewyans would be satisfied with token revenge. A few punches and a few bits of hair plucked from the head of their adversary would be sufficient compensation for the most bloody outrages. This is sufficient proof of their natural propensity for gentleness, even sometimes for cowardice. I think that the golden ages of chivalry, with their romantic adventures, would find few champions among our peaceful flock. We could perhaps make knights in shining armour out of them, but as for fearless knights, that would be impossible to hope for. They always imagine\(^\text{16}\) that their enemies are pursuing them relentlessly, so that it is not uncommon to see large numbers of them flee because a woman or a child thought she had heard a sound resembling the discharge of a gun, or even because some leaves of the forest appear to bear the footprint of a stranger. The Cree, with whom they have long been at war, do them the honour of recognizing that, although most careful to avoid combat, they were very brave when in action. I can easily believe it because they are of a serious and deliberate character, the kind of people not easily excited, but rather with a constant steadiness of their emotions. When one reproaches them for being panic-stricken, they excuse themselves by their aversion to murder, which is a horror undiminished even in the name of war. This reason, which may be true, is not understood by those who live with them, and they have a reputation of being cowards.

Oppression of the weak has always appeared to me to be a consequence of lack of nobility of character: so I was not surprised to find it among the Chipewyans. It is wretched to be submitted to their authority. I know of nothing more depressing than the lot of an orphan adopted by a stranger. In consequence, these miserable creatures keep, until an advanced age, an air of inferiority, often even of stupidity, which must be attributed to no other cause than the bad treatment
they received in childhood. This proves that while our Savages are not lacking in gentleness, they have little compassion. This flaw in their character shows clearly in their conduct towards their wives. It is painful to see that woman, who was created to be his companion and helper, has become instead the slave of man, who received superior physical strength to serve solely as protector and not as torturer. This last word is unfortunately only too appropriate, since I have seen men, so gentle with others, knock their wives senseless and constantly treat them with a harshness derived from barbarism. How often have I thanked God that my mother was not born the wife of a Chipewyan!!... If anything could make me dislike them, it would surely be this fault. But I am happy to be able to tell you that religion, by its softening influence, is slowly succeeding in erasing the traces of this brutality. One singular thing, apparently incompatible with this lack of tenderness, is that they fall into the depths of despair at the death of a relative. On such an occasion everything would be sacrificed; even the most indispensable garments of the deceased would rarely be kept to clothe the living, or else they would be exchanged for the clothes of others. Endless and boundless weeping moved the most indifferent, and all those who witnessed a death set their hearts to express strongly a sorrow that the majority certainly did not feel. I have seen one of these scenes among people I had just started to instruct. I assure you that one would have needed a very unruffled composure not to be moved at the sight of the contortions and howlings of the father and mother of the deceased. The others, a little more educated, joined in my efforts to calm them.

I said that the Chipewyans had no feelings; I must make an exception in favour of fathers towards their children, of the women in general and especially the mothers. How often have I been touched by the sight of these unfortunate women, themselves overwhelmed with difficulties, lavishing upon the dirty little creatures the signs of the love which gave them life. There are certain general characteristics of humanity which are found everywhere; that of the woman in the exercise of her motherly duties offers something so profoundly characteristic that it is impossible not to discover it even among the most barbarian peoples. Unfortunately, here as in many other places, mothers are often rewarded for their tenderness only by the sorrow of being forgotten.

Here again, good mother, I would have to reproach myself a little. Although my heart gives me the consoling testimony that I have always loved you most tenderly, nevertheless I know that, through my thoughtlessness, I have more than once grieved the one who cared only for my happiness. Pardon me, I beseech you, for faults which were much more the consequence of youthful levity than of malice of heart. I am paying today, by the sorrow of being far from
the best of mothers, for the crime of not having understood soon enough all the tenderness of her love. With this feeling in mind, I try to soften the lot of many unfortunate mothers, and to inspire with filial piety those who for so long have disregarded these sacred obligations. The mother here had no authority over her children, especially the boys; they saw her occupied daily in the most difficult chores without even thinking of helping her. The father had authority as long as his physical strength gave him superiority; but if old age or some accident had deprived him of this advantage, he lost all his influence; he, in his turn, had to obey the son who undertook to support him. This authority of the father, limited though it is, is the only one known to the Chipewyans. This people is essentially republican and we can apply to it, in all truth, what the Holy Books say of the Jewish people at certain times of their history: “At that time, there was no king... but everyone acted as he pleased.”

