

Father Lacombe's Strange Mission: The Lacombe-Langevin Correspondence on the Manitoba School Question 1895-96

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On December 2, 1895, Archbishop Langevin of St. Boniface added an excited postscript to a letter to Archbishop Cleary of Kingston begun three days earlier. He stated that since he had written the first part of the letter, two critical events had taken place: the Manitoba government had replied to the Federal Government on the settlement of the Manitoba School Question; but that reply had been an altogether unacceptable compromise; the second “is the mission given to Very Rev. Father Lacombe by your humble brother and his suffragants [*sic*], to go and see our Rev. Brothers of the Hierarchy.”¹

Thus began the most extraordinary obedience in the life of a most extraordinary missionary. Who was this Father Lacombe, this man who was being entrusted to speak for Archbishop Langevin in an attempt to get more than just words and promises in the fight for the restoration of rights lost to Catholics by the Manitoba School law of 1890? What credentials had he to be thrust into this inevitably explosive situation between Church and State? For explosive it was – already the Manitoba School Question about which Langevin wrote had bedevilled Canadian federal politics for five years – as Wilfrid Laurier, leader of the Opposition had written to Premier Fielding of Nova Scotia, “... [it] may break the opposition, or break the government, or break both the opposition and the government ...”²

Albert Lacombe was born in 1827 at St. Sulpice in L'Assomption county in Quebec. He attended the Collège de L'Assomption and was ordained as a Montreal secular priest in 1849. He had previously obtained Bishop Bourget's permission to offer himself for the Western missions; almost immediately after his ordination he left to work some three years under Bishop Loras of Dubuque. He returned to Montreal in 1852 and there met Alexandre Taché, Oblate and new co-adjutor to Bishop Provencher of St. Boniface. Lacombe resolved to enter the Oblates himself and made his way back to the West with the new bishop. Because of immediate need, novitiate and reception into the order were deferred

¹ Archiepiscopal Archives of St. Boniface, Archbishop Langevin to Archbishop Cleary, December 2, 1895. (Archiepiscopal Archives of St. Boniface hereafter cited as AASB).

² Public Archives of Canada, Laurier Papers, Volume 9, No. 3924, W. Laurier to W. S. Fielding. November 5. 1895.

until 1856; Father Lacombe was sent directly to Fort Edmonton with the traders of the Hudson's Bay Company. The great territory between the Bow and Peace rivers became his parish; he became the friend and spiritual father of both Cree and Blackfoot, though the tribes had long and bitter rivalries. All his life he promoted Indian training schools to ease the inevitably hard transition brought by the white civilization. The year 1874 saw the completion of a remarkable Cree dictionary and grammar. On at least two occasions he almost single-handedly prevented what would have been serious trouble between Indian and white – the first when the C.P.R. was being rushed through Blackfoot territory in 1883; the second when he persuaded the majority of the Indians not to join the Northwest rebellion of 1885. Unquestionably he was regarded as *the* missionary by many, both Catholic and Protestant; not least among these was Sir William Van Horne, builder and later president of the C.P.R. – when the first train arrived in Calgary in 1883, Father Lacombe was honored by President George Stephen and Van Horne by being named President of the C.P.R. for one hour during a dinner in the official dining car. Nor was he a novice at dealing with government officials; between 1893 and the fall of 1895 he had been in Ottawa no less than four times to discuss school problems, first of the Metis and Indians, later of the Catholics in Manitoba and the Northwest.³

Thus he was hardly a newcomer to the art of lobbying. But the visit that began on December 5, 1895 was by far his most prolonged, most delicate and most difficult. This paper will tell the story of that visit or rather will let Father Lacombe tell his own story. For his reports to the man who had sent him, Archbishop Langevin, were regular and detailed. Forty-six letters covering nearly two hundred pages arrived back at St. Boniface before Father Lacombe himself returned late in March, 1896. He was to mark his sixty-ninth birthday during his stay. He was to live and work on until 1914, when at the age of eighty-seven he finished a life of hardship and many crises. But never before or after our episode did he have to pitch his tent so directly at the meeting place of so many divergent and angry currents. The Manitoba School Question had no easy answers.

Father Lacombe's first letter comes from Ottawa on December 5th, and his impression on arrival seems rather optimistic or at least the situation is not as bad as he had feared. On December 12th, however, a much longer letter arrives, this time in darker tones. Lacombe has just returned from Toronto; the support of the Ontario bishops seems sure, but the situation in the federal cabinet is worsening. The resignation of Clarke Wallace, Minister of Customs and militant Orangeman, may be, as one of the other Ministers has assured him, a sign that the government intends to go through with its promises; but there are other signs

³ Further biographical details may be found in Katherine Hughes, *The Black-Robe Voyageur*, Toronto, 1911; Une Sœur de la Providence, *Le Père Lacombe*, Montréal, 1916; Josephine Phelan, *The Bold Heart : The Story of Father Lacombe*, Toronto, Macmillan, 1956.

that they will remain promises and nothing more. Auguste-Réal Angers, ex-minister since July, has once more sown seeds of dissension in Quebec. He has told an audience that the Conservative Government which he left has no real intention of restoring the Catholic Schools in Manitoba & which brings Lacombe's wry remark, "Ab amicis nostris libera nos Domine." The missionary then suggests a general tactic for Langevin's approval & and here we are given Lacombe's avowed political position & favor not a party but a cause. "... Donc ... Il est entendu chez vous, à Ontario et (je suppose) à Québec, que si le Gouvernement conservateur, fidèle à ses promesses, est défait, en voulant donner la loi rémédiate et finale, il devra être soutenu par Evêques, prêtres, &, &, quand il en appellera au peuple. Si au contraire il abandonne notre cause ou ne veut nous donner [que] ce que nous ne pouvons accepter, alors nous ferons notre possible pour aider à le renverser? C'est bien cela, n'est-ce pas?"⁴ This was indeed an admirable detachment, but it was one which would be increasingly difficult to maintain.

