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**Marie dans la vie oblate**

**The Beginnings and Development**

**of the Catholic Church in Edmonton**

**La place des Oblats dans le domaine correctionnel**

**Engagement --- Promesse --- Fidélité**

**OTTAWA**

# La place de Marie dans la vie oblate

SUMMARY — The Author examines the place of Mary in the Oblate life by studying the origin of the Oblate charism, the source of our marian spirit and the place of Mary in our lives. The origin of the Oblate charism lies in the spiritual experience of the Founder on Good Friday 1807. Father de Mazenod decided then to help the Church where the needs were more pressing in identification with the merciful Saviour.

The source of our marian spirit can be found in the spiritual experience of the Founder on August 15, 1822 and very clearly in the approbation of the Congregation and the choice of the title Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

We determine the place of Mary in our lives by our personal consecration to Her and through the special means of the propagation of the marian cult.

In conclusion one can say that the Oblate vocation is a mystical identification with the merciful Saviour and Mary Immaculate, Mother of mercy.

Le caractère marial de la vocation oblate a souvent été étudié, en particulier dans la grande circulaire 191 du père Léo Deschâtelets<sup>1</sup> et au Congrès marial oblat de 1954<sup>2</sup>. Il peut donc paraître superflu d'y revenir ici. Toutefois l'Église au Concile Vatican II a opéré en sa vie, spécialement en sa liturgie, ce qu'on a appelé une "recentration" sur le Christ. Cette orientation a entraîné un changement assez profond en ce qui concerne la dévotion envers Marie: prières simplifiées, fêtes supprimées ou devenues fêtes du Christ<sup>3</sup>, etc. Le danger à l'heure actuelle semble moins d'exagérer dans les manifestations de la piété mariale que d'éprouver une certaine hésitation à reconnaître la place que doit occuper Marie, le rôle qu'elle doit jouer dans toute vie chrétienne authentique. La remarque vaut également pour la place de Marie dans la vie oblate. Voilà pourquoi il ne semble pas inutile de revenir sur ce sujet.

Pour guider notre piété en ce domaine, il existe une règle sûre que l'on pourrait facilement formuler ainsi: voir et aimer Marie comme Dieu la voit et l'aime. Dans cette lumière, sans prétendre scruter à fond ce riche aspect de notre vocation, nous voudrions proposer ici quelques réflexions sur la place de Marie dans la vie de l'Oblat, essayer de voir et aimer Marie comme Dieu l'a voulu dans notre vocation.

Nous rappellerons d'abord comment Dieu fit naître dans le cœur d'Eugène de Mazenod l'idéal qu'il communiquera à ses fils. Nous chercherons ensuite comment il inspira le caractère marial de cette vocation. Nous pourrions alors répondre à la question: quelle place tient la sainte Vierge dans cette vie oblate?

## I. L'origine du charisme oblat.

Cette vocation de l'Oblat, le Fondateur l'a comme cristallisée dans la double devise de la Congrégation: "Il m'a envoyé évangéliser les pauvres — Les pauvres sont évangélisés". Saisir le sens et la portée de cette devise n'est pas aussi facile que cela peut paraître de prime abord. Parfois, on sera tenté de restreindre la signification du terme "évangéliser" à la seule proclamation de la Parole de Dieu. Par contre, on peut être entraîné à réduire indûment le sens du mot "pauvres", comme si la promotion sociale des déshérités était le tout de la vocation oblate.

Dans notre devise, les mots "évangéliser" et "pauvres" s'expliquent l'un par l'autre. Mais, pour discerner le sens à donner, selon la pensée du Fondateur, au mot "évangéliser", il faut d'abord, semble-t-il, s'entendre sur celui à accorder au mot "pauvres". D'autre part, pour découvrir la portée du mot "pauvres", il faut se rappeler — et peut-être refaire personnellement de quelque manière — l'expérience spirituelle d'Eugène de Mazenod, sa saisie mystique du

Christ crucifié en ce Vendredi Saint (probablement celui de 1807), qui marqua un sommet de son évolution intérieure, de ce qu'il appelle sa "conversion".

Voici comment il parle de cet événement dans ses notes de retraite de 1814, donc environ sept ans plus tard:

Puis-je oublier ces larmes amères que la vue de la Croix fit couler de mes yeux un Vendredi Saint. Ah! elles portaient du cœur; rien ne put en arrêter le cours. Elles étaient trop abondantes pour qu'il me fût possible de les cacher à ceux qui, comme moi, assistaient à cette touchante cérémonie. J'étais en état de péché mortel, et c'était précisément ce qui occasionnait ma douleur. Je pus faire alors la différence. Jamais mon âme ne fut plus satisfaite, jamais elle n'éprouva plus de bonheur. C'est qu'au milieu de ce torrent de larmes, malgré ma douleur, ou plutôt au moyen de ma douleur, mon âme s'élançait vers sa fin dernière, vers Dieu son unique bien dont elle sentait vivement la perte. À quoi bon en dire davantage? Pourrais-je jamais rendre ce que j'éprouvais alors. Le souvenir seul me remplit le cœur d'une douce satisfaction<sup>4</sup>.

"Quelle que soit la gravité de ce dont il se reconnaît coupable, nous croyons pouvoir répéter ce que Henri Bremond écrivit à propos de M. Olier: "avec les saints, on ne sait jamais". En tout cas, bienheureuses fautes qui nous ont valu un tel Fondateur", écrit le père Henri Gratton<sup>5</sup>.

Cette profonde expérience de la miséricorde du Seigneur à son endroit lui fit découvrir le prix du sang de Jésus. Et là devant lui, il voyait délaissée, ravagée par la Révolution, l'Église pour laquelle le Christ a versé tout son sang.

C'est alors que, progressivement, il s'est senti prêt à tout sacrifier et à tout entreprendre pour secourir l'Église, là surtout où elle était plus abandonnée, chez les pauvres, les prisonniers, les émigrés, les jeunes, etc.

Bientôt débordé par l'entreprise, il se cherche des collaborateurs. Et les premiers mots de la Règle qu'il leur donne, sont connus: "L'Église, ce bel héritage du Sauveur, qu'il avait acquise au prix de tout son sang, a été ravagée de nos jours d'une manière cruelle..." Il veut refaire avec les siens l'expérience du Christ et des apôtres. Il écrira dans sa Règle avec une candeur et une hardiesse admirables:

Leur instituteur, c'est Jésus-Christ, le Fils de Dieu lui-même; leurs premiers pères, les apôtres; ils sont appelés à être les coopérateurs du Sauveur, les corédempteurs du genre humain et, quoique vu leur petit nombre et les besoins plus pressants des peuples qui les entourent, ils doivent pour le moment borner leur zèle aux pauvres des campagnes, etc., leur ambition doit embrasser dans ses saints désirs l'immense étendue de la terre entière<sup>6</sup>.

Il veut former une équipe volante de "coopérateurs du Sauveur" qui courent là où les besoins de l'Église sont plus urgents, les âmes plus abandonnées. Il choisit pour devise les paroles que le Christ a données comme signe de sa mission.

On ne peut vraiment souhaiter vie religieuse et apostolique plus centrée sur le Christ. Ce que traduit bien l'écusson de la Congrégation que la Croix remplit totalement. Il ne faudrait pas qu'un certain sigle représentant de façon plus ou moins artistique les lettres O.M.I. en vienne à remplacer les armoiries si parlantes de la Congrégation.

Cette identification au Sauveur miséricordieux explique tout chez nous. L'Oblat voudra porter la Bonne Nouvelle du Salut à ceux dont la misère spirituelle est plus grande, à ceux que l'Église n'atteint plus. Voilà la vocation oblate: "Il m'a envoyé porter la Bonne Nouvelle aux pauvres".

Les jeunes de l'Association de la Jeunesse d'Aix n'étaient pas nécessairement des pauvres au point de vue matériel, mais des âmes en péril, que l'Église ne rejoignait plus, et de futurs leaders à former pour l'Église. Les grands séminaristes ne sont pas des pauvres à évangéliser; mais, pour secourir l'Église abandonnée, il faut un clergé bien formé, d'où l'œuvre des Grands Séminaires introduite après coup dans la Congrégation.

Pas surprenant dans ce contexte que, dès que possible, la Congrégation, encore toute petite, se soit lancée aux quatre coins du monde pour porter l'Évangile aux peuples qui ne l'avaient pas encore reçu, surtout aux plus éloignés et aux plus abandonnés, d'où le titre de "spécialistes des missions difficiles" que Pie XI, le pape des missions, décernera à nos missionnaires.

Pas surprenant que partout les Oblats, malgré une certaine réserve en ce domaine dans leur Règle primitive<sup>7</sup>, aient été amenés à fonder et à développer de nombreuses congrégations religieuses, ossature d'une Église forte et vivante.

Pas surprenant non plus que Dieu ait choisi les Oblats pour bâtir Montmartre et son rayonnement universel de la miséricorde du Coeur de Jésus, ainsi que son pendant canadien, Saint-Sauveur de Québec et l'oeuvre du père Victor Lelièvre<sup>8</sup>.

Pas surprenant enfin — et l'énumération pourrait se prolonger — que les Oblats soient devenus en de nombreux pays comme le bras droit du chanoine Cardyn dans son mouvement d'Action catholique ouvrière, qui fut pour une longue période un moyen privilégié de relever et de fortifier l'Église, spécialement chez les jeunes.

Le père Jean-Paul Aubry, provincial du Manitoba et du Keewatin, vient de l'écrire très judicieusement:

Le charisme oblat, notre spécialité dans cette mission de l'Église, c'est aller annoncer aux pauvres (aux laissés-pour-compte) que cette "communauté en Jésus-Christ" leur est possible et c'est les aider à se laisser rassembler eux aussi en communauté tout entière responsable et ministérielle. D'où notre "spécialité" n'est pas de "boucher n'im-

porte quel trou" dans les rangs du clergé diocésain ou du laïcat chrétien, mais d'être des bâtisseurs d'Église, des rassembleurs de communautés en Jésus-Christ parmi les pauvres, là où personne ne veut aller ou auprès des groupes humains que les structures ordinaires de l'Église ne rejoignent pas<sup>9</sup>.

## II. La source de notre esprit marial.

M<sup>gr</sup> Jacques Jeancard, dans ses *Mélanges historiques* sur les débuts de la Congrégation, écrit très justement que le Fondateur réalisait le plan de Dieu, mais que ce plan ne lui était communiqué que progressivement<sup>10</sup>. Cela semble particulièrement vrai de la prise de conscience de la place de Marie dans la vie de la Congrégation. Ne rappelons ici que deux ou trois événements d'importance majeure qui ont marqué cette évolution.

Marie a joué un rôle de premier plan dans la vie du Fondateur et de la Congrégation, et cela dès les débuts. Qu'on se rappelle la bénédiction de la statue de l'Immaculée, la "chère Mère de la Mission", comme on l'appelait, le 15 août 1822, en l'église de la Mission d'Aix. On connaît la tradition de famille qui entoure celle que nous nommons la "Vierge du miracle" ou la "Vierge au sourire" — que nous avons le privilège de conserver au-dessus du maître-autel de la chapelle de la maison générale.

Quoi qu'il en soit de ces manifestations extraordinaires (qu'on croit avoir eu lieu en cette circonstance), écrit le père Morabito<sup>11</sup>, il est certain que devant cette statue, ce soir-là, le Fondateur en prière eut des intuitions surnaturelles, des lumières divines, sur la Congrégation qu'il avait fondée et sur les bénédictions que la Vierge Immaculée allait déverser sur elle.

C'est lui-même qui l'écrit au P. Tempier le soir de ce 15 août:

"L'office vient de finir, mon très cher et très bon frère, le silence règne dans la maison, il n'est troublé que par le son d'une cloche lointaine qui annonce le départ de la grande procession. Que ne puis-je vous communiquer tout ce que j'ai éprouvé de consolation dans ce beau jour consacré à Marie, notre Reine. Je n'avais pas senti depuis longtemps tant de bonheur à parler de ses grandeurs, à exciter les chrétiens à mettre en elle toute leur confiance, comme ce matin à l'instruction de la Congrégation. J'ai l'espoir d'avoir été compris et ce soir j'ai cru m'apercevoir que tous les fidèles qui fréquentent notre église ont partagé la ferveur que nous inspirait la vue de l'image de la sainte Vierge et plus encore les grâces qu'elle nous obtenait de son Fils, tandis que nous l'invoquions avec tant d'affection, puisqu'elle est notre Mère. Je crois lui devoir un autre sentiment particulier, que j'ai éprouvé aujourd'hui, je ne dis pas précisément plus que jamais, mais plus qu'à l'ordinaire. Je ne le définirai pas bien, puisqu'il renferme plusieurs choses qui se rapportent pourtant toutes à un seul objet: notre chère Société. Il me semblait voir, toucher du doigt, qu'elle renfermait le germe de très grandes vertus, qu'elle pourrait opérer un bien infini. Je la trouvais bonne, tout me plaisait en elle, je chérissais ses Règles, ses Statuts; son ministère me paraissait sublime, comme il l'est en effet. Je trouvais dans son sein des moyens de salut assurés, infaillibles même, de la manière qu'ils se présentaient à moi<sup>12</sup>..."

Je ne crains pas de rapprocher de cette illumination intérieure celle du Vendredi Saint rappelée plus haut: celle-ci portait sur la place du Sauveur dans la vie du Fondateur et plus tard dans celle de ses disciples; celle-là éclaire le rôle maternel que l'Immaculée doit jouer dans l'existence de la Congrégation du père de Mazenod. Toutefois, ici encore, la clarté se fera progressive.

Dès 1818, en faisant appeler les Missionnaires de Provence à la desserte de son sanctuaire du Laus, la Vierge s'impliquait dans leur ministère. Elle faisait éclater le cadre restreint de la Provence comme champ de leur apostolat et les forçait en conséquence à changer leur nom de Missionnaires de Provence en celui d'Oblats de Saint-Charles.

L'évolution atteindra son sommet lorsque, un peu plus tard, en décembre 1825, pendant que l'Église fête l'Immaculée, le père de Mazenod à Rome pour l'approbation de sa société, est inspiré

à demander au pape de changer le nom d'Oblats de Saint-Charles, qui ne lui plaisait guère, en celui d'Oblats de Marie Immaculée. "Comment n'y avons-nous pas pensé plus tôt<sup>13</sup>, se reproche-t-il dans une lettre à ses confrères. Puis, quand la faveur est accordée, il écrit: "Puissions-nous bien comprendre ce que nous sommes!... consacrés à Dieu sous les auspices de Marie, dont la Congrégation porte le nom comme un nom de famille qui lui est commun avec la très sainte et Immaculée Mère de Dieu<sup>14</sup>". Et il ajoute plein d'admiration: "C'est l'heureux commencement d'une ère nouvelle pour la Société<sup>15</sup>..."

### III. La place de Marie dans la vie oblate.

Pour notre Bx Père donc, la profession religieuse chez nous devient une consécration à Marie. Très souvent le postulant est conscient de ce fait dès son entrée dans l'Institut; c'est même souvent ce qui l'a attiré chez nous: il veut devenir Oblat pour être plus pleinement l'enfant de Marie. Les gens du dehors aussi nous jugent ainsi, comme des faits multiples le manifestent chaque jour. C'est églement ce qui valut à la Congrégation d'admirables âmes mariales, comme le père Isidore Belle, missionnaire à Sri Lanka, plus tard assistant général; le père Anselmo Trèves, de la province d'Italie, dont la biographie a été publiée sous le titre révélateur: *Con la Madonna*<sup>6</sup>; ou bien encore cet Oblat hollandais, Rodolphe Smit, polyglotte réputé, qui pouvait parler admirablement de Marie des heures et des heures sans lasser son auditoire...

Mais il y a plus. Cette profession religieuse non seulement est une consécration personnelle à Marie, mais elle nous agrège à un institut marial et de la sorte nous consacre d'une façon spéciale à propager le culte de Marie. Parce que le chapitre des fins de la Congrégation dans la Règle du Fondateur ni même la riche préface ne contiennent rien sur le culte de Marie, il ne faut pas nier cette mission de la Congrégation. Notre Vénéré Fondateur n'a cessé de le répéter en termes exprès: "Prædicta Congregatio tanquam finem peculiarem habet cultum erga Beatam et Immaculatam Deiparam ubique diffundere", écrit-il dans une supplique au Saint-Siège en 1836<sup>17</sup>.

Ce deuxième aspect de notre consécration à Marie explique cette chaîne de sanctuaires de la sainte Vierge que la Congrégation a desservis en France d'abord, puis dans tous les continents, parfois même on lui a confié la desserte du sanctuaire national d'un pays, comme Madhu à Sri Lanka et le Cap-de-la-Madeleine au Canada.

Voici la liste impressionnante de ces sanctuaires en France du vivant du Fondateur: N.-D. du Laus, 1818; N.-D. de la Garde, 1833; N.-D. de l'Osier, 1835; N.-D. des Lumières, 1837; N.-D. de Bon-Secours, 1846; N.-D. de Sion, 1850; N.-D. de Talence, 1851; N.-D. de Cléry, 1854; et peu après la mort du Fondateur, N.-D. de Pontmain, 1873, dont un des voyants devint Oblat: le père Joseph Barbedette. Et l'histoire continue... Au sujet de N.-D. de l'Osier qui venait de nous être confié, le Fondateur écrit: "Ainsi la Congrégation est placée à l'Osier précisément selon l'esprit de son institut pour évangéliser les âmes les plus abandonnées de ce vaste diocèse et pour contribuer de tout son pouvoir à relever la gloire de la sainte Vierge... Et voilà comment, par une disposition admirable de la Providence, la Congrégation accomplit ses grandes destinées, la double mission qu'elle a reçue du chef suprême de l'Église dans les Lettres apostoliques de son institution<sup>18</sup>."

On le voit, la fin de prêcher Marie et de propager son culte, si réelle qu'elle soit dans la pensée du Fondateur,

vient elle-même s'intégrer à la fin générale, qui est l'évangélisation des âmes les plus abandonnées. Mais chez nous, cette fin est obtenue d'une façon spéciale par Marie Immaculée et avec elle. C'est ce que la lettre d'approbation de Léon XII — que vient de rappeler le Fondateur — nous indiquait comme esprit propre: "Nous espérons ... que les membres de cette famille qui, reconnaissent pour patronne la Mère de Dieu, la Vierge Immaculée, s'appliqueront, selon la mesure de leurs forces, à ramener dans le sein de la miséricorde de Marie les hommes que Jésus-Christ, du haut de la croix<sup>19</sup>, voulut lui donner pour enfants<sup>20</sup>."

