

Vital Justin Grandin, O.M.I.,
First Bishop of St. Albert, Alberta.
1829-1902

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Of late years, the name of Vital Justin Grandin has been the focus of considerable attention in ecclesiastical as well as in civil circles, due mainly to the fact that the cause of his beatification and canonization is being actively forwarded.

Will Bishop Grandin be the first Canadian canonized Saint, is a timely question, and one that might well arouse the keenest interest in Canadian Catholic historical minds. For was it not this great man who led the van of that band of heroic missionaries who first brought Christian civilization to the northern fastnesses of this country? Was it not he who laid broad and solid the foundations on which rests securely the vast and vigorous structure of Catholicism both on the prairies and in their frozen hinterland? A brief study of the life of this pioneer of the cross will reveal the fact that there is not a single phase in the development of this western land in which Bishop Grandin and his heroic band of Oblate missionaries did not play a leading part. That they made it their chief concern to bring the gospel to the dusky children of the plains, goes without saying. Neither need the story of their institutions of education and charity be enlarged upon: these they used as a means to an end. But the part they took in the agricultural and industrial opening up of the country is a matter of moment not only for the Catholic historian but for the Canadian historian, regardless of his religious affiliation. Road-making, bridge-building, farming, milling, stock-raising, prospecting and exploring are not pursuits that, in the popular mind, are usually associated with the missionary. Yet one could not omit their mention and still give an adequate idea of Bishop Grandin and his work. In other fields, too, are he and his fellow Oblates encountered. Here they are peace-makers among native tribes; there they put into syllabic form the different dialects of the Indians, and classify the rules of grammar that govern them, the while compiling dictionaries to render the task of learning to speak and write easier for their successors; elsewhere they gather valuable material for the ethnologist and anthropologist; again they are found setting down for the geographer the information willingly, if painfully, gleaned during their ceaseless missionary jourmayings. At all times, and in all places, they have been the faithful and reliable chroniclers of events that since have been embodied in the secular as well as the religious history of the immense territories which they evangelized - events, many of which, it is safe to say, would have remained unrecorded had it not been for the care and foresight of

these men. When, on the one hand, we consider the bulk of purely missionary work accomplished in a brief lifetime by almost any of these Oblates, and, on the other, when we view his contribution made in one or many other fields, we are truly amazed at what must have been the activity of both mind and body of these tireless searchers after souls to save.

Vital-Justin Grandin, the ninth of a family of fourteen children, whose father was Jean Grandin, and whose mother was Marie Veillard, was born at Saint-Pierre-la-Cour (now called Saint-Pierre-sur-Orthe) in the diocese of Laval, on February 8, 1829. His parents eked out a bare existence for their numerous family from a farm which they cultivated, as well as from a small hostelry that they conducted. As a consequence of their straitened circumstances, the life of young Vital, as well as those of his brothers and sisters, was destined to be governed by the dictates of the most stern economy. Poverty imposed itself on his childhood and early youth; in later years, he himself would accept it as his chosen portion, at first in the still young' Oblate congregation, and then in the mission-field, where he felt its keenest rigours.

But, if the Grandin family were not blessed with material wealth, they were possessed of a truly Christian spirit, and it was in this atmosphere that Vital-Justin grew to adolescence. His brother Jean, by that time, was nearing the end of his studies for the priesthood, and Vital had secretly resolved to follow his footsteps towards the altar, despite the many obstacles that stood in his way. The combined forces of his own determination, the almost heroic sacrifices of his parents, and the kindly offices of his friend, Abbé Sébaux, overcame these obstacles, so that the future Bishop of St. Albert, after taking part of his course in three different seminaries, requested and obtained admission to the Oblate novitiate near Grenoble on December 21, 1851.

After that date events in the life of young Abbé Grandin moved in rapid succession: his first encounter with his future Superior, Bishop Taché, from the Red River, in 1852; his religious profession on New Year's Day, 1853; his ordination by the Founder of the Oblates, Mgr. de Mazenod, at Marseilles on April 23, 1854, and, finally, his departure for the Red River, where he arrived on November 2, 1854, filled with youthful apostolic zeal. That he was willing to carry that zeal to its logical conclusion seems evident from a letter he wrote to his brother, Abbé Jean, shortly before his final "oblation":

The very name of "Oblate" which I shall assume is significant enough. I should be willing to consider myself a perpetual victim and to order my life accordingly. This truth will be brought home to me at every moment, by the sight of the crucifix that I shall wear. It will constantly remind me that the life of an Oblate of Mary Immaculate should be one of intense self-denial and self-immolation, so to speak. So far, our congregation has had no martyrs. If only I could be found worthy to be the first Oblate martyr, what a joy it should be for me, my beloved brother, and what an honour for you.

