

OBLATE VICTIMS IN THE FAR NORTH

Gaston Montmigney, O.M.I.



OBLATE
HERITAGE

11

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by
Gaston J. Montmigney, O.M.I.

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Translated by: James Beggan, O.M.I.

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As Louis-Frédéric Rouquette so well expressed in his 1926 book entitled “L’Épopée Banche” (The White Epic), the prophecy of the psalmist has been realized : “*My word will spread to the ends of the earth*”. This found a special reality in the frozen north of Canada.

After 150 years of Oblate presence in North Western Canada, the Oblates are blessed with several real martyrs who lived, worked and died in that land. We speak here of just five great missionaries who were chosen by the design of Divine Providence to shed their blood - a Brother and four Priests, all Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. They followed in the footsteps of their Divine Master who was himself sacrificed on the Cross of Golgotha.

1. Brother Alexis Reynard, O.M.I. (1828-1875)
2. Father Félix-Adélard-Léon Fafard, O.M.I. (1850-1885)
3. Father Félix Marchand, O.M.I. (1858-1885)
4. Father Jean-Baptiste Rouvière, O.M.I (1881-1913)
5. Father Guillaume Le Roux, O.M.I. (1885-1913)

Brother
Alexis
Reynard,
O.M.I.
1828 - 1875



Born in the village of Castillon in France, on September 28, 1828, Alexis confided to his mother on the day of his First Communion: “*Mother, I want to be a monk and die a martyr like St. John the Baptist, the patron of our parish.*” His whole life testified to his willingness to reproduce in his own life the example of the saintly Precursor of Christ.

He said often: “*I am not made to work on the land, but to work for souls.*” Devoted to prayer, penance and mortification, and endeavouring to imitate more and more the saintly John the Baptist, he went even as far as to sleep on the bare paving stone of a stable, covered only in a sheep’s skin. Such was the life of Alexis Reynard up to the moment when, in 1849, he obtained permission to join the Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

He went to the Oblate Novitiate without really knowing his mind clearly. The Novitiate was neither a college, nor a seminary. Latin was not studied there. Alexis wished to study and become a priest, but he was already a young man at this stage. After becoming aware of procedures, he was free to return home or remain as a lay novice. Through timidity, he did not dare insist, and began his novitiate in order to become a Lay Brother, still keeping in mind his ambition of becoming one day a priest.



Oblate Mission of Fort Chipewyan

At the end of his novitiate, he pronounced his First Vows, and hardly a year later was admitted, by a special favour, to Perpetual Vows before his departure to the Great Canadian North. For ten years he dedicated himself to the mission at Nativity (Fort Chipewyan), seven years to the Providence

mission, and four years to Notre-Dame des Victoires (Lac la Biche), returning for his last assignment to the Nativity mission. In all his posts, Brother Alexis generously and joyfully accomplished all the work which was usual at that time for a brother: cook, gardener, engineer, boat builder, dog handler, fisherman and hunter for provisions, etc. ... He was an indispensable man, and where education was lacking, effort compensated and enabled him to achieve his goals. He gave his time joyously for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

When he accepted finally the painful sacrifice of abandoning the pursuance of his studies in order to become a priest, divine graces rewarded his heroic act. From that time on, Brother Alexis made rapid progress in holiness, so much so that it filled with admiration all those who lived with him - the ordinary faithful, religious sisters, brothers, priests and bishops. Bishop Vital Grandin wrote of him in 1861: "*He is a true angel of peace, gentleness and purity.*"

Having learned that Bishop Faraud, on returning from Europe, was going to arrive at the Lac la Biche with his new missionaries, Brother Alexis wished, come what may, to meet his bishop and place himself at his disposal. He therefore joined a caravan and left enthusiastically. After a fortnight, navigation having become impossible owing to floods, the caravan, consisting of Métis, the most daring travellers in the world, turned back to the trading fort that they had passed a few days earlier.

