

The Oblates

After having considered – from the great writings – the beautiful achievements in the apostolate of the foundation and the development of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate during the first half century of their existence in Canada, the recounting of deeds which may have appeared tiresome to more than one reader, let us take a look at the “little” history of this congregation, where, in different words, we receive spiritual profit from these true stories taken from the annals of the oblates. So then, here is a sample extract from the “Little Oblate History”, written by Father Andrew Dorval!

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The Blessed Virgin kept her promise

During his second journey at Lake Athabasca, in 1848, Father Alexander Tache had the happiness of baptizing a young Montagnais orphan, to whom he gave the name of John. “From now on,” the missionary Oblate tells him, “the Blessed Virgin will replace your deceased mother.” “Is that true?” asks the child. “Then what must be done to prove to her my love?” “It is easy,” answers the Father. “Say your rosary every day, and when you think of Mary, say mama, as you used to say to your mother when you were young. Do that, my John, and your heavenly mother will be happy with you; she will help you in your needs, right up to the hour of your death.”

The years passed and John remained faithful to this prayer. He is now eighty years old. One day, he falls seriously ill. His son, Peter, who is also a good Catholic, is saddened to not be able to have a priest come to assist his father in his last moments. The closest mission is 64 km. away and the missionary only comes every two years. A few days before Christmas, the state of the poor man becomes alarming. “Father,” Peter says to him, “I believe that you are going to

die soon.” “No, no,” feebly responds the invalid. “I am not dying.” “Oh yes,” repeats his parents and friends. “You are at the point of death. Prepare yourself to appear before the Good Lord.” “No,” keeps insisting the old Amerindian, “do not worry about me; I am not dying, I am sure of it.” “My God, why such obstinacy? Has the dear old man lost his mind? Oh, Blessed Virgin, have pity on him. Help him.”

It is now December 24th. Outside, the snow whirls. A storm is raging. Suddenly, someone knocks at the door of the poor hut. Peter opens it. A stranger, numb with cold, appears in the ray of light. “Would you be able to show me the path to Fond-de-Lac? I am lost in this awful storm.” “Of course, but first come in and warm yourself.” “Thank you,” says the visitor. “I cannot refuse. I am exhausted.” As soon as he enters, he notices the invalid, lying on his pallet in a corner of the room. In a quick glance, he becomes well aware that the old man is in his agony. Then, approaching the dying man, he sweetly suggests to him: “My good friend, death seems to be approaching; you must prepare yourself to die.” “No, no,” the old grandfather repeats again. “I am not dying.” “But it is God

who decides the hour of our death; we can do nothing about it." "I know that, my good man, but hear me well." Then showing proudly his rosary: "I have recited this every day for a very long time and the Blessed Virgin has promised me that I would not die before seeing a priest..." Touched by such faith, the visitor then opens his anorak of caribou skin and lets his Oblate cross be seen. "Well, my friend, your confidence has been rewarded. I am a priest. It was certainly the Blessed Virgin who sent me to you. She allowed me to lose my way in order to find you here." He then administers to him the last sacraments and, in the first hours of Christmas day, John, the old Amerindian, sweetly dies while whispering with the missionary and all his loved ones: "Holy Mary, pray for us, now... and at the hour of our death."

What a beautiful bishop in the ice!

Louis Veillot said one day to the Oblates, after an interview with Mgr Vital Grandin: "What a beautiful bishop you have in the ice!" A missionary for fifty years in the Great North of Canada, the merits of this man of God are known and we await the day when he will be proclaimed the first saint of the Church from Western Canada. His travels by snowshoe and in bark canoe accumulated to a distance equal to seven times around the world. These apostolic journeys he made like Saint Paul, in the midst of dangers of all kinds, suffering from hunger, from cold, from mosquitoes, from fatigue and from lice. The terrible night of December 15th, 1863, which he spent accompanied by a young Indian, on the Great Lake of the Slaves, is a proof of it. The young bishop was on his way to celebrate Christmas at Fort Resolution, two hundred kilometers from Fort Providence. In normal weather, with good sleigh dogs, it would take four or five days. "It's as easy as a leap of a cat," affirms Monsignor, in order to reassure his young fourteen year old companion. They therefore depart. The dogs are vigorous and the cold is intense. The days pass and all goes well. The mission is just ahead; yet a little effort... forward march! Suddenly the sun darkens, the clouds gather and a storm arises. In no time at all, the poor travelers are drawn into the whirlwind of a horrifying blizzard. "We had walked several more hours," later wrote Mgr Grandin. "We had shouted with all our strength, but only the tempest answered. We were on pure ice and the wind swept up the

snow as soon as it fell. Protected as well as we could by our sled and our dogs, my young lad sitting on me and leaning on me, we were prepared to die. The cold overpowered us and we were forced to get up and walk, wrapped in our coverings, in order to escape death. Then, a little later, we perceived two sleds. We cried out with all our strength. It was the father and the uncle of my companion, looking for us. We were just a quarter of an hour away from the mission." The following year, Mgr Grandin went to Rome to visit the Pope. Pius IX was given some details on the fatigues of his apostolic journeys, on the poverty and the solitude of the missionaries of the Great North. At the request of Mgr Grandin to be able to keep the Blessed Sacrament without a lighted lamp, since the mission did not have the means to pay the oil for it, the Pope answered: "Keep the Lord! Yes, keep Him. You have such a need of Him, you and your missionaries. Keep Him, without a lighted lamp."