The pious young cleric was not destined to be the proto-martyr of the Oblate order in the sense suggested, but he was intended to go through physical sufferings and mental anguish far more frightful than those we associate with the actual shedding of blood. The bodily weakness and infirmities which had caused him to be rejected from a French seminary as being too weak for diocesan work in his sunny France were to accompany him throughout his forty-eight long years in the frozen wastes of the North, as a perpetual reminder that "for the salvation of souls 'he' should be a victim without reserve." And when at the end of that time he laid down the heavy burden of life, and his remains were reverently laid to rest among those of his Oblate brethren at St. Albert, it was within a few steps of what might well be styled "martyrs' row" that they placed them. To Fafard, Marchand, Alexis, and, later, to Rouvier and Leroux came the call to actual martyrdom; he who had led them onward had to be content with a less spectacular end.

Many are the touchingly beautiful episodes of the childhood and early manhood of Father Grandin that cannot even be mentioned in a brief sketch of his life: scenes of mutual love, affection and devotedness in his humble home; his manly struggles with poverty; his leave-taking of a beloved mother; his farewell to Abbé Jean; his encounters with church dignitaries - each one of these, and many others, would serve, perhaps better than the more important events of his after years, to show what a lovely soul and what a stout heart were in this frail human frame. Throughout his entire missionary life he never failed to show to his brothers in religion, as well as to the uncultured half-breeds and Indians among whom he labored, that gentleness, goodness and love that were so characteristic of his fine-fibered soul.

IN THE MISSION-FIELD

As a simple missionary priest, Father Grandin's career was destined to be of short duration. From the late autumn of 1854 until the following summer, the young apostle stayed with Bishop Taché at St. Boniface, preparing himself for his first mission into the North. On June 5, by order of his superior, he left for far-off Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabaska, which he did not reach until the beginning of August. There he found three fellow Oblates, Fathers Fafard and Grollier and Brother Alexis Reynard, each of whose names is written large in the story of the northern missions.

Father Grandin soon acquired a strange, but beneficent, influence over the Indians placed in his charge. These crude children of Nature yielded at once to that combination of personal holiness and goodness of heart which were the outstanding characteristics of this man of God. His first conquests were among the Crees and the Montagnais of Lake Athabaska. Many were the tribes that in after years were to open their simple minds and hearts to his benign influence. With the directness and simplicity that were among the peculiar traits of the plain men, one of them said to him one day: "The God whom you preach must be good indeed, you yourself are so good."

At the Nativity Mission, at Lake Athabaska, the young Oblate remained but

two years. In September 1857, he betook himself to Ile-à-la-Crosse, which he had visited on his way west and north from St. Boniface. There he manifested a new gift, that of peace-maker — a gift that was to be brought into requisition on more than one occasion during the years that were to follow. He left this place at the call of the Holy See itself when, despite his youth, he was named co-adjutor to Bishop Taché. Though the appointment was made on December 11, 1857, word of it reached Father Grandin only in July, 1858. It was another eight months before the humble Grandin could be persuaded to accept the dignity of the episcopacy. Even then it took a formal order from Bishop de Mazenod for him to proceed forthwith to Marseilles to prepare for episcopal consecration. Accordingly, he undertook the long journey from his northern outpost to the cradle city of his beloved Order, there to be made a bishop of God's Church. The ceremony took place on November, 30, 1859.

Thoughts that were uppermost in the minds of those who had watched the unfolding of the imposing rites that morning are well summed up in the diary entry of Bishop de Mazenod, of the same date. We read:

This has been one of the loveliest days of my life. I have given episcopal consecration to our good, holy, and most excellent Father Grandin. How delighted I am that Bishop Taché and I have made this choice. How charming is his simplicity! What love and loyalty he shows for the Congregation, his spiritual mother! How willingly he has given up all that was dear to him! And what a kind heart is his! In a word, what boundless devotedness to his work fills his soul!

This overwhelming joy of the ageing consecrating bishop was fully matched by the feelings of intense gratitude and humility of him who was probably the youngest bishop of his day — the newly-consecrated Bishop Grandin. Let us read a few of the thoughts that he that day committed to writing:

Man struggles and strives, but God leads him on ... *Quid retribuam Domino pro omnibus quae retribuit mihi?* ... The least I can do is to have great confidence, and to submit myself in all things to God's holy will... I feel from experience that the most painful happenings of my life have been but the effects of the goodness of God ... *Infirmus mundi elegit Deus* ... These are the very words that settled me in my calling ... Who could have foreseen how fully their meaning would be borne out in real life?

