

# The Oblates

The Oblates of Mary Immaculate spread throughout the West and North of Canada in the second half of the 19th century.

Rev. Fr. Roger Guéguen

## The vicariate of Athabaska-Mackenzie

The Oblate missionaries in this vicariate were both isolated and far from St. Boniface. Aware of the importance of their missions, however, they soon began to ask for a bishop who would remain in their region. Father Grollier was the first to make such a request, and Bishop Taché promptly saw to its fulfilment. In this way a new apostolic vicariate composed of the districts of Mackenzie and Athabaska was established on May 13, 1862 and entrusted to Bishop Henri Faraud. Two years later, November 30, 1864, this apostolic vicariate became a religious vicariate separate from that of St. Boniface. Bishop Vital Grandin, the coadjutor of St. Boniface, was in charge of the vicariate until another bishop could be appointed to it, which was only in the summer of 1865.

## The Inuit, Alaska and the Yukon

Three apostolic missions of the Oblates were of especial significance:

1. The first was the courageous attempt to evangelize the Inuit around the Arctic Ocean, but which has never reached tangible success.

2. The second mission was to Alaska, where the seed did not take root immediately either.

3. The third important operation was the founding of a mission in the Yukon, as the Whites poured in seeking Klondike gold. If only men were as enthusiastic for holiness as for yellow metal...

The era of pioneers was not over in this apostolic vicariate. Bishop Grouard, Bishop Faraud's successor, described the missionaries' lives in 1898 in this way, "Both the fathers and the brothers are obliged to carry out work of all kinds. Teaching our savages, and studying their languages for this purpose, preparing books that must be printed and bound, hearing confessions, visiting the sick, who are sometimes at a considerable distance, both in winter and summer, teaching school wherever it is possible--such is the task of Northern missionaries, like missionaries everywhere else; but our missionaries also have to carry out a thousand

other tasks in order to obtain their scanty food or to protect themselves from the cold. They help the brothers with fishing, building, logging, and gardening, wherever the ground can be cultivated with some hope of success. In other words, the concerns of material existence, the struggle for life take up a great deal of our time, and please notice that this work is not necessary for the sake of a certain ease or in order to live somewhat comfortably, but really so that we do not die of cold and hunger. No one is dispensed from work if he wants to live in our missions." (Missions, 36 (1898), pages 180-181)

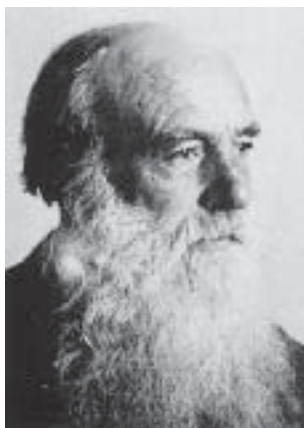
Besides carrying out the material work required for the maintenance of the missions and the life of their personnel, the brothers had to virtually become captains, navigators, and mechanics for the steamboats they had built themselves to deliver supplies to the missions. Bishop Grouard, in order to avoid the exorbitant cost of having supplies delivered by the Hudson's Bay Company, had decided to furnish his vicariate with two boats. One, christened the St. Joseph, traveled the Athabaska river and the lake, beginning in 1893. The other one, christened St. Alphonse, began its work on the Athabaska river and the Mackenzie river in 1895. The heroic collaboration of the Grey Nuns of Montreal with the Oblates must be pointed out as well, especially thanks to their presence in the schools and orphanages, and by their charitable visits to homes.