Notre oblacion nous constitue donc officiellement — c'est le pape qui a parlé — les ministres des miséricordes de Marie, ses coopérateurs dans son rôle d'"Alma Socia Christi", ses prolongements, ses "doubles" dans son ministère de corédemptrice, son plérôme par lequel elle exerce sa maternité spirituelle. C'est la forme la plus parfaite de consécration à Marie. Non seulement elle nous constitue les chantres et les apôtres de Marie — ce qui laisse subsister la distinction entre elle et nous, — mais elle nous identifie mystiquement et réellement à l'Immaculée, la pleinement rachetée, "avide de reporter sur les hommes de nos temps, et les plus dénués de tous, la miséricorde dont elle a été comblée la première<sup>21</sup>". "Il ne s'agit pas, si nous voulons comprendre notre vocation, écrivait le père Deschâtelets dans sa circulaire déjà citée, d'avoir pour Marie Immaculée une dévotion ordinaire. Il s'agit d'une sorte d'identification à Marie Immaculée; il s'agit d'une donation de nous-mêmes à Dieu par elle et comme elle, qui va jusqu'au fond de toute notre vie chrétienne, religieuse, missionnaire, sacerdotale<sup>22</sup>".

La vocation oblate, qui nous voue au service de l'Église pour le salut des âmes les plus abandonnées, est une sorte d'identification mystique à la fois au Sauveur miséricordieux — que nous rappelle notre croix d'Oblat — et à Marie Immaculée, la pleinement rachetée et la mère de miséricorde — que nous rappelle le nom que nous portons.

"Puissons-nous bien comprendre ce que nous sommes!"

Maurice GILBERT, O.M.I.  
Rome.

#### NOTES :

1 *Notre vocation et notre vie d'union intime avec Marie Immaculée*, Rome, Maison générale O.M.I., 1951, 89 pp.

2 Voir *Études Oblates*, 14 (1955), p. 3-147.

3 Par exemple, Annonciation du Seigneur, Présentation du Seigneur, etc. Voir Exhortation apostolique *Marialis Cultus*, no 4

4 Postulation générale, Rome, dossier D.M. IV, 2, cité par Joseph MORABITO, o.m.i., *Je serai prêtre*, dans *Études Oblates*, 13 (1954), p. 54.

5 *La dévotion salvatorienne du Fondateur. Aux premières années de son sacerdoce*, dans *Études Oblates*, 1 (1942), p. 158.

6 *Constitutions et Règles de la Société des Missionnaires de Provence. Premier manuscrit français*, Rome, Maison générale O.M.I., 1951, p. 15. Voir aussi *Missions de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, 78 (1951), p. 15.

7 "Afin que l'exercice des missions ne soit jamais négligé et que les sujets ne perdent jamais de vue la fin principale de leur vocation, qui est de s'employer au salut des âmes les plus abandonnées, ils ne s'engageront pas dans des occupations qui les en détournent.

"Ainsi, ils n'assisteront pas aux processions ou cérémonies publiques; ils ne se chargeront pas de la direction des séminaires; ils ne dirigeront pas les religieuses ou autres personnes du sexe réunies en communauté, ni en commun ni en particulier; ils ne leur donneront même pas des retraites, si ce n'est à l'occasion des missions ou autres exercices qui auront lieu dans les lieux où les monastères sont situés ou aux environs". (Ibidem, p. 22).

8 "Saint-Sauveur, une splendide succursale de Montmartre". Jean-Baptiste LEMIUS, o.m.i., *Cinquante ans d'adoration perpétuelle à Montmartre*. dans *Missions... des... Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, 70 (1936), p. 32.

9 *Réflexion sur nos engagements apostoliques*, dans *Vie Oblate Life*, 40 (1981), pp. 7-8.

10 *Mélanges historiques sur la Congrégation des Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, Tours, A. Marne & Fils, 1872, p. 70-71.

11 *L'Immaculée et la spiritualité du Fondateur*, dans *Études Oblates*, 14 (1955), pp. 32-33,

12 Le texte de la lettre provient de Achille REY, o.m.i. *Histoire de Monseigneur Charles-Joseph-Eugène de Mazenod, évêque de Marseille, Fondateur de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, Rome, Maison générale, 1928, vol. 1, p. 280. Voir aussi Toussaint RAMBERT, o.m.i., *Vie de Monseigneur Charles-Joseph-Eugène de Mazenod, évêque de Marseille, Fondateur de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, Tours, A. Marne & Fils, 1883, vol. 1, pp. 352-353.

13 M<sup>gr</sup> de Mazenod au père François-de-Paul Tempier, Rome, 22 décembre 1825, dans *Missions... des... Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, 10 (1872), p. 201.

14 M<sup>gr</sup> de Mazenod au père Tempier, Rome, 20 mars 1826, *Ibidem*, 10 (1872), p. 277.

15 Chapitre général de 1826, séance du 13 juillet, dans *Copie du Régistre des délibérations des chapitres généraux... maison saint Joseph, Billens en Suisse*, p. 25 (archives générales O.M.I., Rome).

16 Anselmo Rosssri, o.m.i., *Con la Madonna. Vita del P. Anselmo Trèves, Missionario Oblato di Maria Immacolata*, Roma, [s.e.], 1948.

17 Circulaire manuscrite du Fondateur, 2 février 1857 (archives générales O.M.I., Rome), citée par Léo DESCHÂTELETS, o.m.i. *Notre vocation et notre vie d'union intime avec Marie Immaculée*, p. 55.

18 *Acte de visite de Notre-Dame de l'Osier*, 16 juillet 1835 (archives générales O.M.I., Rome), cité par Joseph MORABITO, o.m.i., *L'Immaculée et la spiritualité du Fondateur*, loc. cit., 14 (1955), p. 60.

Cette orientation est aussi confirmée par la tradition. Voir, par exemple, *Les apôtres de Marie*, dans *Réunion plénière des prédicateurs oblats de l'Est du Canada*, dans *Missions... des... Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, 72 (1938), pp. 294-295.

19 Remarquons au passage: "Jésus-Christ, du haut de la Croix", mais c'est la grâce du Vendredi Saint 1807; "La Vierge Immaculée..., Mère de miséricorde", mais c'est bien celle du 15 août 1822...! Le dessein de Dieu se dévoile progressivement.

20 Voir le texte dans *Constitutions et Règles de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de la Très Sainte et Immaculée Vierge Marie ...*, Rome, Maison générale 1930. p. 193.

21 Marcel BÉLANGER, o.m.i., *Vocation oblate*, dans *Études Oblates*, 3 (1944), p. 101.

22 Page 51.

# The Beginnings and Development of the Catholic Church in the Edmonton Area

## and the Contributions of the Oblate Fathers and Brothers

SOMMAIRE — Après avoir étudié rapidement les premières activités de l'Église dans l'Ouest canadien, le père Drouin passe à l'établissement de l'Église dans la région d'Edmonton et en montre les développements jusqu'à l'arrivée des Oblats.

Il relate ensuite le travail accompli par les Oblats, particulièrement dans la ville même d'Edmonton, par la formation de la paroisse Saint-Joachim qui devint la paroisse mère d'un grand nombre de paroisses de diverses nationalités.

### Introduction.

It would require an unwieldy tome to record in detail the various aspects in the birth and development of the Catholic Church in the area centered around our provincial capital. Such a study would have to start with the origins and growth of each one of the 40 Latin and 9 Ukrainian-rite parishes that now serve the area. That would mean a full report, first of all on each one of the hundreds of priests, religious and secular, who labored here during the past century and more, an appreciation of the indispensable part played by teachers and administrators in the formation and operation of the 85 schools that also serve the area, a chronicle of the arrival and activities past and present of some eleven orders of men and 32 of religious women's congregations who undertook Catholic religious, social and even national service and action for us, and, by no means least of all, the multiplicity of organizations and associations, religious and lay, some defunct but others very much alive, which enriched the texture of our Catholic life and achieved, at least partially, the goals for which they had been started, — truly a herculean task and quite beyond the scope of the present article.

We propose to deal primarily with only one aspect of the total picture, namely the part played by Oblate Fathers and Brothers here. This is not to minimize what others have contributed later and often better, but because the exploits of the early Oblates are more readily to hand in our Archives here, and having always been the most numerous Congregation in these parts and inclined to being 'jacks of all trades' through force of circumstances, they managed to become involved in very many Catholic projects, generally at the ground-floor level, some of which they still carry on, others that have passed to their successors, all hopefully to the glory of God and the greater benefit of souls.

### Genesis or Beginnings.

The Catholic Church in Edmonton did not arise, of course, by spontaneous generation. One must go back to New France before the conquest in 1759 to discover its roots.

The Church affairs between 1535, when Jacques Cartier set foot on our land, and the arrival, in 1659, of Mgr François de Montmorency Laval (1623-1708) as Vicar General or Vicar Apostolic, had been directly in the hands of the French monarchy at Versailles. Laval remained somewhat subservient to that royal court till, in 1674, he became titular bishop of Quebec, with jurisdiction over all the French possessions in America, even down to the mouth of the Mississippi River on the Gulf of Mexico.

One of his first acts was to found a Major Seminary to educate local young men who showed signs of priestly vocation and would replace eventually the clergy from France. This strongwilled nobleman was not forgetful of his spiritual life, as his beatification by Rome in 1980 proved.

He and his successors always felt that their responsibilities included christianizing and civilizing the Indians living in all territories claimed by the kings of France. Of course, if one allowed himself to project the present into the past, — the common failing of too many historians, — the philosophy and the methods employed by the Recollets priests, and later by the Jesuits and the first Nuns in Canada, might, to some extent, be open to question today. One must admit, however, that they did have solicitude and zeal, a fact that should never be forgotten because of some mistakes they made.

This solicitude of the bishops of Quebec generally brought them into conflict with the governors of New France who were not always scrupulous about ways and means of ruling the Natives and of securing a monopoly of the fur trade. One of these was trafficking in hard liquor. That solicitude also caused the heads of the Church to insist that all or almost all exploration parties must include some priest for spiritual contact with whatever tribes they would meet. This explains, for example, the presence of Fr. Jacques Marquette, S.J., with Louis Jolliet during the latter's canoe trip down the Mississippi River in 1673.

There existed a rather indefinite territory to the west of Canada or Quebec, a mysterious 'Pays d'En-Haut' or hinterland beyond Michilimakinac at the north end of Lake Michigan and Michipiton, Chaguamigon or Kaministiquia and Fort Nipigon on the east, southwest and north shores of Lake Superior, which beckoned adventurers who fretted at the constraints of civilization as it then was at home and who hoped that it might become a source of personal wealth for them through independent albeit illegal fur-trading with Natives.

Over decades, a number of them did play a game of cat and mouse with civil authorities of New France, a fact which the latter did not relish and which they endeavored to stamp out. By 1718, some of these men had established themselves on Lakes la Pluie (Rainy) and des Bois (of the Woods); they even knew something of the Big Lake or Lake Winnipeg. Hence, in 1731, the Sieur Pierre Gaultier de la Vérendrye was commissioned to venture into 'Les Pays d'En-Haut' to establish a chain of forts which would pin back the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) unto the shores of the Hudson's Bay and intercept all fur trade travelling in that direction. He was to keep an eye upon the independent *coureurs-des-bois* and restrain them if possible. He was also given the responsibility of discovering a direct passage to the Western Sea, a persistent dream of both England and France.

Perhaps just giving in to pressure by the bishop of Quebec, the governor allowed a Jesuit, Fr. Charles-Michel Mesaiger or Messenger, to join the expedition. He was the first Catholic priest to penetrate the West, but he got no further than Fort St. Charles on Lake of the Woods<sup>1</sup> established in 1732 and within which he had a house and a church built for himself.

By 1734, Fr. Jean-Pierre Aulneau, S.J., had replaced him, but he, along with one of Lavérendrye's sons and nineteen companions were massacred by a party of Sioux Indians on the small island now called Magnusson, some twenty miles from the fort, where they were surprised during the night. This was in 1736.

When Fr. Claude-Gaufre Conquart, S.J., in 1742, took Fr. Aulneau's place, a series of forts had already been erected on Lakes Winnipeg and Manitoba — Lac des Prairies, — on the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, as far west as Portage-la-Prairie, the farthest penetration made by a Catholic priest prior to 1818 when Fr. Norbert Provencher arrived at the confluence of the two rivers.

When the British conquered Acadia and set foot upon what would later become the United States, the Catholic Church matters became still more complicated than theretofore on this continent<sup>2</sup>. Everything came to a head after Wolfe prevailed on the Plains of Abraham in 1759 and particularly after the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763.

The last of Laval's successors before the Conquest, Bishop Henri-Marie Dubreuil de Pontbriand, unfortunately died in 1760. There would be no successor till the Quebec Vicar General would, in 1766, be secretly consecrated in western France during a British Government's authorized trip to his family. Ostensibly he was still only a Vicar General. Such an anomalous situation would remain the rule till 1827 when Bishop Joseph Octave Plessis was finally and officially recognized as a bishop.

The painful situation all stemmed from Article 4 of the Treaty of Paris of 1763 which stipulated that the population of Canada would enjoy freedom of religion inasmuch as the laws of Great Britain permitted. This was not much for Catholics; moreover, it meant that the king was the head of the Church in Canada and that no relationships of any kind could exist with Rome. These British laws were yet far from being liberal although they then were considerably more benign than they had been with Elizabeth I and her immediate successors, when a priest discovered in England could be and often was hanged, drawn and quartered, and when lay people who attended Mass or harbored a priest would also suffer dire penalties. In 1763, priests celebrating Mass could still be condemned to life imprisonment. If one has visited the Tower of London and its exiguous stone dungeons deep down in the bowels of the earth below the nearby Thames River, he must conclude that such a sentence would not, in fact, last very long before the prisoners died.

In 1778, when the "Roman Catholic Relief Act" was passed by both houses of parliament of England, highly destructive riots — The Gordon Riots — broke out in London. With the cry of "No Popery", crowds roamed the streets to pillage and burn during a number of days.

In Canada, although attempts were made to Anglicanize the new French-Canadian subjects of His Majesty, wisdom prevailed. Governor James Murray and his successors judiciously tempered the application of the laws locally. This relaxation during the decades, even into the nineteenth century, was partially due to political events in America: the American War of Independence (1775-1783), the 1812-1814 war between the Americans and the British in Canada, and finally the unrest which would culminate in the Papineau Uprising of 1837 in Lower Canada and in the Mackenzie counterpart of 1838 in Upper Canada.

#### **A Mustard seed is sown.**

After the conquest of Canada, no priest saw 'Les Pays d'En-Haut' till 1811 when abbé Charles Bourke from Ireland accompanied the first contingent recruited by Lord Thomas Douglas Selkirk to settle upon his new colony at the Red River. However,

this minister of religion went no further than Fort Nelson on the Hudson's Bay where the expedition had to spend the



first Winter before proceeding. Found unsuited for the work he would have to do amongst the immigrants, he sailed back home the following Spring.

The initial trying years of the life of the colony are well known and yet there was no Catholic priest to temper the law of the jungle which prevailed as a result of the fight to the death between the H.B.C. men and those of the North West Company which culminated in the Battle of la Grenouillère or the Massacre at Seven Oaks at the north end of Winnipeg's Main Street in June 1816.

Miles Macdonnel, a Catholic and first governor of the colony, did his best by helping with his counsels, also by baptizing the dying and officiating at marriages, but that was not enough to satisfy the aspirations of the 2000 Catholics and Métis of the West, 700 of whom were right there on the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. James Sutherland, a Protestant, did the same thing for his co-religionists.

The Sunday prayer service presided over by the chief clerk according to the rules of the H.B.C.<sup>3</sup> did not prove very satisfactory either.

Finally, between 1820 and 1823, an Anglican minister, Rev. John West resided at the colony for the benefit of Protestants and as chaplain to the H.B.C.

Bishop Plessis of Quebec had seriously considered doing something for the far-distant portion of his diocese. In 1815, he contacted superiors of the North West Company, and, the next year, he despatched abbé Pierre-Antoine Tabeau on an inspection trip. When this priest arrived at Rainy Lake he learned of the massacre of Seven Oaks in 1816. He immediately returned East.

Selkirk having obtained the services of the Company of Meurons, composed mostly of Swiss mercenaries discharged from the 1812-1814 War, to protect the inhabitants of his settlement,

in 1817 resolved to persuade Bishop Plessis to send priests west. The result was that abbés Joseph-Norbert Provencher, Sévère Du-moulin and the seminarian Guillaume Etienne Edge arrived on the Red River on July 16, 1818, the first with the title of Vicar General of the Quebec Bishop for the western territories. Comparatively, ministers of non-Catholic denominations except that of the Church of England were late comers: Methodists or Wesleyans (1840); Presbyterians (1851); Baptists (1873); Lutherans, Mormons, Congregationalists, Moravians and Jews (1885).

Distance was so great and communications so difficult that the prelate soon decided he would have Provencher consecrated as an auxiliary with full powers over all the land up to the Rocky Mountains and even north to the very pole. Secretly, because British authorities to some extent still frowned upon relations with Rome, Plessis obtained Bulls from the Pope authorizing him on the first possible occasion, to consecrate Provencher as a bishop. This occasion presented itself in 1820 when the latter, for health reasons, had to pay a visit to doctors in Quebec. He had not been consulted about the whole matter so that, unhappy about the situation, he requested to be given a period for reflexion on it all. He finally gave in. Plessis conferred the episcopal consecration on him on May 12, 1822. This he did rather secretly not to offend British susceptibilities and because England was, as yet, opposed to the division of the Quebec Diocese. She wanted to have to deal with but one man instead of with many and not with a Catholic archbishop whilst there was as yet no Anglican one.

Provencher was hardpressed to find co-workers since priests from the East were reluctant to expatriate themselves to a land where almost unhumane conditions prevailed and where the obligations were crushing. Besides, England wanted no French nationals to come from overseas. In 1821, he succeeded in securing the services of abbé Thomas Destroismaisons, dit Picard, and of the seminarian Jean-Baptiste Sauvé who, because he decided not to become a priest, returned home. In 1822, the bishop brought abbé Jean Harper with him to St. Boniface, the name he had chosen on November 1, 1818, for the village on the Red River which stood on the land given him by Selkirk. Some of the priests in turn went back to Quebec while others came to replace them. They too, in turn, left again, so that, during his life in the West, he never had more than six secular priests at any one time with him.

Yet, he wanted to send at least one west to the Saskatchewan Valley, but he did not succeed until 1842, for he had to deal with two almost impossible men.

