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Father Albert Lacombe, OMI after whom the new Canadian Oblate province is named

*by Paul McGuire, Editor of Oblate Missions
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We have relied heavily on James G. MacGregor's 1975 enjoyable biography of Father Albert Lacombe, OMI, for this article. The book offers a thorough account of the life of this legendary Oblate, as well as a detailed picture of Canada's West during a period which saw the prairies transformed from a wilderness to a land of prosperous towns and homesteads.

Father Albert was born in 1827, at St. Sulpice near Montreal. For generations the Lacombe had lived just upstream on the St. Lawrence River, in St. Eustache Parish. It was Father Albert's grandparents who moved to St. Sulpice, and here in 1824, his parents, Albert and Agathe (Duhamel) were married.

HARDSHIPS AND HEROISM

MacGregor tells us that even when the grandparents had first come to St. Sulpice, it was an old settlement, having celebrated its first Mass in 1706. "And many a tale its old ones had to tell of their forebears' hardships and heroism, of the adventures encountered as the settlers sought their livelihood from the fish of the St. Lawrence, or from the game of the woods behind their lots, or from the little fields they had hacked out of their hardwood forests."

It was a difficult life, bears dened in the nearby woods and mauled and even killed settlers. Every family had its tale of tragedy, including capture or death during Iroquois raids.

MARIE LOUISE BEAUPRE

Father Albert's paternal grandfather, Augustin, was fond of telling about sixteen year old Marie Louise Beaupré from St. Sulpice. One day with everyone working to clear land, the Beaupré adults toiled near the edge of the forest, their guns leaning against the trees. Two young sisters of Marie Louise had been left with her to keep them near the homestead.

When the group returned, the youngsters were howling; their sister had vanished! Months passed without a trace and Marie Louise was presumed dead. Five years later, however, an uncle, who

[**Editor's note:** As we move towards full electronic communication, we are discontinuing the little pamphlet format of *OMI Documentation*, beginning with this number. This will make it easier for those who must reproduce it for the confreres who do not have e-mail or Internet access.]

traded over great distances, discovered her, living with a camp of Ojibway, about seven hundred miles west of Montreal. She had been treated well and married a young Ojibway. The couple had two children. The uncle stole Marie Louise and her children away, and took them home. A year later, in 1767, Marie Louise married Pierre Duhamel. They became staunch members of the parish and one of the children was to become Father Albert's grandmother. From her came his inheritance of Ojibway or Saukteaux blood.

DREAMS OF ADVENTURE

This was a time when the parish priest was not only pastor, but also a revered leader. And MacGregor tells us that, "no parish had a priest more respected and loved than Father Viau who ruled his St. Sulpice flock with a firm but gentle hand." It was Father Viau who carefully watched over the Lacombe family. As the children grew, they shared the hard work of the family farm, but all was not incessant toil. Around the fireplace, MacGregor writes, the talk often turned to Albert's great-uncle who years earlier had journeyed out to the prairies. When Father Albert was about ten, the uncle returned and his tales of adventure had a strong impact on the youngster. They reminded him that the grand river, so near his home, could take people to Trois Rivières or Quebec City, and beyond there to the Atlantic. Up river lay Montreal and, beyond that bustling city of 50,000, lay the West, incredibly far away. Visions of adventure danced in young Albert's mind.

EDUCATION FIRST

The lad's father realized, however, that the fulfillment of dreams often lay in education. For the first years, young Albert walked six miles to a school in a neighboring parish. He had a keen mind and was an eager student. And, Father Viau was watching.

This wise priest saw the extraordinary potential of thirteen year old Albert. He told the boy's parents that he would find the money for him to pursue his education at L'Assomption College, eight miles away. Here, "building on the good material of a husky farm boy, the institution added a generous helping of book learning, a deep sense of piety and the ready obedience to discipline that produced the caliber of a man that they could foresee in Albert Lacombe."

It was here too that the young man developed a desire to become a priest, and he was given the chance to continue his studies at the residence of the Archbishop in Montreal. He entered a new world - in the largest city and commercial capital. He was able to pursue his theological education and he profited immensely from dialogue with the constant flow of priests and other visitors to the Archbishop's quarters.

PROVENCHER

Years before Father Albert's birth, the first French Canadian priests arrived at the Red River Settlement. Father Joseph Norbert Provencher was among that group, and in 1822, he was made Bishop, with headquarters at St. Boniface.

