

The Oblates

in the West of Canada and the Far North

Rev. Fr. Roger Guéguen



Missionaries were sent

Bishop Joseph-Norbert Provencher will be our guide across the vast expanse of the Oblates' apostolate. A French Canadian cleric, he himself did not belong to the Oblates. He was sent as a missionary to Red River in 1818, and in 1822 he was consecrated bishop of Juliopolis (in partibus infidelium), acting as assistant to the bishop of Quebec, and then was put in charge of the missionary vicariate of the Northwest—the first to hold that position. This region was known as the Hudson Bay and Northwest Territories at the time when the Holy See separated that huge stretch of country from the immense diocese of Quebec on April 16, 1844. The future diocese of St. Boniface extended between the 49th parallel, the Rockies, the Arctic Sea, and Hudson Bay, and to the east, the divide that separates the waterways flowing

into Hudson Bay and James Bay from those that flow into Lake Superior.

As Bishop Alexandre Taché sagaciously points out in his "Vingt années de missions dans le Nord-Ouest de l'Amérique" (Twenty Years of Missions to Northwestern America): "One of the venerable bishop's first concerns was to obtain the help of a religious order to ensure there were enough missionaries for the many savage tribes scattered within the boundaries of his jurisdiction."

And not without reason. During this period, 12 secular priests from Quebec had successively gone to this region : Sévère Dumoulin (1818-1823), Destroismaisons (1820-1827), Jean Harper (1822-1832), Boucher (1827-1833), Belcourt (1831-1859), Poiré (1832-1839), Thibault, Demers (1837-1838), Mayrand (1838-1845), Darveau (1841-drowned in 1844), L. Laflèche (1844-1856), and lastly Bourassa (1844-1856). These missionaries did not lack zeal, but there were already too few of them, and their numbers would fall even more since the region was removed from the jurisdiction of the bishop of Quebec. Bishop Provencher, seconded by the indefatigable Bishop Bourget, asked the Oblates for help. The Oblates' General Council received the bishops' request favourably (December 16, 1844), and two missionaries were sent to Bishop Provencher in the spring of 1845: Father Aubert and a subdeacon whose name was to go down in the history of these regions, Alexandre Taché.

The two missionaries left the convent of Longueuil on June 24, 1845, the feast of St. John the Baptist, patron of French Canadians. The next day, in a birch bark canoe manned by six men, they set forth from Lachine, near Montreal. Their trip would mean 1,800 miles on rivers and lakes and 62 days total travel time, interrupted by 144 portages and enlivened by running 50 rapids. Moreover, the travellers were accompanied by two Grey Nuns from Montreal going to join their sisters posted at Red River the previous year. They



arrived safely at St. Boniface on August 25, the feast of St. Louis, king of France. The two Oblates would spend their first winter there, ministering to the Métis and learning the Indians' languages.

Brother Taché had had his 22nd birthday on the trip, and on September 1, Bishop Provencher ordained him a deacon. On October 12th of the same year, he ordained the young man a priest. The next morning, Father Taché took his vows before Father Aubert before celebrating his first Mass, the first Oblate to take his vows in this region. He was also a great nephew of the man who discovered Red River and the surrounding country (I mean, of course, Sieur Varennes de La Vérandrye, related through his mother and one of his nieces to the La Broquerie family, who were maternal ancestors of Father Taché).

Oblate missions

The first missions that Father Aubert carried out among the *Saulteaux* Indians in the St. Boniface region met with failure, since the local natives refused to hear the message of the Gospels.

Because of this failure, coupled with the extreme difficulties of apostolate in such vast and deserted lands, very unfavourable reports and descriptions of the situation came to the ears of Bishop Mazenod, founder of the order, and the Superior was on the verge of recalling the Oblates from this vast missionary field altogether. What saved the missions of Western Canada was Father Taché's appointment as coadjutor to Bishop Provencher in 1850.

Among the Montagnais and the Cree

While Father Aubert worked on the missions to the *Saulteaux*, Father Taché and the secular priest Louis-François Lafèche (future bishop of Trois-Rivières), founded a mission among the Montagnais and the Cree some 1,500 kilometres to the west, which they named *Île-à-la-Crosse* (1846). From there, Father Taché opened the Lake Caribou mission in 1847, over 500 kilometres to the north, and then, in the same year, the mission of the Nativity at Fort Chipewyan, 600 kilometres west.

It would be too long to tell how all the missions in these regions were founded, one by one. However, by the end of the 1860s, the Oblates had travelled all the way up to the Arctic Circle, to the limits of Eskimo territory.

In the west

To the south, the huge territory of the Peace River valley, Lesser Slave Lake, and the north branch of Saskatchewan River was partially covered by the Oblate missionaries. The central mission of this region was established at Lac Ste. Anne by secular priests in 1843, and in 1852 and 1853 Fathers Albert Lacombe and René Rémas of the Oblates joined the mission. They and the Oblates who came to join them in following years served outposts of Whites, Indians and Métis along the Saskatchewan, Athabaska, and Peace rivers. Like the missionaries at Red River, they regularly joined the buffalo hunters on their trips to the great prairies.

Fruits of their early labours

The missionaries scattered across this immense region were forced to suffer distances, isolation, cold and often meagre means of subsistence. Wherever they went, the Oblates studied and practiced Indian tongues, even publishing pious works in these languages, and looked after Indians, Whites and Métis. The Grey Sisters of Montreal also provided invaluable assistance.

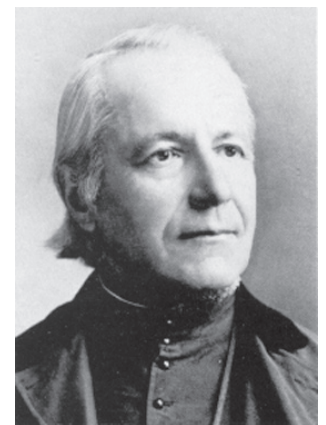
"The most notable fact of this missionary epic," wrote Father Joseph-Etienne Champagne in his book *"Les missions catholiques dans l'Ouest Canadien"* (Catholic Missions in the Western Canada) "was not the number of conversions, but how, in fewer than 15 years, the Oblates occupied every strategic point of a country as big as a continent. And this marvel of apostolate was carried out by a mere handful of missionaries, whose means were primitive and whose resources were extremely limited."

Father Donat Levasseur, in his book *"Histoire des Missionnaires Oblates de Marie Immaculée"* (History of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate) estimated the number of Catholics of the Vicariate of St. Boniface in the 1860s at around 20,000, out of an overall population of around 50,000 Indians, 15,000 Métis (almost all Catholics), 4,000 Eskimos and 4,000 Whites.

In conclusion, let us mention that Father Taché, who, in 1850, was appointed coadjutor bishop to Bishop Provencher at the age of 27, became the residential bishop of St. Boniface three years later. In 1857, he himself received a legendary coadjutor in the person of Father Vital Grandin.



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