## The vicariate of St. Albert and Saskatchewan

In 1868, four years after the vicariate of Athabaska-Mackenzie was established, another religious vicariate, that of St. Albert, was separated from St. Boniface and put into the care of Bishop Vital Grandin. Many missions were contained in this vicariate, including that of Portage La Loche and St. Pierre on Lake Caribou, and, in the north-west of the vicariate, Cumberland House and Peli-



Mgr Henri Faraud



Mgr Emile Grouard

can Lake. Many Oblates worked in these missions. One of them was to become famous later on, Father Ovide Charlebois, who was nicknamed "The Hermit of Cumberland". The southern part of the vicariate of St. Albert, which included more or less the valley of the Saskatchewan River, developed quickly. In the newly founded missions, the Oblates ministered to the prairie Crees, who had not had many missionaries before 1861, the Métis and the Whites. In southern Alberta, other missionaries began work among the Blackfoot nation. The first mission to open there was Our Lady of Peace (Calgary), in 1873. Father Albert Lacombe played a major part in evangelizing the Blackfeet by gaining the confidence of the tribe's chief, Crowfoot, and obtaining from the Canadian government help to establish an industrial school for them, opened at Dunbow in 1884. He was its first director. The missionaries in southern Alberta also ministered to the Assiniboine Indians and the Whites, who began moving to this area in the 1880's. In order to understand the missionary activities in the Saskatchewan valley and in the prairies, the profound change that took place in this area, beginning in the 1880's, must be understood.

In 1870, many Manitoba Métis, uprooted by the pioneers, began moving west. The countless herds of buffalo, the main resource and food supply of the Indians and the Métis that covered the prairies in summer began to disappear never to return. In 1883, the railway began to bring many pioneers and Whites of all nationalities, who needed priests and churches. The Indians lost their lands and reassembled on reserves; treaties with the government gave them a number of privileges in compensation. In 1879, Father Leduc declared, "These events are extremely important for us, and the vicariate will have to change its structure completely in a few years." (Missions, 17 (1879), p. 435.) The Métis and the Indians, whose way of life had been shattered, suffered from extreme poverty. Difficulties in gaining respect for their rights caused them to resent the government and even the Whites. Their resentment eventually culminated in the Métis rising of 1885, supported by the Indians and led by Louis Riel, during which two missionaries, Father Léon Fafard and Father Felix Marchand were killed, victims of their own devotion to their work. Other missionaries were mistreated, and seven churches and missions were either completely destroyed or severely dam-

aged. Father Lacombe successfully kept the Blackfoot tribes in order; Bishop Grandin and Father Joseph Lestanc soothed the Métis and the Indians in the St. Albert district at the beginning of the rising. Other missionaries were less successful. These missionaries were opposed to a rising that was doomed to failure. However, when defeat ensued, they did not fear to defend the vanquished before the general-in-chief. Bishops Taché and Grandin used every possible means to obtain an amnesty for political prisoners. The graces given to a number of the prisoners, the conversion of two Indian chiefs and the Christian deaths of the prisoners condemned to death, including Louis Riel, rewarded their efforts.

The missionaries, both to the west and the north, usually established missions near the Hudson's Bay Company trading posts when the area was not yet developed, since the nomad Indians usually came to the trading posts a few times every year. When the Indians came, they would hold mission exercises, usually consisting of teaching the Faith with the Catechism and the Sacraments. During the rest of the year, they would minister to the people near the mission, visiting Indian camps, and answering sick calls, even when long distances were involved. In their ministry, they used the Indians' language, question-and-answer catechism, picture catechisms that illustrated the mysteries of the Faith: the story of the Redemption, dogma, morals, the Sacraments. Among picture catechisms, the one published by Father Lacombe was popular. Holy cards, hymns and prayer books in the Indian languages were also commonly used. The missionaries considered schools to be extremely important. Not only did they provide an indispensable formation in Christian life, but they provided a necessary general education. In major centres, they opened boarding schools, where the nuns provided precious and necessary assistance. The Oblates were always near their flocks and devoted to their interests, and so they gave advice and help according to their means. The Oblates supported the industrial schools opened by the Canadian government as a means of help to Indians who would inevitably mix with the Whites. The schools that they directed were also very useful for the Christian formation of the Indians. The Oblates often became peacemakers between tribes and negotiators between the Indians and the Whites to make the best of the inevitable invasion of Indian territory