The innermost soul of Bishop Grandin stands fully revealed in the choice which he made of his episcopal coat-of-arms. He compares himself to a bending reed, symbol of weakness, but bending towards the cross in which he is assured of light and strength. The motto he chose epitomizes his own life story: "*Infirmus mundi elegit Deus*" — The weak things of earth hath God chosen.

THE WANDERING SHEPHERD

The last and longest period of the life of Bishop Grandin began when, on a beautiful day in July in the year 1860, he reached St. Boniface at the head of an ardent group of young Oblate missionaries. They were received in the city of the "turrets twain" with all the enthusiasm that the occasion called for. Great was the joy of the good people at the turn that events religious and ecclesiastical had taken. What shall we say of the joy of the Chief Pastor, Bishop Taché? Had that great and saintly prelate been able to peer into the future no doubt that his joy would have been overflowing. He whose return had occasioned such jubilation was going to be his co-adjutor and friend for twelve years, and Bishop of St. Albert for thirty. What we yet have to say can be but the barest outline of the fruitful career of this, the first bishop of the North.

Bishop Taché, now that he had a co-adjutor, began to see possibilities of extending the missionary activities over the entire prairies and right into the "Great White North". He planned to ask the Holy See to form the northernmost part of Canada into a vast vicariate apostolic. While he opened negotiations with Rome, Bishop Grandin was commissioned to visit the outposts, going as far into the northland as possible. Accordingly, the future "Saint of St. Albert" set out on a journey which for distances, sufferings, privations, and the good accomplished, surpasses some of the most soul-stirring events in the history of the missions throughout all times. It lasted three years, 1861 to 1864.

During these truly heroic journeyings, God alone knows the sufferings, privations, and humiliations endured by this lover of souls. The heroic courage with which he endured the one physical inconvenience of the filth of his surroundings in native lodges has gained for him the rather incongruous title of "l'Evêque Pouilleux" (the bishop covered with vermin). Only those who have taken the trouble to study the fine fibre of the mind and heart of Bishop Grandin can fully appreciate — or can they? — how much he suffered from the sordid conditions under which, for the love of souls, he had to live. Like another Benedict Joseph Labre, he bore with all. With his mind fixed on higher values, the things of bodily comfort mattered little. With no other means of transportation than his dog-sleds, drawn by his trusty huskies, Bishop Grandin went from mission to mission. When the shadows of an early northern night fell, to keep from freezing, he often shared his humble tent with them. It would not have served the cause of cleanliness and comfort to ask for lodging with the Indians among whom his lot was cast: there the filth beggared description.

And so "l'Evêque Pouilleux", often sleeping on a bed of snow, or on the frozen surface of river or lake, carried the "good news" to these forgotten ones. In turn, Crees, Montagnais, Dogribs, Yellow-Knives, Rabbit Skins, Loucheux Indians heard his words. On he went, encouraging and blessing the few missionaries whom he met along his extended course. Here he built a new "mission"; there he gave a new lease of life to an old one. Providence, which was to be the see of a future bishop, thus came into being. Like the Apostle of the Gentiles, in season, and out of season, he constantly saw his life in danger in order that souls might be saved. Such was the life of Bishop Grandin during these three

heroic years — a life of heroism that has rarely been equalled in the epic whose main theme is the quest of souls.

With the Vicariate of Athabaska-Mackenzie under Bishop Faraud finally established, Bishop Grandin returned from his three-year expedition to Saint-Jean-Baptiste. Thence he proceeded to Lac Caribou, where, he had heard, four Oblate Fathers were living under conditions that were truly frightful. After consoling and helping his afflicted brethren to the extent of his slender means, the wandering shepherd returned to Ile-à-la-Crosse where other trials awaited him and his brother missionaries. Trials seemed to dog his every step. This time the demon of fire was to destroy the work which had cost so much hard labour and so many harder privations. On the evening of the first of March, 1867, his residence, which Brother Bowes had just enlarged by adding a wing to shelter the many children that had been placed under the loving care of the Grey Nuns, was totally destroyed by fire. Nothing was saved. The loss was crushing indeed. However, the disaster was not without compensation. Right while the fire was at its worst, the good bishop prayed, and behold, the wind, which had threatened to carry the destructive element to the adjoining church and convent, suddenly veered, and these precious buildings were saved. Besides this, not one life was lost. The saintly prelate recalled that trials are the hall-mark, and often the reward, of God's work and of those that do it. It was therefore with a heart full of gratitude that he took his little flock to the church, where he led in a solemn hymn of thanksgiving - "Te Deum laudamus!"