### **A Branch extends Westward.**

The first one was John Rowand, an impetuous Irishman and a Catholic, who, after serving in the ranks of the North-West Company, had passed into the service of the amalgamated H.B.C. in 1821 and attained the high rank of Chief Factor at Fort Edmonton. From there he directed and dominated the fur trade and the affairs of "the Honorable" (H.B.C.) in the Districts of the Saskatchewan Valley and of the Athabasca River. Although feared by most, this "Tzar of the Prairies" or "Napoleon of the North" could not fully control the eighty-odd inhabitants of the fort and also the voyageurs, trappers, guides, providers, etc., living nearby, and he did not like the Methodist minister Rev. Robert Rundle sent him in October 1840.

Perhaps the group which was the greatest menace to the fur-trade monopoly that the company claimed as its right and which Rowand defended to extremes, even to the point of, one day, having a set-to with Fr. Albert Lacombe,

o.m.i., who had dared to get muskrat skins sewed on the collar and cuffs of his overcoat for protection from cold, was the one composed of Canadians and Métis who, after their service contracts had terminated, became free traders and coureurs-des-bois. They constantly chafed at the autocratic control of the company and they did their best to elude it, an effort which lasted till the William Sayer Affair of 1849 when the H.B.C. was forced to relinquish its stranglehold on trading, starting with the Red River country.

In name at least, most of the people were Catholic since they either had personally and as young men come from the St. Lawrence Valley as servants of either fur companies or were born of Indian women taken to wife by the white men. The former remembered, to some degree, their religious knowledge acquired in

their formative years, while the latter had learned some elements of it from their forebears. Besides, the usual language used in the Edmonton fort and in all other forts of the West and the North was French and hence a Black-Robe alone could do.

Two historians<sup>4</sup> indicate that Rowand, as far as he personally was concerned, did not care to have any minister of religion too close to him unless he could control him as he did the other servants of "the Honorable" which, to him, came even ahead of God. One of the reasons of this attitude seems to have been that he was inclined to make up his own set of Commandments rather than submit to those of God and the Church, particularly in respect to marriage. Hence, he disliked Fr. Jean-Baptiste Thibault, the first priest to come, who was rather inflexible. Hence also the latter's choice of Lac Ste. Anne as the site of the first mission. The priest had soon discovered that a rather wide buffer zone between him and Rowand was imperative.<sup>5</sup>

The second one, George Simpson, the Governor of all the H.B.C. forts in the West and the North, also seems to have been, though a genius in administration, an ambivalent man. In his relations with the H.B.C. Governors in London he appears to have been obsequious, somewhat of a Uriah Heep, while, with subordinates in the field, he was autocratic and imperious although his changing moods at times caused him to relent a bit. This might explain the fact that some Catholic missionaries lauded the attitude of some of the clerks towards them while others accused the company for its negative or biased treatment of them.

Only a Catholic priest could, Rowand was convinced, become a successful agent of pacification among all these people with whom he had to deal and among their nomadic Indian cousins.

Had he not had a good taste of that remedy in 1838 during the quick passage of abbés Modeste Demers and François Blanchet? These two priests, sent to St. Boniface by their Quebec bishop so they would spend some time there becoming acclimatized and acculturized to the West before proceeding to the Oregon and the Pacific rim of New Caledonia where the H.B.C., which had forts along the Columbia River right down to its mouth, and the population in its service had asked for the presence of Catholic ministers of religion. They had been given free passage on an H.B.C. boat over the Plains and through the mountains. On the way they had stopped at each fort along the water route, to instruct whoever was willing to listen to them and to baptize some and regularize the marriages of others. They had remained at Fort Edmonton too and their stay had been such a refreshing breeze that the Chief Factor had resolved to obtain a priest who would permanently remain in the district.

In passing, one can wonder if our politicians who pontificated from the top of our parliament hill knew that before the promontory became an arena for their legislative debates it had already been dedicated to the Lord Jesus. In fact, the two priests had climbed to its crest which dominated the fort 143 years ago and planted a tall wooden cross. When Fr. Lacombe arrived in 1852, he discovered this sign of our salvation lying in tall grasses and replanted it.

When the advantages of the H.B.C. required it, Rowand, at least temporarily, could put his own sympathies and antipathies under wraps. Hence, during his periodical visits to the Red River for council meetings of the company, he pushed relentlessly and persistently for Governor George Simpson and Council not only to approve the despatching of a Catholic priest, but to badger both Bishop Provencher and Bishop Plessis of Quebec to send him a priest. Provencher saw in this persistence an act of Divine Providence since he, himself, had long desired to extend the work of the Church to the farthest regions but had been frustrated because of a lack of missionaries. In fact, the half dozen men he had had with him at any one time had more work than they could possibly do right there at home. As early as 1839 the two H.B.C. men had promised him free passage on their York Factory Boats for a priest to go to Fort Edmonton. However, when they sought permission from the head office in London, they were flatly refused.

Why this refusal? Was it that these overseas men were still under the inherited emotional "no popery" complex, or was it that Simpson, in his correspondence with them on the matter had advised them to say no? Of course, too, one must remember that the ecumenical spirit breathed into the world by Vatican Council II was still more than one hundred and twenty years in the future. Galbraith, in his book referred to earlier, also claims that as far as Simpson was concerned only two entities in this world were important to him... the H.B.C. and George Simpson... and "he looked after the interests of both very well indeed!"

In any case, the Honorable Gentlemen in England preferred sending three Methodist ministers, two from England to be under the supervision of Rev. James Evans of Toronto to Rupert's Land. They gave them free passage and took care of them also free of charge once they arrived. They were part-time chaplains to the H.B.C. and missionaries to

the Indians. They remained at the establishments around the Bay but Robert Rundle, proceeded to Rowand's 'Big House' establishment at Fort Edmonton in October 1840. Apparently, his success with the local population was not that impressive. His efforts were more rewarding at other forts

and on the Plains. He baptized 592 children and adults, the latter numbering 58, and he performed 59 marriages. No doubt, he was zealous and his work proved rather effective among Crees and Stoneys<sup>6</sup> till his departure in 1848. He travelled quite often and extensively.

A Seed is planted in fertile Ground.

Rowand's cautious and discreet persistence paid off in 1841<sup>7</sup>. He was in Fort Garry that Summer when a Métis, son of a French Canadian by the name of Piché who had adopted the Indian ways, years before, when he had married a Cree woman, a Magdeline Opitaskewis, arrived. With their four boys, their own children and a number of relatives, the Pichés had lived a rather nomadic existence in the foothills near Jasper House and farther south, even down as far as the Banff area. The patriarch, on a trading trip to the Red River, had seen and listened to the teaching of priests years before. A nostalgia for his childhood faith had then revived<sup>8</sup>. How was it that the Plains man arrived in St. Boniface just at the proper time to serve as an agent for Rowand to use with Provencher. It was a coincidence of course that old Piché, that very year, had decided to send his son with a request to the bishop to send a Black-Robe so that his people might learn more than he, himself, had been able to teach them about his religion. In a letter of that bishop to his confrère in Quebec, dated July 23, 1841, the coming of the man is mentioned. Fr. Thibault, who already knew the Saulteux and the Cree languages, instructed the Métis to some degree and gave him Fr. Blanchet's Catechetical Ladder so he could pass on his knowledge to his own extended family.

This event clinched the matter with Provencher who persuaded abbé Jean-Baptiste Thibault to accept the invitation. Since he could not use the H.B.C. boats, he had to manage his own trip. Bravely, on April 20, 1842, in the company of a handful of Métis and on horseback, he set out over the Prairies. Dangers and fatigue would not daunt him. However, he later complained that the rather fast pace set by his companions caused his two horses to become exhausted to the point that he and a single guide had to allow the rest of the party to proceed without them, at least from Fort Pitt, where he elected to remain for some days while he took care of the spiritual needs of the population there and in the vicinity. This kind of pastoral work he had duplicated at every stop along the way.

When he finally arrived at Fort Edmonton on June 19, he was fêted by all present. While resting there and waiting for the guides Piché had promised would meet him, he catechized, baptized. He also rectified marriages according to the laws of the Church. Days and weeks passed. No guides showed up. He then decided to set out over the Prairies with but one Métis companion to find the Piché clan. This took him as far south as Dog's Pond. He finally came upon a small party of Métis who consented to despatch a messenger to Piché who, with his people, then hurried to meet the missionary. The latter, after some weeks of apostolic work among the group, returned to Fort Edmonton and thence to St. Boniface to report to his superior. He arrived there on October 20 after having covered some 2,200 miles during the Summer and Fall<sup>9</sup>.

As a written report which Bishop Provencher had asked of the two priests who had travelled over the Plains and the Mountains in 1838 as to the best location for a permanent mission had arrived, he directed Thibault, when he left again in June 1843, to build such a post at Frog Lake. For the first time during that Summer he visited the Métis families at Lake Manito, an H.B.C. fish camp.

From Fort Pitt, where he stayed for almost a month during July and August, he sent a Métis couple by the name of Thibert to construct an abode at Frog Lake in which he resided from October 31 to late Spring of 1844.

He then wended his way back to St. Boniface where he arrived in mid-June and persuaded his Prelate that Frog Lake was not the proper place to use as headquarters and that a spot closer to Fort Edmonton would be preferable. Six days later, abbé Joseph Bourassa, the priestly companion who had been promised him, arrived from Eastern Canada. On the 25th, he left with a caravan headed by Rowand. From June 10 to July 25 he had to stay at Fort Pitt as his horses were but skin and bones. He pushed on then and reached Fort Edmonton on August 5th. After a single day there he headed for Lake Manito to help Pierre Thibert and his wife, Julie Belcourt, erect the new house-chapel. Not that much had been yet accomplished so that he had to pitch in, something Thibault himself had to do when he, in turn, showed up later in August. By September 8, the missionaries moved into a yet-doorless log abode, and Thibault renamed Manito Lake, Lac Ste-Anne.

From there the two men radiated even as far as Rocky Mountain House, Jasper House, Lesser Slave Lake, Cold Lake, Lac-laBiche, Ile-à-la-Crosse, even Dunvegan and Portage-la-Loche and many intermediary points including, of course, Fort Edmonton which they visited more often than any of the other stations, all of this to the great dismay and consternation of Rev. Rundle. All in all but not all at the same time, the Lac Ste-Anne personnel served some forty-four mission stations.

### **Specialists for Service to the Poor arrive.**

By that time, Bishop Provencher, having despaired of ever finding enough Secular Priests — i.e. those not

belonging to any religious order — had, on a visit to Europe, endeavored, without success, to convince the Jesuit Fathers to accept his missions. What was he to do?

He had obtained some Grey Nuns in 1844 to establish a school, an hospice and a hospital in St. Boniface. Could he not then discover a religious order of men right in Eastern Canada? In fact, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate who had come to Canada from France in 1841 were very popular there. Their coming into Canada had broken the British ban on entrance of Religious in our country. Bishop Provencher met their founder in Marseille and wrenched from him a promise that some of his men would be sent to the Red River. His main argument used with Bishop de Mazenod was that his Western Canada people were the poorest in the whole world, an argument which the founder of the Oblates could never reject, even when it meant over-extending his Congregation. He trusted Divine Providence to send a greater number of young men to replace those he sent out and bring in still more.

Fr. Pierre-Blaise Aubert and Subdeacon Alexandre Taché disembarked from their canoe at St. Boniface in 1845. They were the forerunners of a whole phalanx of priests and brothers who, from 1856, would assume the full responsibility for all souls living west of St. Boniface even to the very rim of the Pacific and Arctic Oceans. Besides, from 1853, the year when the then thirty-year-old Taché succeeded Bishop Provencher as head of all that vast territory, until 1912 when Archbishop Mathieu was named to the new see of Regina, all the Vicars Apostolic and Bishops in charge of Churches in the West and the North were Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

Unfortunately, too many historians, dazzled by the performances of Fr. Albert Lacombe, a natural-born albeit sincere Public Relations man, a flamboyant idealist, and a much-travelled liaison officer in the name of his diverse superiors, have forgotten or almost the hundreds of other Oblates who labored in the field, sacrificed their health and, in forty-one cases, their very lives, to the call of duty. In point of fact, that number died non-natural deaths. Seven were assassinated, three of them cannibalized; a number were drowned or froze to death on the trail; some just seem to have disappeared into thin air, never to be heard of or seen again.

Of these men, even as early as 1872, John Maccoun, a non-Catholic Canadian botanist, wrote in his book, *Manitoba and the Great North-West*:

In all of the North-West, none of the representatives of any of the Churches were superior in any area to the Fathers that I have met during my trips on the East and the West of the Rocky Mountains.

I consider that their efforts have produced the proper respect due to marriage, religious respect for the Sabbath, along with the spirit of peace and of uprightness in all the regions of the country I have visited.<sup>10</sup>

A still more glowing tribute appeared in *The Western Catholic Reporter* of June 14, 1961:

The saintly Bishop Grandin, at death's door, made an impassioned plea to all the bishops, priests and laymen who were to inherit the vast territory which was then under his shepherd's crook never to forget all the work, all the sacrifices consented to by religious women and men who had labored over many decades when every day was fraught with dangers.

Pius XI once called the Oblates "specialists of the most difficult missions." Western Canada was one of the most difficult and these men, who first arrived in St. Boniface in 1845, were certainly specialists since they were, in great part, responsible for the bringing of Christianity to the people of the Plains. This has been so well expressed by the editor of "The Western Catholic" on June 14, 1961:

On the list of the institutions which have earned a title to consideration, history, in Alberta and in the West, is inscribing the name of the Order of Oblates of Mary Immaculate; if history wished to epitomize by means of a marginal note the salient characteristic of those hundred years, that note might well be "Heroic Endurance." That phrase embodies, in compact form, the sum of the impressions that were made on the minds of all by the Oblate achievement in the West, in personal contacts and through the medium of innumerable details of that achievement.

The article continued:

For all persons acquainted with it, the story of the Oblate Fathers (and Brothers) is one that evokes amazement by its revelations of the capabilities of the spirit of man in the struggle for advancement of an ideal against odds multiple and fearful — a desolate, immense, unknown and, too often, unfriendly, if not hostile land; disparities of ideologies and customs; differences of languages and cultures; disease drought, epidemics, famine, discord, revolution, elemental upheavals, fire and flood, many on a scale so large and of such frequent occurrence, that the most intrepid among men all cast in heroic mold could not help but feel that there, in the menacing vastness of the West, human endurance, however resolute and inspired, was pitted against adversaries too formidable to be overcome.

But endurance by the Grace of God, prevailed.

Out of that slow-moving, tense tragedy-laden panorama of those years, there emerges a symbol which epitomizes again the struggle waged ever anew since the dawn of christianity between the forces that contend for dominance over the Apocalyptic horsemen, Pestilence, Famine, War and Death, with the legions of Apathy, Ignorance, Indifference, Contempt and Hate, there appeared as singular and — if one judges by human standards — as pitifully inadequate a troop of champions as ever rode into combat in vindication, defense of furtherance of a cause — the "Cavalry of Christ".

Theirs were no exploits such as the "representative" poets, painters and novelists of a secularized age would consider "significant" for any or all of many reasons... No man, reading the reports of missionary priests laboring under conditions like

those which the Oblates of the West in the course of time regarded as "normal" can be expected to understand either the record or the person who wrote it, unless that reader possesses at least a spark of the sublime faith which inspires the missionary.<sup>11</sup>

The same laudatory acknowledgment should be rendered, particularly to the Grey Nuns of Montreal and also to the Sisters of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin from Nicolet. Both, the Grey Nuns who came West in 1844, and the second who imitated then in 1891, had some roots in this part of Canada. The foundress of the Montreal congregation was a niece of Lavérendrye whom she knew and listened to when he told the tales of his adventures in the "Pays d'En-Haut". Further, she was sister to Christophe Dufrost de la Jemmeraye, nephew to Lavérendrye. He had participated in the first of his uncle's expeditions during which he had died at twenty-eight, in 1736, where Letellier, Manitoba now stands. She, no doubt, passed on much of that knowledge to her religious companions and some form of tradition was thus established amongst the succeeding generations of nuns who joined them, a tradition which caused them to feel a special attraction to the West.

Is it surprising then that the Grey Nuns readily accepted the invitation of Provencher in 1844? Is it surprising that they, too, like the Oblates, dared to go even to the extremities of Canada, eventually reaching Aklavik? Is it surprising that they instinctively trusted Divine Providence when they were called upon to come to Lac Ste. Anne in 1859 to share in the work and the abject poverty of the Oblates in these parts?

The Sisters of the Assumption also had special roots in the West that inclined them to accept Bishop Grandin's invitation to come in 1891 to Onion Lake as collaborators of the Oblates at the Residential Indian School, to Hobbema in 1894, for the same purpose, and to the Colony of St-Paul-des-Métis in 1899. Afterwards, they founded boarding convents and taught in a diversity of Alberta and Saskatchewan localities, including Edmonton where they operated L'Académie de l'Assomption from 1925 to 1972.

Abbé Jean Harper, a recruit of Bishop Provencher and later co-founder of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Assumption, came to St. Boniface in August 1822 as a lay man. During the next two years, while studying theology mostly on his own, he taught a few boys who, the bishop hoped, would become priests. From his ordination on November 1, 1824, till his return to Quebec, he served especially in and around St. Boniface. In fact, between 1827 and 1829, he was the sole priest there. He ministered to the population; he was in charge of the St. François-Xavier mission to the west; he accompanied the Métis on their Summer buffalo hunts and even went to York Factory to preach a parochial mission. During the 1830-1831 absence of his superior, he singlehandedly administered the affairs of the diocese. In 1831, he returned to his native Quebec, but at least part of his affections remained in the West. In fact, in 1847, he petitioned Provencher to reaccept him, but this request was not granted, a providential occurrence since he, in 1853, as parish priest of St. Grégoire, Nicolet, with three young ladies, founded the Congregation of the Sisters of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Undoubtedly, till 1862, the year of his death, as their wise director, he inspired in them a love of the West as he reminisced about his own years on the frontier.

Let us now revert to the 1840's.

On his short visits to the Montagnais and Crees at Ile-à-la-Crosse in 1843 and 1844, Fr. Thibault had been struck by the Chippeweyan or Déné nation's receptivity of the teachings he brought them. This he reported to Bishop Provencher who, as a consequence, in 1846, sent Abbé Louis Laflèche, a future bishop of Trois-Rivières, and the newly-ordained Fr. Alexandre Taché to found a permanent mission post there, a mission which would be the mother-mission for all the major ones established later in the Athabasca-Mackenzie District.<sup>12</sup>

The following year or in 1847, Taché, in a canoe with three native companions, travelled the water route to Fort Chippeweyan on the west shore of Lake Athabasca. Hence, he was the very first Oblate to penetrate into a territory which, in 1905, was to become the Province of Alberta. He made another trip there in 1849. Therefore also, the Fort Chippeweyan mission was the very first one the Oblates founded in our province.