Unable to recruit enough priests from Quebec, he looked to Rome and attracted the Oblates. Already there were Oblate men in Lower Canada. As MacGregor reports, "During the few years they had been in Quebec, they had established an enviable record for the fervor of their preaching and an astounding one for the spiritual rewards their efforts earned them. Though not even Bishop Provencher could have envisaged the great success that would crown their efforts... the Oblates... were destined to establish the greatest record of service of any missionaries of any faith."

On August 25, 1845, a canoe bearing Pierre Aubert, OMI, and Antonin Taché, OMI, landed at St. Boniface, the first of the long line of pioneering Oblates.

Meanwhile, Albert Lacombe pursued his studies and grew into a robust young man - with “itchy feet that might soon tire of the rounds and bounds of a circumscribed parish.”

ORDINATION

He was ordained on June 13, 1849. Having had developed a strong desire to head West, he dreamed of the day his superiors would allow him to go. He didn't have to wait long. In August, Father Albert boarded a train in Montreal and rode it as far West as it went - to Lachine. There he transferred to a steamboat, setting out for a mission on the prairies over two thousand miles away. He also would have to travel by stage, by ox-cart and on foot - a total of one hundred days, “until November's snow ushered the wayfarers into Pembina... on the west bank of the Red River.”

OBLATE NOVICE

In 1851, Father Albert returned to Montreal for a few months and during this respite, he met the now Bishop Taché, OMI, who was ministering some eight hundred miles beyond St. Boniface. The Bishop had returned East to plead for men and money. Father Albert agreed to return to the West and Taché promised to accept him as a candidate for the Oblates.

Father Albert returned to St. Boniface but was soon on the move again, this time to Lac Ste. Anne and then to his new mission at Fort Edmonton. Although he was to continue his novitiate, it was to be less structured than he had wished. Nevertheless, he now was somewhat independent and free to apply his untested talents to the missionary cause.

ALBERT LACOMBE, OMI

Meanwhile, in a chapel at Lac Ste. Anne, in September of 1856, Father Albert made his vows and became a member of the Oblate Congregation.

The ensuing years saw steady progress for the new Oblate. As other priests arrived to assist him, he became fluent in the Cree language and conversant in others. He developed productive vegetable gardens and introduced cattle to the area. Still, he would have to travel for as many as 145 days, sometimes through 45° below zero weather to, “get groceries - some salt, sugar and a box of tea.”

Father Albert also became an effective arbitrator and peacemaker during these years. There was constant friction between the Crees and the Blackfoot, other First Nations among themselves and, as well, with the Métis.

ST. JOACHIM CHAPEL

In 1859, he built St. Joachim Chapel, the first church building in Edmonton. And, probably of greater importance, “his adherents amongst the Crees kept increasing in numbers and dedication” as MacGregor puts it. Then, in 1861, as Father Albert himself recorded, “accompanied by Michel Normand, his wife, Rose Plante, and a young orphan, I went to the large lake I was to name St. Albert. We camped at night and then reached the hill. We had with us four oxen, some horses, a plow and the tools we needed. A shelter made of hides served us as a fine residence.”

ST. ALBERT MISSION

Soon, with his companions and some Métis friends, Father Albert had a twenty-five by thirty foot wooden structure ready to become the center of the St. Albert Mission. The rough lumber had been whipsawed from trees the party had felled themselves. By 1864, the new place could boast of some forty Métis families and a population of about three hundred. Father Albert found this “too civilized.”

Coincidentally, in the fall of '64, a delegate of the Superior General of the Oblates was touring the country and, accompanied by Bishop Taché, journeyed to St. Albert. To Lacombe's great joy, the two agreed that he would be freed of the St. Albert Mission, where his “work was already done.” Again he was roaming the prairies to evangelize among the ever-wandering Cree and the Blackfoot.

A GREAT MAN – A GREAT MISSIONARY

The next several years, with Father Albert's complete merging of his life with that of the Cree and Blackfoot, was to be his way to greatness. He came to know every chief of the Cree, Stoney, Sarcee, Piegan, Blood and Blackfoot. He urged these people, “to adopt his concept of the will of the Supreme Being, begging them to keep peace amongst themselves, and advising them to prepare for the day the country must inevitably be invaded by the white man.” Already having perfected his command of the Cree language, he now turned his mind to mastering Blackfoot. He had become admired and loved enough to be called “Prayer Chief”. As he trekked, on horseback and on foot, from one settlement to another, and still another, he faced great danger - from warring First Nations, from disease and epidemics, from lack of food and extremely hot and extremely cold weather. At least once, he was laid up with a gunshot wound.