On a trip to France, in the interests of his missions, that followed, Bishop Grandin was accompanied by Bishop Taché, who had new plans whose fulfillment was to affect profoundly the Church in the West. The plan was nothing less than the creation of the See of St. Albert, with his co-adjutor as its first ordinary. Thus Bishop Grandin would rule over the entire northwestern portion of the diocese of St. Boniface. The new diocese would include the territory about English River, or Churchill, and the Saskatchewan country. This combined area would give him a diocese twice as large as France. At the time, negotiations along these lines were entered upon, but it was only later that they were brought to a happy conclusion. When the Bishop returned, he fixed his abode — in so far as a wandering prelate could be said to have a fixed abode — not at Ile-à-la-Crosse, but at what since has become "Historic St. Albert", on the Sturgeon River, some nine miles from Fort Edmonton. It is now a sacred spot — a holy hill — hallowed by the blessed remains of prelates, priests and lay brothers, some of them martyrs. All of them gave their lives for the greatest cause that they knew: to make the name of Jesus known and loved among those who hitherto had not even heard of it.

ON ALBERTA'S HOLY HILL

We have now come to the last great turning-point in the life of a truly great man. The same "brief" that made the diocese of St. Boniface an archdiocese, and its distinguished incumbent an archbishop, erected a new see at St. Albert with Bishop Grandin as first Ordinary. This "brief" was dated September 22, 1871. It

reached Bishop Grandin, however, only on April 2, 1872.

On receiving this order from the Holy Father — for an order he took it to be — the Bishop of St. Albert, characteristically enough of an Oblate, performed his first official act, which was the consecration of his new diocese to the Immaculate Heart of Mary and to Our Lady of Victories. This done, Bishop Grandin set to work with such earnestness that one would imagine that, up to this time, he had done nothing in the mission fields.

The travels of the Apostle of the Nations, as related in the Acts of the Apostles, make one marvel at the zeal of one who has fully grasped what it really means to win souls to Christ. Those of the Bishop of St. Albert recall some of the finest and most heroic episodes of this first chapter of the history of God's Church. From St. Albert to Lac Caribou, and points in between; then from the same starting-point to the present borders of Montana, through the Blackfoot country, and back again to St. Albert, travelled the saintly Oblate. Some times he travelled by carts of the crude Red River type; again he went by canoe; at other times he went from mission to mission on horseback. Regardless of personal inconvenience, the Bishop always chose that means of locomotion that made the smallest inroads into his slender purse. Who will tell how many thousands of miles he thus travelled up and down the prairies in search of souls! Only the Master whom he served knows the sufferings and privations he endured that he might bring these simple children of Nature to the feet of the Redeemer. His sufferings ran the full gamut of misery from the relentless grasp of the Frost King to the unspeakable discomfort caused by the poisonous bites of the millions of gnats and mosquitoes that infest the prairies during the scorching western summer. But these, added to the hunger, that was more often present than absent, were as nothing compared with the one real privation he had to endure: that of often being unable either to offer up the Holy Sacrifice or recite the Divine Office, or to spend, as had been his wont, long hours in the presence of his Eucharistic Lord. When these great joys of his saintly soul lay beyond his reach, he tried to make up for them by often telling his beads as he travelled from place to place. "My God", he once was heard to exclaim, "how tired I am of these ceaseless wanderings! How much I would love to rest my weary limbs if for one such as I, rest could be taken without detriment to duty!" Let it be noted in passing, that it has been estimated that, during his missionary career, Bishop Grandin's travels aggregated eight or nine times the circumference of the globe.

In the vast expanse that was the diocese of St. Albert in 1872 there were but five mission houses. Besides the St. Albert Mission, which was also the Bishop's see, there were Lake Ste-Anne and St-Paul-des-Cris in the Saskatchewan Country, with those of Ile-à-la-Crosse and Lac Caribou in the English River District. The missions at Lac La Biche and of Lesser Slave Lake, which canonically belonged to St. Albert had been placed, for the time being, under the jurisdiction of Bishop Faraud. From each of these centres the Fathers went hither and yon wherever the good of souls called them. Some of these outposts lay at distances of fifty, a hundred, or even two hundred miles away.

St. Joachim, at Fort Edmonton, was served from St. Albert. The whole diocese was composed of a dozen priests and a few lay brothers. Besides these, in the nearby building that served the purpose of both school and hospital, a number of Sisters of Charity, known as Grey Nuns from Montreal, carried on the work of their admirable calling. An institution, similar to this, and also under the Grey Nuns, was likewise to be found at Ile-à-la-Crosse.