Brother Alexis on the contrary, spurred on by his courage, and what he believed to be his duty, decided to continue overland with his servant, an Iroquois Métis by the name of Louis Lafrance, and a young orphan girl for whom he took the responsibility of taking from Athabaska to Lac la Biche and who likewise did not wish to be separated from him. This group had still to undergo twenty days of walking, with provisions for three days only, as well as carrying ammunition with which they hoped to catch game. Unfortunately they encountered little game, and they found

themselves reduced to all the horrors of hunger. Along the way Brother had to admonish his guide who did not always behave himself in an exemplary manner with the young girl. This had created a rather strained situation.



*Lac la Biche Mission
Now a Government Historical Site*

When the Métis caravan from which Brother Reynard had parted finally arrived at the Notre-Dame des Victoires Mission at Lac la Biche, consternation arose on learning or realizing that Brother Alexis had not arrived at the mission. Immediately Brother Lambert was dispatched with some servants furnished with food in search of Brother whom they believed to be in trouble.

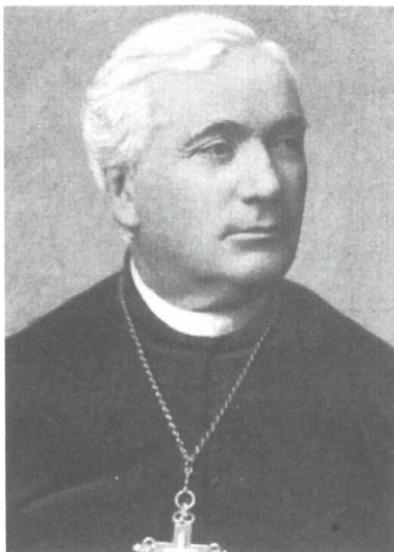
Concentrating their search in the place where the caravan had lost track of the three travellers where the mouth of Des Maisons river merges with the great la Biche river, Brother Lambert first of all found some personal effects of Brother Alexis. Then they found his bare bones covered by a light layer of sand. Not far from this place of horror, there was yet a more horrible one. They discovered traces of a fireplace and the remains of a frightful meal: a vertebra, some finger bones and parts of ribs. The skull had been pierced by a bullet. All the bones were collected amid tears and deep emotion, and brought back to the mission. There were added tears and sobbing during the entire funeral ceremony.

Bishop Grandin wrote in his notes:

"I consider that Brother Alexis died the death of St. John the Baptist: a martyr of chastity. I retain his clothing and axe as relics."

All honour is due to our good Brother Alexis who obeyed only his dedication to duty. He was a martyr of duty during his life and at the time of his death. May the Lord deign to crown him just like the martyrs of faith, for to give one's life in either case is it not making an act of perfect charity?

Brother Alexis Reynard, O.M.I. worked for more than twenty years in the North Canadian Missions with boundless devotion. He was always the model of the perfect religious. His death was dreadful in the eyes of nature, but we believe that God received him into His eternal kingdom.



**Venerable Bishop Vital Grandin,
O.M.I., 1829-1902 Great
Missionary and First Bishop of
St. Albert (Edmonton).**

**Father
Léon Fafard,
O.M.I.
1850-1885**

**Father Félix
Marchand,
O.M.I.
1858-1885**

The bloody Holy Thursday of April 2, 1885 is better known today as the Massacre of Frog Lake (Alberta, Canada). A Métis revolt had spread to the plains of Western Canada. Returned from exile, Louis Riel no longer stirred up the Métis. His Indian allies were split, particularly Big Bear and his savage warriors. Riel, a reasonable man, played for time, but Big Bear more aggressive, swore death to all white foreigners. Actions quickly followed words. At the head of seven or eight hundred Indians, Big Bear marched hastily towards the mission established near Frog Lake.



Fr. Léon Fafard, O.M.I.

this mission was thriving well. Its joyful and well turned-out appearance was the admiration of all visitors. Besides the completed church and presbytery with its outbuildings, there was a school with some forty pupils. On Holy Thursday, April 2, 1885, Big Bear in a few hours was to make all of that into a pile of smoking ruins, bathed with the blood of two Oblate martyrs.

Father Fafard, director of this mission, maintained friendly relations with all his neighbours and even dined with them. "What an energetic man! What an edifying religious!" cried Brother Bigonnesse after a stay in his house. He answered every call, whether English or French, and he did good everywhere. He knew no fear, and duty would have made him face death anywhere.