The next letter is sent on December 16th. This time Lacombe has gone to Quebec; he has not seen Archbishop Begin but has been assured of full support by Mgr. Marois, Vicar General. Lacombe then says that he has heard a rumour that Langevin is coming East to attend the special session of Parliament in January. The missionary warns that important but unnamed people in the government have stated that such a move would seriously embarrass the Conservative position; but in a postscript he adds that in point of fact it might be wise if Langevin did come, and says that he himself is ready to return home at any time.

On December 18th, Archbishop Langevin's mother died in Valleyfield; the Archbishop was unable to come, and Bishop Emard officiated at the funeral. Expressions of sympathy are the main subject of the letters of December 20th and December 22nd, but in the latter Father Lacombe plunges back into political matters. Two important bye-elections are being held in Montreal in late December. At no time does Lacombe seem confident that Jacques Cartier will be won, but on December 22nd he is still confident that the reluctant but highly respected Dr. Hingston will win Montreal Centre for the Conservatives. Most important, however, in the December 22nd letter, is the first hint of a difference of opinion among the bishops to whom Lacombe has spoken. "... Depuis ma dernière lettre, j'ai vu plusieurs amis, surtout Mgr Emard, qui, quoiqu'avec nous de coeur et d'âme, cependant craignent et n'ont pas la même confiance que moi. C'est effrayant tous les embarras qu'on s'étudie à préparer contre le règlement de la question de nos écoles. ..."

The December 24th letter reports that he, Lacombe, has finally been able

⁴ AASB, Lacombe to Langevin, December 12, 1895. (Subsequent quotations from the Lacombe-Langevin correspondence will not be footnoted when the date is indicated in the text).

to see Angers – and the interview has not been very pleasant; but at least he has been able to get from the chief “Castor” a promise of support for a remedial bill, if not for the Conservative government. “... Hier je voyais longuement l’Hon^{ble} M^r Angers, qui maudit les Ministres conservateurs comme une bande de chanapands, qui seront toujours prêts à sacrifier les Catholiques de Manitoba, si ça fait leur affaire. Pour tout au monde, il ne voudrait retourner au milieu d’eux; cependant il fera tout en son pouvoir, pour aider, afin que le Bill réparateur soit voté...”

December 30th and 31st bring a burst of activity. Three letters arrive from Montreal on the 30th, two from Ottawa on the 31st. The Montreal letters mourn the loss of the bye-elections, and then take up a much more thorny matter – Lacombe is being asked to be the intermediary to fill the cabinet post left vacant by Angers. John Costigan, Minister of Fisheries, has arrived and has asked him to approach Senator Rodrigue Masson about entering the cabinet, and to do it no less officially than in the name of the Prime Minister. Lacombe hardly knows which way to turn, but feels he cannot but go on. His second letter from Montreal is full of doubt and incredulity at his own position. “... Je pars à l’instant pour aller offrir à M^r Masson le portefeuille de M^r Angers, et cela au nom de Bowell qui vient de m’écrire - O tempora! O mores! où sommes-nous? Où suis-je? Est-ce que je rêve? Demain je partirai pour Ottawa. Costigan vient me rencontrer demain matin. . . . Je joue à gros jeu. Qu’est-ce que la Congrégation va faire de moi, sur mes vieux jours? ...”

Masson refused the plea of Father Lacombe on grounds of ill health, and the third letter from Montreal on December 30th shows that the die is being cast even deeper for the old missionary. Now he feels he has no choice but to return to Ottawa and either cross swords or join hands with Bowell. “Il faut que je sois ce soir à Ottawa et presse M^r Bowell d’ouvrir ainsi la session sans s’occuper de remplir la vacance d’Angers; car il me menace de prendre un Anglais et un protestant, puisque les catholiques se montrent si apathétiques...” “It may have been unconscious on his part, but Father Lacombe’s involvement is now so profound that he feels that it is he who must press on, he who is being threatened.

His arrival in Ottawa does anything but relieve the pressure. The Cabinet, he reports, does not hesitate to point out that the defeats in the Montreal bye-elections seem to prove that those least interested in doing anything for the French and Catholic in Manitoba are the French and Catholic in Quebec. “... Le gouvernement paraît épouvanté de ce que va arriver. Les amis d’Ontario menacent de l’abandonner, puisque les catholiques de Québec et d’Ontario semblent se tourner contre la passation de la mesure...”⁵ Thus Lacombe feels that he is obliged to do everything in his power to shore up the sagging French side of the government. His first letter of December 31st from Ottawa indicates that his next move will be to try to get Senator Desjardins to accept the vacant

⁵ AASB, Lacombe to Langevin, December 31, 1895, Letter No. 1.

portfolio: a second note of the same day is quite sure that Desjardins will refuse – “... Pauvre Desjardins! it est tout tremblant. Il ne sait vraiment s’excuser – il a des embarras personnels, et puis, et puis ...” Lacombe now sounds very close to discouragement; but having put his hand to the plough, he is not one to turn back. He has already gone so far as to promise full ecclesiastical support at election time if the government is beaten over the presentation of a remedial bill. “ ... Je disais aux Ministres, hier soir: ‘Si vous êtes battus, en présentant franchement et loyalement, devant les chambres, *la loi*, aux élections générales, nous vous ramènerons au pouvoir...”