A NEW MOSES

Despite all, Father Albert wrote: “And now, off to the prairies! With Alexis, my excellent Blackfoot cook, my horses, my cart, and, my portable altar, my catechisms, some objects of piety, these made up my church and my rectory. Truth to tell. I was as happy as a Prince of the Church! My people, half of whom are now Christians, in the stature of great hunters before the Lord, respected and loved me. I was as a new Moses in the midst of the new Israelite camp.”

1870 – A BITTER YEAR

“Eighteen-seventy was a bitter year,” writes MacGregor. The simmering unrest among the First Nations themselves, and between them and the white man was near the boiling point. Smallpox spread and its devastation was inconceivable. More than fifty percent of Alberta's First Nations people had died. Circumstances involving the transfer of ancestral lands to the new confederation of Canada were driving the Métis, “to the point of oiling their guns.” For the Crees and the Blackfoot and the other First Nations, life was never the same. Their undisputed claim to the vast forests and the seemingly endless prairies was falling away.

FUNDRAISER

In 1871, St. Albert became a separate diocese with Vital Grandin, OMI, as Bishop. It was a challenge. The missions were expanding and he needed many new schools, but had impossibly limited resources. He had only a handful of men who wore moccasins, slept in skin tents and physically lived a lean existence. And, Father Albert was trying to wrangle more missions.

Grandin saw an opportunity. He made Father Albert Vicar-General of his new diocese; and his job was to be, in the Bishop's own words, "Go I pray you, into your own country, your hands out to your friends and mine."

A DIPLOMAT

Father Albert returned to Montreal and although ill disposed always to be asking for money, he attracted large crowds and was able to send healthy sums to Grandin. But, enough was enough! "He wanted the feel of snow under his moccasins and the crackle of juicy short ribs sputtering at the fire."

Again his superiors had other plans. Bishop Taché needed Father's help. This was the era of the introduction and development of railways and a steady increase in migration. Many of the new settlers were Protestants from Ontario and soon conflict between them and "Catholic French from Quebec," and between the "Orangemen" and the Métis became serious and needed almost daily attention.

This also was the time of Louis Kiel's leadership of the Métis. A hero to many, he was nevertheless a villain to others. Conflicts between the Métis and "Ontario Orangemen" multiplied.

TACHÉ'S MAN

In 1874, Father Lacombe was made Pastor at St. Mary's in Winnipeg, where the population had reached three thousand. But, he was much more than a Pastor, as he became immersed in his work as "Taché's man."

For the next several years, Father Albert became absorbed in recruiting French Canadians to come West. He wanted to offset the rapidly increasing, mainly protestant families, immigrating from Ontario. But the odds were against him. MacGregor reports that, "Of eleven thousand immigrants who came to Manitoba during the five years ending in 1875, less than two hundred were French-speaking."

WHISKEY TRADERS

By 1872, traders in whiskey already were operating around Edmonton, "and the Cree and Blackfoot who were gleefully buying it were soon feeling its dreadful effects." One official reported that, "The demoralization of the Indians and injury to the country from this illicit traffic is very great. It is stated on good authority that last year, eighty-eight of the Blackfoot were murdered in cruel drunken brawls among themselves..." Eventually, the government in Ottawa responded and the North-West Mounted Police came riding in. These "red-coated soldiers" were able to help control the sale of whiskey and some measure of well-being returned to the area. Father Albert was among the many who, either directly or indirectly, had promoted this development.

"WHAT WILL BECOME OF US?"

As well, he provided advice and badly needed support when the government became anxious to make treaties with First Nations. The chiefs could appreciate more fully what missionaries had been saying for years. Chief Crowfoot is quoted as asking: "When thousands of white men come pouring in and the buffalo are all gone, what will become of us?"

Knowing that the buffalo would not last, most of the chiefs, making the best of a bad bargain, signed the treaties. It was expected they would support themselves by cultivating the earth. But, as

MacGregor records, "Physically they could have tilled the soil, or tended the cattle; psychologically they could not."

AN INFLUENTIAL MAN

Now fifty and well established at St. Mary's, Father Albert welcomed many, if not all, of the important people who came to Winnipeg. They wanted information, perhaps to start a business, or hoping to use the city as a springboard to political life. He continued to travel extensively, and in 1879, he presented a copy of his Cree-English dictionary to the Pope. As well, he still undertook successful fundraising projects, for a new stone church at St. Mary's, for construction of a college at St. Boniface and for his missions. And, he played a role in extending the CPR the nine hundred miles from Winnipeg to Calgary. But, he longed to return to the West and in 1882 he set out again for St. Albert.

