

The Oblates

The Oblates of Mary Immaculate's expansion over the second half of the nineteenth century

In Eastern Canada (1861-1898): The Oblates were zealously working in three fields: the Indian missions, regions newly opened to pioneers and colonists, and lastly, the towns and villages of south-eastern Canada.

Rev. Fr. Roger Guéguen

The Indian missions

A primary observation about this first mission field is the incredible spread of the Oblate missions to the Far North: first to Betsiamites on the north shore of the Saint Lawrence in 1862, then Fort Chimo on Ungava Bay, in the heart of Inuit territory, in 1872. Among the Oblates who worked at these missions are famous missionaries such as Louis Babel, Charles Arnaud and Zacharie Lacasse.

The second major region of Indian missions was in Timiskaming, to the west of Quebec, near the Abitibi River, and all along Ontario up to James Bay. Ville-Marie was an important mission in this area, founded in 1889. More famous names are linked to this region: François-Xavier Fafard, known as Sapier, Joseph Guinard and the Breton Jean-Marie Nédélec, a man who completed the 13,000-kilometre canoe trip to the James Bay mission 21 times (this mission was part of the Timiskaming jurisdiction).

The third major region of the Oblate-ministered Indian missions was known as the Saint Maurice Missions. The Breton priest Jean-Pierre Guéguen, the appointed missionary to the region, ministered to the region from 1867 to 1899, making a 2,700-kilometre canoe trip every year, through rivers and lakes, interrupted by innumerable rapids and portages, starting from either Maniwaki or Timiskaming. On the trip he would visit seven main posts and many secondary intermediate posts.

Throughout all these missions, the missionaries learned the Native languages of the peoples to whom they ministered—the Montagnais, Al-

gonquin, Iroquois and Cree tongues; they wrote or reprinted prayer books, hymnals and catechisms in these languages. They also built chapels, whenever it was possible.

Among the settlers:

Maniwaki, Timiskaming, Mattawa

Ministering to the pioneer regions, also known as settler regions, was the second major field of activities in Canada.

The first region was Gatineau, where the Brothers in Maniwaki contributed significantly to settlement by developing large model farms, and building a sawmill and a flourmill.

In the second region, Timiskaming, the famous Brother Joseph Moffet began experimenting with topsoil quality. He was later called the "father of Timiskaming" because of his genius for organization.

The third region was the area surrounding Mattawa, located in Ontario, west of Timiskaming. The Oblates took up residence there in 1869. Besides officiating at the new parish, they visited the widely distributed population along the Ottawa and Mattawa Rivers and around Lake Nipissing. They ministered to settlers, Indians, men employed in builder's yards, and railroad workers.

Apostolate in the cities

The third sector of the Oblates' activities in Canada included various cities, such as Montreal, Quebec City, Ottawa, Hull, and Lowell (now in the United States). In Montreal, St-Pierre-Apôtre remained the main house of the region.



Bishop Adélarde Langevin

There the Oblates had charge of a church attended by over 8000 faithful. They preached in all the parishes of the Montreal diocese successively, as well as in many other parishes in dioceses throughout the country and even in the United States.

The Saint-Sauveur convent in Quebec City provided priests from 1853 on for a church that became a parish in 1867. Father Flavien Durocher played an important role in this area.

As for Ottawa, the Bytown College, a bilingual institution founded in 1848 by Bishop Guigues, must be mentioned. It was declared a university by the Canadian government in 1866, and a Catholic university in 1889 by a decree of Leo XIII.

For the record, the parish of Notre-Dame-de-Grâces in Hull, Quebec, must be mentioned in connection with Father Louis Reboul. As for Lowell, south of Plattsburgh in the United States, a Franco-American centre was founded there for work among some 500,000 French-Canadians distributed over the eastern states, and the Catholic Irish.

The first centre was located at St. Laurent Mission, south of Lake Manitoba. It was a great success; Bishop Adélarde Langevin declared in 1898: "This part of the vicariate progressed in giant steps."

The second centre was opened in 1867 at Fort Alexander, located at the mouth of Lake Winnipeg—an immense mission territory that stretched from Lake Winnipeg, to Nelson River, to Hudson Bay.

The third centre was formerly known as Qu'Appelle, now Lebret. Its location was chosen by Bishop Taché himself and entrusted to Father Joseph Ritchot. Soon the mission became the centre of five smaller posts. Moreover, five other missions with resident priests were successively opened around Qu'Appelle.

Bishop Langevin, mentioned above, was thus able to write at the end of his report to the General Chapter in 1898: "Our faithless savages, whose hardheartedness has become a byword all over the Northwest, are now willing to listen to the Word of truth."

At St. Boniface itself, the Oblates provided priests for the parish of St. Mary, in the new city of Winnipeg, and the parish of St. Charles, around 16 kilometres from St. Boniface. On September 22, 1871, the diocese of St. Boniface became an archdiocese and a metropolis, whose suffragans were the diocese of St. Albert, created that same day, and the apostolic vicariates of Athabaska-Mackenzie and British Columbia. Bishop Taché was made an archbishop at the same time. On a side note, a council took place at St. Boniface from July 16th to 24th in 1889, with the unique characteristic of being made up solely of Oblate bishops, with Archbishop Taché presiding: Vital Grandin, bishop of St. Albert; Henri Faraud, apostolic vicar of Athabaska-Mackenzie; Isidore Clut, his auxiliary bishop; Paul Durieu, coadjutor of Bishop Louis D'Hermobez of the apostolic vicariate of British Columbia, represented by Father Célestin Augier.

In the next issue, we will finish our historical investigations with the development of the various vicariates in the northwest and the west of Canada over the same period.



In Winnipeg, in 1880, construction began on a new St. Mary's church, which later became St. Mary's Cathedral. It was blessed in September 1881 and solemnly consecrated by the Archbishop of Montreal on September 25, 1887. Land was also acquired for St. Mary's Cemetery in the Fort Rouge area of the city.

In the West and North of Canada (1861-1898)

The vicariate of St. Boniface

This vicariate had large areas lopped off twice: first in 1864, when the vicariate of the Athabaska-Mackenzie missions was established in the Far North, and again in 1868, when the St. Albert missions were established. The vicariate of St. Boniface evangelized three different groups: the Sauteux, Cree, Assiniboines and Sioux; Whites; and Métis, usually mixed with the previous two groups. Bishop Alexandre Taché led this apostolate.