**Mgr Vital Grandin**

by the Whites. Among their remarkable peace negotiations, the following stand out. "In January, 1861, Father Lacombe put an end to the conflict between the Cree and the Blackfeet; Father Jean-Marie Caer did the same in 1863; Father André worked as an agent of the American government to negotiate peace between the Sioux and the state from 1863-1865, and was eventually shamefully betrayed by the military authorities. Bishop Taché left the Vatican Council in 1870 at the government's request, to establish peace, and again in 1885, to be betrayed as well by the promises of the authorities. Father Lacombe prevented the shedding of blood in 1883 over the construction of the railway and, in 1885, successfully kept the Indians on the government's side." (Gaston Carrière, O.M.I., *La réponse des Oblats de l'Ouest canadien à la perception de la « mission »* chez Mgr de Mazenod, manuscript, p. 15.)



**Mgr Louis d'Herbomez**

### **The vicariate of British Columbia**

The Oblates had been working in Oregon since 1847, and in 1858 they changed their centre of activity to the diocese of Bishop Modeste Demers. On Vancouver Island, the Oblates had already been ministering to the Whites in Esquimalt and in Victoria and the local Indians. On January 7, 1864, a school called St. Louis was established in Victoria. A mission near Fort Rupert was opened in 1863, later to be transferred to Habledown Island. Even the islands in the Queen Charlotte archipelago were visited. In continental B.C., the evangelization continued. Two missions were founded, one in 1859 on Lake Okanagan, and the other in the following year at New Westminster. Moreover, several missionary expeditions were carried out to the regions of Fort Hope and Fort Yale, on the lower Fraser. In 1861, they doubled their activities. Two chapels were built at New Westminster, one for the Indians, the other for the Whites; another was built for the Indians at Fort Hope. The St. Mary's mission was inaugurated. A long expedition was organized to minister to the Whites and Indians in the Mount Cariboo gold mine area. Roughly 12,000 Indians were visited and instructed by the missionaries during 1861. On December 20, 1863, an important event marked the development of these missions. The Holy See declared continental British Columbia and the Queen Charlotte archipelago an apostolic vicariate and entrusted it to the Oblates, who became thus much freer in their organization. Father Louis D'Herbomez, the vicar of the missions, was

appointed apostolic vicar and established his residence in New Westminster and chose St. Charles' church as the seat of his vicariate. In 1865, he founded a school under the patronage of Saint Louis there, and, the following year, he transferred the Oblates who had been working at the school in Victoria there. Later, in 1893, Bishop Durieu opened a minor seminary that existed until 1909. The New Westminster missionaries developed an active ministry not only among the white population, which was growing rapidly, but also among the many Indians in the area.

Two missions founded in the north of the vicariate should be pointed out, namely Saint Joseph's (1867) on Williams Lake, founded for the Whites and Indians in the Caribou mines area, and 500 kilometres to the north, the mission of Our Lady of Good Hope, on Lake Stuart, for the two to three thousand Indians scattered over the huge region. In the south-east of the vicariate the residence of Saint Eugene (Cranbrook) was founded for the Kootenay of the upper Columbia, and to the east of the Fraser, the mission of Kamloops. Moreover, the Oblates became responsible for the parish of Vancouver, the last city on the railway since 1885, which was developing rapidly. The work of the missionaries in British Columbia was unique in some respects: the assembly of Indians in central missions to prepare and celebrate with great festivities some feast days, and the missionaries' care to form the Indians in the trades and in agriculture by starting trade schools. A social and religious organization of the Indians established by Bishop Durieu, known as the "Durieu system", based on the Indians' traditions and culture, attempted to assemble the converts in villages, where they would be governed by chiefs who were responsible, under the authority of the bishop and the missionary, to make the laws of God, the Church, the state and the local Indian government respected. The system also included the practice of public penances for public sins, a custom that had to be practiced with care, and that began to disappear after 1893.