Although we are certainly far from the scenes of the great political upheavals, nevertheless, some letters, with too few items of news, and some fragments of newspapers lead us to believe that modern society is undermined by an unrestrained desire for liberty. I do not think, however, that the most fervent advocates of power for the people ever dreamt of a complete democracy as that which the Chipewyan nation enjoys. One must admit that such an order of things would not suit the all too obvious ambitions concealed under the apparent devotion of the free-thinkers. Although authority seems to me to be the inborn guardian of order, nevertheless I would consent to see peoples do away with the various levels of society, under the condition however that this levelling would also take place in the hearts of the different members of these societies, thereby silencing all those ambitions and vicious tendencies which, if not bridled, would turn the human race into an immense republic of wolves... But I am digressing from my subject; let us allow the various peoples to follow their respective tendencies, and come back to our good Chipewyans. They alone are republican in the fullest meaning of the word, because they alone are without ambition. I am mistaken, these Savages are not republican, for there is no public interest, since every one of them works for his own particular interest; it is to a degree a happy situation where everyone, satisfied with his little successes, rejoices in those of others without envy.

Humility is essentially a Christian virtue, and therefore one cannot hope to find it among infidels. This word “I,” ringing so loudly in the discourse of the pedant, so sweet to the ear of the philosopher, also exists in the Chipewyuan language; many fond accounts of real or alleged excellence prove that these brave people believe in themselves in the same way as do others. And why should they not? One sees great geniuses take empty pride in the elegant cut of their clothes; why should a poor child of the woods not think himself distinguished
because he is neither a murderer nor a robber, neither ambitious nor quarrelsome, and because he is a skilled hunter, etc., etc., etc.?

If all men were like our Chipewyans, no one would have ever thought of protecting himself with bolts, nor of inventing padlocks. Of all vices, stealing is the one to which they have the greatest aversion and, certainly, this nation is the most honest of peoples. This is all the more extraordinary because they passionately love all their possessions; they are as reluctant to give up what is theirs, as to take what belongs to others. Nothing for nothing. The word "generosity" is erased from the dictionary they use, not only towards strangers, but even towards those they love most. I assure you that a missionary here who had to wait for help from his beloved people would need a good stomach. Sometimes, however, when there is an abundance of food, they receive their friends into their homes; apart from that, no friendship can replace payment. They never, or almost never, give without ulterior motives. These rare efforts make such an impression on their minds that they are engraved there, so to speak, never to be forgotten. The smallest mouthful of meat seems to them a precious deposit for which they are entitled to a life annuity. Woe to those they honour with their generosity! Add to this an unrestrained passion for importuning. If the laws against begging were in force here, the whole nation would have been behind bars for generations already. If you grant them their first request, it is immediately followed by a second, then by a third, and so on until at last a refusal, or even several refusals, forces them to stop asking. To give to one is almost to invite the others to come running for your gift. They are positively tiresome on this count and do not want to change.

On my arrival here, someone wishing to summarize their character on this point told me: "A Chipewyan will ask for your last shirt." The expression struck me as exaggerated, but it was not long before I became convinced it was absolutely true. In fact, one day when I was away on service, a Chipewyan accosted me and said: "Give me a shirt." I excused myself on account of my poverty; but he insisted, feeling with his finger for the collar of my shirt: "Here is one," he said, "it is almost clean, and you must have another one to replace it when it becomes soiled; just give me the one you are wearing and put on the clean one." Unfortunately for him, the poor man had guessed only too well the state of my wardrobe. This fact also shows you that our Savages are not what polite society would call refined. Shame often colours their faces, but it almost never directs their conduct: so there is a saying, "as cheeky as a Chipewyan." They must see and touch everything. Among the neighbouring tribes one finds what could be called Indian courtesy; among the Chipewyans, nothing, absolutely nothing, resembling politeness, or the sense of what is fitting and which adds so much pleasure to our relations with our
fellow men. These Savages maintain in their dealings, both among themselves and with strangers, a character of downright rusticity which pleases them as much as it embarrasses others. There is neither rank nor distinction. The child and the old man, the father and the son, treat one another as equals, correct one another and laugh at one another as if age and nature did not command respect. The presence of the highest dignitaries would not stop them playing about. Were they before her gracious Majesty, they would not even try to tone down the explosive expressions of their intestinal needs.