Yet another crisis is looming. A new bye-election is coming up, this time in Charlevoix. Lacombe has received a note from Caron, Minister of Militia, which practically demands that the missionary go to Chicoutimi to take a hand in winning the seat for the Conservatives. “. . . Si nous perdions Charlevoix,” Caron has stated, “je crois réellement que le sort des écoles est tout à jamais scellé.”⁶ The Minister fails to mention that his own fate will be sealed along with that of the schools; in any case he puts Father Lacombe in a very embarrassing position. Lacombe’s letter of January 6th, once again from Montreal, indicates that he has decided not to bend to the pressure of the government – several eminent churchmen have dissuaded him, and, significantly, Lieutenant Governor Chapleau has joined them in their warning. Indeed, eventual Conservative defeat in Charlevoix would have made Lacombe’s position even more difficult than it was.

Mention of Chapleau adds yet another piece to the puzzle. It was no secret that the Lieutenant Governor was regarded as the one man who could once again rally the Quebec contingent for the Conservative party – and it was becoming almost equally clear that he would do no such thing until the actual government had presented what he considered a satisfactory remedial measure. And yet Chapleau is represented by Lacombe as supporting very heartily the Government’s current attempts to get something done on the restoration of the schools – perhaps a combination of fidelity to a promise and of pride too often hurt kept the Lieutenant Governor from at least attempting to rescue the party he had so often saved before.

In any case, events would not long await him or anyone else. On January 4th, seven ministers resigned on the pretext that the Cabinet vacancy left by Angers had not been filled. Lacombe’s January 6th letter from Montreal shows that he has not yet heard this news officially; all the same he is quite sure that Bowell is in grave trouble. January 7th finds Lacombe back in Ottawa, informed of the crisis and completely bewildered by the whole affair. He writes that he has just come from dinner at Bowell’s house; he has found the Prime Minister disgusted with his colleagues and ready to resign. “. . . Je pense qu’il va résigner, peut-être demain. Il est dégouté de la conduite du grand nombre de ses collègues. Il n’y a pas à s’étonner, quand on a entendu ce qui s’est dit cette après

⁶ AASB, A. P. Caron to Langevin, January 1, 1896.

midi, dans la chambre. La déclaration de Foster est indigne d'un gentilhomme envers son chef..." Lacombe expects that Sir Charles Tupper will be called in to replace Bowell, and once again points to Chapleau as the key man. "... Pour moi, je pense qu'il (Tupper) n'en viendra pas à bout, s'il ne gagne pas Chapleau à venir le joindre..."

By January 10th, once more in Montreal, Lacombe feels that things are somewhat brighter. Bowell has made a very impressive defense of his position in a speech to the Senate; Desjardins has been prevailed upon to take Angers' place,⁷ and the remaining ministers have expressed confidence that the Cabinet can now be reformed. But the anomaly of his own position is becoming more and more sharply evident. Thus we hear a missionary's lament – he sees a “comedy” tinged with sadness: “. . . Ah! mon Dieu! est-il possible que sur mes vieux jours de sauvage, il m'était réservé d'être mêlé à de semblables questions de politiques! Moi, pauvre missionnaire du pauvre et de l'ignorant, traitant et discutant aujourd'hui avec nos hommes d'état, les avisant et leur servant d'interprète, dans les crises ministérielles! Ça me paraît comme une comédie. . .”

On January 13th, Lacombe reports still another turn of the tide, this time against the government. So close was the fall of the Bowell ministry at this point that Lacombe can write, “...Quand vous recevrez ces lignes, déjà le télégraphe vous aura annoncé sans doute la chute de notre ami, Sir Bowell et du ministère. Si c'est Tupper sen. qui vient comme premier ministre, que va-t il arriver? Je vous dis franchement que je crains ce qu'on dit de voir former la nouvelle organisation ...” And what of his own position vis-a-vis a future Laurier government, a circumstance Lacombe is quite sure he will soon have to face? Whatever he felt in his heart, he expresses confidence on paper. “... Certains de nos amis craignent que je me compromette, dans mes rapports avec les Ministres, surtout dans les circonstances délicates et scabreuses pour moi. M^r Laurier a connaissance de mes faits et gestes. S'il arrive au pouvoir, comme on s'y attend, aux élections générales, 'Comment vous arrangerez-vous avec celui, pour lequel vous n'aviez que de l'opposition,' me dit-on, tous les jours. 'Je me conduirai avec lui, comme j'ai agi avec les conservateurs, c-à-d, franc et loyal, avec tout pouvoir dûment constitué', je répons et je répondrai...”