What were the results of the missionary work in British Columbia? Bishop Durieu described it in 1866 in this way: "The six tribes that we have been preaching to for over a quarter of a century have made great strides in civilization. Surrendering to the gentle influence of the Faith, they have given up their nomad lifestyle to live in groups around

the churches, and today are villages on the same level as those of the European immigrants... Unfaithfulness has been put to an end among these six tribes, drunkenness is now unknown among them... [However,] there are still several tribes of savages immersed in the darkness of idolatry." (Missions, 24 (1886), pages 121-122.)

### Remember

What a wonderful reward for this congregation whose only desire was to evangelize the poor all over the world! And what a resounding response to those who criticize the missionaries' methods these results, comments upon which would be superfluous, are, just as the Jesuit Fathers' results in the well-known "reductions" in Paraguay in South America were. The facts are there, and

speaking clearly to all those of good will. These facts bring honour to the Catholic Church, who, however, is constantly maligned for the good deeds that she has never ceased to perform for the souls she has reached. What would have occurred if the Church had imitated the methods of the WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) in the United States, methods that moreover are glorified in Hollywood's Westerns! But the Roman Catholic Church is a good mother who is only concerned about one thing, the salvation of souls, and she is ready to sacrifice everything else if need be. To her be all honour and glory, as to the Blessed Trinity, and to her glorious army of missionaries who is mainly composed of French-Canadians and French!

Let us remember them!



**Mgr Paul Durieu**

## **Letter asking Members of Parliament and all the people of Canada to reflect on the possible consequences of Bill C-384**

21 September 2009

The Parliament of Canada is soon expected to debate private member's Bill C-384, an Act to amend the Criminal Code (right to die with dignity), which aims at legalizing euthanasia and assisted suicide in Canada.

Those wishing to re-open this debate are no doubt motivated by concern for the sufferings of others. An unfortunate understanding of compassion has led them to suggest euthanizing the most vulnerable instead of providing them with proper care, effective pain control, and social, emotional and spiritual support until their natural death. It is always important to be as clear as possible about intentions and possible consequences when we consider human acts, so as to assure the greatest good and limit any harm to the persons directly affected and also to the wider community.

Unfortunately, some of the terms being proposed for this debate are misleading or unclear. This can only lead to discussions that are confusing and unhelpful, and also makes it difficult to find common ground from which to assess the risks and impact of proposals for new legislation.

From the Catholic perspective, it is legitimate to use medication and other means to alleviate suffering, even if a side effect can be the shortening of life expectancy. It is also legitimate for someone to refuse medical procedures that are found to be especially burdensome. But what is never acceptable is the direct and intentional killing of the depressed, handicapped, sick, elderly or dying (Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 2276-77).

It is hard to see how any legislation legalizing euthanasia and assisted suicide would protect the most vulnerable in our society. What confidence and trust could they possibly have that their lives would continue to be protected by health-care providers, family and friends, or society at large? Euthanasia and assisted suicide, by their very nature, mean there is no longer a common duty for all to protect the lives of others. There is also the well-founded fear that euthanasia and assisted suicide can be imposed on individuals as a way to save costs and lessen demands on care-givers. Inevitably, the result would be a society even more fragmented, with its members living in greater isolation and anxiety.

As this debate resumes in our country on such an important question, the Catholic Bishops of Canada invite: The members of the Parliament of Canada – elected representatives in the House of Commons as well as Senators – to use clear definitions in their upcoming debates, and also to consider the profound impact that such legislation would have on the lives of individuals and on the wider community; All Canadians to become better informed about euthanasia and assisted suicide, and to promote instead palliative and home care to help those in need and their care-givers; Catholics, our brothers and sisters who belong to other Christian communities or other faiths, and all who appreciate the beauty and dignity of life, to engage in this debate civilly and respectfully, so as to witness a profound reverence for the inherent dignity of each and all human life.

Most Reverend V. James Weisgerber  
Archbishop of Winnipeg