

The Oblates and the Northwest: 1845-1861

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The object of this paper is not to relate minutely the missionary activity of the Oblates in the Canadian West, but rather to show very briefly how, in the midst of serious difficulties, they succeeded in less than fifteen years—from the time of their arrival at Saint Boniface until the death of their Founder—to cover the vast territory of the diocese of Saint Boniface which then extended as far west as the Rockies and as far North as the Arctic Ocean.

The Oblates came to Montreal on December 2, 1841. Acting under the influence of the Bishop of the North West, Norbert Provencher, they sent missionaries to the Indians in Eastern Canada in 1844.¹

Bishop Provencher arrived at Red River in 1818² and, after more than twenty-five years of heroic acts, of privations and sufferings of every kind, all he had accomplished by 1845, due to no fault of his own, was but a humble beginning, especially among the Indians.³ This was due in great part to the fact that he never had more than four or five priests at the same time. Many, tired or disgusted, remained but for a few years or even less and returned to Quebec.

Dom Paul Benoit, C.R.I.C., biographer of Bishop Taché, writes that:

En 26 ans, 12 prêtres séculiers seulement étaient venus avec lui apporter leur concours dans l'immense district qu'il avait à évangéliser; encore la plupart d'entre eux, après 1, 2, 5, 10 ans de séjour étaient retournés dans le diocèse de Québec, épuisés ou dégoûtés. Je ressemble disant tristement un jour le prélat à l'un de ses missionnaires, je ressemble à un chêne qui demeure seul au milieu d'une plaine où l'orage emporte tous

¹ See Gaston Carrière, O.M.I., *Histoire documentaire de la Congrégation des Oblats de Marie-Immaculée dans l'Est du Canada* Ottawa, Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1961, vol. 3, pp. 15 ff

² Abbés Norbert Provencher and Sévère Dumoulin arrived at Red River on July 16, 1818 (*Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 17 (1918), pp. 176-177). See also Provencher to Plessis, July 21, 1818, in *Bulletin de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface*, 3 (1913), p. 26.

³ Adrien-Gabriel Morice, O.M.I., *Histoire de l'Eglise Catholique dans l'Ouest canadien* Montréal, Granger Frères, 1921, vol. 1, p. 304.

les autres arbres.⁴

Faced with this tragic situation, the Bishop sought the help of a religious Congregation and, although in 1843, he was given the hope of obtaining the Jesuits,⁵ it never materialized. On June 7, 1843, he wrote to Sir George Simpson, Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, asking permission to introduce foreign, that is European priests, into the district.⁶ The reply made by the Governor on June 9 was far from encouraging. "In the matter of introducing foreign priests," said Simpson, "I dare not in any capacity sanction this part of your Lordship's plan."⁷

Fortunately, the Company made no objection when the first French priests were sent into the territory.

Unable to introduce the Jesuits in his diocese, Bishop Provencher decided to call the Oblates. On June 26, 1844, he wrote to Bishop Pierre-Flavien Turgeon, of Québec: "As we now stand, there is no general agreement, everyone acts his own way."⁸ To achieve the desired unity of action, he wanted the establishment of a religious Congregation; as he stated to Abbé Félix Cazeau on June 30 of the same year: "We will make little progress without religious. [...] Religious will do more than us and spend less."⁹ The following month, on July 6, he wrote to the Archbishop of Québec, Joseph Signay: "If there are vocations [for the Oblates], encourage them, because we will accomplish nothing with a secular clergy. There is no unity of action. *Ommes q̄ure quæ sua q̄ærunt*, a source of expense without result. I also expect some requests [on the part of the clergy] to leave [the country]."¹⁰

After the tragic death of Abbé Jean-Edouard Darveau, Bishop Provencher asked Bishop Ignace Bourget, of Montréal, if he could send him some of his Oblates, preferably Canadians. Strangers could come later."¹¹

Bishop Bourget, whose missionary zeal was worldwide, would, once more, be instrumental in furthering the work of the Oblates. On October 10, 1844, he pleaded the case of Bishop Provencher, in a letter to Bishop de

⁴ *Vie de M^{gr} Taché archevêque de St-Boniface* Montréal, Librairie Beauchemin, 1904, vol. 1, p. 53.

⁵ Diocesan archives of Québec, RR. I-95.

⁶ Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface.

⁷ Hudson's Bay Company archives, London, D. 4/61, p. 223.

⁸ Diocesan archives of Québec, RR. II-228.

⁹ *Ibid.*, RR. IV-20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, RR. I-123.

¹¹ July 30, 1844 (Diocesan archives of Montreal); *Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 18 (1919), p. 264.

Mazenod, Founder of the Oblates, discussing among other things the Red River mission: “In my mind, this a beautiful mission, an opportunity which should not be missed.”¹² This letter produced the expected results and the Oblate superior in Canada, Father Joseph-Eugène-Bruno Guigues, who was hesitating, received several dispatches from Marseilles telling him to advise Bishop Provencher that his proposal was accepted and that two Oblates would be put at his disposal forthwith.¹³ Guigues conveyed the news to Bishop Signay,¹⁴ who in turn assured Bishop Provencher that he would have two Oblates and hoped that “these two missionaries would soon be followed by a good number of men from the same Order; because I understand that the work will go better ... when all the labourers shall have uniformity of views and opinions.”¹⁵

¹² October 10, 1844 (*Registre des Lettres*, vol. 3, pp. 432-433).

¹³ Alfred Yenveux, O.M.I., *Les saintes règles de la congrégation des missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée expliquées d'après les écrits, les leçons et l'esprit de M^{sr} Charles-Joseph-Eugène de Mazenod*, vol. 7, pp. 37-38 (Manuscript: Oblate general archives, Rome). See also *Délibérations du Conseil général*, December 16; vol. 1, p. 2 (*ibid.*) and Mazenod to Bourget, February 6 (Diocesan archives of Montreal, Oblates).

¹⁴ February 8 (Diocesan archives of Quebec, PP. 0. I-20).

¹⁵ *Registre des Lettres*, vol. 21, p. 215.

Father Guigues, however, is not completely converted to the idea, but the Founder of the Oblates cut short his representative's hesitancy on May 24, 1845, when he ordered Father Pierre Aubert (French) and Brother Alexandre Taché (Canadian) to Red River.¹⁶

Needless to say that the Bishop of the North West was very pleased with the good news and immediately decided that, in the spring of 1846, the new-comers will probably be sent to the missions established by Abbé Jean-Baptiste Thibault,¹⁷ in what is now Alberta.

The Oblates leave Lachine, near Montréal, on June 24, 1845, and reach Saint Boniface on August 25. According to Bishop Taché, the old Bishop was quite disappointed and told Brother Taché, then subdeacon: "If you are not a priest you could have stayed home,"¹⁸ while Dom Benoit writes that he also said: "Subdeacon! but it is priests we need;" "they are sending children when men are required."¹⁹

At the time, Bishop Provencher was far from thinking that this "child" would soon become his coadjutor and successor. However, he was not long in appreciating the qualities of the young missionary and wrote: "Des Taché et des Lafèche, vous pouvez m'en envoyer sans crainte."²⁰

About the same time, the Bishop began asking for a coadjutor²¹ and his numerous representations would lead to the appointment of Taché on June 24, 1850.

With this first caravan of Oblates the Bishop is now assured of a constant inflow of missionaries which will enable him to continue, strengthen and increase the number of missions very valiantly established by his secular priests so few in number. From 1845 to 1861, 20 Oblate priests, 8 brothers, and 2 secular priests who became Oblates were sent to the Red River missions.

The first two Oblates spent the first month studying the Saulteux

¹⁶ Alfred Yenveux, O.M.I., *op. cit.*, vol. 9, p. 35.

¹⁷ *Diocesan archives of Quebec*, RR. I-165.

¹⁸ *Quelques notes sur les commencements de l'histoire religieuse de ce pays; Résumé des conférences données par M^{re} Taché du 15 déc. 1881 à la fin de mai 1882 au collège de Saint-Boniface* [résumé par M^{re} Gabriel Cloutier], 8^e leçon, 4 avril 1882, in *Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 38 (1939), p. 158.

¹⁹ *Vie de M^{re} Taché* [...], vol. 1, pp. 86-87.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 87.

²¹ Bishop Provencher began asking for a coadjutor on August 29, 1845. See Provencher to Signay, August 29, 1845 (*Diocesan archives of Quebec*, RR. II-229).

language and ministering to the Whites and Métis of the Colony.²²

The purpose of this paper is not to dwell on their action at Saint Boniface but rather to examine their missionary work outside the episcopal city and especially how, in a short time, they had covered the whole territory.

The expansion of the missions was not an easy task. Bishop Taché, in a long report to the *Propagation de la Foi de Paris*, on July 16, 1888, mentions some of the difficulties: the innumerable and endless journeys in all kinds of weather, by canoe, on horseback or with the Red River carts; the poverty of the missionaries who often experienced hunger and lived in poor huts; their isolation which has been one of the greatest hardships of the missionaries, living alone for years and receiving news from the outside world only once or twice a year and having to foresee the amount of supplies needed two or three years in advance; the ignorance of the various languages which they had to learn while deprived of grammars and dictionaries and, finally, the dubiousness of success – having the impression that their work and sacrifices were all in vain.²³ With an unflinching courage and the grace of God they overcame all these tremendous difficulties and forged their way ahead.

Father Aubert was the first Oblate to minister to the Indians of Red River. In June 1846 he visited the Saulteux mission of Wabassimong established by Father Georges Belcourt in 1838.²⁴ He returned the following year with Father Henri Faraud who went as far as Rainy Lake. These visits proved that the Saulteux were not ready to accept the Gospel and the mission was abandoned²⁵ in favour of other tribes asking for the missionary.

The same happened with the mission of Duck Bay on the West shore of lake Winnipegosis, visited for the first time by Abbé Jean Baptiste Thibault in 1840.²⁶ Father François Bermond said in 1850: “I think that God does not

²² Joseph-Etienne Champagne, O.M.I., *Les missions catholiques dans l'Ouest canadien (1818-1875)*, Ottawa, Editions de l'Université; Editions des Etudes Oblates, 1949, p. 73.

²³ Archives of the Propagation de la Foi de Paris, F. 193a, Saint-Boniface.

²⁴ Alexandre Taché, O.M.I., *Vingt années de missions dans le Nord-Ouest de l'Amérique*, Montréal, Cadieux & Derome, 1888, pp. 11-14.

²⁵ Provencher to Turgeon, December 4, 1847. In this letter he states: “les sauvages n'ont pas voulu entendre parler de religion” (Diocesan archives of Quebec). See also Taché to Propagation de la Foi de Paris, July 16, 1888, pp. 11-12 (*loc. cit.*).