He returned to find the First Nations destitute! MacGregor writes, "Far out into the windswept prairies the hunters searched in vain. Amid the snowdrifts in cove or coulee... mothers waited, boiling bone scraps, moccasins and shaganappi, watching in vain for the return of the hunters; in tent and tepee... children, weak and empty, whimpering for food, cried in vain, and died." Most First Nations people whom Father Albert met, spoke of starvation and humiliation, living on reserves and having to rely on government handouts.

Nevertheless, Father Albert was determined to help where he could. He intervened in disputes between the railway workers and the Blackfoot and Cree; he acted as a lobbyist for the First Nations in their negotiations with the CPR and with the federal government and he was a key player in the campaign to build schools for First Nations children.

Most people of that day concluded that the way to assimilate First Nations would be through such schools. Children could be isolated and taught skills to ensure their success in the white world.

But, like so many ideas imposed by white men, the schools fell miserably short of being a solution.

NORTH-WEST REBELLION

Father Albert was preoccupied as well by other problems. All over the West the First Nations and the Métis were hatefully bitter. The buffalo were gone and people were starving.

Political patronage in appointing "Indian Agents" had made Cree and Blackfoot, Sarcee and Stoney ready to join the more rambunctious Métis. Again Lacombe was called to help with disputes. And, he remained active in the world of fundraising and diplomacy, winning many gifts and concessions for First Nations and his missions. He had to contend again with Louis Kiel, but at Batoche, Riel was defeated and captured, and the Métis nation was broken. Father Albert joined others in a campaign to have First Nations chiefs released from prison for their role in the North-West Rebellion.

In 1886, Sir John A. MacDonald arranged for Chief Crowfoot, Chief Red Crow of the Bloods, North Axe of the Piegans and four Cree chiefs to travel to Ottawa as a reward for their loyalty during the rebellion. Father Albert would accompany the chiefs.

PINCHER CREEK HERMITAGE

Father Albert would never lose interest in the First Nations people he had come to know. Yet, during this trip he had come to a deeper realization that his major involvement with these friends was coming to a close.

In 1897, at age 70, “the white-haired old man with the steady eyes sought the silence of the foothills and his hermitage.” But he had many years, accomplishments and honors still ahead. He continued to play a significant role as an advisor to the Cree and Beaver, during the 1897-1898 rush to the Yukon, when treaties were again being negotiated. He was still effective as a fundraiser. His superiors called upon him often for direction in dealing with the First Nations. They sought guidance on church, political, national and international affairs. Needing his skills in public relations, his superiors, although wanting him to spend more time at his hermitage, often called him away. He was needed to help with the political turmoil in Ottawa. Hostility between French-Catholics and English-Protestants had broken out again over the question of separate schools for the minority Catholics in the West.

At the turn of the century, the rush to the West was in full swing. The authorities again turned to Lacombe, who again traveled to Europe seeking help. This time, Father Albert managed an audience with both the Pope and with Emperor Franz Joseph.

ONE FINAL PROJECT

At the beginning of 1909, with Father Albert, now 82, his home had become his hermitage. Fewer and fewer visitors came to consult the benign old gentleman. But, still he opened the year with an announcement, “My last piece of work.” He wanted to build Lacombe Home for the Poor to serve the West’s most destitute, “red and white.” It opened in 1910 and Father Albert lived here for the next few years.

THE OLD PRIEST IS DEAD

In March of 1913, Arsous-kitsirarpi (Father Albert), allowed himself to be taken to Calgary where, at St. Mary’s, he gave his last address. A *Family Herald* reporter, quoted by MacGregor, caught the spirit of the occasion:

“As the black figure, leaning on a cane, stood and waved for silence... there was something melodramatic about the hush. The figure silently gazed at the sea of faces and the gaze was returned by thousands of eyes and so profound was the silence, even breathing seemed a sacrilege.”

“A sob, audible to all, came from the grizzled Father,” the reporter continued. The naked truth that this would be his last appeal seemed to dawn on him and his audience at the same time.

“There was another lull until this realization had sunk into the hearts of everyone present.”

But the figure stiffened, the withered lips moved. His words, clear and deliberate, he pleaded one last time the cause of his First Nations friends.

MacGregor writes that three years later, December 11, 1916, “the dreams ceased and his spirit became forever free to roam the wilderness wonderland of his youth – to roam from Fort Chipewyan to Fort Benton, from Fort Garry to Fort Edmonton.” And some folks said the old priest was dead.

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C.P. 9061, 00100 ROMA-AURELIO, Italy
Tel. (39) 06 39 87 71 Fax: (39) 06 39 37 53 22
E-mail : information@omigen.org <http://www.omeworld.org>