Soon, however, the burning zeal of the missionary bishop brought many other institutions into being. Men as well as means were lacking, but the man of God, while using every means that human ingenuity could suggest, always fell back on Providence. What struggles he had to wage, at times, both with rival missionary bands and with those whose duty it was to see that evenhanded justice be dispensed to the scattered settlements of these parts. At times, both men and the very elements seemed to conspire against him. Some of his beloved missionaries came to an untimely end in the furious waters of rivers at their flood; others met their death at the hands of infuriated savages; others, still, breathed their last in the frozen, barren wastes, without anyone at hand to soothe their parting; some of the mission houses that he had built with his slender means became the prey of the devouring flames; supplies of food, clothing, chapel supplies were lost in the swirling northern rivers. These, added to frequent crop failures, with consequent shortages of food, more than once filled to overflowing the cup of sorrow of the good bishop. Perhaps the worst trial of all awaited him when the hopes that he had fostered for an acceptable solution to the school question of the Northwest Territories were dashed to pieces, at a time when the false promises that had been made to him appeared in their true light.

But, under the watchful eye of the Pastor, the work of God continued to grow and to expand. By 1890 the diocese of St. Albert boasted thirty-six missionary centres, served by no fewer than forty-six Oblate missionaries. It was gratifying to note that Christianity had struck deepest roots in those places that had known it for the greatest number of years. In villages that had hitherto remained outside the fold, the sign of our salvation was seen to lift its head above the primitive lodges of the natives. In the schools and orphan homes, that soon appeared here and there throughout the West, and that were entrusted to the loving and intelligent care of the Grey Nuns and the Faithful Companions of Jesus, the superiority of the Catholic missionary units became apparent to all. To complete these units, inasmuch as his means allowed, the apostolic Grandin began the erection of hospitals wherein the sick and poor and aged were cared for. How all these centres of intellectual and spiritual life and solace for every misery were made possible, in a land where every element that went into them was missing, is a question that only the all-seeing God can answer.

What once had been the diocese of St. Boniface had already been divided twice. A new partition was now in sight. It took place in 1891, when the diocese of Prince Albert was created. In withdrawing the Churchill country from St. Albert, there still remained to this latter a territory as large as the whole France.

But times were changing. White colonists, not only from Eastern Canada and

the United States, but also from the "old countries" were beginning to pour into the West by trainloads. Parishes, besides mission houses, now became a necessity, if these new-comers were to be saved to the Church. Cities grew up. Edmonton and Calgary were among the first. The grand old Oblate missionary band, despite their marvelous devotedness, no longer could cope with the requirements. They were the first to recognize this, and to realize that a call must be sent out to other orders and to the diocesan priesthood of the East.

Old age was now overtaking the Bishop of St. Albert. All his life he had suffered patiently from ailments that had threatened him in early manhood. The marvel of it all was that he was still alive. But even heroism has its limitations, and it became evident that he needed a co-adjutor. Accordingly, Father Légal, a brother Oblate of outstanding merit, was chosen for this high office, and was consecrated at St. Albert on June 17, 1897. This done, the saintly bishop seemed to turn from the things of this world to think only of the Great Beyond. During the remaining five years of his life he suffered and prayed as only saints of God know how. When his hour came, with the holy joy that must be the reward of a well-spent life, he was able to bequeath to his successor a truly magnificent legacy. This legacy was the well-organized diocese of St. Albert which, for administrative purposes, Bishop Grandin had divided into five districts: St. Albert, Edmonton, Calgary, Saddle Lake and the Blackfoot Country. In the last-named region, where conversions to Christianity had been extremely rare, there seemed, at last, some hope of a change for the better. Two of the leading chiefs had been received into the Church. Disregarding their unresponsiveness, the Bishop had endowed the Blackfeet with a hospital and three schools, one of which was an industrial school. But among the many institutions that owed their origin to the zeal and initiative of Bishop Grandin, none was dearer to his priestly heart than the diocesan seminary. Two years and a half before, he answered the final call, he had the great joy of seeing the dream of his episcopate become a living reality. It was on January 21, 1900, that he himself presided over its inaugural ceremonies.

THE END OF THE TRAIL

But the lives of great and small, of rich and poor, of saints and sinners, have to come to a term. The life of him who is the subject of this brief sketch closed peacefully and piously on the third day of June, 1902. It was according to the fitness of things that the end should come on the "holy hill of St. Albert". His burial was a strange blending of sorrow and joy: sorrow at the loss of a father, friend and exemplar; joy at the thought that a powerful protector had, at last, taken up his place beside the throne of God to receive a great reward for great services rendered to God and humanity.

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