²⁶ Belcourt to Cazeau, January 1, 1842 (Diocesan archives of Quebec); Provencher to Signay, January 7, 1842, in *Bulletin de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface*, 3 (1913), pp. 198-200.

desire the Saulteux since they have so little use of Him and of His priests.”²⁷

Another mission in the vicinity of Saint Boniface brought great consolations: the mission of the buffalo hunters. The priests accompanied the Métis in all their expeditions and were elated with the result of their apostolate. It also led to an unforeseen mission confided to Father Alexis André by the United States Government in 1863-1864 to bring about peace between the Government and the Sioux tribes south of the Canadian border.²⁸

Let us now turn our attention to the missions outside of Saint Boniface to those we find in what is now Alberta, Saskatchewan and the North West Territories.

Although the first mission established by the Oblates is that of Ile à la Crose, they worked in places already visited or established by the secular clergy.

Lac Sainte-Anne (1842).²⁹

Edmonton and Lac Sainte-Anne were the first places visited in the far West. Abbés Norbert Blanchet and Modeste Demers passed through Edmonton [Fort des Prairies] on their way to Oregon on September 6, 1838. It was a few years later before another Catholic priest came to the post. Although invited in 1839 by John Rowand, Chief Factor at Edmonton, the priest could not go because of the refusal of the Hudson’s Bay Company. Bishop Provencher then told the Company that his authority came from a higher source than that of the Committee in London since it came from God. He had been appointed Bishop to send missionaries all over the country and added: “I shall send my priests at the door of your forts and if they are refused hospitality, they will camp outside, but this will not be honourable for the honourable Company.”³⁰

²⁷ Provencher to Bourget, August 5, 1850 (Diocesan archives of Montreal and *Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 20 (1921), p. 172). See Bermond to Faraud, September 25, 1850 (Oblate General archives, Rome: Bermond, François).

²⁸ See Gaston Carrière, O.M.L., *Une mission de paix. Le père Alexis André, o.m.i., et les Sioux (1863-1865)*, in *Revue de l’Université d’Ottawa*, 39 (1969), pp. 22-93.

²⁹ Philipped’ Armor [Aristide Philippet, O.M.I.], *Bribes d’histoire locale. Mission du Lac Sainte-Anne*, in *La Survivance*, January 18, 1933 ff; Anonymous, *Mission du Lac Sainte-Anne* (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface). See also Louis Laféche, *Etat général des missions du Diocèse de Saint-Boniface*, August 9, 1855 (Diocesan archives of Quebec).

³⁰ Georges Dugas, *L’Ouest canadien*, in *Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 3 (1904), p. 239.

The Company's refusal may be due to the fact that there was probably already an arrangement with the Methodists,³¹ since Reverend Robert Terril Rundle arrived at the "Big House," Edmonton, on Sunday October 18, 1840 – the first missionary ever to reside on the Saskatchewan.³²

In 1841, Rowand renewed his request and a Métis by the name of Picher travelled to Red River to plead on behalf of his compatriots.³³ Bishop Provencher then sent Abbé Thibault, who left on an exploratory trip on April 20, 1842,³⁴ and reached Edmonton on June 19.³⁵ He visited several posts and returned to Red River on October 20,³⁶ after having baptized 353 persons.³⁷

³¹ See W. H. Brooks, *British Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Activities in the Hudson's Bay Company Territory, 1840-1854*, in the present *Report of the Canadian Catholic Historical Association*.

³² Alfred Carter, *The Life and Labors of the Reverend Robert Terril Rundle, Pioneer Missionary to the Saskatchewan Canada*, Boston University (Ph.D. Thesis), 1942, pp. 72, 82. One cannot fail to see that many affirmations are biased.

³³ Joseph-Etienne Champagne, O.M.I., *op. cit.*, p. 64.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64. Thibault to the Bishop of Quebec, June 16, 1843, in *Rapport sur les Missions du Diocèse de Québec*, 1845, pp. 72-80; Provencher to Bourget, June 30, 1842, says that Thibault left on April 20 for the "Pied de la montagne de Roche," and has great hopes in this voyage (*Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 18 (1919), p. 192); Provencher to Signay, June 30, 1846 (*Bulletin de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface*, 3 (1913), pp. 200-201). See also *Mission du Lac Sainte-Anne* (*loc. cit.*).

³⁵ Thibault to his father, Edmonton, July 8, 1842 (*Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 27 (1928), p. 71), says that he left Red River on April 30, and arrived at Edmonton on June 19. His mission is among the Cree Indians, but the Blackfoot listened attentively to his teachings.

³⁶ Thibault to the Bishop of Quebec, June 18, 1843 (*Rapport sur les Missions du Diocèse de Québec*, 1845, pp. 72-80); Provencher to Signay, January 2, 1843 (*Bulletin de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface*, 3 (1913), p. 212), says that Thibault returned from his mission on October 20, after having left Red River on April 20. The population signed a petition to the Governor and he went as far as the foot of the famous mountain.

³⁷ Thibault to Signay, June 18, 1843 (*Rapport sur les Missions du Diocèse de Québec*, 6 (1845), pp. 72-80). He affirms that he baptized 353 children and that the Reverend Rundle, established there for the last "three years," was not happy to see him.. "Grande fut sa colère à l'arrivée d'une soutane; car il savait la force magique qu'exerce cet habit sur l'esprit des sauvages. Ses préventions n'ont point été fausses. [...] J'espère que les brebis rentrées au bercail ne cesseront plus d'entendre la voix du vrai pasteur." (p. 75).

The results of this first mission proved the necessity of a Catholic establishment in that part of the country.³⁸ He returned in 1843,³⁹ with the blessing of the Hudson's Bay Company⁴⁰ and the permanent mission was established at Lake Manito in 1844. Father Thibault was then helped by Father Joseph Bourassa.⁴¹ They changed the name of Manito or Devil's Lake for Lac Sainte-Anne, erected a beautiful chapel, and travelled extensively, visiting Lac La Biche, Ile à la Crosse, Portage La Loche, Lesser Slave Lake, while ministering at Fort Edmonton.

Reverend Rundle was not happy with the arrival of the black robe, because, according to Alfred Carter, Abbé Thibault "had managed to turn almost all the natives to the Roman faith. [...]"⁴² In Rundle's mind Popery and Heathenism were linked together as twin forms of evil. Indeed, he barely distinguished them. However, his hatred of Popery does not seem to have permeated the minds of his followers, nor embittered his relations with Roman Catholic laymen or priests.⁴³ On the other hand, Bishop Provencher writes to Bishop Signay on August 8, 1842, that "the Wesleyans are doing

Some have put in doubt the value of statistics as found in the baptismal records to establish the work of the Church. It is true that these records can give no clue to the spiritual value of the converted Indians, but, as in any other religious or social organization, this seems to be the only way of establishing the number of adherents.

³⁸ Provencher to Signay, August 7, 1842 (Diocesan archives of Quebec).

³⁹ Provencher to Simpson, June 7, 1843, speaks of the voyage of Thibault and says: "Il devient de la stricte obligation de procurer un établissement de prêtre." (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface).

⁴⁰ Simpson to Provencher, June 15, 1843, gives a passage to Thibault the Bishop desires to send to Saskatchewan (Hudson's Bay Company archives, London, D. 4/61, p. 243).

⁴¹ Provencher to Bourget, June 26, 1844. He says that Bourassa left "yesterday" with John Rowand (Diocesan archives of Montreal); while writing to Signay, on July 6, he says that Thibault left "the day before yesterday" and will settle at Devil's Lake (*Rapport sur les Missions du Diocèse de Québec*, 6 (1945), pp. 98-100). He gives the same information to the Propagation de la Foi de Paris on August 4, 1844 (Archives of the Propagation de la Foi de Paris: F 193a, Saint-Boniface). Thibault also writes to Provencher from Lac Sainte-Anne, on December 23, 1844 (Archives of the Propagation de la Foi, Lyon, France: 1844; *Rapport sur les Missions du Diocèse de Québec*, 7 (1847), pp. 53-56), that since July he baptized 236 persons. After Easter, he will proceed to Ile à la Crosse and Portage La Loche.

⁴² Alfred Carter, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 121-122.

nothing. The Company is tired of them”⁴⁴

The opposition between the two creeds, however, never developed into the kind of rivalry which would exist in the Mackenzie district.

On May, 1852, Thibault left for Red River and was replaced by Father Albert Lacombe, who reached Edmonton on September 17 of that year.⁴⁵ He immediately began the study of the Cree language and made several extensive tours of the missions, visiting Lac La Biche and Lesser Slave region.

Father Lacombe did not enjoy the company of Father Bourassa for long, since the latter left Lac Sainte-Anne on March 3, 1853, to return to Red River and Canada. But he soon received an Oblate companion, Father René Rémas, who arrived in September 1853.⁴⁶

Bishop Taché visited the post on March 22, 1854, confirmed a good number of persons at Edmonton, and sent Father Rémas to establish the permanent mission of Lac La Biche.⁴⁷

In 1856, Lacombe visited Fort Jasper and, in 1857, travelled to Red River. On his return, he ministered to his flock at Lac Sainte-Anne, Edmonton and among the prairie hunters where he met the Blackfoot, Sarcee, Piegan and Blood Indians with whom he was to have great influence.

The mission of Lac Sainte-Anne gave much consolation to the missionaries and, in order to put the mission on a more solid footing, the Grey Nuns of Montreal were called and arrived on September 24, 1859.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ *Bulletin de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface*, 3 (1913), p. 208.

⁴⁵ Mission du Lac Sainte-Anne (*loc. cit.*). James Hunter wrote to Venn, from Cumberland, on December 6, 1852: “In August E...] another Priest going up the Saskatchewan to Edmonton [passed here]; even here in the wilderness of America, the zeal and activity of the Church of Rome is manifest (Church Missionary Society archives, C 1 A 90; Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa).

⁴⁶ Philippe d’Armor, *Bribes d’histoire locale. Mission du Lac Sainte-Anne* (*loc. cit.*).

⁴⁷ See Taché to his mother, May 26, 1854 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface) and to Bishop de Mazonod, July 7, 1854, in *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi de Lyon*, 27 (1855), pp. 220-221, where he says that half of his flock “sont des protestants convertis, les autres arrachés à l’idolâtrie.”