But a step was soon taken which made the likelihood of such an easy reconciliation quite remote indeed. And it was of Father Lacombe's own making, however little he may have foreseen that it would heighten the wall between himself and the Liberal party. The step was a letter sent by Lacombe to Laurier

⁷ A memorandum written January 15th by Senator Desjardins on his interview with Prime Minister Bowell and other members of the Cabinet clearly indicates that the Senator entered the Cabinet only on the condition that a remedial bill which met the approval of Father Lacombe and “autres amis autorisés de la cause de la minorité du Manitoba” be introduced. (Archives du Collège Ste. Marie, Montréal). Memorandum kindly made available by R. Père Paul Desjardins, S.J.

on January 20th. By this time the Cabinet crisis had been at least temporarily solved by the Bowell – Tupper agreement. Bowell agreed to take back the “nest of traitors” and remain Prime Minister during the session; Tupper was to enter the Cabinet in place of his son as Minister of Justice, lead the fight for the Remedial Bill in the House of Commons, and take over from Bowell as head of the party and of the government for the general elections. Whatever else the settling of the crisis may have accomplished, it assured that a remedial bill would be presented; and it assured that Father Lacombe, who had worked so hard to help patch the ship of state in order to have such a bill presented, would leave no stone unturned to help the Cabinet put the bill through. One of the first stones turned was this extraordinary letter to the leader of the opposition, in which the old missionary seems at one stroke to go beyond the limits of his commission and to demand what Laurier would be almost certain to refuse. Without reservation he speaks “in the name of our bishops, of the hierarchy and the Catholics of Canada,” and without qualification he asks “the party of which you are the very worthy chief, to assist us in settling this famous question, and to do so by voting with the government on the Remedial Bill.” Nor is Lacombe content to leave the matter as a mere polite request. He moves on to a black and white ultimatum. “... I must tell you that we cannot accept your commission of enquiry on any account, and shall do our best to fight it. If, which may God not grant, you do not believe it to be your duty to accede to our just demands, and if the government, which is anxious to give us the promised law, is beaten and overthrown while keeping firm to the end of the struggle, I inform you, with regret, that the episcopacy, like one man, united with the clergy, will rise to support those who may have fallen in defending us. Please pardon the frankness which leads me to speak thus...”⁸

From the liberal point of view at least, Father Lacombe might well have excused himself for his ‘frankness’; frankness was a mild term for what they considered the letter to be. And for a while at least it seemed that the Liberals would get episcopal support for their point. Through Philippe-Auguste Choquette, deputy for Montmagny, Laurier obtained from Archbishop Begin at least a partial disavowal of Father Lacombe’s action.⁹ Bishop Emard of Valleyfield was even more emphatic. In a letter to Archbishop Fabre of Montreal he stated that he felt Father Lacombe had gone too far, had spoken much too officially in the name of all the bishops. “... Puis-je demander à Votre Grandeur

⁸ Archiepiscopal Archives of Quebec, “La Question Scolaire Manitobaine,” Lacombe to Laurier, January 20, 1896.

⁹ Whatever the content of the letter received by Choquette from Archbishop Begin, it seems that the Liberals made more of it than was warranted. Both his statements to Lacombe as reported February 29th (AASB, Lacombe to Langevin, February 29, 1896), and his later actions show that Archbishop Begin fully intended to approve the remedial bill if Langevin found it satisfactory. Cf. *infra*, no. 18.

si quelqu'un a été, par qui de droit, chargé de représenter l'Episcopat auprès du gouvernement, et si l'acceptation faite par lui de la loi Rémédiateur *telle que proposée* doit réellement lier tous les Evêques. Les conséquences sont si graves que je suis obligé de dire à Votre Grandeur que, s'il y a eu autorisation donnée et engagement pris au nom de l'Episcopat, j'ai été personnellement tout à fait ignoré . . ."¹⁰

Even the usually pro-Conservative *La Presse* was openly critical of Father Lacombe's diplomacy, or lack of it "…Le langage du Père Lacombe peut se résumer à ceci: 'Apprends bien tes devoirs, et tu auras du sucre; sinon, tu auras un bon fouet'. Cela peut être de mise avec les petits sauvages des écoles du Nord-Ouest, que le R.P. dirige avec tant de zèle et de dévouement, mais ne peut produire que des résultats malheureux à Ottawa ..."¹¹

It is true that, as seen from the dates of Bishop Emard's letter and the *La Presse* editorial, the public furor over the ultimatum to Laurier did not come until after February 20th, when the text of this supposedly private letter was published in *L'Electeur*. It is also true that, granted the situation, relations between Lacombe and Laurier would almost certainly have reached the breaking point in some other way, if not in this. In point of fact, however, it was the role of the "ultimatum" letter of January 20th to bring matters to a head. The series of letters from Lacombe to Langevin during the following month indicate as many as five meetings between the missionary and the Liberal leader. Each time the gap seems a little wider. Each time Laurier seems to take as his point of departure that the January 20th letter was a declaration of war. This is summed up in a conversation Lacombe reports on February 15th. "... Grande entrevue de nouveau avec M^r Laurier, que je rencontre dans les couloirs et qui m'entraîne dans sa chambre. Non, il n'y a pas moyen de le convaincre de nous suivre. C'est la guerre qu'il nous déclare, puisqu'on le pousse à cela. Ma lettre est son grand cauchemar. Il la montre à ses partisans et les consulte, sur la portée de ce document. 'Je l'ai toujours devant moi, sur mon bureau', me dit-il. 'Donc c'est la guerre! – Et bien, vous l'aurez', lui ai-je dit! 'L'Episcopat et le clergé veulent nous écraser!' a-t-il continué à réclamer ... Enfin, au moins il persiste à se déclarer contre nous. Que fera-t-il au dernier moment? ..."