The second Oblate was Fr. Henri Faraut sent, in 1849, to the immense district which included the Peace River, the Athabasca, the Mackenzie, the Yukon and even the Alaska regions. From his Nativity Mission established close to the Hudson's Bay Company Fort of Chippeweyan, he radiated in all directions. He remained alone till 1853 when his very first companion, Fr. Henri Grollier, the third Oblate to trod Alberta soil, joined forces with him. From then on the missions multiplied till some took root, even on the Arctic islands.

It is at this juncture of history that Abbé Albert Lacombe arrived on the western scene. Although only twenty-two years of age, he had been ordained a priest in 1849 and immediately left for St. Boniface. Provencher sent him to Pembina, then still thought of as part of Rupert's Land. By 1851, he had become rather restless as the apostolic work there did not offer sufficient challenge to his youthful and exuberant zeal. Hence, he requested permission to return to his Montreal diocese, a permission regretfully granted by Provencher.

The main reason for this move was the proviso he had made when he consented to come west the first time, namely that he be allowed to make his year's novitiate with the Oblates already there so he could become a member of their order. Because of pressing needs, his bishop had not been able to permit him to do so then. Both men knew that missionaries who cultivated the vineyard of the Lord in the West could be hardpressed to withstand the trials

imposed by solitude and poverty unless they belonged to a band of missionaries who could be counted upon to provide them with material, psychological, spiritual and moral support.

Taché, without being asked his consent, was chosen, in June 1850, as coadjutor with future succession to Provencher. Bishop de Mazenod ordered him to accept and reserved the right to consecrate him. Hence, the young priest travelled to France in 1851. On his return trip, he did not have too much difficulty persuading Lacombe to come back West, but the latter insisted upon the same proviso he had wrung from Provencher in 1849. This time, the priest would not labor on the Red River, but would betake himself to Lac Ste. Anne where Thibault, worn out by innumerable trips and heavy responsibilities, had, over a period of months, asked to be recalled to the center of the diocese. As soon as Lacombe arrived, he returned to St. Boniface where he was given the direction of St. Francis Xavier mission also called La Prairie-du-Cheval-Blanc. Abbé Joseph Bourassa remained at Ste. Anne one more year to acquaint Lacombe with his new mission field.

For two more years the latter would remain in charge of a too vast territory. So much for his ardent desire to join the Oblates, but, tenacious as he was, he would not give up.

It seemed he could not reach the "mountain" he wanted to climb, and so Providence sent the "peak" to him in the form of a young diminutive and even timorous Oblate priest, Fr. René Rémas who, in 1853, was given the obedience to found a mission at Lac-la-Biche. He, then, was the fourth of his order to tread Alberta soil.

All he had found to live in outside the H.B.C. fort, where a non-sympathetic clerk presided, was a miserable hovel that had been abandoned. The Indians and the Métis there did not come to his aid, so that his condition soon became quite desperate. Lacombe, hearing of the situation in early Winter, immediately rode horseback over the trails and through the forests and marshes to fetch Rémas and bring him back to Ste. Anne. However, the refreshing stay of the Oblate with Abbé Lacombe was of short duration. In fact, during an Easter-season visit, Bishop Taché persuaded Rémas to return to Lac-la-Biche whither he accompanied him and helped him make his shack a bit more habitable.

Finally, Lacombe's dream would become a reality for, by mid-1855, the bishop sent Rémas to be superior of Lac Ste-Anne and master of novices for Lacombe. Two men, FF. Jean Tissot and Augustin Maisonneuve, replaced him at Lac-la-Biche and soon moved the mission center six miles away to the spot where it still stands.

By september 8, 1856, Abbé Lacombe could finally pronounce his religious vows, hang the Oblate Cross around his neck<sup>13</sup> and henceforth be called "Père" instead of "Abbé". From that day till 1880, no other Secular Priest worked in Alberta. Abbé Hippolyte Beillevaire, that year, was recruited in France along with Abbé Emile Legal. The latter joined the Oblates, but the former, for some reasons, one of them being that, in the Spring of 1881, a man was immediately needed to found a mission at Hobbema, then known as Bear Hills, where the descendants of Piché had chosen their reservations. That Fall, he moved to the Laboucane Settlement, the future Duhamel, where he remained till his death in 1937. The next abbé to come would be Jean-Baptiste Morin, a colonization agent, who, in 1891, founded the town which still bears his name. Others followed him.

### **Fort Edmonton opens its door to Saint Joachim.**

Let us now restrict our historical field to Edmonton.

Since the foundation of Ste. Anne, the Catholics of the fort and surroundings received the ministrations of the missionaries residing at the lake. After the foundation of St. Albert, in 1861, they were served from that center.

While he still lived, John Rowand, although with evident diffidence at times, had extended hospitality to the missionaries from Lac Ste. Anne, but the latter had avoided setting up headquarters in the fort because they did not feel comfortable to be under the Chief Factor's thumb. However, after he died suddenly in a fit of anger at Fort Pitt in the Spring of 1854, Fr. Lacombe did not hesitate to ask permission of William Sinclair, the new Factor, to build a small house-chapel within the walls of the establishment, a permission which was readily granted. The priest then felt more at home and he prolonged his stays for the benefit of the Catholics.

Soon William Christie replaced Sinclair and, as James MacGregor wrote in his biography of Fr. Lacombe:

In 1857, as a special favour to his friend Father Lacombe, he started to build a little chapel for his use. This friendly gesture he set on foot with both eyes open. With one of them he saw the pleasure it would give the good Father, but with the other he saw the Blackfeet, whom he noted were coming to respect the priest whose friendly overtures to them might ease the tension of Blackfeet visits... Recently, when a mysterious illness fell upon their camps, these mighty plainmen had sent for the missionary, and he had gone among them. Though helpless to stem the tide of an epidemic of scarlet fever... he nevertheless extended the hand of sympathy in their time of need, and pagan though they remained, they responded to the kindness of the priest's heart. W. J. Christie's chapel would be a good investment.<sup>14</sup>

A good investment it remained for two more decades, since, just as Rowand, on more than one occasion had done, his successors could and did call upon Father to rush from Lac Ste. Anne and then from St. Albert to come when the fort was in danger of being attacked or was being besieged by some Blackfoot tribe. This oc-cured even late as 1870.

This chapel was the first of four St. Joachim churches.

A most important event took place in 1859. The missionaries felt that a feminine touch and women's zeal were required to make the missions more viable, more effective in their work. Fr. Lacombe obtained a contingent of Grey Nuns for Lac Ste. Anne. The only promise the priest could make to their superiors in Montreal was that whosoever would consent to come, would have to share the lot of the priests and brothers in overwork and poverty. The response was immediate, unhesitating and generous.<sup>15</sup>

Three volunteered, the oldest was thirty-one, the other two twenty-three and twenty-two respectively. They embark in a canoe at Montreal in mid-September of 1858. After thirty-three exhausting days they arrived in St. Boniface where they stayed for nine months to become acclimatized and to absorb some degree of acculturation.

On August 3, 1859, accompanied by some Métis and led by Fr. René Rémas, they climbed aboard Red River Carts for a fifty-day trip, a most harrowing experience for young well-bred ladies from the East. On the twenty-fourth of September, they arrived at destination and immediately began their work. Domestic work in their home and in that of Fr. Lacombe; visiting the families and counselling the mothers; some dispensary services; but especially the opening of an all-girl school — the very first of the kind in Alberta — taxed their energies no end and yet no complaints were ever uttered. How do teachers educate youngsters who, barring one exception, know nothing but Cree whilst they themselves know not a single word of that language? Fr. Lacombe became their teacher in that tongue. They learned fast and, for the next four years or till they removed to St. Albert, they continued to devote themselves at Lac Ste. Anne.

It should be remembered that only two white women had preceded them in this province. Marie-Anne Lagimodière had lived in and around two Forts Edmonton<sup>16</sup> with her husband Jean-Baptiste from the Spring of 1807 till May of 1811. In the Spring of 1859, a Scotch lass went through to Fort Chippeweyan to wed her fiancé.

Among the missionaries who were starting to arrive was an Oblate Lay Brother by the name of Constantine Scollen. His home had been near Dublin and he was a fairly well-educated man. His arrival permitted Fr. Lacombe to realize one of his plans, namely to open a regular school in Fort Edmonton in the Fall of 1862. The original house-chapel seems to have been used for the purpose although some documents do claim that the 1857 chapel served as the school-house.

Rev. Robert Terrill Rundle, soon after his arrival in 1840, had started some kind of school in the fort wherein he, himself, was the teacher when he was there between his many trips, but it seems that he just made a "Sunday School" type out of it. His Papers or daily chronicles always talk about religious and Bible instructions but no mention is made of the three R's. Only once did he affirm in them that one pupil was copying out of a book<sup>17</sup>. Yet, G. M. Hutchinson says Rundle taught Rowand's girls and two illegitimate sons of George Simpson, James and John, whenever he happened to reside in the fort between missionary trips on the prairies. Rundle endeavored to spend about 130 days a year in the establishment.<sup>18</sup>

On the contrary, Brother Scollen, much appreciated by all, continued as a pedagogue in the very first co-educational school in Alberta wherein the four R's were expounded till 1868. Because negative religious overtones became apparent at the fort, and because many Métis families had moved to St. Albert as the H.B.C. fort lost its original importance so that their services were no longer in such demand, but also because the Blackfoot and Sarcees preferred Rocky Mountain House to Fort Edmonton for trading purposes and no more threatened it, the school population dwindled to the point that, by 1868, too few pupils remained to warrant keeping the school in operation. It was then closed down.

Founded by Fr. Lacombe in 1861, St. Albert was to become the important center of activities for the Catholic missions in Alberta and in Saskatchewan, while Lac Ste. Anne waned in importance.

At the same time, a man of still greater influence and importance than even Fr. Lacombe arrived on the scene. This was Bishop Vital Justin Grandin, o.m.i.

Sent from France as a young priest in 1854, he was posted to Ile-à-la-Crosse whence he worked in the missions of the Athabasca-Mackenzie District. Over his protests, in 1857 he was appointed auxiliary bishop with rights of future succession to Bishop Taché of St. Boniface and consecrated — the term now used is "ordained" — two years later. His field of authority extended over most of Saskatchewan, Alberta and the North, so that when he was named superior of all Oblates in these parts in 1868, he deemed it wiser to move to St. Albert as more central and accessible than Ile-à-la-Crosse.

During the devastating smallpox epidemic of 1869-1870 which claimed thousands of Indian and Métis lives — some 300 in St. Albert alone — the bishop, the priest, the brothers and the sisters and many lay people all risked their own lives to devote themselves selflessly to the sick, the dying and the orphans left behind. Dozens of them were taken in by the Sisters in their school-convent.

Fr. Lacombe, relieved of his responsibilities at St. Albert at the end of 1864, had become Pastor of the Plains or *Big Chief of the Prairies* and the next year had founded St-Paul-des-Cris on the spot where Brosseau is now located. His goal was to gather Crees there to protect them from Blackfoot attacks but especially to teach them the sedentary

life of farmers since he and all the missionaries foresaw the future disappearance of the buffalo and the old Indian way of life. From there he and another Oblate radiated even as far away as Pagan or Victoria to succor the smallpox victims. Fr. Lacombe himself succumbed to the plague but he recovered and pressed on in the work. Besides him, only Fr. Hippolyte Leduc was struck down. The Nuns at Lac Ste. Anne saw to it that he be transported there. They nursed him back to health, but his face remained forever pock-pitted. Notwithstanding this, he was destined to be an important churchman. Over the years that followed, he was vicar general and treasurer of the diocese and of the Oblates, missionary and parish priest in diverse places, defender of the rights of the Métis and of the Catholics in the educational field, member of the Board of Education of the North West Territories, school inspector, professor of theology for young Oblates, the one greatly responsible for the establishment of the Edmonton General Hospital in 1895, the coming of the Misericordia Sisters in 1901, and of the Sisters of the Assumption to Onion Lake the next year. In 1899, he directed the construction of the actual St. Joachim Church. He died in Edmonton in June 1918 and was buried alongside Bishop Grandin and Fr. Lacombe in the crypt of the St. Albert church. The Town of Leduc is named after him.

Other Oblates have also influenced Alberta and Saskatchewan history: Fr. Alexis André, Victor Bourguin, Alexandre Blanchet, Joseph Dupin, Léon Doucet, Vital Fourmond, Henri Grandin, a nephew of the bishop, Laurent LeGoff, Alphonse Lemarchand, brother of René who built the "Lemarchand Folly", the taunting name given by many to the Lemarchand mansion when it was built out in the bush, Joseph Lestanc, Zéphirin Lizée, Émile Petitot, Christophe Tissier, Valentin Végréville and many others. One would have to list practically all the names which appear on the 175 headstones in the Oblate section of the St. Albert cemetery, the 70 in Grouard and Girouxville, the 65 in Fort Smith and other places in the Mackenzie Diocese, and a certain number in British Columbia, in Québec and even in Europe whither some of the men returned to work and die.

Let us return to St. Albert.

On September 22, 1871, it became the center of a new diocese of the same name which was detached from St. Boniface. Bishop Grandin became the first titular of the See of which he took of-

ficial possession on April 7, 1872. In 1875, in that village, he started, albeit most humbly, a minor seminary for native boys who showed signs of religious and priestly vocations. At least two Métis boys, Edward Cunningham and Patrick Beaudry became Oblates and priests. A more regular and sophisticated seminary was started in 1900 immediately behind the church, an institution which remained open till June 1919. Three of its students, Émile Coulombe, Matthias Schnitzler and Ovide Desroches joined the Secular Clergy. Later, the last named joined the Trappists in St. Norbert, Manitoba. The Oblates ceded, in 1911, the direction of that seminary to other religious called the "Sons of Mary Immaculate". Fr. Paul Bodin, F.M.I., was the superior during all of this period.

By 1885, Bishop Grandin was dubbed "The Angel of St. Albert" because of his selflessness, his sanctity of life, his commiseration with all sufferers, his defense of Indian and Métis rights, his pacification efforts between both these groups in the whole of his jurisdiction, and finally for the unstinting hospitality offered the hundreds of people who, from Edmonton and other centers took refuge in and around the episcopal residence during the Riel Uprising of 1885. In a genuine spirit of ecumenism and Christian charity, no one was turned away because of religious affiliation.

Fr. Jules Le Chevallier, O.M.I., quoting the "Codex historicus of Saint Albert" wrote:

All the rumours flying around for the last few days caused worries among the rural population of the district. For precaution, farmers prepared their guns and bought munitions; they cached their belongings and victuals; they abandoned their houses and farms to take refuge either at Fort Saskatchewan, or at Edmonton or again at St. Albert. The majority of families, persuaded that, in case of attack, the primary objectives of the Indians would be Fort Saskatchewan, headquarters of the NWMP, and Edmonton where were to be found the government offices and the most important stores of the district, preferred seeking refuge in the episcopal village of St. Albert. Bishop Grandin threw his doors open to all. 'We shall be obliged to suspend classes', he wrote, 'since the school house is filled with families'. The blacksmith shop, the carpentry shop, the sheds, in a word all possible buildings were left at the disposal of people who emigrated from Fort Saskatchewan, from the Namao colony and even from Edmonton. A Methodist Minister asked the bishop for asylum for his wife and his child, while Agent Anderson caused his son to be brought over by an Indian woman. All were received with cordiality.

The inhabitants of the village, following the example of their pastor, also put themselves to inconvenience so no one would be turned away.

Within a few days, St. Albert had become a veritable city of refuge where reigned a feeling of calm and security under the protection from the first pastor.<sup>19</sup>

Fr. Alexis Tétreault, o.m.i., relates those particular events in the following manner:

#### THE RIEL UPRISING — 1885.

It is now necessary that I relate how the uprising affected St. Albert and what St. Albert did during these regrettable events.

On March 28th, a telegram brings the news of a bloody encounter close to Duck Lake Saskatchewan, and Carlton, between the Mounted Police and the Metis. The next day, Father H. Leduc, at St. Albert, relates the event in church, notes



the disastrous consequences of such action, and stresses the obligation of obeying lawful authority. Many in the Settlement are very excited. On April 4th, a courier brings the sad news of the Frog Lake Massacre. Rumors of an imminent attack on Victoria spread like wildfire. The population of Fort Saskatchewan and elsewhere fear for their safety.

On April 8th, at 3 o'clock p.m., at a large meeting in St. Albert, it is decided that the Bishop will call another meeting if the circumstances warrant it, that in case of trouble in the vicinity, a delegation consisting of the Bishop<sup>p</sup> himself, a priest, Messrs. Sam Cunningham and John Rowland and three or four other ambassadors will go to interview the trouble-makers. That same day, Jos. Lamoureux, Frank Lamoureux and Mrs. Curron and their families seek refuge in the nun's convent. On April 9th, six other families arrive from Fort Saskatchewan barracks of the RCMP. A telegram from J. John Howard, a Methodist minister, to Bishop Grandin said, "May I send my wife and child to you for shelter? Answer". Bisho<sup>p</sup> Grandin threw open his large new two-storey school buildings, his warehouse and shops for the refugees, and gave them all every comfort and assistance.

On April 11th, Mr. Beupre from Fort Saskatchewan brings the news that the Indians of Beaver Lake have stolen some cattle and are advancing on Fort Saskatchewan. The same day, a telegram from Captain Griesbach's dispatch says, "It is reported that the Blackfeet have or are about to tear up the C.P.R. tracks". In the whole district, fear had by now developed into a panic. All but four families from Fort Edmonton sent the women and children to the "city of refuge", the only place that seemed safe because of the prestige and influence of the holy Bishop of St. Albert, of Father Lacombe and their associates. All the women and children of Namao arrive. One of the refugees writes: "The women and children made their beds on the floor in long rows". Some fifteen women and twenty-one children were fed and sheltered at the Mission. Many found lodging at the homes of Dan Maloney, Noël Courtepatte, and elsewhere, and many tents were set up close to the Mission.<sup>20</sup>

Notwithstanding grave opposition from many quarters, constant rebuffs from the Federal and North West Territories government authorities, innumerable sacrifices, deaths and disasters, but through sheer doggedness, genuine zeal and persistence of the bishop and all the missionaries of both sexes, the St. Albert Diocese forged ahead. Where, in 1871, only five missions had existed, wherein one bishop, nine priests and a few lay brothers devoted themselves, by 1902, on the demise of Bishop Grandin, the same territory had a seminary, thirty parishes with resident pastors, twenty-five missions attached to them, thirty-one elementary and eight boarding schools, one Indian Industrial School in Dunbow, two orphanages, five hospitals, fifty-two priests (42 Oblates and ten Secular), one hundred and thirty-six Nuns (Grey, Faithful Companions of Jesus, Assumption, Providence and Mercy or Misericordia), and twenty-four lay brothers.