⁴⁸ *Chronique du couvent d’Youville fondé au Lac Ste Anne en 1859* (Archives of the Grey Nuns of Montreal, film 188, in Archives Deschâtelets, Ottawa). See also Taché to Propagation de la Foi de Paris, January 28, 1859 (Archives de la Propagation de la Foi de Paris, F. 193a, Saint-Boniface). On June 25, Sir George Simpson gave a letter of recommendation. The Sisters left Red River on August 3 (Taché to Maisonneuve, August 2, 1859: Oblate Provincial archives, Winnipeg). See also Sr. Valade to Sr. Deschamps, August 4, 1859 (Archives of the

They learned the Indian language⁴⁹ under the direction of Father Lacombe, opened a school for about 20 children,⁵⁰ visited the sick and took care of the chapel.⁵¹

The days of Lac Sainte-Anne as the important mission around Edmonton were numbered. Considering the site unsuitable for agriculture, Bishop Taché decided, during a visit at the end of 1860 and the beginning of 1861, that the mission would be transferred to a more convenient location. A place at the mouth of the Sturgeon River was selected early in 1861 and placed under the patronage of Saint Albert, the patron saint of Father Lacombe.⁵²

Father Lacombe immediately began building the new mission and the Sisters' convent was transferred to Saint Albert in 1863,⁵³ where several Métis families had already moved.

It must not be forgotten that the mission at Lac Sainte-Anne had produced abundant fruits, since the Records show that 3,284 baptisms were performed between 1842 and 1862, and is still in operation.

As for Edmonton, William Christie, in charge of the Fort, authorized the erection of a Catholic chapel within the interior of the Fort in 1859⁵⁴ and the chapel was ready for the service on Christmas.⁵⁵ The same favour was refused several times to the Wesleyans. Besides ministering to the Fort, the Oblates, Father Rémas especially, taught the children until Brother Constantine Scollen opened a regular school a few years later.

Grey Nuns of Montreal, film 210) and Sr. Alphonse to her Mother General, October 18, 1859 (*Rapport de... la Propagation de la Foi... Montréal*, 12 (1860), pp. 61-76).

⁴⁹ Sr. Alphonse to Sr. Deschamps, December 29, 1861 (Archives of the Grey Nuns of Montreal, film 12).

⁵⁰ *Saint-Albert (ibid., film 7)*.

⁵¹ *Chronique du couvent d'Youville ...* and Sr. Emery to her Mother General, November 4, 1859, in *Rapport de ... la Propagation de la Foi ... Montréal*, 13 (1861), pp. 19-28.

⁵² Alexandre Taché, O.M.I., *Vingt années de Missions...*, p. 134.

⁵³ Philippe d'Armor, *loc. cit.* See also Sr. M. M. Côté, S.G.M., *St. Albert, Cradle of the Catholic Church in Alberta*, in *The Canadian Catholic Historical Association*, Report 1965, pp. 31 ff

⁵⁴ Jules Le Chevallier, O.M.I., *La Paroisse St Joachim d'Edmonton* (Oblate provincial archives, Edmonton) and *1859-1959. Album souvenir. Centenaire de la paroisse St Joachim d'Edmonton, [s.d.]*, (*ibid.*). See also the Post Journal of the Hudson's Bay Company.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Lac La Biche (1844).⁵⁶

Lac La Biche was first visited by Father Thibault on November 1st, 1844, and remained under the care of Lac Sainte-Anne until 1853. On his first voyage, Father Lacombe acquired the certainty that the presence of a priest was desired and urgent,⁵⁷ since a Methodist minister had sojourned several times and gained success. Moreover, a schoolmaster, acting as minister, would soon be located there in the person of Reverend Henry Steinhur, an English Halfbreed. Father Rémas was, therefore, sent the following year⁵⁸ to put the mission on a permanent basis. He found a number of Christians, but noticed that “the words of the priest bore fruit while he was there, but as soon as he left, the enemy sowed the cockle of oblivion, routine and vice.”⁵⁹ The inhabitants also desired the priest for the material benefit they could derive from his presence, and said: “We do nothing for nothing, we want everything for nothing.”⁶⁰ It was under such circumstances that Father Rémas lived, for four months, in a wretched hovel, twelve feet square and six feet high.

While at Lac La Biche, on April 26, 1854, Bishop Taché decided on a new location for the mission and cut the first tree himself.⁶¹ Rémas finished the poor building and took care of his flock. When he left at the end of May 1855, he had already performed 72 baptisms.⁶² The place was considered of the greatest importance for the supply of the northern missions and, in 1855, Bishop Taché sent two priests, Fathers Jean Tissot and Augustin Maisonneuve.⁶³ They again moved the house some eight miles to the West,

⁵⁶ Philippe d’Armor [Aristide Philippot, O.M.L.], *Histoire de Notre-Dame des Victoires au Lac La Biche Alberta* (Diocesan archives of Grouard-McLennan, McLennan, Alberta).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁵⁸ Jules Le Chevallier, O.M.I., *Origine des premières missions du diocèse de Saint-Paul* (Oblate Provincial Archives, Edmonton). See also Théophile Ortolan, O.M.L., *Les Oblats de Marie Immaculée durant le premier siècle de leur existence*, Paris, Librairie des Annales, [1915], vol. 2, p. 198.

⁵⁹ *Le R.P. René Rémas, 1823-1901*, dans *Missions de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, 64 (1930), p. 512. See also Philippe d’Armor, *Histoire de Notre-Dame des Victoires...*, p. 26.

⁶⁰ *Le R.P. René Rémas* p. 512; Philippe d’Armor, *Histoire de Notre-Dame des Victoires*, p. 26.

⁶¹ Taché to Mazonod, April 4, 1854, quoted by Dom Paul Benoît, C.R.I.C., *Vie de M^{sr} Taché, Archevêque de Saint-Boniface*, Montréal, Beauchemin, 1904, vol. 1, p. 283.

⁶² Philippe d’Armor, *Histoire de Notre-Dame des Victoires*, p. 38.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 47, 50.

planted a small garden⁶⁴ and ministered to the Indians and Halfbreeds. When Bishop Taché returned in 1856, he ordered that a cart-road be built between Lac La Biche and Fort Pitt. The work was completed on September 4 and this road, which many considered impossible to build, was the first work of its kind in the whole North.⁶⁵

In 1857, two Brothers, Joseph Salasse and Patrick Bowes, joined the priests and prepared a residence for the Oblates and a house for the Grey Nuns of Montréal who arrived in 1862.⁶⁶

Besides Lac La Biche, the priests visited the Fort, White Fish Lake, Fort Pitt and several other small places.

Consolations were not frequent⁶⁷ but, between 1853 and 1861, the missionaries performed 275 baptisms,⁶⁸ a feat which can be considered an important contribution to the establishment of the Church in Alberta.

The future Province of Saskatchewan also received the oblate priest.

Ile à la Crosse (1846).

Father Thibault was again the first Catholic missionary to go to Ile à la Crosse which he reached on May 9, 1845, and found the Indians in the best of dispositions towards religion, and insisted on the importance of a permanent mission.⁶⁹ He returned the following year.⁷⁰

On his report, Bishop Provencher decided to send priests to reside there. On June 26, 1846, he wrote to Sir George Simpson, to whom he had

⁶⁴ Jules Le Chevallier, O.M.L., *Origine des premières missions*.... pp.8-9.

⁶⁵ Adrien-Gabriel Morice, O.M.L., *Histoire de l'Eglise catholique dans l'Ouest canadien*..., Montréal, Granger Frères, 1922, vol. 2, p. 66. See also Théophile Ortolan, O.M.L., *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 201.

⁶⁶ Philippe d'Armor, *Histoire de Notre-Dame des Victoires*, p. 74.

⁶⁷ See, as an example, Tissot to Végreville, December 17, 1858 (Oblate Provincial archives, Edmonton).

⁶⁸ From the Baptismal Records (Diocesan archives of Saint Paul, Alberta). Before the Oblates, 200 baptisms from Lac La Biche are contained in the Records (*Missions... des... Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, 2 (1863), p. 173).

⁶⁹ Archives of the Propagation de la Foi, Lyon, France, and *Rapport sur les Missions du Diocèse de Québec*, 7 (1847), pp. 57-58; *Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 5 (1906), pp. 23-24.

⁷⁰ Thibault to Provencher, Ile à la Crosse, June 3, 1846 (Archives of the Propagation de la Foi, Lyon, and *Rapport sur les Missions du Diocèse de Québec*, 7 (1847), pp. 62-63).

probably spoken of his plan, and asked whether the priests would be fed with the men of the brigade during the trip, whether they could have lodging at the Fort, and obtain the services of the men of the Company to help them in building a residence. He then requested a letter of recommendation for the priests.⁷¹

The Bishop had already organized a trip by canoe, when the Governor offered him a free passage on the Company's barges. On June 27, Sir George assured the Bishop that the priests would be maintained free of expense during the voyage, that they would receive "such accommodation as the fort may be able to furnish, while they may be engaged in building their own establishment. This also will be free of expense." He would also furnish a letter of recommendation and went on saying:

They will enjoy every facility for ministering to the religious wants of our Catholic servants, which, at the same time, I must state to your Lordship, what I take every opportunity of stating to other denominations, that any attempt, direct or indirect, at proselytising can never be sanctioned by the honorable Company, as being sure to provoke and aggravate religious animosities.

In asking liberty of conscience and worship, you appear to refer to obstacles or embarrassments wholly unknown to me. I can hardly imagine that any person, holding a responsible office in the honorable company's service, has ever attempted, by threats or promises, to deter any heathen from becoming a Catholic. It is, on the contrary, our unanimous desire, that every savage may be left to his own choice by all missionaries as well as by ourselves, that, if he will not adopt our creed, he may not be prejudiced against another.⁷²

This statement of policy by Sir George is truly the Company's policy, but we shall see, later on, that some officers and missionaries have not always been true to the policy.

The missionaries, Abbé Louis Lafèche and Father Taché, left Saint Boniface, on July 8,⁷³ "with the mission of going as far as possible to carry the good news

⁷¹ Hudson's Bay Company archives, London, D. 5/17, pp. 411-412.

⁷² *Ibid.*, D. 4/68, pp. 205-207.

⁷³ *Vingt années de Missions ...* p. 28. Paul Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist Among the Indians of North America...*, Edmonton, M. G. Hurtig, [1968], p. 67, is wrong in giving the date of July 5.

The date of July 8 cannot be put in doubt due to the great number of independent witnesses in favour of this date. See Taché to his mother, July 8 (*Les*

of salvation to the Indians of the North West,⁷⁴ and reached their destination on a snowy day, September 10. They were gladly welcomed by the Indians and resided at the Fort, where Roderick MacKenzie offered them a generous and benevolent hospitality⁷⁵ and soon became a great admirer of the priests.⁷⁶

In the course of the winter, Father Taché visited Green Lake and Reindeer Lake, and spent the summer with his companion preaching the mission to the Indians,⁷⁷ studying the Chippewa and Cree languages⁷⁸ and clearing the land for a small garden.⁷⁹ On August, Father Taché left again, this time for Portage La Loche and Fort Chipewyan. On his return in October, he found the “Chateau Saint-Jean,” the poor house of 30 feet by 20,⁸⁰ ready to receive the priests.