They called it "Grouard"

A small village in the north of Alberta has the name "Grouard"; of old it was called "Little Lake of the Slaves". The French Canadians, the majority in this region, wanted to change this name, which did nothing to stimulate their sense of pride. Towards 1909, Father Constant Falher suggested giving this mission the name of Grouard, in honor of Mgr Emile Grouard, apostolic vicar of Athabaska. The French Canadians gave themselves to this idea. The Metis, on the contrary, in spite of their strong affection for their "Great Man of Prayer", did not seem very enthusiastic about this proposition. It was a difficult name to pronounce. As for the English Protestants of the place, they would have preferred an English sounding name, but hoping to gain the Cris to their cause, they proposed a name full of sweetness: "Mionouk", which meant "beautiful site". A resident of the place, who later became a Jesuit, related that a turbulent crowd held this position. They were going to vote. A supported conspiracy caused a rapid rise, to a peak, for this cause. A few Metis even imagined that Mgr Grouard was presented as a deputy against Mionouk...

"The evening for the vote arrives. A young Metis is seen to arise: "Mgr Grouard taught me the catechism and my prayers, and he taught me to read. Behold fifty years that he is amongst us and that he labors to teach us. Mionouk, he, what

has he done for us?" Another adds: "If I know something from the books, it is thanks to Mgr Grouard. Therefore, I vote for him." The name of Grouard seems to have the preference. However, the president of the assembly, both a good citizen and an excellent speaker in English and in Cri, is in favor of Mionouk. The tension mounts, Tempers get hot. Seeing themselves lost, the opponents try to stop the vote by demanding to keep the old name of Lesser Slaves Lake. The discussion lasts until two o'clock in the morning. Finally, the time to vote arrives. All the Catholics, except one, vote for Grouard. "We still have French blood in our veins," hurls a French Canadian. Another, crying with rage, responds: "I do not want to stay in a place that bears the name of a Catholic bishop." Grouard's blacksmith cannot control his enthusiasm: "If only for the assembly of this evening," he said, "I am happy to have come to the North." Mgr Grouard, himself, had to accept the accomplished fact. "It was done without my knowledge," he wrote in his memoirs; "I am perfectly innocent of all claim in this matter." In fact, after his golden anniversary, he departed to visit Lake Esturgeon. Upon returning, a week later, the trick had been played. His Episcopal village had changed its name. It was called Grouard.

An Oblate President

Father Albert Lacombe, O.M.I., (1827-1916), has become, especially in Canada, a legendary person. For more than sixty-five years he fulfilled with extraordinary dedication his priestly ministry amongst the Amerindians and the Metis of the Prairies. These latter knew how to appreciate him for his true value. They were quickly conquered by his great kindness and the interest that he showed them. When, according to their custom, the question arose of giving him a name, the Black-Foots called him *Arsous-Kitsi-Parti*, which signified for them: "The man with a good heart". Fr. Lacombe had consecrated the best of his energies to the evangelization of the Amerindians, scattered from the Red River to the Rocky Mountains. During his numerous travels, he smoked the peace pipe with the children of the woods. He taught them to pray, he healed their sicknesses, and he became their protector with the pale faces, invaders of their territory. To this apostolate, he added an important civil act. In several years, he became one of the most influential men of the West. He was involved in

the great events of the time (1849-1916): the development of the Church, the construction of the railroad, the uprising of Riel, the signing of treaties, the colonization of the West, etc. It is thanks to his rising to the Black-Foots that the Canadian Pacific was able to happily finalize the project of the railroad in the prairies. He knew how to pacify the proud Amerindians, discontent to see the "iron horse" traverse their hunting territory without taking into account past treaties with the Canadian government. On the subject of this peaceful intervention, the authorities of the Company have recognized the merits of Father Lacombe, as is highlighted in the following anecdote recounted by Father Paul-Emile Breton, O.M.I., in his book "The Great Chief of the Prairies" (1954, pp. 162-163).

