

The Centenary of The Oblates of Mary Immaculate

BY

THE REV. F. E. BANIM, O.M.I., S.T.L., M.A.

On the 2nd December, 1841, there arrived in Montreal from France six members of the Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. At that date the entire Congregation consisted of only 40 Priests and 9 Brothers. In the century which followed their numbers grew until at the present time, according to the Centenary Number of "L'Apostolat" published at Chambly-Bassin, in North America alone they number 11 Bishops, 1447 Priests, 472 candidates for the priesthood and 503 Brothers.

This paper was, I believe, Mr. President, conceived by the society as its contribution to the celebration of the centenary. As such, it will do no more than rapidly review the work which the Oblates have done since their arrival in Montreal one hundred years ago.

Although their coming was arranged in 1841 as a result of a visit of M^r Ignatius Bourget, second bishop of Montreal, to Marseilles, the hope of being able eventually to send missionaries to the Americas was in the mind of their founder as early as 1825. In that year, in urging the Holy See to give its official approval to the new Congregation, he had written to Cardinal Pedicini: "One of the chief reasons which prompts us to seek the approval of the Holy See is that burning desire, shared by all our members, to preach the Gospel in all parts of the world... as the Congregation grows, the superiors will, in all probability, send missionaries to America."

Within a week they were installed at St. Hilaire. Vocations came quickly. The first recruit was Fr. Dandurand, who died in 1921 at the age of 102 years. Of special interest to the English section of this society are the following: Fr. Corbett, born in Cork in 1826, left the seminary in Pittsburg to join the Oblates; Fr. Mulloy, also of the Diocese of Cork, where he was born in 1804, who was the first to come directly from Ireland. He died in 1891 at Quebec. Another to come from Ireland in those first days was Fr. Molony, who died in San Antonio in 1893.

The records show that the little band lost no time in starting the work they had come to do. Within a few days of their establishment at St. Hilaire the first parochial mission on Canadian soil was begun at St. Hilaire itself. Within two years a house had been founded at Ottawa, and in 1847 the Provincial, Fr. Guignes, was consecrated first Bishop of Bytown. The Saguenay mission was opened and thence the first contacts with the Indians

were made in the Labrador mission. The College which is today the University of Ottawa was founded in 1848 by Bishop Guignes. Meanwhile, in 1844, a request of Mgr. Provencher for aid for his Red River Mission was being entertained. In 1845 we hear for the first time reference to a name that was to become historic in the North Country. It is that of Alexander Taché. He was then only a sub-deacon as he left with Fr. Aubert on the journey west and north in which the seed was sown that later blossomed into those great missions of the Northwest which have always been the particular pride of the Congregation.

Quite independently of the Montreal foundation assistance was sought in 1846 for their Oregon missions by bishops Norbert and Magloire Blanchet. Bishop de Mazenod sent them five Oblates who arrived in Walla Walla on September 5th, 1846. These missionaries worked valiantly amongst the Yakimas, the Cayouses and the Snohomish, but, their work thwarted by political events, they retired to British Columbia in 1857. They established themselves first on Vancouver Island and two years later crossed to the mainland. In July, 1859, they travelled by canoe up the Fraser River and established themselves in the Okanagan Valley. From this foundation stemmed the English Province of the Congregation in Canada, first known as the Province of British Columbia, and in recent years (1926) as the Province of St. Peter of New Westminster.

Expansion continued in the East. St. Peter's Parish in Montreal, which to this day is the official residence of the Provincial of the Eastern Province, was confided to the Oblates in 1848. In 1849 the Indian mission of Maniwaki (Mary's Town) was founded. In 1853 the direction of the parish of St. Sauveur in Quebec was undertaken. Work began amongst the Iroquois, the Escoumains, the Naskapis and the Esquimeaux.