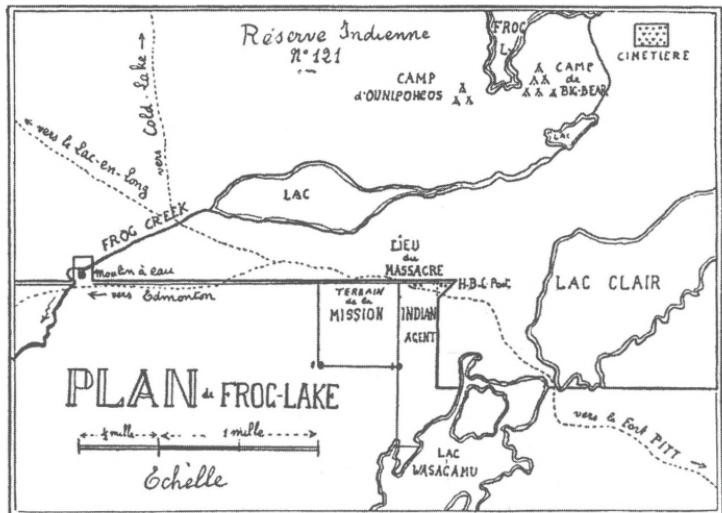
At the beginning of 1885, Father Fafard had finished the construction of Notre-Dame du Bon Conseil (Our Lady of Good Council), two miles south of Frog Lake. However, the missionary residence was only a humble maisonette built with tree trunks. The front door lead directly into the one room which served as kitchen, refectory, parlour and classroom. Thanks to the efforts of the two zealous missionaries, Fathers Fafard and Marchand, and to the resources that they received from their families,



Fr. Félix Marchand, O.M.I.

It was in autumn 1883 that Father Marchand arrived at Frog Lake to perfect himself in the Cree language, and from October 1884 he was sent to found the Saint-Louis mission on Onion Lake. On that occasion he wrote:

"The thought of seeing myself chosen to lay the foundations of a mission made me blush. I see myself so lacking in requisite knowledge. But on the other hand, I am happy with this choice. It will allow me to expend myself still more in the search for the souls of my poor Indians."



*Map of Frog Lake Mission
Site of the Holy Thursday Massacre*

It was in the morning during the prayers of Holy Thursday that Big Bear's men entered the church of Frog Lake in war gear, that is, almost naked, bodies tattooed in a strange manner, heads decorated with feathers and glass jewels, their faces hideously daubed. With horrifying cries of rage they ordered those present in the church to go immediately to the camp of Big Bear, to become prisoners and hear their sentence. Terrified, the faithful left the church and marched in rank behind the two priests who led, reciting prayers. At some distance from the houses, the Indian agent, a

federal government officer, refused to go any further. Immediately a shot ended his life and another was wounded. Father Fafard rushed towards the dying man to give him spiritual aid at that supreme moment, but while he was giving absolution a bullet struck him in the neck and killed him.

During this shooting, Father Marchand, who was some three hundred metres from there, heard the rifle shots, but because of a dip in the ground could not see exactly what was happening. He was told that there were some people wounded and that his confrère was either dead or dying. Fearlessly Father Marchand ran towards the scene of the massacre to minister to the victims. Hardly had he taken a few steps when a bullet struck him full in the forehead and he died instantly.

The Bishop of Saint-Albert, Vital Grandin, O.M.I. related in a letter to the relatives of Father Fafard:

“An old Indian gave me the following details: He said, “When I arrived near the bodies they were already cold. Both their faces and hands were covered with blood. They were holding their crosses with one hand which was also spattered with blood. Father Marchand had his head pierced by a bullet and Father Fafard, besides the wound to the neck, had no doubt a wound elsewhere, for blood was flowing along his arm. I went to fetch water from the swamp and washed their faces and hands, and I also washed their crosses. While I considered them thus, I thought of the sorrows that the Blessed Virgin must have experienced when they gave her the bloodied and pierced body of her Son. I could no longer live in a country where so many atrocities were committed.. I have relatives in the outskirts of Saint-Albert. I shall go there. My three sons will work with white people and will support me.”