In 1848, Father Taché returned to Reindeer Lake,⁸¹ while Abbé Laflèche, who was then sick, took care of the mission.⁸² In the course of the summer Father Henri Faraud arrived. In the same summer, Sir Richardson passed through Ile à la Crosse and noted in his journal: “Mr. Taché and his companion are intelligent, learned men and very devoted to the religious education of the Indians, whose confidence

Cloches de Saint-Boniface, 2 (1903), p. 25), July 18 (*ibid.*, p. 36), Sr. Lagrave to Sr. McMullen, July 18 (Archives of the Grey Nuns of Montreal, film 207), George Simpson to Donald Ross, July 8 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface), etc.

Father Pierre de Smet, S.J., wrote to the Superior General of the Jesuits, Jean Roothan, on April 16, 1846, that two priests were en route to the country of the “Montagnais” (Jesuit’s General archives, Rome: Montes Saxosi, 1-I-11).

⁷⁴ *Vingt années de Missions...*, p. 28.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29, and Louis Laflèche, *Etat général des missions du Diocèse de Saint-Boniface*, August 9, 1855 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface).

⁷⁶ Roderick MacKenzie to George Simpson, January 14, 1847 (Hudson’s Bay Company archives, London, D. 5/19, p. 75°).

⁷⁷ See James Hunter, August 1, 1847, “Report for the Year” (Church Missionary Society C la 91) and Hunter’s Journal, August 19, 1847 (*ibid.*).

⁷⁸ Emile Grouard to Laflèche, September 29, 1892 (*Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 1 (1902), p. 83). Laflèche prepared “Notes sur la langue crise” in 1847 or 1848.

⁷⁹ Taché to his mother, January 20, 1848 (*Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 2 (1903), p. 273).

⁸⁰ It was a gift of the Hudson’s Bay Company (Germain Lesage, O.M.I., *Capitale d’une solitude*, Ottawa, Editions des Etudes Oblates, 1946, p. 37). See also Taché to a confere, April 16, 1848 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface) and Dom Paul Benoît, C.R.I.C., *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 147.

⁸¹ Taché to Mazonod, Lac Caribou, April 4, 1848, quoted by Dom Paul Benoît, C.R.I.C., *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 123.

⁸² Adrien-Gabriel Morice, O.M.L., *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 342, note 34.

they gained to a high degree.⁷⁸³

Father Taché continued his voyages the following years, and received the help of a lay brother in 1849.⁸⁴ Brother Louis Dubé then spent all his life at Ile à la Crosse. 1849 was, however, a sad year. Abbé Laffèche was ill, and the Bishop of the North West, who had chosen him for his coadjutor, ordered him back to Saint Boniface. Moreover, the revolution in France threatened to exhaust the resources of the Propagation of the Faith and it was proposed, in some quarters, to abandon the mission. Fathers Faraud and Taché hurried a reply to their superior, Father Aubert:

Reverend Father, the news contained in your letter afflicts us, but does not discourage us; we know that you have our mission at heart and, for ourselves, we cannot accept the idea of abandoning our dear neophytes, our numerous catechumens; we hope that it will always be possible to secure altar bread and wine for the Holy Sacrifice. Besides this source of consolation and strength, we ask but one thing from you, that is, the permission to carry on our mission. The fishes of the lake will suffice for our existence; the hides of the wild animals for our clothing. For pity's sake, do not recall us.⁸⁵

Their plea was heard, the mission saved and, at the end of the summer, Father Faraud left to establish a permanent mission at Fort Chipewyan.

Life continued peacefully at Ile à la Crosse until the midst of the winter of 1851, when Father Taché learned of his appointment as coadjutor to Bishop Provencher.⁸⁶ He had to leave his beloved mission for Red River and France where he was consecrated bishop. His absence, however, was short and he was back to his mission in September 1852,⁸⁷ bringing with him Father Henry Grollier⁸⁸ who

⁸³ *Arctic Searching Expedition*, London, 1851, p. 104, quoted by Théophile Ortolan, O.M.I., *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 179.

⁸⁴ Taché to his mother, October 4, 1849 (*Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 2 (1903), p. 488).

⁸⁵ *Vingt années de Missions* p. 43.

⁸⁶ In the course of the same winter, on January 4, 1851, he wrote a long letter to his mother (*Annales de la Propagation de la Foi* [Lyon], 24 (1852), pp. 329-354) on the Chippewyas, which is considered as a primary source even today (J. M. Cooper, *The Northern Algonquians on Supreme Being*, in *Primitive Man*, 6 (1933), p. 84).

⁸⁷ Taché to his mother, January 5, 1853 (*Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 3 (1904), p. 26). The date of September 10 was the sixth anniversary of his first arrival at Ile à la Crosse.

⁸⁸ Taché to his mother, July 23, 1852 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface). He had left Saint Boniface on July 8, six years after his first departure from the same place in 1846.

was soon to establish missions all along the Mackenzie River up to the Arctic Circle. He continued the life of an ordinary missionary and we have some idea of his activities in a letter he wrote to Bishop Jean-Charles Prince, of Saint Hyacinthe, on April 10, 1854:

I possess an episcopal palace, as well qualified for this use, as I am for my position. The palace is twenty feet long, twenty feet wide and seven feet high. It is plastered with dirt. This dirt is not waterproof and rain, wind and other atmospheric miseries have free access. Two windows, six panes each, light the main apartment; two pieces of parchment serve as lighting system.

In this palace, where everything may look small, all, on the contrary bears the stamp of grandeur. So, my secretary is bishop, my servant is bishop, my cook himself is bishop. These illustrious employees all have numerous shortcomings; nevertheless their attachment to my person makes them dear to me, and I look upon them with complacency.

When they seem tired of their respective tasks, I send them all on the road; and they join me and I try to bring a diversion to their annoyance.⁸⁹

The Young Bishop had soon to leave his mission for good. The death of Bishop Provencher, on June 7, 1853, saddened him profoundly and made him the new Bishop of Saint Boniface.⁹⁰ When he heard the news in the middle of July 1853, he left a few days later for Chipewyan, returned to Ile à la Crosse where he spent part of the winter.⁹¹ He was in no haste to go to Red River and, in the course of the winter of 1854, visited the various missions, returned to Ile à la Crosse in May for the spring mission, and left for Saint Boniface on September 24, 1854.

After some time spent at Red River, the Bishop returned to Ile à la Crosse with Father Vital Grandin in 1855, made an extensive tour of the missions, and returned to Saint Boniface to take care of his immense diocese.⁹²

⁸⁹ *Rapport de... la Propagation de la Foi*, Montréal, 10 (1853-1854), pp. 46-47.

⁹⁰ Taché to his mother, January 1, 1854 (*Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 3 (1904), p. 132); July 22, 1853 (*ibid.*, 3 (1904), pp. 119-120); to Bishop Bourget, December 28, 1853 (*Rapport ... de la Propagation de la Foi...*, Montréal, 10 (1853-1854), pp. 43-44).

⁹¹ Dom Paul Benoît, C.R.I.C., *op. cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 268 ff.

⁹² See *Voyage de M^{sr} Taché, Evêque de Saint-Boniface* (archives of the Visitation Sainte-Marie, Le Mans, France) and *Scrittura originali riferite nei Congressi. America Centrale*, vol. 19, f. 443 ff (archives of the Holy Congregation of Propaganda Fide, Rome) and Taché to Faraut, November 15, 1860 (Diocesan archives of Forth Smith, N.W.T.).

Ile à la Crosse has been called the “Cradle of the Bishops of the West,”⁹³ and rightly so. Bishop Taché had been there, Bishop Faraud also spent some time, Bishop Laflèche was the founder of the mission and, in 1857, Father Grandin was appointed coadjutor to Bishop Taché. Few missions can boast of having prepared so many bishops.

The mission developed and the priests have always been satisfied with their flock, especially the Chipewyas. In 1860, everything was ready for the arrival of the Grey Nuns of Montreal,⁹⁴ who opened a school attended by 14 or 15 children and staffed a small hospital and a home for the crippled and old.⁹⁵

The good seed produced admirable fruits and, according to Bishop Taché himself, the mission had already, on January 1854, 849 baptized persons out of a total population of 864 souls.⁹⁶

Besides Ile à la Crosse, Chipewyan and Reindeer Lake, the missionaries ministered to several secondary posts: Lac La Ronge, Portage La Loche,⁹⁷ Cold Lake, Green Lake, and even Lac La Biche for some time.

It is impossible to know the exact number of baptisms administered, since the records were destroyed in a fire on March 5, 1867, but it is said that in 10 years more than three fourths of the population was converted to Catholicism.⁹⁸

Reindeer Lake

⁹³ The mission was directed for some time by Fathers Louis Laflèche, Vital Grandin, O.M.I., Alexandre Taché, O.M.L, and Henri Faraud, O.M.I., who all became bishops.

⁹⁴ There had been question of sending sisters to Ile à la Crosse in 1858, but they were directed to Lac Sainte Anne (Taché to the Mother General of the Grey Nuns of Montreal, November 9, 1858: General archives of the Grey Nuns of Montreal, film 54).

⁹⁵ See Sr. Pepin to her Mother General, December 6, 1850 (General archives of the Grey Nuns of Montreal, film 54); Taché to Bourget, December 23, 1860 (*Rapport... de la Propagation de la Foi...* Montréal, 13 (1861), pp. 12-17); Grandin to Mazenod, December 31, 1860 (*Euvres de M^{sr} Grandin*, vol. 8: Research Center in the religious history of Canada, Saint Paul University, Ottawa); Grandin to the Mother Superior of the Grey Nuns, January 4, 1861 (*loc. cit.*, film 54); Sr. Agnes to Taché, April 1, 1861 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface) and Végreville to Taché, June 12, 1861 (*ibid.*).

⁹⁶ Taché to Dawson, February 17, 1859, in *Missions ... des... Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, 2 (1863), p. 173.

⁹⁷ Abbé Thibault was the first Catholic missionary to visit Portage La Loche in 1845 when he baptized 164 persons (Baptismal Records of Fort des Prairies; Oblate Provincial archives, Edmonton). The next visit was made by Taché in 1848. The missionaries then went every year until the end of the present period and a permanent mission was established in 1895.