Let us now pass on to the details of their morality. I would like to draw a veil over this sad page of the story of my people, but, as it is somewhat distinctive, I would consider I had failed in the task you set if I remained altogether silent. Here, as everywhere, immorality is the great social plague, and an even more profound plague as it is more disgusting and more widespread. It is in this very respect that the inadequacy of our humble reason displays itself. How is it that the most shameful passions can appease the hearts which the Supreme Being alone can satisfy! However pitiful the picture which the Chipewyan nation presented in this regard at the time of the missionaries’ arrival, there are nevertheless, in the very manner of its immorality, some traits which set this nation above the other children of nature and even above the first-born of civilization. The capacity for evil in man is such that one is sometimes surprised to find him not fallen as low as he could possibly go. To fully understand the degradation of humanity on this point, it is enough to know that it was necessary “that a rain of sulphur and fire” came to wash away the iniquities of five infamous cities; that after this manifestation of the supreme justice, human legislators, like the divine lawgiver, were obliged to include in their statutes certain laws which clearly prove that man, endowed with reason, is eager to debase himself to the level of the brute and to turn his reason into an accomplice for the perverse desires of his heart. Thanks be to God, these two abominable vices are not known among our Chipewyans; they may often offend modesty, but they never offend nature. It is all the more astonishing that the Crees, with whom they are in daily contact, are nothing less than scrupulous in this matter. The mouth speaks from what is stored in the heart; hence, in so many people we find this frightening facility to speak what can justly be called evil, since it corrupts morality. Here again, our Savages could give some lessons to more enlightened people. The young people would sometimes yield to their mutual desires, but always in secret, and never with the lust or the effrontery which are natural signs of the corruption of the heart. Apart from these grave disorders, our poor Savages had many others which were equally unsuitable; it is not necessary to comment on them. They looked upon polygamy as something as natural and legitimate as monogamy. The good hunters considered themselves authorized to take as many
women as they could provide for; this was commonly two, often three, occasionally four and never beyond that number. However, I know of one who had ten.

The sacred bonds of matrimony, in no way tightened by a prior affection, were as loose as the whim which had tied them. Under the smallest pretext or simply through the fickleness so natural to man, couples would separate and reunite with a ludicrous ease which was interrupted only by the claims of a rival. A weak desire at the outset would grow sour through resistance; frequent quarrels, always more ridiculous than dangerous, brought into the open the war-like ardour of the lovers. The intended became the prey of the victor, who took possession of her by agreement or by force, and this in the presence of the family who ordinarily remained impassive spectators to the scene. This practice, like so many others, had the force of law. How many girls in our country there are who do not marry when they would like, but at least when they do get married it is only when they want to, and to someone they want. Our Chipewyan girls did not have the same privilege; if they had the misfortune to please, they lost their liberty.

In the eyes of the men of the nation, woman was but an instrument of satisfaction; they did not even do her the honour of consulting her. Such an order of things was doubtless a source of unrest, but less so than it would have been among another people endowed with the same liberties. The Chipewyans, extremely jealous by nature, were not sensitive about the honour of their wives. One of the formalities of their reception ceremony was to share their matrimonial bed with a parent or friend to whom hospitality was offered. When two men were together, there was nothing more common than the exchange of companions for a set time. Adultery, committed against the will of the offended party, seemed a crime to them. Fornication, although not considered to be very commendable, was not viewed with the degree of disapprobation it deserves. The woman, less passionate than the man, sometimes forgot the modesty which should always be her most beautiful ornament, but she would never show off her degradation in public. The incomprehensible necessity to recognize crime could have originated only in the destinies of civilization, and the mere mention of it would make the children of the forests blush. I have told you enough about this distressing subject. Forgive me if my desire for accuracy overcame my fear of offending your modesty.

3. Physical stature. — Our Chipewyans have quite a becoming physique; they are perhaps above average in height. I have measured one who was six feet three inches tall. They are neither handsome nor ugly. Their face is quite similar to the European type, with the exception of their protruding cheekbones. Their thick hair is often light brown during childhood, but always becomes black, especially among
men. Their eyes, neither big nor small, do not show the expression of alertness and teasing which is quite common with black eyes, especially those of the Savages; it is easy to read in their eyes the gentleness and calm of their character, which is apparent in their features. Their teeth are neither as white nor as regular as those of people who, like themselves, use food without seasoning; they show the same variety as at home [in Canada]. A beard, often luxuriant and always black, distinguishes them from the other peoples of the woods. Their way of life is more than sufficient to darken their complexion; however, a certain number can be found who are far from dark. Their nose, neither aquiline nor very protruding, is almost always somewhat flattened at its extremity and does not show the indefinable variety which is found in other countries; I know only one of them the proportions of whose nose would have some chance of success in an exhibition of this interesting part of ourselves. They have a delicate and quite tiny foot; following the example of our dandies they take pride in this so-called advantage. The women, in this part of the country at least, are small; a considerable degree of rotundity helps them gain in width what they lose in height. The desire to please, and especially the love of dress so common among women (and in this respect I know a good number of men who are women), must be encouraged in them rather than repressed. Although an enemy of luxury, I am somewhat forced to be its apostle here. Our squaws, it is said, are not ugly; but a better eye than mine is needed to find their charms beneath the thick layer of dirt and fat which serves as a veil over which their short hair hangs, with a capricious carelessness, down to their mouths. Too often the desire to please makes women in general forget certain proprieties, a forgetfulness which renders them contemptible; nothing of this kind is found among our Chipewyan women. Understanding that clothes are given to us only to cover ourselves, they draw the perfectly logical conclusion that they are better dressed when more is hidden. The mothers, however, often make exceptions in the exercise of their maternal duties. I think I have already spoken to you about the dress of the women; let it suffice for me to add here that, unless one sees it, it is impossible to have an idea of the disgusting dirtiness which characterizes it. Men's clothes are quite similar to those of our peasants; they obtain their clothing in the stores of the Company where it is received ready made from England. However, trousers are little used; they are replaced by mitasses, and an indescribable shred of cloth which they call brayet. In autumn, when they come for their credit, the men have a certain air of affluence; their blue or white overcoats, their black, white or red mitasses, their Scottish caps and their coloured belts would lead one to believe that they live, if not in opulence, at least in an honest mediocrity. Alas! How different is the scene in spring and how pitiful the spectacle they present then.