Out of the restricted confines of Fort Edmonton.

Let us now retrace our steps to Fort Edmonton.

By 1875-1876, important changes were rapidly taking place. Besides the fact that detachments of the North West Mounted Police were stationed at Fort Saskatchewan and in the new hamlet of Edmonton,<sup>21</sup> Treaty 6 with the Crees was in the offing and there was also talk of another one with the Blackfoot. As a consequence, Richard Hardisty, whose wife was Rev. John McDougall's sister and who had, in 1872, succeeded William Christie as Chief Factor, requested Bishop Grandin to remove St. Joachim chapel from within the Fort enclosure. This was done in October 1876.

The lumber from the dismantled chapel and also probably from the initial house-chapel there was carted about a mile west to a nine-acre parcel of land given to the bishop by a Scotch Methodist named Malcolm Groat who had squatted upon a large expanse of land<sup>22</sup> which he had calculated would be just outside the three thousand acres claimed by the H.B.C. as its Reserve. He, at the same time, gave the same number of acres to the Anglican Church. Oblate Brothers came from St. Albert to erect a chapel with these materials from the Fort and others they brought in.

On the Catholic property also stood a shack from which a rambunctious Métis family had to be evicted and which was then rented to a young American adventurer who set up a small store in it. Therein, he also undertook the publishing of some weekly telegraphic news which he distributed gratis to his customers. From these humble beginnings, Frank Oliver became, in time, the proprietor and editor of *The Edmonton Bulletin*. Entering politics, he succeeded, after Alberta became a province in 1905, Clifford Sifton as Minister of the Interior in the Laurier Federal Government. The Oblates, to some extent, helped him in opposition to Richard Secord, a Conservative and a local merchant, mostly because of the attitudes of "Old Tomorrow" John A. Macdonald, Prime Minister of Canada who, almost continuously, from 1867 to 1896, had played irritating "tricks" upon the Métis and the other Catholics of the West, notwithstanding the efforts and pleas of Bishop Grandin, Fathers Lacombe and Leduc. To the latter, one day Oliver said:

You, priests, you are at times quite incomprehensible. For years you live in paltry sheds; your churches and your chapels are wretched affairs. You allow other religious denominations to leave you behind. and then all of a sudden you set to work to build real cathedrals, houses, convents, schools and hospitals which carry you to the very top of progress, all abreast with the times.<sup>23</sup>

The old Fort Edmonton chapel had been served both from Lac Ste-Anne and from St. Albert after its own foundation in 1861, depending upon the availability of priests.<sup>24</sup> The new one of 1872 was placed in charge of those at St. Albert exclusively. Whoever came, generally stayed for several days to visit and minister to Catholics in the vicinity.

In 1883, Fr. Henri Grandin, O.M.I., was appointed the first resident parish priest. Within a short time after 1872, it had become evident that this chapel located in the vicinity of what is now 121 Street and Stony Plain Road or approximately at 103 Avenue where it crossed the St. Albert Trail, was not central enough since Edmonton was

developing mostly to the east of the Hudson's Bay Reserve. It should either be moved or replaced with a new one farther east. In 1883, Bishop Grandin hurried to purchase a whole block from the H.B.C. as soon as its Reserve had been subdivided into lots. This block was located between 110 and 111 Streets and 99 and 100 Avenue (Victoria).

Saint Joachim again on the Move.

On July 5, 1886, Brother Patrick Bowes, O.M.I., started the construction of a church with a residence attached at the corner of Victoria Avenue and 110 Street. It was blessed on August 22. The lumber had been brought via the Sturgeon and Saskatchewan Rivers from the St. Christopher saw-mill situated some twenty miles up the Sturgeon from St. Albert. Fr. Grandin continued as pastor till 1889. From then till 1899, four well-known priests succeeded each other.<sup>25</sup>

In 1883 also, Bishop Grandin had obtained a number of Faithful Companions of Jesus Sisters from France and England for schools in Prince Albert and St-Laurent-de-Grandin near Batoche, Saskatchewan. Because of unfavorable conditions and particularly during the Riel Uprising when they were kept prisoners in the Batoche rectory, the nuns and the bishop decided the ladies should not remain among the Métis there. Hence, in July of that year, they were transferred to Calgary. The Oblates there gave them a number of lots immediately south of St. Mary's church. There, the Sacred Heart Convent, still in existence, was erected.

The centennial brochure on Saint Joachim<sup>26</sup> claims that Fr. Lizée Zéphirin, during a few months before the opening of the third St. Joachim church in 1886, had taught school to a few pupils and that in June of that year, M. Saint-Cyr, a layman, took over and continued during the next two years. At least that was something, but not yet sufficient to satisfy the desires of the Catholic population.

Calgary had Sisters; why not Edmonton? Bishop Grandin therefore requested some. Five arrived here on October 12, 1888, after a four-day ride in Red River Carts from Calgary. They were to occupy a new convent but, at the time it was either not yet started or not yet completed since the Oblates ceded to them their own living quarters and moved temporarily to some non-descript shack in the vicinity. The Sisters started classes immediately in the house-chapel of St. Joachim. Such were the beginnings of the Edmonton Separate School system for which a board had been voted in by the Catholics on October 4, 1888. Their convent, which was to serve as a boarding place for young ladies, was being erected. Situated on the south-east corner of the same block at the corner of 110 Street and 99 Avenue, it was a three-storey structure made with a soft type of red bricks fabricated in the valley below. Sand from the river bed was used at the kiln. Except for the floors and ceilings, little wood framing was resorted to. Instead, three thicknesses of bricks were mortared side by side. It must have been ready for occupancy early in 1889, since twelve Sisters were present that Fall<sup>27</sup> and boarders signed in early in 1889. In 1891-1892 it was enlarged, and twice again later on.

On November 2, 1888, 22 pupils presented themselves, but by Christmas the enrolment had increased to 35. The Sisters taught all the required subjects both in English and in French, but added music, art and needle-work. Somewhat later in the century and at the request of Fr. Alphonse Jan, O.M.I., then an assistant in the parish, they opened a night school to help immigrant girls, mostly Gallician or Ukrainian, employed as servants in homes, learn English and Canadian ways. There too the girls could find social life and guidance.<sup>28</sup> It remained in operation till the foundation of St. Josaphat's Ukrainian Parish in 1904.

When the Sisters moved into their new convent, the Oblates returned to their former habitat but soon found it too cramped,

so Fr. A. Lacombe, who had succeeded Fr. L. Fouquet as parish priest in 1895, decided to build a new rectory at the corner of Victoria Avenue and 110 Street, using the same kind of materials and a similar style as that of the convent. In consequence, the 1886 house-chapel had to be moved south or immediately behind the present brick church. From 1899 to 1912, when the spacious sacristy was added to the present church, it served as a sacristy. At the latter date it was dismantled.

### **A Lease on Life for Grandmother.**

When, in 1888-1889, there was serious talk of reducing the Lac Ste Anne Mission to the status of sub-station without a resident priest, Fr. Jean-Marie Lestanc, o.m.i., then parish priest of St. Albert and a good Breton from western France, who had an ingrained devotion to the grandmother of Jesus, was quite upset and called it "sacrilegious" rumour.<sup>29</sup>

With impassioned eloquence, he persuaded Bishop Grandin and his episcopal counsellors to replace Lac Ste. Anne's crumbling church with a new and vaster construction. Fr. Lizée, then in charge of that mission, was all in favor. Plans were drawn, lumber hauled in, and some Oblate Brothers erected the new sanctuary.

On June 6, 1889, Fr. Lestanc presided over a pilgrimage attended by some two hundred people. This was the inauguration of an annual event which has never ceased since then. It always takes place the week of July 25, the feast day of Ste. Anne.

During decades and till very recently, there was a Sunday pilgrimage for white people from Edmonton and many

other points. There even were, at one time, special trains bringing them as close as one mile from the mission.

Natives, Indians and Métis, had their own separate pilgrimage on the closest Wednesday to the feast itself.

The special day for the Whites was discontinued some two or three years ago, so that now there is but one for everyone. However, it runs from Sunday to Thursday morning. Literally thousands, particularly Natives from far and wide, even from diverse points of the United States, devoutly attend all liturgies and devotions. Old time tribal rivalries are now forgotten and, even without the presence of police, peace and order reign. Attendance has been estimated as between 15,000 and 20,000. A brand new sanctuary now adorns the grounds.

### **A helping Hand to the Ruthenians.**

From 1895 the Catholic Church in Edmonton and the parish of St. Joachim were involved with new Canadians, and, as we shall see later, with the Catholic Womens' League since 1912.

As wave upon wave of immigrants, mostly from Galicia, a Ukrainian province of the Austrian Empire, rolled into Western Canada from 1895, Bishop Grandin could not but feel obliged to see that, inasmuch as feasible, they would be cared for spiritually. The great majority of the newcomers were Greek-Catholics or Uniates using Old Slavonic in their Eastern liturgy. As no priest accompanied them in the beginning, Bishop Grandin and Bishop Legal, from 1897 when he became coadjutor to Grandin, had some Latin-Rite priests, especially abbé Raphael Ernest Dorais, parish priest of Lamoureux, and Fr. George Nordmann, O.M.I., visit them regularly. Other priests were willing to transfer to the Ruthenian Rite to be of greater service, but due to a deep-seated fear based upon centuries-old historical events in Europe the Ukrainians were diffident as to the intentions of the Latin clergy. The idea was not welcomed by them. They resisted.<sup>30</sup>

Hence, as early as 1897, the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda at the Vatican was asked to make the necessary contacts with the Ruthenian Metropolitan Archbishop of Galicia so that he might send priests and sisters. The result was that some four or five Secular Priests came to Western Canada, but each in turn, finding the living and working conditions too strenuous, migrated to the United States. Bishop Grandin went so far as to pay them an annual salary, but to no avail. Perhaps missionaries who were religious would be more constant. Therefore, in 1900, Fr. Albert Lacombe was delegated to Europe to plead this cause with Rome, with the Ruthenian bishops of Galicia and with Emperor Franz-Joseph II of Austria. He went back again in 1904 for the same purpose.

When, in November 1902, three Basilian Fathers, a lay brother and four "Sisters of Mary", arrived in Edmonton, Bishop Legal, now in sole command of the St. Albert Diocese, sighed with relief... at last the Ukrainians Catholics would be in good hands! For the greatest part of a year, the Sisters lived on the second floor of the third St. Joachim church, awaiting the completion of their convent in Mundare. One of the four died May 23, 1903. Mundare was chosen as the center of activities for the men and the women since a number of population concentration existed around it.

From 1900 to 1907, the Ukrainian Catholic Church here went through a difficult period because of the famous "Star Church Law Suit" which was carried right up to the Privy Council of England and of which Bishop Legal gives all the details in his book on pages 127-129. However, this imbroglio caused by interference from some Russian-Orthodox priests and by the hardheadedness of three lay church trustees was a minor event compared to similar difficulties which beset Archbishop Adélarde Langevin, o.m.i., of St. Boniface.<sup>31</sup>

Bishop Legal pressed the Basilians to establish a parish in Edmonton as more and more Ukrainians moved to town. Therefore, in 1904, Fr. Sozontius Dycyk, O.S.B.M., got things underway. The bishop gave him half a block of land on 97 Street and 108 Avenue. Here a chapel was completed and blessed late that year and given St. Josaphat as patron.

During the First Plenary Council of Quebec, the Canadian bishops voted to raise \$10,000 annually for ten years to help establish Ruthenian parishes in the West. The western bishops, for their part, consented to forego the annual collection for their schools of the North-West which they had been wont to receive each year from a collection consented to some years before by eastern bishops.

Bishop Legal, hoping to be refunded eventually from this annual collection, advanced \$6,000 for the construction of a fine brick building destined to be the convent and a boarding school for the Sisters in Mundare. He lent the Fathers \$1,000 to build their church there as well.

When, at the beginning of 1913, Fr. Nicetas Budka was appointed bishop for all Ukrainians in Canada, Bishop Legal was well pleased that this responsibility had been removed from his shoulders.

From the date of its foundation in 1912 till approximately 1925, the Catholic Women's League of Edmonton sponsored a hostel for Ukrainian and other girls working in the city where they could find room and board, gather for sound social activities, secure guidance and job opportunities, be taken care of if they fell sick. The League also undertook to help out the Sisters at Mundare financially as well.<sup>32</sup>

Also in 1895, two other noteworthy events occurred. The first was the construction of the General Hospital by the

Grey Nuns at the corner of 111 Street and Victoria Avenue, a building which was in use till 1969 when it was razed. It had then become obsolete and more modern wings had periodically been built, the last one opening in 1981. During many decades, more precisely till 1929, its chaplains were Oblates from St. Joachim.

### **Oblates Land South of the Saskatchewan River.**

The second event of 1895 was the foundation of St. Anthony of Padua Parish in Strathcona, Edmonton's arch-rival across the valley, since it had become quite difficult for the Catholics on the south side of the river to attend services at St. Joachim.

The patron chosen was to honor the Franciscan Fathers who had earlier accepted to come and staff the parish, but they had no men available in 1895. In 1898 further negotiations to the same end were resumed, but again they had no spare personnel. Finally, they were able to accept a parish, St. Francis of Assisi, in North Edmonton, and another in Fort Saskatchewan. Meanwhile, the Oblates from St. Joachim had to look after Strathcona.

A small frame church, with minuscule living quarter attached, was built at what is now 8426-105 Street. For some years, it had to double as a school-house. On week-days, a drape was drawn across the sanctuary and the nave became a classroom.

In 1894, the population had obtained the formation of Catholic School District # 12 (Edmonton's was # 7) and between 1895 and 1902, two nuns went daily from the Faithful Companion of Jesus Convent at St. Joachim's. Early in the morning, they left by pony hitched to a buggy in Summer and to a cutter in Winter and crossed the river either on the ferry which landed in Rossdale or over the ice and returned each evening after school. At Fall freeze-up and Spring break-up, when either way of crossing was impossible, they "camped out" in the cramped quarters behind the church. In 1902, they were replaced by a lay teacher. For a time, after 1911, they took charge of a new four-room school there.

From the end of 1901, St. Anthony had a resident priest who also served the Catholics for some distance along the Calgary & Edmonton Railway line. It is that year that Fr. Alphonse Jan started building a brick church to replace the original one which nevertheless then continued to serve as a school until a proper school building was erected and then it became the sacristy of the new church. Still later, it served as a parish hall. Finally, not so long ago, it was given to the Fort Edmonton Foundation which transported it to the replica of the old Fort Edmonton and reconditioned it for use as a church on occasion.

When, in 1912, the Calgary Diocese was carved out of the St. Albert one and its bishop became a suffragan of Bishop Legal, the latter acquired the title of Archbishop of Edmonton. It was with some reluctance that he left St. Albert, where he had a vast church basement constructed, over which he planned to erect his cathedral later, and he lived in the Foyer Grandin with the other Oblates. That superstructure was added by Fr. Ludovic Larose in 1925 only. The new archbishop chose Strathcona for his residence and hoped to build his cathedral in the university town. Meanwhile, he made St. Anthony's his pro-cathedral and had a house constructed for his own use and that of his chancery office at 10757-83 Avenue, a three-story walk-up. Archbishop O'Leary, who succeeded him in 1920, lived in that house during some three years. The building was transformed into an orphanage in 1923 and he moved to 8317-105 Street where he stayed till 1925. As a new residence for him and the basement for St. Joseph's Cathedral were being built in 1925, he transported himself to the North Side, temporarily living at 10140-114 Street in close proximity to 10040113 Street, the address of the new constructions. The old Legal walk-up was sold almost twenty years later and, today, it is an apartment block.

Because St. Anthony's served as cathedral between 1913 and 1925, it was given the honorific title of "pro-cathedral" which it never lost, even after it moved into new quarters at the corner of Whyte (82nd.) Avenue and Sixth Street and which people call "The Round Church" because of its shape. When this transfer took place, the old St. Anthony's was sold to the Ukrainian Catholics who used it then as their South Side church. The two-storey brick-faced rectory, at least for some time, harbored not only the Basilian Fathers but also a certain number of young Ukrainian men attending the University of Alberta.

Archbishop Legal, just prior to World War I, caused a cathedral basement to be excavated near 83 Avenue, between 110 and 111 Street. The sudden economic depression or "bust" of that year, the four years of war, another depression in 1919-1920 and, finally, his death on March 10, 1920, prevented him from fulfilling his dream. The excavation was a popular skating rink and, after it, was filled in during the early 1940's, tennis courts were built over it.<sup>33</sup>

It should be noted that, since 1851, when Taché was consecrated at Viviers, France, by Bishop de Mazenod and Bishop Henri Guibert, O.M.I., the then head of that diocese and later Cardinal-Archbishop of Paris (1873-1886), four bishops of the Oblate Congregation have had responsibilities in the governance of the Edmonton Archdiocese as now comprised. Bishop Alexandre Taché (later archbishop from the foundation of the St. Albert Diocese in 1871 till his death in 1894), first as coadjutor of Bishop Provencher (1851-June 1853) and then as his successor in St. Boniface was involved in religious matters of Alberta; Bishop Vital Grandin from his ordination as coadjutor bishop to Bishop

Taché in 1859 till his death in 1902, but especially from 1871 when the St. Albert Diocese was formed and detached from that of St. Boniface, was accountable for our territory; Bishop Legal, from the day of his consecration as coadjutor of the previous in 1897 till his demise in 1920, had jurisdiction in the area, at first partial and then complete; finally, Archbishop Anthony Jordan, from April 7, 1955, the day of his transfer from the See of Prince Rupert to become coadjutor of Archbishop John Hugh MacDonald and then his successor August 11, 1964, and till his resignation on July 6, 1973, was added to the list. All in all, Oblates have had a say during a period of 87 years out of the 130 we are concerned with.