⁹⁸ Dr. P. E. Lavoie, *Les origines de l'île à la Crosse* (General archives of the Grey Nuns of Montreal, film 53).

Fathers Laflèche and Taché passed through Fort Charly in August 1846, on their way to Ile à la Crosse,⁹⁹ and gathered information which gave them hope for the establishment of a mission. Roderick MacKenzie, in charge of Ile à la Crosse, urged Father Taché to go without delay; the priest refused because of his inexperience, but decided to go as soon as possible. A few months later, he received news from Charles Thomas, in charge of the Fort, that the Indians desired the visit of the priest.

In consequence Father Taché left for Reindeer Lake on March 9, 1847, and reached the fort on March 20. He was comforted by the good dispositions of the natives and remained two months, working from morning till night to instruct his neophytes.¹⁰⁰ He returned the following year but was unable to visit these Indians in 1849, because of the famine in the region, although he was already on his way.¹⁰¹

Sole priest at Ile à la Crosse in 1850, he could see only the southern end of the lake, but was assured by the natives that the northern end would be a good location for a mission.¹⁰² In 1851, there were already 180 baptized Christians,¹⁰³ but the mission had to be abandoned until 1860, when Bishop Taché decided to reopen it for fear that the Protestants might establish themselves in the region; the residential mission was definitely opened in the summer of 1861 and still exists.

In the Mackenzie district

The development of the Catholic missions in the Mackenzie district is certainly unique in the history of Canadian missions. The missionaries desired to go as far North as possible and the Eskimos haunted their mind. The sudden appearance of the preachers of the Church of England gave a new impetus to the Catholics as Bishop Grandin wrote to Bishop de Mazenod, on December 31, 1860: "The protestant ministers pursue us everywhere and sometimes force us, if not to be more zealous, at least to undertake more missions than we would otherwise do."¹⁰⁴ Among all the priests who devoted themselves in that section of the country, Father Henri Grollier deserves special mention. He was almost always the first to visit the various forts and the most persistent in pressing the authorities. Bishop Taché wrote of him to Bishop Laflèche, on March 28, 1859: "Archdeacon Hunter passed through all our missions, fortunately Father Grollier was in the field to turn his boldness into confusion."¹⁰⁵

In order to judge fairly the actions of both Protestant and Catholic missionaries in that

⁹⁹ Baptismal Records (Diocesan archives of Le Pas, Manitoba).

¹⁰⁰ Taché to his mother, July 23, 1847, says that he performed about 100 baptisms (*Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 2 (1903), p. 237). The Records, however, show only 49.

¹⁰¹ Taché to his mother, June 14, 1849 (*Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 2 (1903), pp. 463-465); Alexandre Taché, O.M.I., *Notice sur la mission du Lac Caribou*, p. 5 (Oblate Provincial archives, Edmonton, at the beginning of the Baptismal Records).

¹⁰² Alexandre Taché, O.M.I., *Notice sur la mission du Lac Caribou*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁰³ Taché to Faraut, January 17, 1853 (Oblate General archives, Rome: Taché).

¹⁰⁴ *Œuvres de Mgr Grandin*, vol. 8 (*loc. cit.*).

¹⁰⁵ Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface and Archives of Saint Joseph Seminary, Trois-Rivières.

district, one must consider the religious mentality of the middle of the last century, when oecumenism was not developed as it is today. A real state of war existed between the two creeds and Father Grollier could not tolerate the presence of an Anglican missionary in what he considered *his* district. The same is most probably true of the Anglicans.

As soon as December 27, 1845, Father Thibault informed Bishop Provencher that he intended to go as far as the main Fort of the Company on the Mackenzie River.¹⁰⁶ The following year, Father Bourassa wrote that Thibault would go the Mackenzie.¹⁰⁷ This, however, proved impossible¹⁰⁸ and the first Catholic missionary to reach Athabasca-Mackenzie was Father Taché in 1847.

Fort Chipewyan

The mission of Fort Chipewyan was the starting-point of all the missions in the Far North. Visited as early as 1842¹⁰⁹ the Methodist James Evans, who died in an accident on his way to a second visit in 1844,¹¹⁰ Fort Chipewyan received the priest only three years later.

Catholic missionaries were already known among the Indians, especially due to the activities of Father Thibault at Ile à la Crosse and Portage La Loche in 1845, where a few Indians were present and asked for a priest.¹¹¹ On December 27 of that year, Thibault told Bishop Provencher that a priest could be stationed at Athabasca¹¹² and in 1846 Bishop François Norbert Blanchet, of Portland, Oregon, had the quaint idea of proposing the place for an episcopal see,¹¹³ to which Bishop Provencher was opposed, knowing well that the time had not come.

The permanent mission of Ile à la Crosse made the establishment of a mission at Fort Chipewyan possible. Father Taché was at the latter place in September 1847¹¹⁴ and the Indians showed their joy on the arrival of the "Father of the Chipewyas." The religious services were well attended and almost all the Indians knew the most important prayers in French.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁶ *Bulletin de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface*, 3 (1913), p. 252.
107 April 23,

¹⁰⁷ April 23, 1846 (Archives of the Propagation de la Foi de Lyon, France: 1846; *Rapport sur les Missions du Diocèse de Québec*, 7 (1847), p. 66).

¹⁰⁸ May 6, 1846 in *Rapport sur les Missions du Diocèse de Québec*, 7 (1847), pp. 60-61, 63.

¹⁰⁹ Alexandre Taché, O.M.I., *Notes sur l'établissement de la mission d'Athabaska*, p. 1 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface and Baptismal Records I of the Athabasca mission, kept in the Diocesan archives of Fort Smith).

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2. Bishop Plessis of Quebec encouraged Father Dumoulin to visit Athabasca, on April 10, 1821 (*Registre des Lettres*, vol. 10, pp. 189-190) and wrote to Bishop Alexander Macdonell for the same purpose on April 13, 1821 (*ibid.*, vol. 10, p. 199).

¹¹² *Bulletin de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface*, 3 (1913), p. 252.

¹¹³ February 23, 1846 in *Acta*, vol. 209, 1846, f. 171' (Holy Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, Rome).

¹¹⁴ *Notes sur l'établissement de la mission d'Athabaska*, p. 3.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Chipewyan was selected as a mission site because it was thought that it could serve as a post whence missionaries would visit Peace River, Slave River, Salt River [Fort Smith] and the shores of Athabasca Lake.¹¹⁶ In the course of his first visit, Father Taché collected pertinent information on the habits of the Indians¹¹⁷ and stated that the Canadian Halfbreeds helped him much during his stay which lasted for a little over three weeks.¹¹⁸ He resided at the Fort where Francis Ermatinger was very kind to him.¹¹⁹ The priest baptized 183 persons.¹²⁰

His report to Bishop Provencher, in which he hoped that a priest would be sent there permanently, prompted the Bishop to take steps to insure the future of the mission.¹²¹

The priest returned to Fort Chipewyan with Ermatinger, postmaster,¹²² the following year. He also experienced great consolations and met several Cariboo Eaters who had waited to see the missionary.¹²³ He promised his neophytes that he would do all in his power to send a resident priest. He remained at the Fort until the beginning of January¹²⁴ in response to the pressing and amiable request of Ermatinger who showed him much graciousness.¹²⁵

While preaching the retreat, the priest selected the site of the mission¹²⁶ and Father Henri Faraud was sent in 1849, this time to stay.¹²⁷

On June 27, 1849, Bishop Provencher advised Governor Simpson that all the Indians of Athabasca and Mackenzie desired a priest and that he intended to acquiesce to their demand.¹²⁸ Faraud was there in the fall, wintered at the Fort and prepared, with the help of the Company's servants,¹²⁹ the materials for the construction of a mission house. He also foresaw the establishment of three missions: Athabasca, Fond du Lac and Fort Resolution on Great

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6. Taché to his mother, January 20, 1848 (*Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 2 (1903), p. 260).

¹¹⁹ *Notes sur l'établissement de la mission d'Athabaska*, p. 6.

¹²⁰ Baptismal Records and Taché to a confrere, April 16, 1848, says that he baptized 194 persons (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface).

¹²¹ *Notes sur l'établissement de la mission d'Athabaska*, p. 7.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 7. He also says to his mother on November 2, 1848, that he arrived on September 20 (*Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 2 (1903), p. 404), but the Records show acts performed on September 8.

¹²³ *Notes sur l'établissement de la mission d'Athabaska*, p. 8.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹²⁵ Taché to his mother, December 27, 1848 (*Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface*, 2 (1903), p. 448).

¹²⁶ *Codex historicus de la mission de la Nativité*, p. 12 (Oblate provincial archives, Fort Smith, N.W.T.).

¹²⁷ Faraud to Pascal Ricard, O.M.I., in Oregon, May 22, 1849 (Archives Deschâtelets, Ottawa: Oregon).

¹²⁸ Hudson's Bay Company archives, London, D. 5/25, p. 313.

¹²⁹ Faraud to Ricard, March 9, 1851 (Archives Deschâtelets, Ottawa).

Slave Lake.¹³⁰

The priest remained alone until 1852 when he was joined by Father Henri Grollier.¹³¹

In 1851, Faraud told Bishop Taché that he was satisfied with his flock of about 1,300 to 1,500 Indians all desirous of being baptized. However, he showed no haste in acquiescing to the wishes of the adults, considering that they continued their instruction as long as they awaited the requested favour.¹³² Also in 1851, he built a house which he occupied in the fall and inaugurated his chapel on September 8.¹³³ He also visited Fort Resolution for the first time.¹³⁴

Bishop Taché came to the mission in 1855 and was delighted with the success met by Faraud.¹³⁵ He left Father Vital Grandin at the mission and the priest devoted himself to the teaching of catechism and the direction of two schools, one at the mission and the other at the Fort.¹³⁶ At the end of the year, in a letter to Father Robert Cooke, in England, Faraud emphasized his beautiful chapel, the work of his own hands, the decent house, the nice garden and the success met with the Crees, the Chipewyas of Fort Chipewyan mission and other posts.¹³⁷

The development of the mission was not without difficulties as we shall see. In a letter to a confrere, Father Grandin dwelt in 1856 on the material aspect of his life: "Today I am parish priest, sacristan, cook and cowherd." The missionaries were still working on their chapel and Father Faraud was engaged in building roads and ditches to improve his garden which was needed to support the mission.¹³⁸

The arrival of the Anglican missionaries in the region in 1858 marked an important development in the history of the missions. Father Faraud was all but happy with this change.¹³⁹ However, he was pleased to note that his mission progressed both materially and spiritually; the Indians were good and perfect Christians.¹⁴⁰ His work owed him the title of "Little Creator" or of "Maker of Land." He also learned the languages, worked in the vicinity

¹³⁰ James Anderson to George Simpson, November 14, 1850 (Hudson's Bay Company archives, D. 5/29, p. 343), to Eden Colville, December 6, 1850 (*ibid.*, B. 39/b 12, p. 29) and to Donald Ross, December 7, 1850 (*ibid.*, B. 39/b 12).