One trait peculiar to our Savages is that, although they are very
covetous of beautiful and fine clothes, they have no taste whatsoever for useless ornaments; no glass beads, no necklaces, no earrings, nothing of that kind. They always prefer the sensible to the frivolous. No adornments in their hair; it hangs in disorder on their shoulders. The men, who are generally better combed than the women, cut their hair at eye height across the entire width of the forehead. The art of make-up has not yet attained a high degree of perfection here. It consists very simply of using a piece of any kind of fat and rubbing it on the hair, the face and the hands with an unlimited extravagance. Men, women and children, all like the shining polish resulting from this operation. One must admit that it has one precious advantage, that of destroying the superabundance of the insect population which, entrenched in the forests of their heads, sends out numerous colonies to populate the most remote parts of the individual. This implacable enemy of mankind’s peace appears to love the Chipewyan nation, although that nation has declared a war of retaliation against it. Yes, a tooth for a tooth. A Chipewyan, and especially a Chipewyan woman, feeling herself bothered by some giant of the species, catches it with astonishing dexterity and condemns it, between her teeth, to a death worthy of its stinging audacity. The desire to destroy vermin sometimes leads them to forget the rules of modesty, but it is all done in innocence, and, if they suffer as much as their pastor, feeling that they are being eaten alive, I think that these little lapses can be forgiven them.

Before the arrival of the Europeans, the skin of animals, especially of the caribou, was the sole source of clothing for our Chipewyans. I am not too aware of their form; there is good reason to suppose that it was in no way subject to the capricious variations of fashion. I have been able to obtain more information on the various utensils they then used. Their axes were made of caribou horns, their “crooked knives” with beavers’ teeth; their other knives, their chisels (to break through the ice), their fish-hooks and spears were fashioned from hard and keen-edged stones; their awls and needles were made from pickerel bones. Their spoons were made of wood or from musk-ox horns. As the inventors of phosphoric matches had not yet imparted to the world their precious invention, our Indians were quite content to produce a spark by striking two pebbles together. It is easy to understand how little suited these various objects are to the usage made of them, and that our Savages must have received with great joy all the things brought by the Europeans. Besides the fish-hook, the Chipewyans knew how to use nets; instead of thread they used *babiche.* I have seen some of these nets; they are better than I would have expected. Their arms for hunting and warfare were the bow and arrow and a few spears. Having no metal pans, they boiled their food in bark or stone dishes over red-hot stones. Often, even today, the belly of an animal renders them this service; they put the meat with water inside
it and hang it over the fire; they then rotate it until the whole is boiling vigorously. They claim that meat prepared in this way would baffle the best gastronomers. All I know is that you have to be one of them to like the spices that an over-indulgent glance reveals in the wrinkles of this remarkable cauldron. Our amiable people are even more grubby in their food than in their clothes. I suppose you will readily excuse me from proving this statement. I assure you that, although I am not overscrupulous myself in this regard, the sight of them turned my stomach often enough that you can take my word for it. Our Chipewyans are exceedingly greedy. If something is offered to them, they first feel everything, then select the most succulent parts which they devour with a disgusting gluttony. Fat meat and grease are their favorite dishes. The use of a fork is unknown to them; this is how they make up for it. They hold the meat in their left hand, grasp it between their teeth, then the knife cuts off as much as the mouth can hold. The first few times I witnessed these scenes, I expected at any moment to see the end of someone's nose fall into the dish, but no, their skill in this is equalled only by the vivacity with which the operation is performed. A dull silence reigns during all this time; one sees that it is a matter of life and death. When the food is finished, everyone licks his fingers and wipes them in his hair. They look at one another complacently when the food has been plentiful; then conversations resume. During this time the stomach, astonished by the treatment to which it has been subjected, tries to recover from its surprise; some explosions from the upper storey restore equilibrium, and they are ready to start again. What amazes me is that indigestion is unknown. After rigorous fasts, they fill their stomachs with a prodigious quantity of the most substantial food without the slightest difficulty.