(To be continued)

Éméric O. DROUIN, 0.1111  
Edmonton, Alberta

#### NOTES:

1 The remains of Fort St. Charles and of the assassinated men were discovered on August 7, 1908, by members of the Société historique de Saint-Boniface, Manitoba. Details of the expedition may be found in *Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 3 (1908), pp. 205-234.

2 Amongst others, consult Guy FRÉGAULT, Michel BRUNET and Marcel TRUDEL, *Histoire du Canada par les textes*, Montréal, Fides, 1952; Thomas CEIAPA: *Cours d'Histoire du Canada (1760-1971)*, Montréal, Bernard Valiquette, vol. 1, 1919.

3 James G. MCGREGOR, *Edmonton. A History*, Edmonton, Hurtig, 1967. pp. 44-45.

4 James G. MCGREGOR, op. cit.; John S. GALBRAITH, *The Hudson's Bay Company as an Imperial Factor, 1821-1869*, Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1957, pp 18 ss, 202-216, 329-332. The author is a Scotsman teaching in Berkeley, who seems to be much less biased in favor of the Hudson's Bay Company, of Sir George Simpson and a number of other key men in the company than many other authors who seem prejudiced, at least to some extent, in favor of their subjects. It is not surprising then that Galbriath's book has not been well received by critics in England.

5 Éméric O. DROUIN, O.M.I., for other reasons as to the choice of Lac Ste Anne for the first Catholic mission. See Lac Ste-Anne Sakahigan, Edmonton, Editions de l'Ermitage, 1973, pp. 13-15. In this instance and in others, the author of this paper quotes his own publications and he underlines some of his contributions to the work of the Oblates in Edmonton and vicinity, not that he considers himself to be the biggest pebble on the beach nor an important cog in the wheel. He does so simply because it is easier to remember events in one's life than in that of others.

After teaching twenty-eight years (1931-1933 and 1940-1966) at Collège Saint-Jean, the author went to Ermineskin Indian Residential School at Hobbema (end of April to end of July 1966) with the purpose of sizing up the situation in view of taking over as Senior Teacher in September, but the superiors of the Oblates decided to send him to St. Mary's Indian School on the Bloof Reservation near Cardston to assume the same kind of responsibility there while Fr. Joseph Régnier, after eight years of service there would be brought up to Hobbema. Fr. Drouin remained three years as Senior Teacher or Principal of the day school in Cardston. After he resigned from the job, he became parish priest of the Francophone parish of Ste Famille in Calgary. By November 1971, he was back in Edmonton to be in charge of the Oblate Archives.

6 James S. MCGREGOR, op. cit., p. 45.

7 Rowand had to be cautious and discreet about it because of the London attitude of 1838 and Simpson's subservience to it, but Adrien Gabriel Mo-RICE, O.M.I., in *History of the Catholic Church in Western Canada: from Lake Superior to the Pacific (1859-1895)*, Toronto, Musson, 1910, vol. 1, p. 16 writes that Rowand adopted a roundabout way of letting Bishop Provencher know that a priest was needed out West. This fashion of proceeding permitted Rowand to deny complicity in an 1844 letter to Simpson (see James G. MCGREGOR, *John Rowand, Czar of the Prairie*, Saskatoon, Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978, p. 133), yet Simpson, somewhere else, accuses Rowand of not being scrupulous about the truth.

8 For further details about this, see Éméric O. DROUIN, O.M.I., Paul-Émile BRETON, o.m.i., *Hobbema... ongoing Indian Mission of Central Alberta*, [n.p.n.p., 1969].

9 For more details about this first trip and his later activities in Alberta, see Éméric O. DROUIN, O.M.I., *Lac Ste-Anne Sakahigan*.

10 Page 11.

11 This tribute is recorded in Lac Ste-Anne Sakahigan, pp. 78-79.

12 Barbara BENOÎT, The Mission at Île-à-la-Crosse, an excellent article in The Beaver, Winter 1980, pp. 40-50. One correction to be made: Bishop Taché was not consecrated in Rome, as stated on page 50, but rather in Viviers, France, by the Founder of the Oblates, Bishop de Mazenod, helped by Bishop Henri Guibert, O.M.I., bishop of that city (1842-1857), then Archbishop of Tours (1857-1871), and finally Archbishop of Paris (1871-1886), and Cardinal of Paris (December 1873).

13 This Oblate Cross, Fr. Lacombe lost in Germany on a speaking tour of a few German cities during his 1900 trip when he was delegated to the Court of Vienna to obtain Ukrainian priests and sisters. He had placed it on the sill of an open railway coach window and it fell out without him noticing it. Of course, he got a replacement one but it could not alleviate his distress at losing a forty-four-year-old intimate companion and friend.

14 James G. MCGREGOR, op. cit., p. 60. Richard Hardisty replaced William J. Christie and, in turn, was replaced by Harrison S. Yound who was there during the 1870 Blackfoot attack against Fort Edmonton.

15 Éméric O DROUIN, O.M.I., Lac Ste Anne Sakahigan, pp. 27-32 for the whole story of the Grey Nuns' stay and work in Lac Ste. Anne.

16 Chronology of the history of the divers forts:

First series of Forts: two miles north of Fort Saskatchewan or near Lamoureux..., one mile above mouth of the Sturgeon Creek or River. First Fort Augustus or Upper Fort des Prairies... built by the North West Company in 1794. First, Fort Edmonton built close by in 1795 by the Hudson Bay Company. Both were destroyed by Blood, Blackfoot and Gros Ventre Indians in 1807.

Second series of forts: built side by side in Ross Flat or Rossdale to the left of the fifth Street Bridge or where the Edmonton City Power House now stands... in 1805. Also called Fort Augustus and Fort Edmonton. Abandoned both in 1810 and burned by the Blackfoot.

Third series of forts: in 1810, both companies decided to move 65 miles to the mouth of the White Earth Creek, some 6 miles from the Smoky Lake Village and near the Saskatchewan River, approximately where Victoria or Pakan later stood. In official documents, Smoky Lake and River are Lacqui-Fume and Rivière-qui-Fume. Fort Augustus there was also known as Fort Terre Blanche or Lower White Earth Post. In official documents the Creek is Terre Blanche. Fort Edmonton, built by Alexander Henry, helped by a Lussier for the Hudson Bay Company.

Fourth series of forts: in 1813, the third series of Forts is abandoned because they were not strategically placed for fur trade. The North West Territories Company built Fort Auguste or Old Fort Whitemud on Upper Terre Blanche Fort, at the mouth of Whitemud Creek. The Hudson Bay Company rebuilt Fort Edmonton on the 1807-1810 location or in Ross Flats, but some time after 1825, it was abandoned and a new one built just below the actual parliament buildings just about where the power house for the government buildings now is.

James C. McGregor writes in Edmonton... (p. 36): "In 1825, one the recurring high floods drove the traders out of their buildings. The river rose high enough to spread out over the flat on which hitherto the two forts had reposed high and dry. Since the amalgamation of the companies, the North-westerns' buildings had been relegated to living quarters and Edmonton House carried on as the trading establishment. While the flood drove everybody out, nevertheless, the staff reoccupied the Fort as soon as it subsided and Rowand carried on at the old stand." On page 41, he states: "In 1830, another flood, worse than the previous one, made it to move Edmonton House to higher ground. The old buildings had been getting into poor shape anyway, and Rowand was glad of the opportunity of laying out a better and more commodious establishment. The work of rebuilding was not completed until 1832, but everyone was so pleased with the new Fort that for a while they renamed it Fort Sanspareil. This change appears to have been viewed coolly in London and the new name was dropped.

"While the new Fort was under construction, Rowand and his men built the imposing "Big House," or "Rowand Folly," as some of his critics called it. It appears to have been finished early in 1832. It was about thirty by eighty feet, having three stories in addition to a basement. Along the front and back, galleries ran the full length of the building. The Big House, by far the largest, west of York Factory, was well provided with windows made up of panes of glass about seven inches by eight inches. To the Indians, this glass, the first to be used in the West, was a seven day's wonder. With his unrivalled grasp of Indian psychology, Rowand saw how his mansion would impress them."

Apparently, the XY Company, formed in 1798 by Forsyth, Richardson and Co., of Montreal, was strengthened in 1800 by the inclusion of John Ogilvy and John Mure, and in 1802 when Alexander Mackenzie joined it, its name changed to the "Sir Alexander Mackenzie and Company." In 1804, it was absorbed by the North West Company.

Between 1798 and 1800, the XY Co. and the Ogilvy and Mure Co., each had a small trading post in the

Saskatchewan River Valley on the actual Municipal Golf Links somewhere between the High and the Groat Bridges. Between 1800 and 1804, only the XY Co. one remained, and, by 1804, it too disappeared.

The Lagimodières or Lagimonière — both these forms are found in history books — therefore lived only in the second and third Fort Edmonton and not in the first nor the last.

17 Hugh A. DEMPSEY, ed., *The Rundle Journals, 1840-1848...*, [Calgary], Historical Society of Alberta and Glenbow-Alberta Institute, 1977, has many entries all along the book.

18 Page xlili of the Introduction.

19 Jules LE CHEVALIER, *Batoche. Les missions du Nord-Ouest pendant les troubles de 1885*, Montréal, l'Oeuvre de Presse dominicaine, 1941, pp. 136-137. As translated by the author. See also K. MALONEY, *The Saint Albert Mounted Rifles of 1885*.

20 Emile TARDIF, o.m.i. — Alexis TÉTRAULT, o.m.i., *Centenaire de Saint-Albert 1861-1961 — Saint Albert Centennial*, Edmonton, Imprimerie "La Survivance", 1961, p. 89.

21 As to further changes, see James G. MCGRECOR, *op. cit.*, pp. 79 ff.

22 The boundaries of Malcolm Groat's Estate were: South — bank of the Saskatchewan River; North — 190-A Avenue; East — 121 Street; West — 136 Street.

23 Émile LEGAL, O.M.I., *Short Sketches of the History of the Catholic Church and Missions in Central Alberta*, [n.p., 1914], p. 27.

24 The following were those missionaries: Fathers Albert Lacombe, René Rémas, Célestin-Marie Frain, Jean-Marie Caër, Jean Tissot, Alexis André, Victor Bourguine, Joseph Dupin, Alexandre Blanchet, Henri Leduc and Valentin Végréville.

25 These four priests were: Valentin Végréville (1889-1890), Léon Fouquet (1890-1894), who later was transferred to British Columbia; Albert Lacombe (1894-1896) and Hippolyte Leduc (1896-1899).

These are all the priests who have served in the four successive churches of St. Joachim in Fort Edmonton and in Edmonton proper:

From the Lac Ste-Anne Mission (all Oblates from 1856 till today): Abbés Jean-Baptiste Thibault... stayed in Fort Edmonton (1842-1844), then at Lac Ste-Anne (1844-1852), Joseph Bourassa (1844-1853), Albert Lacombe (1852-1856); then as Père Lacombe (1856-1861), sharing responsibilities with Fathers René Rémas, Célestin-M. Frain and Joseph Caër.

From Saint Albert (1861-1883): Albert Lacombe, Jean Tissot, Alexis André, Victor Bourguine, Joseph Dupin, Alexandre Blanchet, Hippolyte Leduc, Valentin Végréville, Moïse Blais and Constantin Scollen.

Resident Parish Priests: Henri Grandin (1883-1889), Valentin Végréville (1889-1890), Léon Fouquet (1890-1894), Albert Lacombe (1894-1896), Hippolyte Leduc (1896-1899), Joseph Lestanc (1899-1900), Hippolyte Leduc (1900-1905), Alphonse Jan (1905-1906), Adéodat Thérien (1906-1907), Albert Naessens (1907-1911), Pierre Cozanet (1911-1914), Alphonse Lemarchand (1914-1917), Michel Mézer (1917-1920), Jean Tavernier (1920-1927), Ubald Langlois (1927-1930), Pierre Cozanet (1930), Ange-Albert Chartrand (1930-1931), Armand Boucher (1931-1944), Jean Patoine (1944-1953), Guy Michaud (1953-1956), Gérard Labonté (1956-1958), Fernand Thibault (1958-1961), Hector Ferland (1962), Jules Bidault (1962-1965), Georges Chevrier (1965-1971), Maurice Lafrance (1971-1973), Gérard Lassonde (1973-1981), Georges Tétreault (1981) and Maurice Beauregard (1981 - to date).

26 Page 11.

27 Sister Pat HALPIN, F.C.J., *A brief account of the Sisters Faithful Companions of Jesus in Edmonton, Alberta*, 1981, pp. 2-3. Those Sisters were Anna O'Neill, Teresa Coghlan, Delphine Bousquet, Lucy McLaughlin, M.-Bernard Keelan, Julia Stack, Josephine Plante, Gertrude Bond, Magdalen Walmsley, Mary Ellen Hoolan, Ursula Swales and Josephine Cormyn.

28 Sr Pat HALPIN, F.C.J., *op. cit.*; Émile LEGAL, O.M.I., *op. cit.*, but he has an error in date as to the foundation of St. Josephat's Ukrainian Parish when he states it was in 1907 when, in fact, this occurred in 1904.

29 Éméric O. DROUIN, O.M.I., *Lac Ste-Anne Sakahigan*, pp. 52-63, for the development of the pilgrimage during the last 92 years.

31 Émile LEGAL, O.M.I., *op. cit.*, for details about the Greek Ruthenian Missions, pp. 121 ss.

31 Robert PAINCHAUD, *Les exigences linguistiques dans le recrutement d'un clergé pour l'Ouest Canadien, 1818-1916*, in *La société canadienne d'Histoire de l'Église catholique*, 42 (1975), pp. 43-64; Gilbert Louis

COTEAU, Les Rapports de Mgr L.-P.-A. Langevin avec les groupes ethniques minoritaires 1895-1916, ibidem, pp. 65 ss.

32 Marion CONROY, The Catholic Women's League... Early History and Growth in Edmonton Archdiocese, 1962, pp. 32-40 et al.

33 List of bishops who have been responsible for what is now Edmonton and vicinity: Bishop Joseph-Octave Plessis of Quebec (1818-1827), Joseph Norbert Provencher (1823-1853), Alexandre Taché, O.M.I. (1851-1895), Vital Grandin, O.M.I. (1859-1871 as auxiliary to bishop Taché) and 1871-1902 as bishop of Saint Albert; Emile Legal, O.M.I. (1897-1902 as auxiliary to bishop Grandin) and 1902-1920 as bishop of Saint Albert and then as archbishop of Edmonton (1912-1920); Henry Joseph O'Leary (bishop of Charlottetown, P.E.I. (1913-1920), archbishop of Edmonton (1920-1938).

The text indicates he moved his residence place three times after taking up abode in the house archbishop Legal had build. The reason for his move out that place is that, in 1923, he obtained the services of the Sisters of Providence of Kingston to open a home for boys who had been orphaned or, for one reason or other, had no decent home to live in. These Sisters were not strangers to our city since they had, in 1915, as we have seen, accepted operating the Catholic Women League's Rosary Hall. Four Sisters were on the founding staff at "St. Mary's Home" in the three story walkup.

In 1942, this institution was transferred to 6730, 128 Avenue, in St. Francis' Parish. The Salesian Fathers of Don Bosco, in 1951, took over the direction of the home. Since then, they have built a fine home at some distance from the old site.

In 1927, the same Nuns bought the Whyte Block on the corner of 82 Avenue (Whyte Avenue) and 106 Street to found St. Joseph's Hospital for patients in need of constant care. The old Whyte Block housed shops on the street level and apartments on the upper stories.

While attending university courses, for three summers, Fr. E. Drouin, O.M.I., replaced Fr. Alexander Prendergast, the resident chaplain in that hospital.

John Hugh MacDonald (bishop of Victoria, B.C., (1934-1938), archbishop of Edmonton (1938-1964) when he retired. He had been coadjutor of Archbishop O'Leary (1936-1938); Anthony Jordan, O.M.I. (Vicar Apostolic of Prince Rupert, 1934-1955; coadjutor of archbishop MacDonald, 1955-1964), archbishop of Edmonton (1964 to his retirement July 6, 1973), Joseph Neil MacNeil (bishop of St. John, N.B., (1969-1973), then archbishop of Edmonton.

From 1818 to 1981, a period of 183 years, the Oblates have had a say or may have been in full authority during 87 of those years.



# La place des Oblats dans le domaine pénal

SUMMARY — The place of the Oblates in the penal system is clearly indicated throughout the history of the Congregation as seen in the Oblate literature. Since the inception of the Order, the Oblates took charge of the prisons of Aix, a function Eugene de Mazenod performed even as a young man. During his first years as a priest, he became a benevolent chaplain taking care of the spiritual and material needs of the prisoners. When he wrote the Rules, he enclosed a special chapter on the service to the prisoners.

Such predilection for this class of unfortunate Christians has never been lost in the Congregation as can be seen by a survey of the various countries where it is established. Everywhere, the Oblates have considered this ministry as an important part of their work for and among the poor.

## I. Revue de la littérature.

Pour mieux situer cette question à l'époque où nous vivons présentement, il convient de faire un bref retour historique dans la littérature oblate.

Il faut remonter en 1807, avant la fondation de la Congrégation, alors qu'Eugène de Mazenod exerçait la fonction de semainier à l'Oeuvre des Prisons d'Aix. Cette confrérie constituée en 1686, avait pour objet d'assurer aux détenus une assistance spirituelle et matérielle bien nécessaire. Le semainier présidait à leurs rencontres hebdomadaires et rendait compte des visites aux prisons, des besoins des détenus, des distributions effectuées. L'Oeuvre demandait une régénération. Dans son premier rapport, Eugène dénonça un boulanger sur les abus duquel on fermait jusqu'alors très prudemment les yeux et qui en profitait pour passer du pain de mauvaise qualité aux prisonniers. Aucune vérification n'était faite non plus sur l'exactitude du relevé des rations de pain. Il signalait ensuite "la déplorable situation des prisonniers passagers et particulièrement des conscrits, conduits de brigade en brigade jusqu'à leur corps". La plupart d'entre eux se trouvaient dans une nudité presque complète. Le semainier proposait donc qu'on fasse une quête annuelle, après autorisation du maire et qu'une partie en soit affectée à l'achat "de culottes, souliers, chapeaux, etc. ... pour les distribuer aux misérables indigents, qui sont conduits de prison en prisons"<sup>1</sup>.

Le chanoine Leflon fixe par des recoupements la conversion définitive d'Eugène au vendredi saint 1807, drame de conscience commencé vers 1803<sup>2</sup>. On peut donc dire que le souci des prisonniers fut au coeur de sa conversion. C'est maintenant un laïc converti, bénévole au service de l'aide aux prisonniers et s'acheminant vers le sacerdoce qu'il recevra en 1811.