One day, Father Lacombe receives a dispatch from President Stephen: "I invite you to come to dine with me, tomorrow, in my railroad car, at Calgary." The Oblate could not refuse. He goes with haste to this banquet of inauguration of the railroad. Around the table, the guests of honour and the "big hats" have taken their places: Mr. Stephen, Mr. Donald Smith, William Van Horne, R.B. Angus and many others. The laughter, the kind words, the evocations of the past spurt up from all sides. But can we imagine a banquet without a discourse? Mr. Stephen rises. After a short reminder of the history of Canadian Pacific, of the spirit of the recent progress, he hesitates for a moment and his voice becomes more serious. "Gentlemen," he says to his colleagues, "I regret to offer you my resignation as president of our Company." A gesture which is at the least surprising. Why? What had therefore come to pass? The directors look at one another, questioning themselves. No, they are not all surprised. One can even discover on some of them an air of contentment. In his turn, one of them, Mr. Angus, begins to speak: "Gentlemen," he says, "we have amongst us a man who has rendered great service to our Company, first of all from the Red River, and still more recently, here, in this vast country of the Black-Foots. It is thanks to his influence that we have been able to pursue our undertaking in peace. I therefore propose that in replacement of Mr. Stephen, Fr. Lacombe be elected president of 'Canadian Pacific' for the day." These words barely spoken, the applause and the cheers from the directors are to the missionary a joyful ovation. Sur-

prised, touched by this delicacy, the humble religious feels his throat tighten. With an automatic movement, his hand clenches around his Oblate cross. He hesitates... "Gentlemen," he says, finally overcoming his emotion. "I thank you. What can I add?" Then, turning toward Mr. Stephen: "As for you," he says subtly, "I name you, in my place, pastor of the parish of Calgary." "Poor parishioners of Calgary," says the ex-president. "I feel sorry for you!"

The president for a day, using his privilege, claimed for himself at that moment and for always a free pass on Canadian Pacific. All his life, the missionary would travel at the expense of the Company. His pass, which read "Father Lacombe and Assistant", became legendary. One day, it seems, the ticket collector of the train discovered the famous ticket in the hands of two religious Sisters. "Sisters," he said jokingly, "I would very much like to know which one of you is called Father Lacombe?"

Brother Anthony and the docile swine

When Brother Anthony Kowalczyk arrived at Saint Paul of the Metis in 1897, this little village of Alberta had just barely begun. It comprised in total some fifty families. The "Blacksmith of God", as Father Paul-Emile Breton had so well called him, was not at all a robust missionary. Short in stature, timid and awkward, this Polish Brother spoke French with difficulty, and above all, he was one-armed. The year before, when he had worked in a sawmill, at the lake La Biche, the strap of the mill snapped up his right arm and crushed all the bones of the hand. To avoid the worst, they had to amputate his forearm. However, on the moral and religious level, the acquiring of Brother Anthony was precious for this young colony of Metis. Already his reputation for holiness had preceded him. He had been given the nickname of "Brother Ave", because he had the habit, before beginning a difficult task, to kneel down and to recite an Ave to obtain success. Many a time he had been seen doing extraordinary things. In spite of his unfortunate disability, the little Brother Oblate resolutely applied himself to the task. For ten years he is made the servant of the Cris and of the Metis of the region. Engineer, mechanic, gardener, blacksmith, he comes to the aid of all and of each one. Thanks to his ingenious work, the mission progresses. Soon the Sisters of the As-

sumption arrive and open a boarding school for a hundred children. Father Adeodat Therien, as superior, believes himself responsible for these newcomers. To procure for them abundant food at a good price, he decides to raise swine. The swineherd has already been found: it would be the humble Brother Anthony. Our one-armed Brother accepts gracefully these new boarders. If necessary, he would take some of his hours from sleep to take care of the pigsty. The superior also counts on the farm to complete the alimentation of these quadruped gluttons. Unfortunately, the hail destroys a part of the seed. The summer advances and there is no grain left for the swine. The poor beasts get by as best they can. There is, indeed, a field of turnips, excellent food for animals which would be ready to be eaten. But to reach it, it would be necessary to pass a field of oats which was not ripe enough to be cut. What to do? To wait, would be to condemn the swine to die of famine. Let them out into the turnip field? Yes, but how to arrive there without destroying the crop of oats?

On mature reflection, Father Therien decides to take the risk. He calls Brother Anthony and gives him the command to conduct the swine toward the field of turnips. "Be careful," he adds, "I do not intend that your animals stop on the way to tamper with the oats." "But, Father, that is impossible." "Impossible? That word is not French. Go on!" "Very well, Father, if you wish. I will lead the swine." The Brother goes to the pigsty. Before entering it, he kneels down to recite his Ave. He arises, opens the gate: "Kiou, Kiou, Kiou! Follow me, come to eat." The swine push themselves out of the pen. They are about a hundred and fifty which hasten towards the almost ripe field of oats. "Kiou, kiou! I forbid you to touch these oats. Come on, it is further that we must go; follow me."

Well, the superior, the Sisters and the Metis, who from a distance watch this procession of starving piglets, are witnesses of a nearly miraculous spectacle. Brother Anthony turns into a narrow path, between two rows of oats. For a moment, the swine hesitate, as if to consult one another. Then, in single file, they start again to docilely follow their master. They do not even touch one stalk of oats. All of them end up in the turnip field, where they take pleasure in stuffing themselves like p...!