¹³¹ *Codex historicus de la mission de la Nativité*, p. 13.

¹³² Faraud to Ricard, March 9, 1851 (*loc. cit.*).

¹³³ Théophile Ortolan, O.M.I., *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 184.

¹³⁴ Faraud to a confrere, April 20, 1851, relates the history of the mission (*Annales de la Propagation de la Foi*... Lyon, 24 (1852), pp. 220-227).

¹³⁵ *Codex historicus de la mission de la Nativité*, p. 16.

¹³⁶ Grandin to Maisonneuve, December 12, 1855 (*Œuvres de M^{gr} Grandin*, vol. 26; *loc. cit.*).

¹³⁷ December 30, 1855 (Diocesan archives of McLennan, Alberta).

¹³⁸ Grandin to Maisonneuve, July 1, 1857 (*Œuvres de M^{gr} Grandin*, vol. 26).

¹³⁹ Faraud to Mazenod, December 28, 1858 (Oblate General archives, Rome: Faraud).

¹⁴⁰ Id. and Faraud to Sr. Valade, December 28, 1858 (Archives of the mission of Athabasca).

of Fort Chipewyan and defended his flock against the “enemy.”¹⁴¹

From 1859 on, there is often question of obtaining Sisters but they could not come before 1874. In 1859 again, Faraud visited Fort Vermillon in the Peace River district.¹⁴² His beautiful chapel (58 feet by 24) was finished in 1860¹⁴³ and blessed by Bishop Grandin the following year.¹⁴⁴

It is also noted, in 1860, that “war” was raging between the Catholics and the missionaries of the Church of England along the Mackenzie River.

By the end of this period the mission established by Faraud was very promising, although there had been some difficulties among the Indians due to the presence of so-called “Prophets” or other unbalanced individuals.¹⁴⁵

From the first visit of Father Taché in 1847 until the end of 1861, 1,090 baptisms were registered,¹⁴⁶ evidence that the work had been well done, especially if we keep in mind that Father Faraud was slow in admitting adults to the sacrament.

Fond du Lac

From Chipewyan, since 1853, a priest visited Fond du Lac, the first being Father Grollier. The place was visited each year and the missionary often complained that the Indians were not too fervent. However, between 1853 and 1861, 379 baptisms¹⁴⁷ were performed and a resident priest was sent in 1875.

Peace River

Chipewyan was also the residence of the priest who visited the Peace River district where Thibault had been as early as 1845.¹⁴⁸ He was then replaced by Father Albert Lacombe¹⁴⁹ and, finally, by Father Faraud who, in 1859, travelled the 650 miles separating Chipewyan from Peace River¹⁵⁰ and visited Forts Dunvegan and Vermillon. He returned among the Beavers in 1860¹⁵¹ and, although he did not score a complete success, he considered that this part of the country should not be neglected. Moreover, the Chief Officer of the district wanted Bishop Taché to obtain permission from the Governor to put everything “all right” and not be

¹⁴¹ To Fr. Fabre, March 25, 1859 (Oblate General archives, Rome: Faraud).

¹⁴² Faraud to Sr. Valade, December 28, 1859 (*loc. cit.*) and Faraud to Mazenod, December 30, 1859 (Oblate General archives, Rome: Faraud).

¹⁴³ Faraud to Taché, May 15, 1860 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface).

¹⁴⁴ Clut to Taché, December 27, 1860 (*ibid.*).

¹⁴⁵ Clut to Faraud, December 16, 1861 (Oblate General archives, Rome: Clut).

¹⁴⁶ Baptismal Records of Fort Chipewyan.

¹⁴⁷ Baptismal Records of Fond du Lac.

¹⁴⁸ *Bulletin de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface*, 3 (1913), p. 249.

¹⁴⁹ *Historique de la mission Saint-Charles de Dunvegan*, pp. 5-6 (Diocesan archives of McLennan, Alberta).

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁵¹ Faraud to Taché, December 28, 1860 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface).

in the unhappy necessity of acting “ungentlemanly” towards the missionaries.¹⁵²

The next mission was in 1866 when Father Christophe Tissier established himself at Fort Dunvegan. This was to be the beginning of the Grouard-McLennan archdiocese.

*Great Slave Lake [Fort Resolution] (1852)*¹⁵³

Saint Joseph’s mission, on Moose Island, Fort Resolution, is the oldest Catholic mission in the Mackenzie proper. After his trip to Fort Chipewyan, Father Taché wrote on April 16, 1848, that time had come to go to Great Slave Lake;¹⁵⁴ while in May, 1849, Father Faraud decided to visit the post during the ensuing winter¹⁵⁵ since he had been invited by several Indians.

Notwithstanding his desire he could not go before 1852, when he performed 168 baptisms.¹⁵⁶ Because of objections raised by the Officer in charge of the Hudson’s Bay Company he was unable to return the next year. The difficulty once cleared by Bishop Taché, Faraud was ordered to go to Resolution, select a place, and then decide upon the future of that mission.¹⁵⁷ The intervention of Bishop Taché prompted Sir George Simpson, on December 7, 1854, to intimate to James Anderson, a man very unfriendly to the Catholics, to receive the priest with hospitality.¹⁵⁸ In consequence of this action, Father Faraud visited the place in 1854 and 1855.¹⁵⁹ He was happy with his mission and was of the opinion that three or four priests would be necessary to minister to the other posts from this central place,¹⁶⁰ since the Hudson’s Bay Company had fifteen Forts along the Mackenzie.

In 1856, after Bishop Taché obtained permission for a permanent mission, Faraud build a make-shift house to make sure the Company would not go back on its decision.¹⁶¹ Fathers Grollier and Germain Eynard along with Brother Jean Péréard arrived in the summer of 1858¹⁶² and the mission has been in existence ever since.

Immediately upon their arrival the priests had to travel extensively to minimize the effect of the missionary endeavours of Archdeacon James Hunter who had arrived the same year.¹⁶³ At the end of the year Faraud said that the missions were afflicted by the “pest of

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ Emile-Germain Eynard, O.M.I., *Histoire de la Mission de St Joseph Grand Lac des Esclaves*, 21 novembre 1861 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface).

¹⁵⁴ Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface.

¹⁵⁵ Faraud to Ricard, May 22, 1849 (Archives Deschâtelets, Ottawa: Oregon).

¹⁵⁶ Baptismal Records of Fort Resolution.

¹⁵⁷ Taché to Faraud, February 1, 1853 (Oblate General archives, Rome: Taché).

¹⁵⁸ Hudson’s Bay Company archives, London, D. 5/75, p. 361.

¹⁵⁹ The proof of these visits can be found in the Baptismal Records.

¹⁶⁰ To Mazenod, December 29, 1855 (Oblate General archives, Rome: Faraud).

¹⁶¹ Faraud to Mazenod, December 8, 1856 (*Annales de la Propagation de la Foi...*, Lyon, 31 (1859), pp. 273-291).

¹⁶² Emile-Germain Eynard, O.M.I., *op. cit.*,

¹⁶³ Théophile Ortolan, O.M.I., *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 215.

ministers” and that two more were expected the following year. For that reason Great Slave Lake’s mission should be the best equipped since it “must be the advanced guard to fight against the fiend of error.”¹⁶⁴

The next spring Bishop Taché affirmed that the post was extremely important and, in March 1859, upon the invitation of Lawrence Clarke, Father Grollier visited Fort Rae,¹⁶⁵ leaving it in August for Fort Good Hope¹⁶⁶ and was replaced by Father Zéphirin Gascon.

The missionaries made it a point to remain on good terms with the Officers. In the course of 1860 they worked on their chapel, while considering the opportunity of transferring the mission to Fort Rae,¹⁶⁷ partly for fear of seeing the Protestants occupy the place. The transfer never occurred. Bishop Grandin, on an extensive tour of the missions, wrote at the time that he was very satisfied with the priests of Saint Joseph who, though only three in number, were doing the work of six.¹⁶⁸ They were now in charge of several missions: Fort Rae, Fort Liard, Fort Providence, Fort Simpson and Fort Providence [Grande Île].

During the ten years between 1852 and 1861, 362 persons were baptized at Fort Resolution,¹⁶⁹ besides those baptized in the various missions under the care of Saint Joseph’s mission.

Fort Simpson

The mission at Fort Simpson began in 1858, although a resident priest arrived only in 1894. As other Catholic missions it was started because the Protestants were beginning to enter the country. In 1857, the Bishop of Rupert’s Land, David Anderson, desired to establish an Anglican mission at Fort Simpson while Archdeacon Hunter manifested the same intention and, in fact, was at the Fort in 1858. Father Grollier had been given the task to follow¹⁷⁰ or, whenever possible, to precede the Protestant missionary, something he certainly did not dislike. Knowing of the coming of the Archdeacon, Grollier arrived at Fort Simpson on August 16, 1858¹⁷¹ and is said to have had great success, a fact which is shown by the 45 baptisms entered into the records.

Chief Factor R. Bernard Ross was not sympathetic to the Catholic cause and this brought several difficulties throughout the district.

Reverend Hunter was replaced by Reverend William West Kirby in 1859.¹⁷² A very zealous missionary, he was not at all friendly with the Catholics and was also a bigot. It is only justice to say that the Catholic missionaries paid him back in his own coin, calling him, for

¹⁶⁴ To Mazenod, December 28, 1858 (Oblate General archives, Rome: Faraud).

¹⁶⁵ Emile-Germain Eynard, O.M.I., *op. cit.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.* and Eynard to Végreville, December 5, 1859 (Oblate Provincial archives, Edmonton) and Kearney to Végreville, December 11, 1859 (*ibid.*).

¹⁶⁷ Eynard to Taché, June 12, 1860 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface).

¹⁶⁸ Grandin to Mazenod, July 1, 1861 (*Œuvres de M^{sr} Grandin*, vol. 8).

¹⁶⁹ Baptismal Records of Fort Resolution.

¹⁷⁰ Emile-Germain Eynard, O.M.I., *op. cit.*

¹⁷¹ Sylvio Lesage, O.M.I., *Sacred Heart Mission 1858-1958* [...], Fort Simpson, [1958], p. 5; Faraud to Mazenod, December 28, 1858 (Oblate General archives, Rome: Faraud).