Et le chanoine Leflon de conclure ce chapitre en disant:

Cette expérience, du moins, avait été fort utile en révélant à Eugène, des misères matérielles et morales qu'il ne soupçonnait guère. Lui inspira-t-elle déjà la volonté de se consacrer aux pauvres et aux déshérités? Aucun document n'en témoigne. Mais que les souffrances de ses prisonniers aient stimulé sa générosité à l'heure où Dieu lui demandait le sacrifice de toutes ses ambitions terrestres; que plus tard, leur souvenir ait contribué partiellement à orienter sa vocation vers les plus humbles ministères, il n'est pas interdit de le supposer<sup>3</sup>.

Durant ses premières années de sacerdoce à Aix, il se fait l'aumônier volontaire des détenus privés de secours religieux. Presque chaque jour, il les visite, s'applique à les instruire, à les encourager, à les convertir. Si le résultat ne répond pas toujours aux efforts de son zèle, du moins eut-il la joie de ramener à Dieu une malheureuse femme, qu'on appelait "la Germaine", condamnée à la peine capitale.

Cette coupable créature, qui avait soulevé contre elle l'horreur et l'indignation publique par l'énormité de ses crimes, raconte le P. Martin dans ses mémoires, fut si touchée des exhortations de l'abbé de Mazenod qu'elle se convertit complètement. Elle montra de si excellentes dispositions que, contrairement aux préjugés alors reçus, l'abbé de Mazenod l'admit à la communion. Aussi l'opinion publique se modifia-t-elle sensiblement, lorsqu'on vit cette malheureuse femme s'avancer vers l'échafaud, donnant toutes les preuves les plus touchantes de son repentir<sup>4</sup>.

Les exhortations de son confesseur, qui l'accompagnait, en proie à une vive émotion, "encouragèrent la victime repentante et on bénit à haute voix le charitable apôtre, qui avait contribué si efficacement à opérer ce prodige de grâces"<sup>5</sup>.

Un peu plus tard, ce furent les prisonniers de guerre autrichiens refoulés jusqu'à Aix par Napoléon. Bientôt, le typhus se déclara dans la caserne où on avait entassé les 2,000 Autrichiens, et la mort fit parmi eux quantité de victimes. Médecins et aumôniers succombaient, victimes de la maladie contractée à leur chevet. A cette nouvelle, l'abbé s'offrit à l'administration diocésaine pour remplacer son confrère et, avec un mépris total du danger, entoure de soins les plus empressés des malheureux frappés par la contagion, les console, les prépare à paraître devant Dieu et leur administre les derniers sacrements.

Mais, bientôt, lui-même se trouve atteint. Or, au lieu de s'arrêter immédiatement, pour conjurer, dès le principe, ce qu'on appelle "le mal des prisons", l'intrépide apôtre refuse de se laisser soigner. Brûlant de fièvre, secoué de frissons, il continue son assistance aux Autrichiens. A bout de force, il doit enfin s'aliter. En dépit de sa vigoureuse constitution, malgré le traitement énergique des docteurs, son état devient si grave qu'il demande à recevoir le viatique et l'extrême-onction<sup>6</sup>.

Ce ministère auprès des prisonniers, Eugène de Mazenod en fera un chapitre spécial dans les Constitutions et Règles de la Congrégation des Oblats; à la suite de celui sur la direction de la jeunesse, les deux œuvres de ses jeunes années de sacerdoce. Il nous semble important de citer ce texte des premières Règles de 1818 des Missionnaires de Provence:

On ne perdra jamais de vue qu'une des fins principales de l'Institut est de venir au secours des âmes les plus abandonnées. À ce titre, les pauvres prisonniers ont des droits bien acquis à la charité de la société.

La Règle de 1930 parle encore du ministère auprès des prisonniers parmi les ministères extérieurs et cette oeuvre demeurera jusque dans la Règle de 1966. Dans celle de 1930, on lit aux articles 134-138<sup>7</sup>:

134. Nous ne perdrons jamais de vue la fin principale de notre Institut qui est d'aller au secours des âmes les plus abandonnées; à ce titre, les malheureux prisonniers ont un droit légitime à notre charité.

135. Nous nous efforcerons, autant que le permettront les circonstances, de subvenir aux besoins des détenus, en les visitant fréquemment et en les instruisant des vérités de la religion que chacun est obligé de savoir.

136. Nous aurons soin surtout de les amener, par les plus douces exhortations, soit à l'usage fréquent du sacrement de Pénitence, soit à la réception de la sainte Eucharistie.

137. Nous employerons tous les moyens que nous dictera notre charité pour disposer à bien nourrir les condamnés au dernier supplice.

138. Les missionnaires les accompagneront jusque sur l'échafaud et ils ne les quitteront qu'après avoir reçu leur dernier soupir, afin de les défendre dans ces moments extrêmes contre les embûches du démon, les affres de la mort et le danger du désespoir.

Devenu évêque de Marseille, Eugène de Mazenod continuera de promouvoir ce ministère auprès des prisonniers. En 1839, il confie à son directeur d'oeuvres, l'abbé Charles-Joseph Fissiaux, la fondation du Pénitencier industriel et agricole de Marseille, afin d'arracher les jeunes détenus à la contamination des prisons. Les débuts furent extrêmement pénibles.

Pendant plus d'un an, chaque semaine était marquée par une révolte... En deux circonstances, des personnes de la maison ont failli être les victimes de leur dévouement et n'ont dû qu'à un hasard providentiel de n'être point assassinés. Au reste, nos enfants nous ont avoué plus tard qu'ils n'avaient alors qu'une seule idée, celle de nous obliger à renoncer à notre entreprise..., préférant la vie oisive et les coupables passe-temps des prisons départementales à une vie laborieuses".

Pour assurer l'avenir de l'œuvre, M<sup>gr</sup> de Mazenod avait autorisé son cher Fissiaux à fonder la Congrégation de Saint-Pierreès-liens, destinée à diriger cette entreprise particulièrement délicate. Plus tard, l'abbé Fissiaux installa une colonie agricole dans l'arrondissement d'Aix comme succursale de son pénitencier, car cette colonie, à la fois agricole et industrielle, assurait aux futurs ouvriers de la culture et de l'industrie, une formation professionnelle; si on ne peut la qualifier d'école technique au sens moderne du mot, du moins préparait-elle les jeunes délinquants à la pratique d'un métier pour favoriser leur redressement et leur donner plus tard un gagne-pain<sup>9</sup>.

En octobre 1841, l'évêque de Marseille fait appel aux religieuses de Saint-Joseph de Belley pour prendre soin du pénitencier des femmes. Le gouvernement fut tellement satisfait du bien accompli auprès des prisonniers que, déjà, on songea à remplacer les gardiens par des frères et par des prêtres<sup>10</sup>

Les Oblats suivront la trace de leur Fondateur dans ce ministère auprès des prisonniers. En plusieurs grandes villes comme en pays de mission, on requiert leur dévouement. En Australie, en Afrique, en Argentine, aux États-Unis, à Sri Lanka, au Canada, en Pologne, pour ne nommer que quelques pays, l'Oblat continue à réaliser dans l'œuvre des prisonniers son apostolique devise: "Il m'a envoyé évangéliser les pauvres."

En Pologne, que la guerre a si affreusement meurtrie, les Oblats avaient même la charge de la prison d'État où étaient détenus quelques centaines de forçats. Au Lesotho, un Oblat était chapelain de la prison de Loretto.

Il importe d'admirer hautement le zèle de l'apôtre du Sacré-Cœur au Canada, le père Victor Lelièvre, dont les chaudes paroles font verser des larmes de repentir aux nombreux prisonniers qu'il visite chaque année. Le jeune Oblat, non encore lancé dans l'arène du combat, brûle déjà du vif désir de suivre de près ses devanciers. Dans un but tout apostolique, on a vu des scolastiques faire la visite de la prison au premier de l'an. Cette visite, on la préparait longtemps à l'avance. On garde précieusement des cadeaux pour la circonstance; mais surtout, ce sont des paroles chaleureuses que l'on échange avec les détenus.

À Huntsville, Texas, il y a eu le "curé de la chaise électrique". On appelait ainsi le père Hugh Finnigan, o.m.i. Il conviendrait! aussi de le surnommer le pilote des ces pauvres malheureux vers le ciel. Sur cent-soixante-quinze condamnés, presque tous, lui doivent leur conversion. Les deux plus fameux bandits des années 1930 à 1940, lui devront d'être morts en véritable convertis: Ray Hamilton et Jos. Palmer nourriront à son endroit une reconnaissance éternelle pour tout le bien qu'il leur a fait<sup>11</sup>

Au Canada, le père Henry Roy, fondateur de la J.O.C. canadienne, a lancé une œuvre digne de notre admiration: "Le service d'Aide aux Prisonniers", organisé avec le concours d'ardents apôtres jocistes, dans les grandes villes du Canada. Ce service social de la J.O.C., qui a fait merveille et existe encore à Sherbrooke. Québec, s'occupait surtout des jeunes délinquants et des repris de justice de seize à trente ans, sans oublier les autres détenus. Le sort des ex-détenus était partout des plus pénibles. Aussi, le service d'Aide aux Prisonniers s'occupait-il de les suivre avant el

pendant leur procès, à la prison elle-même et partout à la sortie de la prison afin de les remettre sur la bonne voie. On s'occupera même de leur trouver un emploi selon leurs aptitudes chez les patrons qui consentent à collaborer avec la J.O.C., à leur réhabilitation. D'après le rapport cumulatif de l'année 1939-1940, l'Aide aux Prisonniers à Montréal a enregistré 244 libérations, 465 remises obtenues, 164 sentences et 1,094 suspensions de sentence. Et quel élan! Durant ce même laps de temps, la J.O.C. s'est occupé de 5,942 cas, a logé 11,237 sans foyer, servi 26,372 repas, trouvé de l'ouvrage à 159 d'entre eux, en a habillé 182, visité 8,866, enfin confié 943 en surveillance<sup>12</sup>.

En France, la prison de Fresne avait comme aumônier le père Henri Lauzère. Le père Joseph Sachot a raconté son aventure<sup>13</sup>.

Nous avons noté peu de documentation quant au travail des Frères, sauf un article du père Jean-Marie Larose dans les *Études Oblates*, où il affirme: "On peut dire que les œuvres oblates auprès des prisonniers ont été une exclusivité des frères dans les réformatoires<sup>14</sup>." Il note en outre: "À Durban, le Frère Manuel était chargé de visiter les prisonniers. Tous les dimanches, il se rendait à la prison et réunissait tous les prisonniers catholiques dans une chambre. Il récitait avec eux le chapelet, puis leur faisait une petite allocution. Il les préparait au devoir pascal et les instruisait pour la première communion<sup>15</sup>."

Plus près de nous, le frère Normand Martel, de Richelieu, de l'Association des Visiteurs Bénévoles aux Détenus (A.V.B.A.D.), commençait en mars 1973 une série de rencontres bi-mensuelles avec les détenus du pénitencier de Cowansville. Visites individuelles et aussi groupes de prières, accompagnement spirituel dans le cheminement vers la libération<sup>16</sup>.

## II. Opinions d'ex-aumôniers de détention.

Voilà ce que, grâce aux Archives Deschâtelets, à Ottawa, NOUS avons trouvé dans la littérature oblate concernant le ministère auprès des prisonniers. J'ai pu contacter quelques Oblats ayant fait du ministère comme aumôniers de détention en Abitibi et au Témiscamingue. Selon eux, en plus du travail ordinaire à la prison,

l'aumônier se doit de sensibiliser le public, souvent inconscient des causes de la délinquance. On s'en remet à d'autres, payés pour faire ce travail, et on ne se rend pas compte qu'on favorise, sans le savoir, les causes de la criminalité. La délinquance est souvent le fruit de notre société trop énervante, qui entretient la violence dans les médias de communication. Il faut plutôt s'en servir pour sensibiliser nos chrétiens. Le travail auprès des gardiens de détention a aussi son importance. Il faut les ouvrir à la dimension évangélique de leur travail. La visite ou le téléphone aux familles des incarcérés, des cueillettes de livres pour les détenus, la recherche de correspondants ou de gens pour les parrainer dans leur cheminement: autant d'idées suggérées par ces aumôniers du Québec.

Le père Ovila Gadouas fut aumônier du pénitencier à sécurité maximale de Milhaven, en Ontario, de 1973 à 1976, soit durant trois ans et demi. Pour lui, le ministère auprès des prisonniers ne consiste pas non plus à ne leur dire que la messe le dimanche; il doit être, aussi, le pasteur des gardiens et dénoncer les injustices. Il s'est retiré après trois ans et demi, ne pouvant pas, à titre d'employé du gouvernement, s'exprimer sur ces injustices. Après sa démission, il alla rencontrer le commissaire aux pénitenciers, M. Therrien, puis le Solliciteur Général du temps, l'honorable Francis Fox. Peu après, une enquête était faite dans tous les pénitenciers du Canada. Il se rendait ainsi plus utile en sensibilisant la population, à faire pression sur les députés pour qu'il y ait des choses qui changent au sein des pénitenciers.

## III. Place actuelle des Oblats.

Dans les nouvelles Constitutions et Règles adoptées au chapitre général de 1980 et qui seront approuvées par Rome d'ici à un an environ, un fait demeure: l'évangélisation des plus abandonnés est la fin principale de la Congrégation<sup>17</sup>. Or, les détenus et ex-détenus motivés à changer leur conduite font partie de cette catégorie. Ils sont souvent des pauvres et des marginaux.

Les Oblats, ayant acquis une renommée de spécialistes des missions difficiles, le secteur correctionnel, y inclus la sensibilisation de chrétiens en ce domaine, doit être à bon droit reconnu comme une mission difficile, propre aux Oblats.

La Règle 9 mentionne le ministère pour la justice comme étant une oeuvre éminemment oblate. Le numéro 9 des *Constitutions* dit également: "Ils entendent et font entendre la clameur des sans-voix." La Règle 69 demande aux Oblats de contribuer à rendre les valeurs évangéliques présentes et agissantes dans la société où ils vivent. Or, l'apostolat pour la justice fait partie intégrante de l'oeuvre d'évangélisation des chrétiens impliqués dans ce secteur correctionnel. Nous devons nous laisser interpeller par cette clameur qui traverse maintenant les murs de nos prisons et nous devons relire et écouter l'Évangile pour y entendre le message actuel de Jésus afin d'y donner suite. D'autant plus que, comme le disait notre Fondateur en 1826: "Le ministère de la réconciliation nous a été confié<sup>18</sup>."

Ce ministère de la réconciliation ne consiste pas uniquement dans le Sacrement du pardon. Il faut aider les personnes à se réconcilier entre elles, qu'elles soient victimes ou auteurs des crimes commis, à se réconcilier avec

elles-mêmes et avec Dieu par le Christ.

## Conclusion.

Entendu dans ce sens large de ministère pour la justice, la place des Oblats dans le secteur correctionnel ne doit pas être occupée uniquement par les aumôniers de détention: elle appartient à tout Oblat.

Des mécanismes doivent être mis en œuvre dans les Provinces pour sensibiliser les Oblats à ce ministère de la justice, aux réalités du monde carcéral et aux problèmes ressentis par les ex-détenus. Ceux-ci ont besoin d'être accueillis par la communauté chrétienne à leur sortie de prison.

Mentionnons à cet effet que le Conseil des Églises pour la Justice et la Criminologie, par son programme *Alternatives*, a mis sur pied une série de ressources pour la sensibilisation des chrétiens. Citons la session de "Criminalité, Foi et Engagement", le cours sur la Pastorale d'Accueil de l'ex-détenu, des soirées de partage thématique, une journée de ressourcement pour les animateurs de pastorale d'un diocèse, etc.

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### NOTES :

1 Jean LEFLON, Eugène de Mazenod Évêque de Marseille, Fondateur des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée, Paris, Librairie Plon, [1957], vol. 1, p. 299-300.

2 Ibidem, vol. 1, p. 285.

3 Ibidem, vol. 1, p. 304.

4 Cité par Achille REY, o.m.i., Histoire de Monseigneur Charles-Joseph Eugène de Mazenod, évêque de Marseille, Fondateur de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée, Rome, Maison générale, 1920, vol. 1, p. 158.

5 Ibidem, vol. 1, p. 158.

6 Jean LEFLON, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 446-447.

7 Constitutions et Règles de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de la Très Sainte et Immaculée Vierge Marie..., Rome, Maison générale, [1930].

s Cité par Jean LEFLON, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 106.

9 Ibidem, vol. 3, p. 537.

10 Lorenzo HAREL, o.m.i., L'Oblat, apôtre des prisonniers, dans La Bannière de Marie Immaculée, 49 (1941), p. 89.

11 James E. NOONAN, o.m.i., What the Public Never Hears, dans Mary Immaculate [San Antonio, Texas], 18 (1935), p. 199-201; Two Oblates dig in Texas, Ibidem, 41 (Jan.-Feb. 1959), p. 31.

12 Lorenzo, HAREL, o.m.i., loc. cit., p. 94.

13 Comme l'abbé de Mazenod, dans Petites Annales de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée, février-mars 1947, p. 18-19.

14 Les travaux des Frères, dans Études Oblates, 17 (1958), p. 129.

15 Ibidem.

16 "J'étais prisonnier et vous êtes venus me voir", dans Au Rythme de l'Église, mars 1976, p. 3-4.

17 Constitutions n° 5.

18 Constitutions..., p. 24.

# Engagement - promesse - fidélité

SUMMARY — In a world of rapid change, the themes of "engagement", "promise" and "fidelity" are particularly important. With this fact in mind, Fr. Goudreaux examines how these three themes are intimately connected and how our new *Constitutions* and Rules developed them for the Oblates.

Dans un monde en évolution et aux changements rapides, les thèmes d'engagement, de promesse et de fidélité prennent une importance particulière. Les réalités qu'ils expriment sont indispensables à l'avènement d'une société solide sur laquelle les générations futures pourront s'appuyer pour construire et aller de l'avant. Rien de surprenant que nos *Constitutions et Règles* en fassent des thèmes clés. Les quelques commentaires qui suivent visent à les approfondir en les situant dans le contexte moderne où ils sont incarnés.

Bien que ces trois thèmes: engagement, promesse et fidélité sont difficilement dissociables, nous les traiterons séparément tout en montrant qu'ils s'appellent les uns les autres.