Our Savages live in huts or tents made of skins. They are cone-shaped, the diameter of the base of the cone varying according to the number of those who live in it. The fire is in the middle. All are seated in the oriental manner or lying down, again according to the custom of the same peoples. These huts seem to me to be the least desirable dwellings imaginable. For myself, I cannot get used to them; I have never come out of one without cramp. Although there is a certain order in the distribution of places, this order nevertheless varies; I noticed with grief that only the old women had set places: the worst ones, at the entrance, where they have to fight with all the family dogs to keep the small portion of space assigned to them. In winter especially, the Chipewyans are dispersed; one rarely sees two or three huts at the same place, and then only for a short while. In the summer they regather in greater numbers. Here again all their dirtiness is shown. It is enough for a need to be natural that they feel authorized to relieve themselves coram sole et populo.24

How often have I regretted my incapacity to enforce that law of
Deuteronomy ordering the Jews to carry a pointed stick in their belt and the use they were to make of it. This passage from the holy scriptures may perhaps have given the free-thinkers or the feeble-minded a laugh. I would like to embarrass them by having them survey a Chipewyan camp. Unless they are totally deprived of sight, touch and smell, they would easily understand that the divine Legislator understood things better than they do, and that the smallest of his rules is filled with the most profound wisdom.

Our Chipewyans live by hunting. Moose, caribou, deer and wild ox form their main diet. Although it seems painful for them to eat fish, they are nevertheless obliged to endure it, especially over the past few years. They are very happy when the fishing does not also fail. Oh! How pitiful was their lot before they heard about religion. To be born in tears, to live in suffering and to die without hope could summarize their history. These moving words of the father of suffering can still be applied to them to the letter: "Man born of woman lives but a short time and is filled with miseries." There is an extreme and general misery which is astonishing and which requires in those subjected to it a capacity for suffering which those who are used to another way of life cannot comprehend. You know that as a rule our Savages live from day to day, and in consequence are sometimes in abundance and the next day in need. Our Chipewyans, who have much more foresight than the others, are in fact less exposed to these inevitable hardships. Nevertheless, it frequently happens that the poverty of times and places prevents their foresight from being helpful.

One day, I asked one of them if he had ever been as long as three days without eating. He burst out laughing and said: "You just do not know how we live; I have been up to ten days without taking a single mouthful, neither myself, my wife, nor my children." This is not a rare exception; almost all have the same experience at one time or another. The man of whom I speak is possibly the best hunter in the district. Their situation is less difficult in summer. Besides the fact that they do not have to fight against the bad weather, the country offers more resources than in winter. The proof of the greater suffering in winter is clearly found in the mortality rate during this healthy season. The ratio of summer to winter deaths is about one to eight, sometimes ten. Frequent and lengthy fasts ruin their constitution. Cases of normal longevity are much rarer than elsewhere. In winter especially, all illnesses are serious and almost always mortal. I was trying to encourage a man whose wife was only slightly indisposed and he replied: "We are not like the Whites; death is strong against us, it does not let us be slightly sick." The unfortunate man was right.

In order to have a complete idea of the destitution of these Savages, the excessive poverty of their clothing must be added to the frequent shortage of food. For myself, I am still wondering how they
can resist the rigours of the climate in which they live without resources other than those at their disposal. Habits acquired in childhood must have deprived them of feeling to a degree difficult to imagine. Even in the most intense cold, they sleep outdoors without a fire and under a single blanket, often very much shorter than themselves. I was traveling in winter; a Savage who was with me had already given me several examples of his capacity in this respect. The temperature on the eve of our arrival here was thirty-two degrees (Reaumur) and intensified by a strong wind. During the night, several outbursts of shivering warned me that my bed was not warm enough. We were camped in a very unsuitable place, without shelter and with little wood to make a fire. On wakening, I was shivering all over and my teeth were chattering. I then noticed my Chipewyan with his bare feet sticking out from under his little blanket, exposed to the air and separated from the snow by a fir branch. I could not hold back a cry of surprise, fearing that he was frozen. My other companions woke him up, although with difficulty. He then admitted that he had slept soundly all night without even feeling the cold. When I travel in the winter I usually take two blankets to cover myself, while my coat serves as a mattress.