The fame of these missionaries from the old world and the new spread to the south. In 1847 they were invited to undertake the direction of the seminary of Pittsburg. They were called to Galveston, Texas, in 1849, to Burlington, Vermont and to Buffalo, N. Y., in 1851. The call to Texas resulted in the foundation of the house at Brownsville, the first establishment of the Congregation in the Southland. From this nucleus grew the Second Province of the United States, which today numbers 167 priests, 37 candidates for the priesthood, and 23 brothers. They serve 59 parishes, innumerable missions, and are charged with the spiritual welfare of the Mexican population which is over 200,000. This province has in turn been able to turn missionary, sending its members to Paraguay, to Uruguay, to the Argentine, and to Brazil.

To return to Alexander Taché. At the age of 27 he was called to the episcopate and made coadjutor to Bishop Provencher, then bishop of St. Boniface. His diocese comprised the whole of what is now Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and the Northwest Territories. It would be quite

impossible in a review to chronicle all the events which preceded the present organization of this vast territory. But some idea of the intensity with which the missionaries worked can be gathered from the following quotation from the centenary circular of the present Superior General: "Fr. Taché reached l'Île-à-la-Croix in 1846, Athabaska Lake in 1847; Fr. Grollier founded Fond-du-Lac in 1853. Fr. Faraud followed the valley of Peace River and evangelized the Castors, and from 1858 laid the groundworks of the Vermillion and Dunvegan missions. Fr. Remas settled Lac-la-Biche in 1853, then at Lake St. Anne in 1855. Fr. Lacombe reached St. Albert in 1860 and founded the mission which still exists and which is so rich in historical remains. Fr. Faraud descended the Slave River in 1852, returning to establish the Resolution mission in 1856. Fr. Grollier made a more northerly circuit. His journey is the more to be admired in that his health seemed to militate against such an effort. He went from the Holy Heart of Mary [mission] to Cross Island in 1858; from the Sacred Heart of Jesus to Simpson in the same year; from St. Michael to Fort Rae in 1859, and from St. Therese to Fort Norman in 1860; finally from the Holy Name of Mary to Fort MacPherson. He died, worn out, in 1864, at Good Hope, at the age of 38."

This immense diocese was finally divided. In 1855, Fr. Grandin was named coadjutor to Bishop Taché, and established his headquarters at St. Albert, near Edmonton. In 1862 the Vicariate of Athabaska-Mackenzie was formed with Bishop Faraud at its head.

The rapid colonization of the southern part of this territory presented new problems. The missionaries had to turn to the care of people already Christian, largely Catholic, who had come to seek in the New World the prosperity and security they were denied in the Old. Thanks to the intrepid spirit of the pioneers these immigrants found the Church already firmly established in the new home and priests ready to minister to them. The Cathedral churches of St. Boniface, Winnipeg, Prince Albert, Saskatoon, St. Albert, Calgary and Vancouver are lasting monuments to the work of the Oblates in the building of the Church in Western Canada. The Congregation had, by that time, in those formerly deserted territories, four provinces and five vicariates. The organization and machinery necessary to provide for the spiritual wants of the new Canadians was already established. They did not suffer the fate of their compatriots who settled in other parts of the Americas, and who to a large extent suffered loss of their faith because the Church was not organized in the regions in which they happened to settle.

The Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate must be reckoned amongst those forces which operated to establish the civilization we call "western" on this continent. Their interest in the original inhabitants of the continent was purely spiritual. In pursuing this ideal they could not but establish centres of congregation and settlement. The church became the center of the activities of the community and the Indians were led thus from their

nomadic life to the settlement which is so characteristic of western civilization. The Oblate imposed upon the Indians the Church, the school, the hospital – all of them centres of community life. Under the aegis of the Federal Government he founded schools which today extend the length and breadth of the Dominion and in which the Indian is gently weaned to the ways of the civilization of the new masters of the continent. The most desirable civilization is that which is Roman and Catholic and of that the Oblate has always proven himself the most jealous guardian and the most ardent protagonist. The Oblate has taught the Indian the arts of agriculture and horticulture, he has taught him to read, to write, to play, to work, to pray, to think, to provide for the future especially that which is eternal, in short, to live according to the norms laid down by Christ Himself.