## I. Engagement.

Toute personne qui s'engage fait un choix. En un sens, elle se limite et s'enrichit. Elle se limite car elle ne peut plus choisir entre les nombreuses autres possibilités. Elle se donne une orientation précise qui exclut par le fait même les autres. Ceci fait partie de la pauvreté. Jusque là, la personne demeurerait ouverte à des possibilités multiples et variées; elle pouvait, en un sens, en allant de l'une à l'autre, mener une vie de fantaisie. En choisissant, elle renonce à la polyvalence et son être se définit. Elle s'incarne dans le monde par un biais déterminé. En s'engageant, il lui faut donc accepter l'ascèse de ne pas être tout, de ne pas couvrir l'éventail des témoignages possibles, mais de développer toutes ses richesses dans une ligne donnée. Si elle s'est limitée, ce n'est pas pour s'appauvrir mais pour se donner la possibilité d'aller en profondeur et de porter un témoignage non ambigu sur les valeurs qui ont motivé son choix. Elle sera en mesure, par le fait même, de compléter le témoignage de ceux et celles qui ont fait d'autres options et, à son tour, de se laisser compléter par ceux-ci<sup>1</sup>.

S'engager dans la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée, c'est choisir de réaliser l'unité de sa vie en Jésus-Christ, de faire route avec lui dans la foi, l'espérance et l'amour<sup>2</sup>, de vivre en communion plus étroite avec lui<sup>3</sup>, de le connaître plus intimement, de le laisser vivre en soi-même et de s'identifier à lui; bref, de tout abandonner et de se mettre à sa suite<sup>4</sup>. Mais c'est aussi, à cause de Jésus-Christ et sous lui, s'engager dans l'œuvre missionnaire<sup>5</sup>, être au cœur du monde le levain des béatitudes<sup>6</sup> et de se consacrer principalement à l'évangélisation des pauvres<sup>7</sup>.

S'engager dans la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée, c'est accepter de vivre en communauté ce choix radical de Jésus et d'accomplir en communauté la mission que l'Église a confiée à cette même Congrégation<sup>8</sup>. Imitant "l'exemple de Jésus qui a été chaste et pauvre, et a racheté le monde par son obéissance", les Oblats "adoptent la voie des conseils évangéliques" et, par les vœux, s'unissent, dans l'amour, au Seigneur et à son peuple<sup>9</sup>.

S'engager dans la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée, c'est choisir *une personne précise* qui devient le tout de sa vie, *une mission précise* qui en est une d'évangélisation avec prédilection pour les pauvres, *un style de vie précis*, celui de la vie communautaire marquée par les conseils évangéliques.

Ce qui fait la beauté de l'engagement, c'est la liberté du choix. La personne se donne librement, par amour. "L'étape du noviciat se termine par cet acte libre et plein de foi qu'est l'engagement dans la Congrégation. Après avoir fait l'expérience de l'amour du Père en Jésus, le novice consacre sa vie à rendre visible cet amour; il confie sa fidélité à Celui dont il partage la croix et espère les promesses<sup>10</sup>." Si le novice peut ainsi se donner, c'est qu'il croit en Jésus. Il y a dans son engagement un élément de foi. Il veut cheminer et grandir avec Jésus, bâtir avec lui un projet. Il compte sur lui non seulement pour le présent mais pour ce qui est à venir et à construire. Son engagement est rempli d'espérance.

Pour cheminer et grandir avec Jésus, il faut que l'engagement dure dans les épreuves comme dans les joies, d'où la nécessité de la générosité. Comme le projet n'est pas réalisé mais bien à réaliser, il n'apparaît pas dans une lumière parfaite et ses contours ne sont pas nettement définis; il peut réserver des surprises. Mais l'engagement comporte la volonté de poursuivre le projet malgré les obstacles et les crises pratiquement inhérentes à toute entreprise valable. S'engager, c'est en un sens se lancer dans une entreprise qui dépasse ses prévisions. Mais, avec les conseils et le soutien d'un guide spirituel, l'engagé sera aidé "à discerner l'action de Dieu et à grandir à travers les expériences et difficultés de sa vie personnelle et de son ministère<sup>11</sup>".

L'engagement suppose une bonne maturité puisqu'il implique un choix lucide, un don de soi dans l'amour, une foi dans l'autre, etc. Bref, l'engagement suppose que la personne n'est plus le centre d'elle-même et qu'elle est prête à entrer dans les vues de celui avec qui elle veut cheminer et grandir. Appelés à suivre Jésus, "les Oblats demeureront, comme lui, à l'écoute du Père, pour se dépenser sans réserve à l'accomplissement de sa volonté de salut<sup>12</sup>". Leur travail exige un réel détachement de leur volonté propre et un sens profond de l'Église<sup>13</sup>.

Le contraire de l'engagement, il va de soi, c'est le désengagement provoqué par un amour de soi qui fait qu'on se réserve constamment et qu'on dispose toujours de soi-même. Le désengagé trouve en lui-même son centre de gravité, refuse de se compromettre parce qu'il est soucieux de répondre aux caprices des événements, jouir de l'instant, se réserver le droit d'être à chaque moment différent de ce qu'il était peu auparavant. Désireux d'être libre de tout faire, il n'a jamais rien commencé qui puisse l'engager plus d'un moment. Pour demeurer ouvert aux possibilités de la vie, il ne s'engage jamais dans celle-ci et manque par le fait même sa vie. S'engager, ce n'est pas se réserver ou conserver en quelque sorte la propriété de soi-même; c'est, au contraire, un don de soi. "Ils chercheront à devenir des hommes de Dieu, des missionnaires enracinés dans le Christ et fermement décidés à se donner totalement par l'oblation perpétuelle<sup>14</sup>". "Ils doivent [...] renoncer entièrement à eux-mêmes [...], vivre dans un état habituel d'abnégation [...], prêts à sacrifier tous leurs biens, leurs talents, leur repos, leur personne et leur vie pour l'amour de Jésus-Christ, le service de l'Église et la sanctification du prochain"]".

## II. Promesse.

La promesse, qui peut revêtir différentes formes, est l'expression publique de l'engagement. "Voici, dit la personne, ce que je veux faire de ma vie". Le noviciat, qui initie le candidat à la vie religieuse, est précisément "orienté vers un engagement public dans la Congrégation<sup>16</sup>". Dans la promesse, l'heure de la difficulté est prévue, bien qu'elle ne soit pas connue quant au mode, au temps et aux circonstances qui la marqueront. Mais, par la promesse, la personne exprime sa volonté de trouver aux heures de difficultés une solution qui demeure dans la ligne de son engagement. Et, comme l'engagement s'est fait vis-à-vis une personne avec laquelle sera réalisé un projet, la promesse exprime la création d'un lien avec cette personne, une alliance, une sorte de contrat social. La solution à rechercher, aux moments des difficultés, doit donc être respectueuse de la personne envers laquelle on s'est engagé. Nier les liens existants ou en faire abstraction dès que la situation change ou ne rencontre pas nos prévisions, c'est agir de manière irresponsable. L'engagement, en effet, ne se définit pas d'abord par un projet mais plus fondamentalement par la responsabilité assumée dans l'amour vis-à-vis une personne. Laisser tomber celle-ci sous prétexte que le projet n'est plus selon nos prévisions, c'est sacrifier la personne et rompre les liens sur lesquels elle pouvait compter. "Le but de la formation spirituelle est de *rendre adulte dans la foi celui qui a opté personnellement pour le Christ*<sup>17</sup>". Les Oblats "accepteront avec foi, par amour du Seigneur crucifié, les souffrances personnelles, les épreuves des travaux apostoliques et les contraintes de la vie communautaire<sup>18</sup>".

## III. Fidélité.

Le respect de l'engagement exprimé par la promesse relève de la fidélité. Celle-ci, aujourd'hui, fait l'objet de nouvelles objections. On peut parler à son sujet d'une crise, c'est-à-dire d'une période où elle est remise en question, jugée, évaluée, reconsidérée à la lumière de nouvelles données.

Il est certain que l'évolution rapide et constante de la société a marqué la psychologie d'un grand nombre et a fait naître des doutes sur la possibilité d'un engagement à vie. Comme tout semble temporaire et relatif, s'engager pour toujours semble se compromettre sur l'imprévisible.

Cette impression de temporaire et de relatif en tout est d'autant plus forte que les institutions les plus fondamentales et les plus sacrées (la famille, la vie religieuse, le sacerdoce, l'Église, etc.)

sont elles-mêmes remises en question et que certains groupes sociaux qui, par leur comportement même, transmettaient des valeurs et des normes, ont été dissouts. La fidélité est donc l'objet de nombreuses objections.

L'homme moderne, dit-on, a le culte des sincérités successives. Il doit apprendre à s'adapter à tout moment, à se muer comme le serpent, à se métamorphoser, à réagir rapidement aux événements. Dans cette optique, la fidélité apparaît à certains comme le cimetière de la lucidité et de la spontanéité. Elle semble impliquer un mandat de ne rien changer, de garder le "statu quo", de se méfier du nouveau, de craindre le risque et les provocations de la vie. Pour eux, la fidélité canonise pour ainsi dire, un moment de la vie et en fait le critère à partir duquel tout le reste sera jugé. Ce moment devenant une sorte d'absolu, la personne est portée à s'enfermer en lui et entretenir à son égard une sorte de dévotion.

Enfin, dans un monde où l'on met en relief l'avenir, le progrès, l'expérience du changement, la nécessité de la malléabilité, l'évolution, la créativité, l'ouverture constante à de nouvelles possibilités, la fidélité semble la complice de la répétition, du formalisme et du fixisme. Elle gêne l'inédit des situations et est ressentie par plusieurs comme une valeur usée, une atteinte à la sincérité moderne, une invitation à la répétition sécurisante de ce qui devait être à l'origine un élan mais qui, dans la durée, est devenu simple obligation.

Ces affirmations frisent la caricature et mettent en relief ce que pourrait devenir une fidélité mal comprise. Elles nous servent de mise en garde et permettent d'insister sur les éléments les plus susceptibles de faire dévier la personne d'une réelle fidélité.

Si le monde en évolution exige une constante adaptation et, par le fait même, des changements ou des ajustements dans nos comportements, il ne faut pas que ceux-ci soient causés par le désir maladif de goûter

successivement à tout, par l'incapacité de nous fixer quelque part ou par la peur de nous compromettre dans une direction donnée. La fidélité qui reposerait sur un arrêt de la vie, la crainte du risque ou le désir de se soumettre à un cadre prédéterminé et rigide ne trahirait que la peur de vivre et signifierait inertie. Si elle n'était que le prolongement d'un mouvement dû à l'élan initial et non la réactualisation constante de l'esprit qui est à l'origine de cet élan, elle ne serait qu'une caricature de la fidélité. La fidélité se manifeste dans la vie et non dans la contemplation passive d'un idéal figé dans des structures dépassées. "Les fondateurs, écrit le père Tillard, ont créé un type d'existence évangélique répondant à une perception qu'ils ont eue dans l'Esprit-Saint, à partir du terreau concret où se situe leur expérience. Lorsque les circonstances et les situations changent, mais que l'inspiration originelle est toujours valable, c'est ce que doit continuer de faire l'Institut s'il ne veut pas se réduire à un organe témoin et s'il veut demeurer vivant. Il lui faut prévoir dans la législation un moyen de se reformuler sans cesse son idéal, son projet de vie et son service évangélique en fonction de l'aujourd'hui"<sup>19</sup>.

Dans cette optique, la fidélité n'exclut pas les initiatives et les expériences. Au contraire, et spécialement en temps de crise, elle les appelle. Pour transmettre la vie oblate, par exemple, aux générations futures dans toute sa richesse, son élan et sa puissance d'adaptation, il faut chercher ses formes les plus viables, c'est-à-dire celles qui, d'une part, favoriseront le plus parfaitement possible l'épanouissement des valeurs propres à cette vie et, d'autre part, seront les mieux adaptées à la mentalité des gens d'aujourd'hui. L'Oblat, "s'inspirant de l'exemple de Marie", vivra "son engagement envers Jésus Christ *dans une fidélité toujours inventive*" et se mettra totalement au service de l'Église et du Royaume<sup>20</sup>. La formation "implique une conversion constante à l'Évangile et nous tient *toujours prêts à apprendre et à modifier nos attitudes* pour répondre aux exigences nouvelles"<sup>21</sup>. "Les Oblats, instruments du Verbe, *doivent demeurer souples et ouverts*; ils doivent apprendre à faire face à des besoins nouveaux et à chercher des solutions aux questions nouvelles. Ils le feront dans un constant discernement de l'action de l'Esprit *qui renouvelle la face de la terre*"<sup>22</sup>. "S'inspirant des Constitutions et Règles, les supérieurs veilleront à ce que *les structures demeurent assez souples pour évoluer au rythme de notre expérience vécue*"<sup>23</sup>. Le Supérieur Général et son Conseil "veilleront avant tout à ce que la Congrégation *reste fidèle à l'élan apostolique* que lui a légué le Fondateur sous l'inspiration de l'Esprit". Ils "*favoriseront le partage des expériences et de l'information* dans l'ensemble de l'Institut"<sup>24</sup>.

À la base de bien des objections contre la fidélité, il y a cette conviction que le développement de l'histoire humaine est à la merci du changement et qu'il ne peut y avoir de valeurs qui soient permanentes et qui transcendent les frontières du temps. Mais, à scruter cette même histoire humaine d'un peu plus près, on constate que sous des formes nouvelles et sans cesse en voie de transformation, ce sont les valeurs les plus fondamentales qui demeurent et sont véhiculées. Elles sont si inhérentes à la nature humaine qu'elles demeureront aussi longtemps que celle-ci subsistera. "Encore aujourd'hui, écrit Jean Daniélou, nous éprouvons dans le contact avec Mozart ou avec Greco, que nous atteignons les sommets de qualité humaine, qui n'ont rien à voir avec la différence des moyens dont Mozart ou le Greco disposaient par rapport aux musiciens ou aux peintres contemporains. Ce serait une perte irréversible pour l'intelligence, une perte irréversible pour la culture, que de penser que le passé a cessé d'avoir pour nous une signification et une valeur et qu'il n'y a que le moderne qui puisse avoir un sens pour nous"<sup>25</sup>. Il n'est pas question de désirer avec nostalgie un style de vie dépassé ni de viser à un savant dosage entre une ouverture au monde et une fidélité au passé qui serait, au fond, une trahison partielle de l'un et de l'autre. Ce qui est exigé, c'est la fidélité dans un changement qui suppose trois choses: continuité avec le passé, orientation vers l'avenir et nouveauté. Mon engagement d'aujourd'hui, s'il veut être historique et authentique, doit être solidaire et du passé et du futur. Du passé, car il dépend de nous que ce qui fut autrefois produise aujourd'hui tous ces fruits; du futur, car ce que nous faisons en ce moment décide du monde de demain. Comprise de cette façon, la fidélité est respectueuse du passé sans pour autant le canoniser. Elle ne dicte pas un conformisme passif ou la reproduction matérielle d'un modèle passé mais elle invite la personne à chercher d'où elle vient, quelles sont ses racines, quelles sont les valeurs sur lesquelles elle peut s'appuyer pour construire le présent et préparer l'avenir. La fidélité l'invite à redonner vie au passé dans ce qu'il a de plus valable, à assurer son triomphe sur la déchéance du temps, à fournir aux initiatives les racines nécessaires à la vie. La fidélité, sans canoniser le passé ni le renier, en tient compte pour le dépasser. On peut comprendre, à la lumière de ceci, le rôle qui lui est attribué dans nos Constitutions et Règles. "La fidélité à notre vocation oblate doit *nous guider* dans nos entreprises missionnaires et dans l'acceptation des tâches pastorales. Ce même souci de fidélité *guidera chaque Province dans l'établissement de ses priorités* et dans le choix des ministères à remplir sur son territoire. Enfin, *il servira de critère dans l'évaluation périodique* de nos engagements apostoliques"<sup>26</sup>.

La fidélité, pour parler très positivement, est commandée par l'amour lui-même. C'est au nom de l'amour du Christ et des hommes de notre temps qu'il faut aller jusqu'au bout et donner à nos capacités leur développement maximal. La fidélité nous invite à nous perdre, non par un processus d'aliénation, mais par un don de nous-même dicté par l'amour. La fidélité qui deviendrait source d'aigreur, qui serait subie plutôt qu'assumée, qui déshumaniserait au lieu d'épanouir, ne serait ni agréable à Dieu ni utile aux personnes qui doivent lutter<sup>27</sup>, une invitation à la constance et une imitation du Christ qui aime les siens jusqu'à la fin<sup>28</sup>. La fidélité colore l'ensemble de la vie; aucun domaine lui échappe; sa marque est en toute décision et en toute activité. Elle est, en un sens, un style d'existence. Celui qui la rend possible, c'est le Dieu fidèle qui ne saurait être autrement sans se renier lui-même<sup>29</sup>, celui par qui nous avons été appelés à la communion de son Fils<sup>30</sup>, celui qui se dit Dieu de tendresse et de pitié, lent à la colère, riche en grâce et en fidélité<sup>31</sup>.

NOTES :

1 La difficulté d'une vocation ne vient pas seulement des exigences de la vocation elle-même mais de tout ce qu'il y a de bon dans les autres et que la personne, pour être fidèle à la sienne, doit accepter d'abandonner.

2 Constitutions et Règles de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée. Chapitre général de 1980 [Rome, Maison générale 1981]. Constitutions, n°30.

3 Ibidem, Constitutions, n° 20.

4 Constitutions, n° 2.

5 Règles, n° 1.

6 Constitutions, n° 11.

7 Constitutions, n° 1.

8 Constitutions, n° 11.

9 Constitutions, n° 12.

10 Constitutions, n° 56.

11 Règles, n° 26.

12 Constitutions, n° 24.

13 Constitutions, n° 25.

14 Constitutions, n° 60.

15 Préface des Constitutions et Règles.

16 Constitutions, n° 54.

17 Règles, n° 60.

18 Constitutions, n° 33.

19 Jean-Marie-R. TILLARD, o.p., Repenser le gouvernement des instituts, dans *Vie consacrée*, 42 (1970), p. 207.

20 Constitutions, n° 45.

21 Constitutions, n° 46.

22 Constitutions, n° 63.

23 Constitutions, n° 66.

24 Constitutions, n° 99.

25 *La culture trahie par les siens*, Paris, Épi, [1972], p. 65.

26 Règles, n° 4.

27 Règles, n° 13.

28 Constitutions, n° 28.

29 2 Tm 2, 13.

30 1 Cor. 1, 9.

31 Ex. 34, 6.