*Memorial Card of the Two Victims
"Martyrs to Charity".*

After this horrible attack, the assassins pillaged the church, the sacristy, the presbytery, and when they had taken all they wanted, they set the building on fire. Around this fireplace, which they looked upon with a wild joy, they organized a diabolic dance. In order to render it more satanic, they rigged themselves out with the clothing of the martyrs and some church vestments. They could be seen jumping around like firebrands, in an unbridled jumble, adorned, some with a cassock, others with chasubles in golden, silver or black cloth, and copes of diverse colours. Those who had not been able to succeed in snatching a cope or a chasuble, had at least a stole or a maniple, an alb or a surplice.

Proud of this abominable feat and convinced that everyone would tremble before him, Big Bear sent emissaries to Lac la Biche, to Notre-Dame des Victories mission. He charged

all the Indians of the place under pain of death to come and swell the numbers of his troops of looters and assassins, asserting that within a few days the Notre-Dame des Victoires mission would also be totally plundered and undergo fire and blood.



Alone in the Tundra: Frog Lake Mission in 1937.

This rebellion of the Métis and Indians of the North-West, led by the skilled Riel and some Indian chiefs, lasted two months and covered the region of Battleford and Batoche in ruins. Finally the rebellion was wiped out at Batoche. Seven Oblate missions were destroyed, two Oblates dead and several others kept in captivity where they had to endure abuse and threats from the Redskin warriors.

The consequences of this rebellion could have been disastrous without the hold of the Oblate missionaries over the other great plain tribes who, following their advice, maintained neutrality or ranged themselves alongside the Canadian government. Such were the 5 000 Blackfeet, Blood Indians and Piegan warriors. Bishop Grandin, O.M.I. and Father Albert Lacombe, O.M.I. by their influence over the Indian Chiefs, thus rendered an immense service to the country.

Following these events, the Oblates completed their apostolic work by converting the murderers of their confrères and all the principal Indian Chiefs of the revolt, including Poundmaker and even Great Bear himself.

Let us conclude by quoting some biographical notes on the two victims of this bloody drama, written by Bishop Vital Grandin, O.M.I. himself.

"Poor Father Fafard belonged to the diocese of Montreal. He entered our Congregation in 1872 and received his Obedience for the missions in 1875. I ordained him priest on December 8, 1875, and placed him immediately in the Indian missions under the charge of an experienced priest. He was always distinguished by his zeal. For almost two years he was superior of a district. He had succeeded in setting up a magnificent mission. For that he worked like a hireling."

Father Marchand, the second martyr, was from the diocese of Rennes. He joined our Congregation in 1880. After his Novitiate in Holland, he was sent to Ottawa to finish his theological studies. I ordained him priest in September 1883 and gave him to Father Fafard as companion. In order to learn the local language quickly he was put in charge of the infant school. He soon fitted himself to become a real missionary, and his superior had him build a house with chapel on a reserve, eight or ten leagues from his own. He was in charge of this new building from the previous Autumn and he was with his confrère and superior when he was massacred."

The bodies of our two martyrs Fafard and Marchand, have remained in the Oblate cemetery of Saint-Albert (Alberta) since 1928, after being exhumed twice previously at Frog Lake and Onion Lake (Saskatchewan).

Fathers
Jean-Baptiste Rouvière, O.M.I.
1881-1913

Guillaume Le Roux, O.M.I.
1885-1913



In 1911, Father Jean-Baptiste Rouvière, O.M.I. had experienced, among the last miserable dry fir trees, the most difficult winter on Lake Imerenick which was about hundred kilometres to the North of Dease Bay on Great Bear Lake. A skilful carpenter, he hastened to square off and adjust tree trunks which were to make his poor dwelling. He was able to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice there for the

first time on September 17. After the departure of the last Eskimos for the frozen sea, Father Rouvière spent the winter in solitude, prayer and manual labour.