But was the letter the real cause of the final split between Laurier and Lacombe? Or was it not the symptom of a deeper, a more inevitable division? It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the rights and wrongs of the two parties' solutions to the Manitoba school problem. The point we are concerned

¹⁰ Episcopal Archives of Valleyfield, Emard to Fabre, February 21, 1896. It should be noted, however, that Bishop Emard was specifically reproving the letter to Laurier, not Father Lacombe's entire mission. On March 13th he writes Lacombe to assure the missionary of his esteem and of his willingness to approve the remedial bill, though not in a public statement. (Episcopal Archives of Valleyfield, Emard to Lacombe, March 13, 1896).

¹¹ *La Presse*, quoted in R. Rumilly, *Histoire de la Province de Québec*, VIII, 26.

with is that, right or wrong, there was a radical division. Granted the simple fact that two approaches had been proposed, and that the two parties were rallying around the opposed solutions for reasons of politics as well as of principle, Father Lacombe could hardly avoid moving closer to identification with one or other of those. practical answers. And both the long and the short history preceding his visit to Ottawa fairly well assured that he would choose the Conservative solution. Even if we do not go beyond Father Lacombe's letters to his Archbishop, it becomes evident that the cold fact of two irreconcilable practical policies form the real gulf between Laurier and the old missionary.

There is no denying that personal relations between the two men worsened as time went on; each interview that is reported tells of a growing strain. Furthermore, as the missionary's ability to find common ground with Laurier decreased, his admiration for and confidence in Bowell increased. For example, in his January 17th letter, Lacombe speaks of Bowell as "toujours le même, sincère et fidèle." And on February 4th Lacombe describes a chance meeting with the Prime Minister which seems to speak volumes. "...comme toujours, j'ai été très content et très satisfait de mon entrevue avec mon vieil ami, qui, quoiqu'orangiste, me témoigne tant d'intérêt et même d'affection. Ce matin, désirant le rencontrer, je m'en allais dans une belle voiture couverte, quand je le vis qui s'en allait à pied vers les bâtisses du parlement. Je descendis de ma voiture et j'allai l'inviter à monter avec moi, en lui disant 'C'est l'Eglise qui vient chercher l'Etat.' 'Indeed you are too kind, my good father confessor!' fut sa réponse. Et nous nous dirigeons vers son office..." On the other hand, we should not conclude that Lacombe personally disliked Laurier, even at the end. Though differences on policy grew deeper, Lacombe repeatedly spoke of a genuine admiration for the Liberal leader. During the furor over the "ultimatum" letter of January 20th, the missionary could write, "... Pourtant c'est drôle, je suis porté à vouloir estimer cet homme. C'est bien regrettable qu'il ait embrassé cette ligne de conduite. Il est probable qu'il va encore chercher à me rencontrer. Que puis-je faire plus pour lui? ..."12 And even after Laurier's March 3rd speech, with which Lacombe could not have disagreed more profoundly, a spark of attraction still remains – "... Que c'était triste et regrettable d'entendre une si belle éloquence défendre une si mauvaise cause!"13

In any case, the problem was far more than a question of personal likes and sympathies. Once again, Father Lacombe's correspondence is the clearest proof that the ever-present contradiction on practical policy was the catalyst about which all other differences were gathering. And the closer the time approached for practical action, the clearer the division became. Laurier's first complaint was obviously that the bishops, as represented by Lacombe, were interfering too much; what made the pill even more bitter was that, in his view, they were getting far too little. As he put it to Father Lacombe in early February, no matter

¹² AASB; Lacombe to Langevin, February 19, 1896.

¹³ AASB, Lacombe to Langevin, March 4, 1896.

what concern was shown or influence exercised on behalf of the Conservatives by the bishops, the net result promised to be only a very poor half-loaf for the Catholics of Manitoba. “... Ah! mes amis,’ me disait Laurier, ‘Mgr Langevin criait partout qu’il n’accepterait pas de compromis et qu’il voulait ses écoles et rien que ses écoles ... Et voilà que *votre* bill vous en fait avaler en masse!’”¹⁴

What is crucially important to realize at this point is that, while Laurier was stressing the fact that Lacombe’s action would result in arraying ecclesiastical thunder on the side of an inadequate solution, Lacombe was just as surely moving to the position that the alternative would be to get nothing at all. Lacombe’s contention was that a far from satisfactory bill might have to be accepted as a point of departure; as early as January 17th he writes, “... Il paraît que ce *bill* que je n’ai pu voir encore *in toto* est pas mal [*sic*] altéré et changé depuis l’original de l’été dernier...” “... Le succès de notre question se dessine de plus en plus. Il faudra voter pour ou mourir; car c’est une question de vie ou de mort...” By February 9th, when Lacombe tells Langevin of an encouraging visit to Archbishop Walsh of Toronto, the position of “half a loaf is better than none” seems to have been accepted as a hard but necessary fact of life by the old missionary.¹⁵

In point of fact, Langevin was not ready to accept half a loaf; so much was this so that we find the next group of letters revealing a near rupture between the Archbishop and the missionary. And, for better or worse, they show how central Father Lacombe’s role had become in the piece – once more, though someone else might have produced the same effect in his absence, it was Lacombe and none other who actually engineered the fateful approval. The letters of February 13th, 15th, 18th, 19th, and 22nd read almost like a suspense novel; each in its own way is an ultimatum. What is more, granted Langevin’s February 17th reply, “... Legem ignoramus. Primae editiones de libris et taxatione displicent...”,¹⁶ there is no sure guarantee that the ultimatums will work.