I did not think that such a bed was in any way a luxury when it is necessary to sleep in the open. Well! would you believe it, good mother, I have probably never once prepared this simple bed without hearing the Savages who were accompanying me pass remarks on the happiness of my situation, on the advantage of being so sumptuously furnished with all the necessities of life. Two blankets for one man seemed to them a treasure which only strangers to their nation could possess. It may be asked how these Savages can be so poor, when their furs are a source of wealth for the Company which enjoys the exclusive privilege of trading here? I would like to tell you at length about this Company, but I shall come back to it; let it be enough for this time to tell you frankly that I am far from the opinion of those who see only evil in it and who work towards its destruction. I do not pretend to say that it is entirely above reproach; certainly what administration entrusted to human hands leaves nothing to be corrected? Undoubtedly more could be expected from a benevolent society which had immense sums of money to spend on the welfare of the natives of these parts, but I think that we cannot reasonably ask more from a company of merchants who acquire through considerable hardships a modest fortune for their old age. It is a great mistake to compare this company with the North West Company, or with what it might have been had it not been engaged in continuing battle against the most powerful of its antagonists. Here, in three words, is my opinion. In all the territory of the Chipewyans which I know intimately and where the use of intoxicating liquor is absolutely forbidden. I find that the trade of the honourable Hudson's Bay Company is carried out according to the most strict justice. Moreover, the greatest evil which
could befall our Savages would be the opposition, from whatever side it came. What is more, although the help this Company gives us may seem very little, nevertheless, without it, and left with only the resources we now have, it would be morally impossible for us to continue the work of the missions here. The opinion I now express is not one that I have always held, but is the result of serious and conscientious reflection on the situation of the Indians, for whose welfare I work. I am on this point partisan only by conviction; I am not even influenced by the courteous and generous treatment which I personally have received in all my dealings with members of the Company. I have already told you several times of the fatherly kindness of Mr. McKenzie, and I could say the same of his successor, Mr. N. Finlayson; nevertheless, as I am not here on my own account, the propriety of these dealings would not blind me to the point that I would close my eyes to the lot of those whose happiness is intimately linked with mine. If therefore these Savages are so poor, it is due to the adorable will of God who has placed them in the most inhospitable corner of the world. More industry and a little more hard work would also improve their condition. Our own situation does not allow us to help them in any other way than by our advice. This mode of regenerating a nation is slow. It takes time to change habits which are the result of centuries.

If the condition of the tribe is indeed pitiful, that of the women involves privations and suffering absolutely unknown among civilized nations. "I shall multiply your sufferings," said God to the first sinner; this terrible curse still lies heavy here: it is misery multiplied by misery, resulting in terrifying anguish. Christian women, if you do not understand the advantages that spiritual rebirth has procured for you, come for a while to the school of infidel nations, and you shall see what you would be without the salutary influence of Christianity. Beloved mother, in other letters, I have already unfolded to you the catalogue of miseries endured here by your sex. Your feelings were sufficiently touched by it that there is no need to repeat it. I must now put an end to the account I undertook to give you of the Savages I am evangelizing. I have already said too much for a letter; not enough for the history of a people.

If, as one might suppose, God has assigned to nations as well as to individuals the role which they have to play on the great scene of the world, it is permissible to wonder what can be the role of the Chipewyan nation. This role certainly seems very restricted, especially if one compares it with that of the colossal powers who extend their empires from one pole to the other and dictate their laws to hundreds of subsidiary nations. In any mechanism, both the smallest wheels and the greatest are necessary for the smooth running of the whole; likewise, in the great harmony of the world, the weakest as well as the most powerful of nations must contribute to the general enlighten-
ment. Thus our Chipewyans, in the midst of the grossest ignorance and the most profound poverty, offer some salutary lessons in their moral code. Natural religion was sufficient to convince them to set up an insuperable barrier to the passions which all too frequently corrupt even the most Christian groups. This would seem to show that we must look beyond the degradation of human nature to discover the reasons for crimes which are incomprehensible to reasonable beings. Deprived of original innocence, we doubtless have a natural propensity for evil, but this propensity becomes stronger and more widespread because of the ease with which we pursue it, to the point where it is true to say that we corrupt our own corruption. The conduct of this nation seems to me also to be a great justification of providence and proves that God must have said to men, through their primitive law, what he repeated to the great apostle of perfect charity: "My grace is sufficient unto thee." By a secret judgment as adorable as it is impenetrable, generations have succeeded generations right up to the present; centuries have followed centuries right up to our times, without this nation ever receiving the precious graces which have been given to others at their birth; without it ever hearing of its Redeemer; without even desiring to, for lack of knowing Him. But, finally, the favourable hour has come; God, in his mercy, has remembered his people and sent ministers to raise the standard of salvation on these inhospitable shores which seemed accessible only to greed. Your son, in the company of a truly worthy friend, and followed by more of our dear brothers, has been chosen to continue the work of a zealous predecessor! Well, I ask you, is the position of this son so miserable? I call upon your own judgment, not, in truth, to your testimony as a mother. I know that before that tribunal, as before that of my own heart as a son, I would receive a swift and total condemnation. I call upon you as a woman, and above all as a Christian woman. The world admires the joy of a mother whose son, in a political turmoil, will arm himself with a sword and rush selflessly to the help of his fellow citizens. And lo! Would the happiness of a Christian mother be any less when her son, a young soldier of the Lord's army, seeing humanity at war with its most formidable enemies, will arm himself with the saving Cross and run to the aid of the most neglected portion of the great human family? Would you blame me, good and loving mother, for having followed the natural consequences of the principles you have tried to engrave in my heart since my earliest days? Young plants for a long time show traces of the bonds which united them with the stakes supporting them; so also has my heart kept the memory of the advice you unsparingly gave me in my inexperience. "Understand, my son," you often told me, "that the sweetest and purest of satisfactions is to do good to our fellow men." This happiness, loving mother, I understood; I enjoy it in all its fullness. Would you wish to take it away from me? Would you wish to be saddened by what is,
after all, the ambition of all mothers? No! These are not your sentiments; your letters, all filled with the tenderest love as well as with the noblest resignation, prove that I was not mistaken in my estimation of the soundness of your character and of the degree of your piety. In fact, from whatever point of view one considers the conduct of a Canadian priest dedicating himself to the Indian missions of British America, one can see only reasons for consolation. As to the great questions of humanity and religion, the case in point speaks for itself too clearly to need proof. From the political point of view, this behaviour also has merit, since it consists in producing more enlightened and better, that is, more faithful subjects from those nations submissive to the glorious Empire whose flag flies on the banks of our great river. From the national point of view, this step by a Canadian priest must be meritorious in the eyes of his fellow citizens, since he is paying his country's debt.