In April 1912 the missionary hitched up his dogs and went to Fort Norman to pick up the new companion he had been promised, Father Guillaume Le Roux, O.M.I. He had been born in the diocese of Quimper in 1885. Tough in body and spirit, and a great linguist, he was made for long arctic journeys and for the organization of the new and difficult missions to which the Vicar Apostolic of Mackenzie



called him. On the other hand Father Jean-Baptiste Rouvière, O.M.I. thirty years old, was born in the diocese of Mende, gifted with all the qualities which God was pleased to provide for his great apostolic works.

Our two apostles, ready for everything, left Fort Norman for the infertile land in mid-July 1913, and on August 29, they entered their maisonette on Lake Imerenick. But it did not take long to realize that unless they established their residence on the very polar sea, they could not dream of converting the Eskimos. The two missionaries therefore left Lake Imerenick on Wednesday October 8, 1913. Both were ill, Father Le Roux suffered from a cold, and Father Rouvière from a wound on his hand which occurred while building the house at Dease Bay. A considerable group of Eskimos had come the previous evening to accompany them. Among them were Sinnisiak and Kormick.

The caravan took about twelve days to cover the 140 kilometres which separated them from the polar sea. Father Rouvière's diary continually noted intense cold, frightful weather, difficult roads, adverse winds, tiredness of starving dogs etc. ... The final words written in the priest's diary were dated from October 20 or 23:

"We arrive at the mouth of the Coppermine river. Some families have already left. Disillusionment among the Eskimos. We are threatened by famine also, and we do not know what to do."

To describe the bloody tragedy which followed, let us listen to the words of an Eskimo named Koaha who was considered by all the police officials as the most reliable witness. His evidence, moreover, was confirmed by the complete and spontaneous confession of the two murderers themselves.

"The two Whites who were assassinated had come with us in the autumn, to the mouth of the Coppermine river. They came from Lake Imerenick, after crossing the arid land by sledge. The two Whites were Kuleavik (Father Rouvière)

and Ilogoak (Father Le Roux). The two men were dressed in great black tunics, buttoned to the feet. They could speak our language easily. When we spoke together, we understood them. On arriving here with us at the Coppermine river, the Whites stayed five nights. They lived in Kormick's tent. One night Kormick took Ilogoak's gun and hid it in a corner of the tent. The next day Ilogoak found the rifle, took it back and scolded Kormick. The latter became angry and I watched him, because he wanted to kill the White men. I am telling the truth and not saying just any old thing. (This in Eskimo language is equivalent to an oath).

I did not wish to see the good Whites assassinated, and I helped them to get away. I helped them load



Uluksak and Sinnisiak

their sledge. Near the door of the tent I forcibly held back Kormick and I said to his mother: 'Hold back your son, Kiguena, I am going out.' I stood outside the tent. The two Whites were heatedly talking to one another. Noochtellig helped me prepare for the departure of the Whites. I started the sledge under the harness as the Whites had only two dogs.

With them I went back up the river as far as I could see only the top of the tents behind us. Then I said to the Whites: 'Continue forward as far as you can, I like you and I do not wish anyone to harm you.' Ilogoak ran in front of the sledge that Kuleavik was driving. They shook hands with me. The sun was very low.

Two nights after the departure of the Whites, Uluksak and Sinnisiak left to catch up with them. They took the dogs but not the sledge. The two met the priests and journeyed with them for one day. The next day Uluksak and Sinnisiak made the first move. The Whites remained at the camp. They were cold because they had no tent.

Towards evening the two Eskimos returned and camped with the Whites. The next morning the four left together. They had returned to a place near Bloody Falls, where there is a stream and two small lakes. Snow was falling. Kuleavic was clearing the way with his snowshoes. Ilogoak was holding the sledge.

Sinnisiak whispered something to Uluksak and both removed the harness. Sinnisiak went behind the sledge, but Ilogoak watched him. Then Sinnisiak made a pretence of undoing his belt to satisfy a natural need. The priest looked away. At that moment, Sinnisiak quickly took his knife and stabbed Ilogoak in the back. The wounded man fell forward but Sinnisiak shouted to Uluksak:

'Finish that man and I shall shoot the other.'
Alerted by the cry of anguish from his companion, Kuleavik returned. When he saw Ilogoak collapsed on the ground and Sinnisiak who was taking the rifle from the sledge, he attempted to run towards the stream. The first shot the assassin fired missed him, but the second got him in the small of the back and he fell on the snow.