¹⁷² Emile-Germain Eynard, O.M.I., *op. cit.*

instance, the “little minister,” the “little mister,” etc.

When Father Gascon arrived at Fort Simpson for the mission, in 1860, he found a house prepared by him by Ross.¹⁷³ He stated that he rebaptized Indians already baptized by the Anglican minister, a practice which would be common. Father Grollier gave a justification of this action in the beginning of the *Baptismal Records* of Peel River. According to him, Reverend Kirby had not denied (at Fort Simpson in August 1860 before Father Gascon) that he considered baptism only as a ceremony pure and simple.¹⁷⁴ This was sufficient reason to repeat the sacrament. At Fort Simpson, Gascon stated in 1860 that he had not yet seen Reverend Kirby but was ready for him. “If he attacks me, I shall defend myself,” said Father Gascon. In closing his letter he insisted on the necessity of establishing a mission at Fort Yukon and Fort Liard.¹⁷⁵

The misunderstandings between Catholic and Protestant missionaries continued the following year and Bishop Grandin wrote from Fort Simpson¹⁷⁶ that a Catholic Bishop was now necessary in the Mackenzie district.¹⁷⁷

Although the mission was only four years old in 1861 the Records show 134 baptisms.¹⁷⁸

Fort Roe

One year after the opening of the mission of Fort Simpson another one was begun at Fort Rae. Rumor had it in December 1858 that a house was prepared for a protestant catechist.¹⁷⁹ In order to prevent this and the possible success of the Protestants, Father Grollier, whom Ross called the “blind leader of the blind,” was at Fort Rae in March and May 1859, and was followed by Father Eynard in the Fall. The Records show 111 baptisms for this first year,¹⁸⁰ and Father Eynard, on the testimony of Lawrence Clarke, the Officer in Charge, estimated the population at more than 1,200.

Father Gascon replaced Father Grollier in 1860 and obtained from Clarke the promise that he would do all in his power to help the priest, since he disliked the protestant missionary.¹⁸¹ As for Father Eynard, although he was all in favour of a mission at Fort Rae, he regretted that this led to the neglect of the mission of Grande Île (Providence).¹⁸²

In December 1860 or early in January 1861, Clarke spent a few days at Resolution and informed the priests that he had found the wood for a house of 27 feet for the priest. Father Eynard, who preached the mission in the spring of 1861,¹⁸³ said that the Indians had changed

¹⁷³ Gascon to Taché, March 3, 1861 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface).

¹⁷⁴ Baptismal Records of Peel River (Diocesan archives of Fort Smith, N.W.T.).

¹⁷⁵ To Taché, March 3, 1861 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface).

¹⁷⁶ Grandin to Taché, September 27, 1861 (*ibid.*).

¹⁷⁷ Grandin to Taché, September 29, 1861 (*Œuvres de M^{re} Grandin*, vol. 9).

¹⁷⁸ Baptismal Records of Fort Rae (Fort Rae Mission).

¹⁷⁹ Ross to Hunter, December 24, 1858 (Hudson’s Bay Company archives, London, B. 200/b/33).

¹⁸⁰ Baptismal Records of Fort Rae.

¹⁸¹ Gascon to Taché, June 1, 1860 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface).

¹⁸² Eynard to Taché, Fort Rae, November 14, 1860 (*ibid.*).

¹⁸³ See the Baptismal Records and Kearney to Taché, April 1, 1861 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface).

for the better.¹⁸⁴ The house promised was at last ready in 1861 and measured 30 feet by 25.¹⁸⁵ Father Gascon visited Fort Rae in the summer and went as far as Fort Halkett on the Upper Liard River.

The missionaries considered the progress of Christianity at that Fort very satisfactory and between 1859 and 1861 they baptized 282 persons.¹⁸⁶ A permanent mission was established in 1872.

Fort Liard

Contrary to the other missions in the Mackenzie district where Father Grollier was the first priest, Father Gascon was the first to reach Fort Liard, also called "Fort Pouilleux," on September 4, 1860. Grollier, however, was instrumental in the establishment of the mission. Having rendered service to Ross, Chief Factor of Fort Simpson, he obtained a passage for Father Gascon who reached Fort Liard a few days before the Protestant missionary.¹⁸⁷

There, animosities between Catholics and Protestants were also apparent. Clarke told Father Gascon that if the Catholics continued their visits to Fort Simpson, Fort Liard and Fort Norman, Reverend Kirby would visit Fort Resolution.¹⁸⁸

It should be stated here that the Company's policy would have been to divide the territory between the various creeds and avoid to have more than one in a particular Fort.

Gascon met with difficulties in the person of William Hardisty during the course of his trip¹⁸⁹ but, undaunted, returned in the winter of 1861,¹⁹⁰ insisting on the importance of establishing a mission at Fort Liard as soon as possible. He also expected trouble on the part of Reverend Kirby, but thought that "this dear minister will be the victim." The Reverend Kirby has not even looked at him at Fort Simpson and, at all cost, Father Gascon was determined to go to Fort Liard before "my little unmanerly fellow" went. He added: "This little mister prepares himself to leave with me. [...] Let him come, I care very little about him," and he hoped to gain a victory over his "little enemy." He closed his letter with these words: "War to Satan, war to little Kirby."¹⁹¹

It is easy, by this last sentence, to understand the religious climate in the Mackenzie district at the time. It was not only competition, but open conflict.

In a letter to Bishop Taché, Father Gascon explained how he waited for the arrival of the "dear dainty" and how he warned the Indians and told them to shake hands with the Reverend, but that all refused. He shared his room at the Fort with the minister, but was displeased to see this "gem" at the door of the tent where he celebrated mass, hence a verbal war which lasted for a long time.

There was also a game of hide-and-seek at the time of leaving, each missionary trying to guess whether the other would leave or not. The priest concluded his letter by stating that Fort Liard is very important and that it is imperative to visit it in the spring.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁴ Eynard to Taché, Grande Ile, May 5, 1861 (*ibid.*).

¹⁸⁵ Gascon to Taché, July 2, 1861 (*ibid.*).

¹⁸⁶ Baptismal Records of Fort Rae.

¹⁸⁷ Adrien-Gabriel Morice, O.M.I., *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 20.

¹⁸⁸ Gascon to Taché, June 1, 1860 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface).

¹⁸⁹ Gascon to Taché, November 30, 1860 (*ibid.*).

¹⁹⁰ Eynard to Taché, January 7, 1861 (*ibid.*).

¹⁹¹ Gascon to Taché, March 19, 1861 (*ibid.*).

¹⁹² Gascon to Taché, November 15, 1860 (*ibid.*).

He was satisfied with his visit, as Brother Patrick Keamey of Fort Resolution writes that the priest showed heroic courage in his mission, that he won a “glorious victory,” and was elated with his success and speaking of returning the following spring.¹⁹³

Father Gascon returned in 1861 and his “little unmanerly fellow” followed him, but without success. After spending three days together at the Fort, the quarrel began anew.¹⁹⁴ Bishop Grandin passed through Fort Liard in September 1861 and complained that the Indians could become good Christians, but that Protestantism had inculcated indifference. All the Indians, except for three, were in favour of the Catholics.¹⁹⁵

It seems that the ghost of Reverend Kirby followed Father Gascon everywhere, a fact which is probably true also of the Reverend. In a letter to Father Faraud at the end of the year, Gascon wrote that he was deprived of the presence of “little Kirby,” “this beautiful pretty little gem” at Fort Simpson. “What a loss!”¹⁹⁶

Notwithstanding the difficulties of all sorts encountered at Fort Liard, 75 baptisms are registered for this period, and a residential mission was to be established in 1871.

Fort Providence (Rapid, Grande Île)

The mission of Fort Providence was visited early by the priests of Fort Resolution who refer to it as the Grande Île mission. Father Grollier spent two weeks there in 1858¹⁹⁷ and returned in 1859, while Father Eynard and Bishop Grandin also did missionary work. In 1861, the missionaries prepared for a permanent residential mission but, on his visit to Grande Île that year, Bishop Grandin found the site of the first meeting place too unsatisfactory and discovered a new place at the present site of Fort Providence. On August 6, he took possession of a piece of land in the presence of Chief Factor Ross and named it Providence because, in his estimation, it was to become the Providence of the northern missions. He also thought that the bishopric would be well located at this point.¹⁹⁸

Ross was also happy to see the Catholics established there, since the Anglican minister had refused the place which the officer considered a good location for a mission. He promised help for the new establishment.¹⁹⁹ During the period 1858-1861, 100 baptisms were registered²⁰⁰ and a permanent mission established the following year, 1862.

Fort Norman (Middle Fort, Fort du Milieu)

Fort Norman, where Hares, Slaves and Dog Ribs met, was first visited by Father Grollier in the summer of 1859. He reached the place in June, but met opposition from Nicol Taylor

¹⁹³ Kearney to Végreville, December 10, 1860 (Oblate Provincial archives, Edmonton).

¹⁹⁴ Gascon to Taché, May 1, 1861 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface).

¹⁹⁵ Grandin to the Fathers of Athabasca, Simpson, September 27, 1861 (*ibid.*).

¹⁹⁶ To Faraud, October 20, 1861 (Oblate General archives, Rome: Gascon).

¹⁹⁷ Baptismal Records of Fort Providence.

¹⁹⁸ Grandin to Taché, September 6, 1861 (*Œuvres de Mgr Grandin*, vol. 9), and Grandin to the Fathers of Athabasca, Simpson, September 27, 1861 (*loc. cit.*).

¹⁹⁹ Grandin to the Fathers of Athabasca, Simpson, September 27, 1861 (*loc. cit.*).

²⁰⁰ Baptismal Records of Fort Providence.

(in charge of the Fort) who told him he could not receive him, asserting that he had not been advised by Ross. He also told Kirby that the Fort was his. Grollier then told the Officer that he would camp near the new Fort. After a lengthy discussion Taylor gave his consent to Grollier's stay.²⁰¹

Difficulties continued, since on February 13, 1861, Taylor wrote to Grollier that he could not come to Fort Norman without a written instruction from Ross, saying: "I will have nothing to do with priests or parsons."²⁰²

Father Grollier returned to the post in 1861 and his work was fruitful since in the short space of three years he baptized 81 persons.²⁰³ The mission continued to be visited yearly until a priest resided in 1876.