The European who sets foot for the first time on the soil of our beloved country is astonished by the revolution which takes place in his ideas; the testimony of his senses is so surprising that it is barely sufficient to dispel his illusions. The words "Canada" and "Canadian" have always been associated by him with a scene so thickly forested that he has been unable to rid himself of the ideas of a wild country and of a barbarian people. He is very much surprised to find, beyond the seas, the trappings of civilization and, in our country people, the pure blood of our ancestors and all the courtesy which distinguishes them. The Canadian who visits the immense solitude of the North West experiences as great an astonishment, but of a very different nature. When a person examines his home, he finds in it an array of precious qualities which make it commendable in the eyes of everyone; but if he moves away from the steeple of his parish, if he ceases to hear the voice of the pastor who guided his youth, he becomes an altogether different person. It is in the Indian country especially that his behaviour shows the most disgusting side of his own history. And so, Canadian myself, I have very often blushed at the poor conduct of our voyageurs in this region and told myself: "since some of my fellow countrymen wore themselves out here in an orgy of corruption, I am honour bound to work hard for the regeneration of their progeny and of the nations to which they joined themselves by unions which were too tarnished to be honourable." I am living more of a family life here than might perhaps be expected. Besides the employees of the forts, who are almost all Canadians or sons of Canadians, one finds, among the Savages themselves, names which tell clearly enough the origin of those who bear them. On our arrival at the portage of Fort de Traite, we noticed (Mr. Lafleche and I) an Indian better-looking than his brothers. Mr. McKenzie introduced him to us, saying: "this is M..." "What!" I exclaimed with great surprise, "would he be a relative of...?" "Precisely," added our respectable companion,
“this Savage is the son of the honourable M... de.....” I know that the brothers and sisters of this half-breed flaunt their wealth daily before the inhabitants of Montreal without perhaps ever having thought of giving a mite to the Propagation of the Faith, the only effective method of helping the man whom they must cherish as a brother according to the law of nature.

I mention this fact among a thousand, because there are many Canadian families who would be surprised to find some of their members among the Savages wallowing in the most profound ignorance, forgetful of the God who served their ancestors and whom their fathers have taught them only to curse. Just as we were approaching this place for the first time, a Chipewyan got aboard our barge and came up to us, swearing in French. The poor man did not have the slightest idea of what he was saying, he was simply echoing Canadian phrases too commonly used for these kinds of greetings. This is why I say that the Canadian priest is paying off a national debt. I was neither a traitor to my country, nor forgetful of my duties toward our gracious Sovereign, when I joined an Order capable of assigning me to the vocation which I am so happy to follow. I quote those words because they were once said, largely in reference to me, in a place where every word should have been a counsel of wisdom, and where every individual should at least avoid being ridiculous. Just because I am far from my own country, I do not lose the feelings which should move every good man. The Saviour who assigned the entire world to his missionaries as their country did not forbid them to show a fondness for the land of their birth. Beloved Canada, I would like to send you traitors like those who give everything they have out here to pay off the holy debt that your most unworthy children have contracted in your name.

If there is one feeling to which I have been a traitor, it is the consideration I should have had for your sensitivity; you are the one, loving mother, who must pardon me for this crime; I know that you have already done so. Although I know your sentiments on this subject, I thought I should not conceal the preceding reflections, because they are of such a nature as to sustain your courage against the painful impressions which a very natural love may implant in your heart. Religion rules the emotions, but it can neither stifle nor condemn them. Virtue is not the enemy of sensitivity; I can see no virtue at all where there is only apathy. And so, loving mother, I understand that you must suffer from your son being so far away, just as he himself suffers through his separation from the mother who has so much right to his love. For our mutual consolation, let us often say: “The hand of God is here,” He is the one who unites us in spirit, even when he separates us in body. Blessed be His holy name! His will be done. Yes, tender mother, let His loving will be done! Let us be joyful that
the Lord has looked favourably upon us! Shall we regret the sacrifices necessary to spread the word of this good master to the many peoples who know him not? May these great thoughts help to give you strength. May God in His infinite goodness bless my mother and console her a hundredfold for the grief I may have caused her through my sole aim of helping my fellow men. And if the thought that one is loved by those one cherishes is the greatest alleviation of the sorrows of separation, then be reassured that the heart of your son is similar to that of his mother; he loves God ardently above all, and his mother, after God. Besides, last week I sent you a letter on the occasion of the New Year which will tell you well enough that neither time nor separation in any way diminishes the love I have for her who is interested only in my happiness. Goodbye, dear mother. Who knows if God does not keep in store the joy of seeing us united again in this world! What I do know is that He leaves it to me, and even commands me, to dutifully love you.