Uluksak stabbed Ilogoak twice and had left him dead. He came near Sinnisiak who had approached Kuleavik. 'Finish him,' Sinnisiak ordered this time. Uluksak plunged the already dripping blade of his knife into Kuleavik's stomach. The priest's lips still moved. Sinnisiak fetched the axe of the Whites from the sledge and, returning to the dying person, cut off his head and legs. Uluksak himself stated that they had eaten some entrails of the victims as well as a piece of their warm livers."



Sinnisiak and Ulaksak arrested at Coppermine.



In 1936 four Oblates, Bishops Fallaize and Breynat, and Frs. Delalande and Plante, pause and eat at Bloody Falls, Coppermine, where their two confreres were killed in 1913.

Their trial was held at Calgary. The two assassins were condemned to death. But Bishop Gabriel Breynat, O.M.I. then Vicar Apostolic of Mackenzie, was the first to ask that this sentence be commuted to a great act of piety and charity. The Bishop of the Far North received permission to detain Sinnisiak and Uluksak under guard at the Fort Résolution mission, on the banks of the Great Slave Lake. It was prison without chains or iron bars. For almost two years the two Eskimos who had killed the missionaries and eaten their liver would be able to see what the Catholic religion signified and that for it, martyrs are found ready to die at all times and places for what they believe in the name of the Crucified.

Conclusion

Daniel-Rops in his book “The Church of the Apostles and Martyrs”, says: “*Completing in their flesh what is still lacking in the passion of Jesus, according to the word of St. Paul, these first martyrs have given to faith the mark of voluntary oblation, without which no truth triumphs here below, and they have offered to generations to come models which neither the passage of time nor the words of men*

have been able to lessen. And it is through the virtue of such examples that christian witness is renewed in voluntary sacrifice.”

What was attributed to these first martyrs of the early Church equally applies to the Oblate martyrs of North-Western Canada. It sufficed that these apostles loved their flock beyond life. That is why other Oblates have subsequently taken their place. The earth may keep their bodies and drink their blood, but living and generous souls arose to continue what was begun in the middle of the 19th century by the sons of Saint Eugene de Mazenod, O.M.I. We have told here of five of our Oblate confrères who were chosen to become victims of their zeal, their holy ministry, their fidelity to their commitments, and their steadfast faith in Jesus Christ their divine Master. We could also still tell of other model Oblates who left this earth because of premature violent death during the exercise of their apostolate. Let it suffice for us for the moment to contemplate this group of five Oblates who became “the seed of conversion” in the frozen regions of Canada, and who have given us an example of true sons of our saintly Founder Bishop de Mazenod who wrote in the preface of the Oblate Rules: “*The sight of ... evils has so touched the hearts of certain priests, zealous for the glory of God, men with an ardent love for the Church, that they are willing to give their lives, if need be, for the salvation of souls.*”

Reynard, Fafard, Marchand, Rouvière and Le Roux gave the ultimate proof of such love.



Fr. Desnoyers at the Memorial Cross to Frs. Rouvière and Le Roux at Escape Rapids.

OBLATE HERITAGE SERIES II 1998

7. Oblate Witnesses: 1831-1997

Sixty-eight Oblates who lost their lives in connection with their ministry

8. The Oblate Cavalry of Christ

Early mounted Oblate missionaries in Texas and Mexico

9. The Spanish Oblate Martyrs

Twenty-two Oblates shot in 1936 during the troubled times of Spain

10. Oblate Brothers Amid the Snow

Some Oblate Brothers who by example and work were outstanding missionaries

11. Oblate Victims in the Far North

Five Oblates - a Brother and four Priests - killed in the Canadian missions

12. Five Oblates of LaBrosse

In the intrigues of World War II, these five men were summarily executed

13. German Oblate Resistance

Faced with Nazism, forty-two German Oblates suffered for their resistance

14. Oblates Along the Mekong

Six Oblates shot as Communism spread throughout Laos

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C.P. 9061
00100 Roma-Aurelio
Italy**