The letter of February 13th sets the stage; Father Lacombe reminds his archbishop that the linchpin of episcopal support for the bill in Ontario and Quebec is approval from St. Boniface. “... Vous savez que je vous ai dit, dans une lettre, une déclaration bien importante, c-à-d, que les Evêques d’Ontario et

¹⁴ AASB, Lacombe to Langevin, February 9, 1896.

¹⁵ *Re* Archbishop Walsh’s attitude, which included a recommendation for a meeting of all parties concerned, and which was warmly seconded by Governor General Lord Aberdeen, Lacombe has this to say: “C’est un frère pour nous” (AASB, Lacombe to Langevin, February 7, 1896); and “Laurier . m’a dit que, malgré le respect qu’il avait pour L’Archevêque Walsh, il soutenait et soutiendrait que S. G. avait oublié, parce que certainement, en octobre dernier, Elle lui avait dit qu’Elle approuvait son projet d’enquête ou commission...” (AASB, Lacombe to Langevin, February 9 1896).

¹⁶ AASB, Langevin to Lacombe, February 17, 1896. This telegram might be freely translated as follows: “We do not recognize this law. The first clauses on books and taxation displease us.”

de Québec m'ont assuré qu'ils seraient satisfaits du Bill et le soutiendraient une fois que l'Archevêque de St. Boniface et les autres intéressés auraient exprimé leur satisfaction et acceptation. . .” The first letter of February 15th spells out a near demand that the bill be accepted, imperfect as it may be. “... Mais ... ne vaut-il pas mieux céder, sur certains points de détails, qu'on pourra régler plus tard, que de ne rien avoir du tout, quand nous sommes assurés que nous avons le principal, c-à-d., le contrôle de nos écoles? ...” A second dispatch goes out the same day, when Lacombe receives Langevin's strong objections to the book clause of the bill in particular; the missionary states that he will suspend action if so ordered, but warns that a delay in approval may be fatal. February 18th finds Lacombe in Quebec, and so far committed to the Bill that he has left the following statement with Archbishop Begin in Langevin's name: “... Que nous acceptons, *en principe*, le Bill rémédiateur, dans la prévision que des amendements y seront ajoutés, lors de la discussion...” With the bridges burnt at the Archevêché in Quebec, the “*legem ignoramus*” telegram, which Lacombe evidently did not receive until after he had written his February 18th letter, could bring little but consternation. Consternation or not, Father Lacombe saw no alternative but to push on. His letter of February 19th shows increasing urgency; he can only express dismay at the Archbishop's refusal to accept the bill without delay. Finally the missionary is driven to a complete spelling-out of the case for an immediate and unqualified acceptance. This is the letter of February 22nd. It is accompanied by urgent telegrams bearing the same message, unblushingly paid for by J. Alderic Ouimet, Minister of Public Works – “C'est l'Honble. M. Ouimet qui paye les télégrammes que je vous envoie aujourd'hui.” The open and shut case in the letter runs as follows:

.. C'est fini – Prenez votre parti – Voulez-vous tout ou rien? Si vous adoptez cette dernière résolution, alors la question est perdue et notre espérance s'en va. Rappelons-nous que nous ne commandons pas. Nos adversaires sont légions...” “... Pour moi, Mgr, malgré ce qui m'est réservé dans l'avenir de responsabilité, devant Dieu et devant les hommes, voici mon *ultimatum*: et cela après bien des réflexions et des consultations avec ceux qui s'intéressent à notre cause. – Je vous dis, que nous devrions accepter le Bill, tel qu'il est, franchement, dans la prévision et l'espérance, que si le Gouvernement remporte le vote, alors on pourra facilement amender certains détails, qui deviendront faciles avec le temps. Pour le moment, il faut accepter cette loi, telle quelle, supposé qu'elle soit acceptée par la majorité, à la seconde lecture ou bien, nous allons jouer notre dernière carte et nous abandonner au pouvoir des libéraux, avec lesquels l'épiscopat est en guerre en ce moment, sur presque tous les points du pays. Si nous voulons courir ce risque, c'est votre affaire. –

C'est très bien et très brave de dire: “Je ne veux pas de telle clause, je m'opposerai; il nous faut telle chose, on doit changer telle disposition &' – mais si nous perdons ce que nous étions loin d'espérer dès les commencements de la lutte, ne nous exposons-nous pas à tout perdre? quand nous allons voir les conservateurs vaincus et s'éloigner (un grand nombre de ceux des nôtres) de l'arène politique pour toujours? Je vous conseille donc d'écrire de suite à

tous les Evêques de Québec, des Provinces Maritimes, d'Ontario et de votre province d'accepter, avec vous, la loi rémédiate, telle que formulée dans le présent Bill, et cela malgré l'opposition des libéraux, qui veulent faire du zèle.
– Plus que jamais c'est le moment critique.

Soyez sûr que ma manière d'agir n'est pas dictée par mes sympathies pour le parti conservateur, mais pour la cause de nos écoles, qui me préoccupent jusqu'à me rendre malade..."