This thought consoles and encourages the most tenderly affectionate of your sons.

ALEX. TACHÉ

NOTES
1 This letter was 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.

2 The use of the French word “Sauvage” had no disparaging connotation at the time, as it sometimes has today. It has been translated literally, as “Savage,” except in contexts where to do so is inappropriate in English usage.

3 René Châteaubriand.

4 Taché was not writing for the public, and one can conclude that the observations he makes in his letter are really his own opinion. As early as January 6, 1847, he complained to his mother: “This time, I am sending you a few details of my trip. If, in Montreal, they were not so eager to print, I would be ashamed to say that this piece was not written for the public, but in the present circumstances it is a useless precaution. This letter is for your own satisfaction and that of the family and these are, at the most, the limits of its distribution. I say nothing on the Indians, it would be the most interesting part, but you lose nothing by waiting and I propose to send you, in the spring, a long article on their account; I have not had time to do it now.” (Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface, 2 [1903], p. 191). See also his letter to his mother, October 4, 1859, also in Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface, 2 (1903), p. 501. As for the letter translated here, the Editor of the Rapport writes: “We owe to the good offices of a friend the following letter [...] although it was not intended for publication.” (p. 67)

5 Or Stoney.

6 It is intriguing to note Taché’s use of lines of latitude to describe the limits of the areas covered by the various “families,” which serves to emphasize how little known the region then was by Europeans.

7 “From one, learn about them all.” Taché also gives information on the various tribes in his Esquisse sur le Nord-Ouest de l’Amérique, Montreal, Typographie de Nouveau Monde, 1869. For the Chipewyans, see pp. 86-89.

8 Of the fourth family. He gives a more complete description of these tribes in Esquisse sur le Nord-Ouest de l’Amérique, pp. 89-91.

9 Kutchins or “Quarrelsome.”

10 He adds the following note (p. 69): “This word Montagnais has misled some writers into saying that they are a tribe of the Saulteaux, to whom they bear not even the shadow of a
resemblance. Nor should this name make one believe that they resemble the Montagnais of the Saguenay. It is the latter which must be considered as a tribe of the Saulteaux or the Crees."

11 Taché says of the language in his letter to Simon James Dawson on February 7, 1859, "Mr. Humboldt made a serious blunder when he assured us that there was a great resemblance in the structure of all the Indian languages." (Missions de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée, 2 [1863], p. 161).

12 This is an effort to convey the probable sense of the original; Taché’s meaning for “à part” is not clear.

13 For Taché on the intelligence of the Indian, see Esquisse sur le Nord-Ouest de l’Amérique, pp. 76–78.

14 The French word “jonglerie” was used in the text; it is normally used to convey the sense of the “trickery” or sleight-of-hand characteristic of a juggler.

15 It should be pointed out here that the story of the flood might nevertheless have found its way into the Chipewyan lore by a process of diffusion originating in a Christian society and reaching the North West perhaps a number of generations before the arrival of the missionaries.

16 There is a typographical error in the French text. The word “peuvent” (p. 77) must be changed to “pensent” as in the other published texts of this letter.

17 For Taché on the Chipewyan woman, see the letter to his mother, April 10, 1848, in Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface, 2 (1903), pp. 320–322, 331–334.

18 The Indian had to feel Taché’s shirt with his finger, since it was beneath the priest’s cassock.

19 The text in the Rapport de l’Association de la Propagation de la Foi pour le District de Montréal reads “sans effet” (p. 83) and that of the Rapport sur les Missions du Diocèse de Québec: “sans assaisonnements” (p. 27).

20 See Taché to his mother, April 10, 1848.

21 In the letter to his mother, April 10, 1848, p. 319, he uses the word “haut-de-chausse” or breeches, called “mitas” in the country.

22 The translation of this word is uncertain.

23 Leather thongs.

24 “Under the sun and in public.”

25 The text erroneously has “lieux” instead of “liens” as in the Rapport sur les Missions du Diocèse de Québec, p. 39.

26 Taché is probably alluding here to conversations with priests in rectories. He had joined a French Order and had been sent to the missions, and some of his contemporaries may have felt that he was turning his back on what could have been a very useful career as a priest in Eastern Canada.