The Oblate thus exercises a profound influence on the economy of the New World. But his influence is not confined to the original inhabitants. Amongst the new settlers he is the apostle of the "back to the land" movement, establishing thereby those rugged virtues which are found amongst those who cultivate the soil and the loss of which is the subject of perennial jeremiads from moralists. Suppose it is granted that the influence of the Oblate has been exercised largely through the French language, would it not be permissible to ask if this influence might not one day be recognised as no less invigorating to the life of the Western World than the Norman influence was to the English world of centuries ago?

But, as far as the new colonists are concerned, the greatest influence of the Oblate has been exercised in the field of the parochial mission and of education. The Congregation was founded originally with the intention of preaching missions to those who were remiss in the faith. And this end is pursued wherever the Oblate is found. Both the French and the English provinces regard this work as their primary obligation. In the field of education they are intent on the formation of Catholic leaders who will prove worthy of their faith.

The University of Ottawa is a venerable institution – approaching, as it is, its own centenary. Its evolution from a simple school in a small town to a full-fledged university with both Civil and Pontifical Charters must be regarded as one of the great achievements of the Oblates during the past century. It is a centre, not only of the regular, traditional, university activities, but also of a vigorous and aggressive Catholic action. Its Catholic Centre has in a few years done work of immense value in combatting subversive doctrines and in promoting the study and cult of the liturgy among the laity.

In 1926 the English-speaking Oblates in Canada were formed into a Dominion-wide province. They have undertaken direct missionary work among the Indians, and have assumed the direction of several Indian Schools where the young are gently weaned from a way of life which is scarcely compatible with the modern political and economic life of the Dominion. They

direct many parishes, and their missionary labours have taken them to parishes and missions in every corner of the settled parts of the Dominion. They built and maintain, at great cost in money and personnel, St. Patrick's College in Ottawa. This institution devotes itself to the higher education of English-speaking Catholic youth. Its ideal is to form laymen who, being imbued with the Catholic attitude towards sociological, economic, political, and scientific problems, can give leadership in the field of Catholic Action. Recently it has developed the Lay Catholic Apologetic Association, an organization devoted to preparing laymen to give a reason for the faith that is in them. The College has at its disposal the rich fund of contributions made by the missionaries of the past century to the sciences of economics, sociology, ethnology, anthropology, cartography, and the natural sciences. Here, it might be mentioned, is a promising field for research in Canadian Catholic History. The members of the English-speaking Province cannot undertake it as yet – as usual, the labourers are too few. Meanwhile precious time, material, and contacts are being lost.

The Catholic Press of Canada owes much to the Oblates. Besides the numerous publications of the University, they founded a daily newspaper, *Le Droit* of Ottawa, and the very versatile Canadian Publishers, Ltd, of Winnipeg, whose publications appear in five languages.

Mention has already been made of the foundation of the Texas Province. A reference should also be made to the three other provinces in the United States which stem, in the last analysis, from the six pioneers who arrived in Montreal in 1841. The First Province, centered at Lowell, Mass., extends throughout the East and North. This province has flourished so prodigiously that it has been able, while carrying on its regular work of parochial missions, to specialize in work among the negroes of the Southern States, and to send missionaries abroad to South Africa, to the Philippine Islands, and to all parts of Canada. After a century the direction of missionary migration is reversed. Two provinces are devoted to work among the French, German, and Polish Americans.

These are the high-lights of the first century of the Oblates in the Americas. Enough has been said to indicate how profound was the influence of the members of this Congregation in the ecclesiastical, cultural, economic, and political fields, as new institutions were developed on this continent. The evaluation of this influence has scarcely begun. Compared with what has yet to be done, what has been accomplished so far is insignificant. But there is no doubt that when this evaluation is made it will form one of the most glorious chapters not of Canada alone, but of the Universal Church.