Fort Good Hope

Father Grollier was not satisfied before he had reached the end of the world and had settled at Fort Good Hope, This he did in 1859. The post had been offered to Bishop Taché, while in London in 1856. Lord Colville, on behalf of the Committee, gave him permission to establish a mission.²⁰⁴

On June 15, 1858, Sir George Simpson sent a letter of introduction to Ross, asking a passage to Good Hope and hospitality at the Fort for Father Grollier. This new venture was also a source of difficulties. On August 23, 1858, in reply to a letter of Archdeacon Hunter (dated August 21), Ross told him that he had received no "official intimation" concerning the "unsolicited permission" granted to Grollier for his mission.²⁰⁵ On the same day, under the influence of Hunter, a petition was signed against the move by the Officers in charge of the various posts in the Mackenzie district. It read in part: "having heard the Company have given him [Grollier] their sanction to establish a popish mission in this District, and at Fort Good Hope, in particular, beg strongly to deprecate such permission being granted."²⁰⁶ However, since the permission had been granted by London and Sir George Simpson, little or nothing could be done to prevent the Catholic missionary from going. Nevertheless, efforts would be made to throw difficulties in the way of the priest.

In 1859, Grollier wrote a fellow Oblate that he was *ad latera aquilonis*, only one hundred leagues from the sea and at the door of the Loucheux or Kutchin Indians and the Eskimos. He also asked for Nuns and a Bishop for the district.²⁰⁷ In a letter to his Superior General, the missionary said that he wanted no Protestants at Fort Good Hope because this Fort was too attractive for the Oblates where they could have the cross acclaimed by a sun which never set.²⁰⁸

According to Bishop Taché, the priest was going to Fort Good Hope, not to established a mission (something he was unable to do), but to live at the Fort and prevent the good Indians from falling into the hands of the Protestants.²⁰⁹ He was also pleased with this new

²⁰¹ Grollier to Taché, July 20, 1859 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface).

²⁰² Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface.

²⁰³ Baptismal Records of Fort Norman.

²⁰⁴ *Missions... des... Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, 6 (1867), p. 480.

²⁰⁵ Church Missionary Society archives, C I A 91.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, C I A 91.

²⁰⁷ To Végreville, February 2 (Oblate Provincial archives, Edmonton).

²⁰⁸ Théophile Ortolan, O.M.I., *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 230.

²⁰⁹ Taché to Faraud, June 7, 1859 (Oblate General archives, Rome: Taché).

establishment and wrote to his mother: "I am very happy that the Gospel has spread to the North West extremity of my diocese."²¹⁰

Father Grollier was also delighted with his new situation; he was ready to go and live with the Indians if the Company refused him hospitality.²¹¹ His work there, according to a letter he wrote to an Oblate, was "to guard the camp against the protestant invasion."²¹²

This Fort was looked upon as a very good place for a mission because from this post the missionary could visit Fort Norman and Peel River.²¹³ As for Father Grollier, he was not completely satisfied. In his zeal, he wanted four priests at Fort Good Hope, one for the Fort itself, one for Fort Norman during the summer, another for the Eskimos and a fourth for Peel River.²¹⁴

A small house was built by the Company where the priest lived.²¹⁵ Unfortunately, Grollier was already seriously ill (he died in 1864) and he wrote that he considered himself useless; life was leaving him and three Anglican divines were expected in the summer of 1860. Reverend Kirby had also promised to be at Fort Good Hope in the spring of 1861.²¹⁶ Under these circumstances, Father Jean Séguin was sent in the summer of 1861 to help Grollier.²¹⁷ Bishop Grandin deeply felt the state of health of Father Grollier because he thought he was the only man capable to stand in front of Reverend Kirby ("tenir tête à Kirby"), and that it was to Grollier that the Catholics owed the great expansion of their missions.²¹⁸

The Bishop visited Fort Good Hope in the fall and winter of 1861-1862 and found the mission very poor. The priests lived in a small house of 22 feet by 18 feet, the chapel included.²¹⁹

In three years since the arrival of Father Grollier at Fort Good Hope, 138 baptisms had been registered at the mission.²²⁰

Peel River

From Fort Good Hope, Father Grollier also visited Peel River and while there he baptized

²¹⁰ October 22, 1859 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface).

²¹¹ Grollier to Grandin, February 2, 1860 (Oblate General archives, Rome: Grollier).

²¹² *Rapport ... de la Propagation de la Foi*, Montréal, 13 (1861), p. 36.

²¹³ Gascon to Taché, June 1, 1860 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface)

²¹⁴ To Taché, July 20, 1860 (*ibid.*).

²¹⁵ Grollier to Ross, [undated], first draft (Diocesan archives of Fort Smith).

²¹⁶ Grollier to Faraud, February 24, 1861 (Oblate General archives, Rome: Grollier).

²¹⁷ Boisramé to Taché, June 5, 1861 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface), and Grandin to Mazenod, June 22, 1861 (Oblate General archives, Rome: Grandin).

²¹⁸ Grandin to Clut, night 28-29 September 1861 (Diocesan archives of Fort Smith).

²¹⁹ Grandin to Mazenod, November 13, 1861 (Oblate General archives, Rome: Grandin).

²²⁰ Baptismal Records of Fort Good Hope.

four Eskimos and sixty-five Loucheux²²¹ on September 14, 1860.²²² His visit, however, did not please the Officers of Peel River, Charles Gaudet and James Lockhart. The former wrote to Ross on February 2, 1861, that Father Grollier was responsible for the famine at the Fort, since he had kept the Indians away from hunting. This, in fact, was false information. As for Lockhart, he went as far as saying that if a priest or a parson was to live at his Fort, he would abandon it.²²³

Grollier wrote to Fathers Faraud and Isidore Clut, in February 1861, informing them that the two men were furious to see him go to Peel River, even telling him that he could not eat with them. Nevertheless, the priest went to Peel contrary to their wishes, and made the trip in a barge "with the dogs." At Peel, the Indians were happy to see him and he thought that his presence would be necessary at this point as at Fort Liard, otherwise the Protestant missionaries would come in this direction.²²⁴ A few days later, he told Father Végreville: "What a pity if Kirby after visiting this post [Peel] established himself before us."²²⁵

He also gave a long description of his voyage to Father Léonard Baveux, in May 1861, and stated that on September 14, feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, he had succeeded in bringing peace between the Loucheux and the Eskimos.²²⁶

In July, he prepared himself for a second trip to Peel River. On this occasion, he sends a letter to Bernard Ross. During the last visit he had to find his own food, since the Officers refused to receive him in the Fort. He was now protesting because such a refusal had been made nowhere else in the Forts of the Company and he asked to be treated with more humanity.²²⁷ He had already told Ross that he had gone to Peel River before and has asked nothing from the Fort, living off the products of his fishing rod.²²⁸ This unusual procedure on the part of the Company prompted Ross to make apologies to Bishop Taché on November 20, 1861.²²⁹

In August of the same year, Grollier wrote: "It seems that heresy has let loose its rage against the North."²³⁰ However, he was not discouraged since Bishop Grandin had assured Father Faraud on September 9, 1861, "that notwithstanding his illness, Father Grollier was disposed to return to Peel River, where they had refused to help him even with a 'fish tail'." The Bishop was sending a letter of complaints to the Governor himself.²³¹

If the Bishop was happy with the work of Father Grollier, he was sorry that the

²²¹ Baptismal Records of Peel River.

²²² *Ibid.*

²²³ Gascon to Taché, May 1, 1861 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface).

²²⁴ Oblate General archives, Rome: Grollier.

²²⁵ February 28, 1861 (Oblate Provincial archives, Edmonton).

²²⁶ Grollier to Léonard Baveux, O.M.L., May 28, 1860 (*Rapport... de la Propagation de la Foi...* Montréal, 13 (1861), pp. 35-43).

²²⁷ July 29 (Diocesan archives of Fort Smith).

²²⁸ July 9 (*ibid.*).

²²⁹ Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface.

²³⁰ To Végreville, Peel River, August 3, 1861 (Oblate Provincial archives, Edmonton).

²³¹ Oblate General archives, Rome.

Protestants had been at Fort Yukon before the Oblates,²³² and Father Clut attributed this “misfortune” to the illness of Father Grollier.²³³

During 1860 and 1861, the priest registered 83 baptisms at Peel River;²³⁴ but he was never to see these Indians again, as he would be replaced the following year by Father Séguin.

* * *

This short account of the work of the Oblates in the Canadian Northwest shows that their coming to Red River really saved the Catholic missions. Not only had they worked in the vicinity of Saint Boniface, but they carried the message of the Gospel in every direction and reached the Arctic circle within a very short time. If the Church obtained a solid foothold in these regions, it was due to their unflinching zeal and to the arduous labours of the secular priests – the first to visit or establish several missions which, by 1861, were under the exclusive care of the Oblates.

Besides preaching the Gospel, it must be remembered that the Oblates taught the Indians how to write and read. They printed books in the various Indian languages,²³⁵ developed agriculture in their missions, built roads, etc.

Canada has recognized their work by dotting its geographical maps with the names of various Oblates.²³⁶ Moreover, it has also been acknowledged that the work they did under the direction of Bishop Provencher and, especially, as their number grew, under the guidance of Bishop Taché, was beneficial and productive. Becles Wilson, biographer of Lord Strathcona, could thus write: “Monseigneur Alexandre Taché was a prelate of unusual sagacity, ability, and enlightenment, and exerted a special influence upon his coreligionists throughout the whole of Rupert’s Land and the far north.”²³⁷

²³² Grandin to the Fathers of Athabasca, September 27, 1861 (Diocesan archives of Saint Boniface).

²³³ Clut to Faraud, December 16, 1861 (Oblate General archives, Rome: Clut).

²³⁴ Baptismal Records of Peel River.

²³⁵ Gaston Carrière, O.M.I., *Contribution des Oblats de Marie Immaculée de langue française aux études de linguistique et d’ethnologie du nord canadien*, in *Culture*, 12 (1951), pp. 213-226; *Une riche collection de manuscrits en langues indiennes*, *ibid.*, 18 (1957), pp. 105-112.

²³⁶ There are more than 350 Oblate names in the geography of Canada: Gaston Carrière, O.M.I., *Essai de toponymie oblate canadienne*, in *Revue de l’Université d’Ottawa*, 28 (1958), pp. 364-394, 522-531; 29 (1959), pp. 92-108, 233-246; *Quelques nouveaux toponymes oblats*, in *Études Oblates*, 22 (1963), pp. 285-287. Many new names have been added since.

One can also find a considerable number of streets, buildings, etc., named after the Oblates as well as many historical sites (Gaston Carrière, O.M.I., *De quelques monuments historiques*, in *Revue de l’Université d’Ottawa*, 32 (1962), pp. 68-80). This list is also incomplete.

²³⁷ *The Life of Lord Strathcona & Mount Royal...*, London [etc.], Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1916, p. 159.