The pressure had results. Whatever the precise importance of Lacombe's barrage of letters and telegrams, the outcome was what had been demanded. On February 22nd, probably after the telegrams but certainly before the letter of the same day from Ottawa had been received, Archbishop Langevin wired the following message. "... Lex applicabilis, efficax et satisfactoria. Probo illam. Omnes episcopi et veri catholici approbare debent. Vita in lege. Optima littera tua. Nihil vero de conciliatione..."¹⁷

In many ways, once Archbishop Langevin's consent to the Remedial Bill as proposed is in, Father Lacombe's story in Ottawa and Quebec is anti-climatic. More and more his letters reveal that he is tired of his role on the public stage and that he wants to go home. But the situation he has been so central in creating will not let him go. As we have seen earlier, the protest over the letter to Laurier has to be faced, no longer in private with the Liberal leader, but in public. Some anxious moments are produced by reports of Archbishop Bégin's statements to Choquette and other Liberals, but on February 29th Lacombe is able to write from Three Rivers that everything has been cleared with the Quebec prelate. "... S. G. m'a reçu avec sa bonté ordinaire. Après une longue explication, qu'on voulait avoir de ma bouche, *os ad os*, plutôt qu'une lettre, Mgr m'a déclaré, comme il a dû déjà le faire dans une lettre à V. G., qu'il acceptait votre manière d'agir et l'approuvait, promettant de nous supporter jusqu'au bout. Sur mes remarques, Mgr m'a rassuré me disant qu'il n'y avait rien de vrai dans ce que les libéraux avaient publié, affirmant que S. G. désapprouvait ma conduite. 'Ne craignez pas, un semblable acte de lâcheté et de trahison de ma part', me disait-Elle..."¹⁸

The purpose of Lacombe's visit to Three Rivers involved still another problem, that of the possibility of a collective episcopal letter urging the Catholic members of parliament to vote for the Remedial Bill. And indeed Three Rivers was the logical place for him to go; Bishop Laflèche in this as in other matters was the chief protagonist of strong episcopal action. Father Lacombe summarizes his position on the subject to Archbishop Langevin on February 28th, the day before he is to visit Laflèche. "... Si vous écrivez une lettre

¹⁷ AASB, Langevin to Lacombe, February 22, 1896. A free translation here would be as follows: "The law is applicable, efficacious and satisfactory. I approve it. All the bishops and all true Catholics ought to lend their approval. There is life in the law. Your letters are excellent. There will be no conciliation..."

¹⁸ AASB, Lacombe to Langevin, February 29, 1896. Cf. supra no.

publique, comme vous le conseille Mgr Laflèche, vous avez besoin d'être bien sûr de toutes vos paroles, qui vont être commentées. Pour moi, je vous conseillerais de ne rien dire pour le moment, visa-vis la conscience des voteurs. Malgré ce que prétend l'Evêque de Trois-Rivières, je vous prierais d'attendre pour publier une lettre quelconque. En disant cela, je suis l'interprète de nos amis du Gouvernement, de Bowell, Ouimet, Angers &..." Once more we see the other side of the coin of Lacombe's mission – by choice or necessity, he has become the government's agent as well as the bishops'. In any case, despite some confusion over what was to be done in private, Laflèche seems to have been convinced; no public letter was sent to the deputies.

As for the debate on the Remedial Bill, Lacombe was by then a bystander, though a very excited one. He could only record his approval of the Conservative speeches and his sorrow and anger at the Liberal, that of Laurier in particular. In his letter of March 4th to Langevin, Lacombe gives vent to his feelings.

"... J'arrivais hier ici de Montréal pour assister à la chambre à deux grands discours, bien différents au point de vue de notre cause. L'un de ces discours était prononcé par un protestant, Sir Charles Tupper, en notre faveur; l'autre par un catholique, Mr. Laurier, contre nous. Honte et ignominie à cet homme sans coeur, qui vient de décider son avenir comme homme public. Donc c'est fini! Ce dont il m'avait menacé, il y a quelques jours, il l'a accompli hier, au milieu des applaudissements de ses partisans. Il a déclaré la guerre – Pendant une heure et demie, avec une éloquence entraînante, il nous a condamnés, les Evêques, le clergé et moi donc! Malgré ses protestations de catholicité et d'attachement à sa mère, l'Eglise, c'est fini, il s'est suicidé hier devant sa patrie et son église. Mon Dieu que c'était triste et regrettable d'entendre une si belle éloquence défendre une si mauvaise cause! Mon coeur en pleurait! C'est fini! qu'il ne vienne plus me parler, je le renie – qu'il ait le sort des Mercier et des autres esprits forts! ..."

Yet one further significant task remained to the old missionary on his amazing political expedition. It concerned the projected peace delegation to Winnipeg and the Greenway government. The man who insisted most loudly on this delegation was Sir Donald Smith, President of the Bank of Montreal and soon to be Tupper's successor as High Commissioner to England. But behind the scenes there was another force, that of the Governor General, Lord Aberdeen. Father Lacombe's contacts with Lord and Lady Aberdeen during his mission are a story in themselves, so obviously do they illustrate the veneration in which the old missionary was held. Several of the December and January letters tell of invitations to Lacombe to come to Rideau Hall to give a soirée on his missionary experiences. Finally he runs out of excuses; on January 17th he writes that he has agreed to go up on January 23rd. "... Je rencontre à la porte du Parlement Lady Aberdeen; je ne puis pas me dégager; elle insiste. Coûte que coûte, il me faudra, le 23 prochain, aller à Rideau Hall, donner une lecture, en compagnie de Magnificus Rector et de quelques-uns de ses élèves, qui chanteront. Vraiment, c'est à ne pas y croire! Qui me rendra mon ermitage?..."

And if he could not say the same of any other phase of his mission to the east, Father Lacombe at least could call his visit to Rideau Hall “un grand succès... Il y a longtemps que j’ai été aussi à l’aise et que j’ai reçu autant de marques d’affection et d’estime, n’en déplaise à mon humble position ...”¹⁹

For obvious reasons, Lord Aberdeen had to avoid being drawn into the political quarrel over the Remedial Bill. Yet on two occasions at least, Father Lacombe’s letters show that the Governor General was far from indifferent. The first involved Archbishop Walsh’s suggestion for a conference at Ottawa among all the contending parties, already referred to;²⁰ the second concerned the delegation to Winnipeg. On February 13th, Father Lacombe tells how he was instrumental in discouraging Lord Aberdeen from the first project. “. . . Elle (Son Excellence) semble beaucoup tenir au plan de Mgr Walsh et insistait pour que je me prêterai à favoriser cette conférence. Je lui ai dit franchement qu’on ne devait pas y penser, que la chose n’était plus possible, que personne n’en voulait, ni Archevêque de St. Boniface ni conservateurs, ni Laurier. . .” As for the project of the Smith mission to Winnipeg, Lacombe is far from enthusiastic about it, but is willing to act as intermediary to urge Langevin at least to refrain from condemning it. “. . . Mgr et bien cher de mon cœur, ne vous occupez donc pas de Greenway. Ne dites plus que vous n’accepterez pas ceci ou cela. Cette conférence n’aura pas lieu. Quand même elle aurait lieu, il est certain qu’elle n’aura aucun effet. Laissons-les faire. Dans tous les cas, si Greenway acceptait une conférence, il faudrait qu’il se rendît aux conditions du Bill rémédiateur, ce qu’il ne fera pas. Sir Donald Smith, supporté par Rideau Hall, veut avoir la satisfaction d’être un homme important. Laissons-lui cette consolation ...”²¹ Thus once again Father Lacombe provided a real but sufficiently hidden point of contact for Lord Aberdeen in the explosive political atmosphere.²²

By the time of this last letter, however, Father Lacombe is sure that his personal mission is finished. The very next day his letter concludes with these words, “. . . C’est probablement la dernière lettre que je vous adresse d’Ottawa et de la Province de Québec.”²³

Father Lacombe left Ottawa on March 23rd. His heart and eye were set strongly on the mission at St. Albert; he even missed meeting Archbishop Langevin when passing through Winnipeg. On April 2nd he writes to Langevin from Edmonton; by now, however, although he makes a brief comment on

¹⁹ AASB, Lacombe to Langevin, January 28, 1896.

²⁰ Cf. supra, no. 15.

²¹ AASB, Lacombe to Langevin, March 18, 1896, Letter No. 2.

²² The role of the Governor General in the crisis of 1896 is treated by J. T. Saywell in his introduction to Lady Aberdeen’s *Canadian Journal*, to be published by the Champlain Society in 1960. While his official position prevented him from entering actively into politics, there is no doubt that Lord Aberdeen, goaded on by his wife, had in this instance involved himself very deeply.

²³ AASB, Lacombe to Langevin, March 19, 1896.

developments back East, his main topic is the activities of the mission. He is back in his true harness again, and writes as if nothing had happened to disturb his peace of mind or ordinary way of acting.

What are we to think of this mission and of the man who made it? Reading over what the Liberals and others had to say about him, Father Lacombe may well have wished to be back among the Indians where they said he belonged – at least their savagery, their jungle, was one he could understand better than that at Ottawa. Again and again he stated that he was not a party man; as he put it at the beginning of his mission, his political creed was to support the government in power as long as that government was working reasonably for justice and equity – in this case for the restoration of the school rights taken away by the law of 1890.

But, willing or not, qualified or not, the old missionary had plunged very deeply into the political cauldron of the country. In the first place, in late December and early January he was in the middle of the business of patching and repatching shaky cabinets, even coming close to the business of making and unmaking governments. Secondly, Father Lacombe was the one through whom Laurier definitively broke with the episcopal position – it was his letter which prompted the Liberal leader to make his statements as strong as they were. Thirdly, Lacombe was the chief instrument which pushed Archbishop Langevin to the acceptance on February 22nd of a Bill against which he had violently protested only four days earlier. Perhaps Langevin would have been pushed there anyway; as with the break with Laurier there is no knowing what would have been the outcome had Father Lacombe not been on the scene. The point however is that he was on the scene – that he was in this, as in the other episodes we have seen revealed in his letters, the arm of the government with the bishops and of the bishops with the government.

We cannot avoid the conclusion that Father Lacombe did not fully grasp the implications of the situation into which he was plunged – particularly of the party system of politics. His support, and through him the support of the bishops for the Remedial Bill as proposed, involved a support not only for a bill of uncertain value, but for the total program of a government that was crumbling under its own weight. And, like it or not, disavow it or not, this involved an over-identification with the party which formed that government.

Hindsight, that chameleon faculty which is at once the vice and virtue of historians, may make us say that the price of Father Lacombe's decisive action came too high. At the same time it reminds us that Father Lacombe was above all a man of action – a man who would far rather be accused of having tried and failed than of not having tried at all. From many points of view it may be regrettable that this famous old missionary was the one chosen to do the "infighting." Yet in its own way the choice was a tribute to the cause – neither the bishops nor Father Lacombe were playing for small stakes – and to the man, that he should be asked, and accept, and spare nothing in the doing.