

John Joseph Leddy and the Battle for the Soul of the Catholic Church in the West

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When John Joseph Leddy (1879-1949) was buried in Saskatoon in January 1949 many of the leading citizens of the city and province came to pay their last respects. Among the mourners was the Roman Catholic Bishop of Saskatoon, the Abbot of St. Peter's Benedictine Monastery at Muenster and over two dozen priests from various dioceses in Saskatchewan. City Hall was represented by the Mayor and three aldermen, and members of the provincial and federal Conservative parties were also conspicuous. Faculty and administration from the University of Saskatchewan, St. Thomas More College and the Saskatoon Separate School Board were present in large numbers, as well as over one hundred members of the Knights of Columbus. The presence of such a large number of distinguished mourners was a testament to Leddy's enormous contribution to the Roman Catholic Church and its educational institutions in Saskatoon and his active role in the political life of the province. But as is frequently the case, the mourners also came to pay tribute to the representative of a particular constituency, for since his arrival in Saskatoon in 1912 Leddy had served as leader and spokesman of the English Catholic community in the city, a group that was predominantly of Irish origin. As well as highlighting the achievements of this remarkable individual, therefore, an analysis of various aspects of Leddy's career will provide some insights into the experience of this group during the early development of the province of Saskatchewan. In particular, it will shed some light on the various controversies which erupted between the Irish and French Canadians within the Catholic church in the West.

John Joseph Leddy was born on a farm outside Lindsay, Ontario in 1879. His parents were part of the large influx of emigrants from Ireland during the Famine period, and like many of their Irish counterparts, the Leddy's were solidly established in the Ontario agricultural community by the 1870s. From a young age Leddy showed academic promise and after graduating from high school he went to the University of Ottawa where he received a B.A. and B.Ed. He began his teaching career in a rural school and then moved to St. Patrick's

Separate School in Ottawa where he served as principal for twelve years. During this period he became involved in politics, acting as campaign manager for Frank Cahill, an Irish Catholic businessman who ran for the Conservative Party in the 1911 federal election. Leddy was also caught up in the growing controversy over Regulation 17 in eastern Ontario at this time. A critic of the extension of French language rights in Ontario, he ran into difficulties with the Separate School Board in Ottawa, and he resigned his position in early 1912. With a wife and two young children to support Leddy joined the thousands of Ontarians who were attracted by the opportunities which the prairies offered, in October 1912 he moved to Saskatoon to manage Frank Cahill's real estate investments.¹

From the little known of Leddy's early years what is particularly striking is that his family life, education, career, and even marriage all occurred within the Irish Catholic immigrant milieu.² He demonstrated many of the characteristics which have been attributed to the Irish Catholic migrant sub-culture as it became integrated into the Canadian mainstream. Although some of these characteristics were shared by all English-speaking or Anglo-Celtic Catholics, the Irish appear to have been the most vocal and aggressive. Foremost among these values was a profound commitment to the Roman Catholic Church as the primary focus of individual and collective loyalty. Indeed, Leddy was named after John Joseph Lynch, Bishop of Toronto and first Irish Catholic Archbishop of Ontario. Leddy's life-long concern with educational issues was also typical of a group which identified education as a crucial route to economic success and social prominence. His insistence on combining religion and education through the Separate School system was also a distinguishing feature of the Irish Catholic community. In his involvement in politics Leddy was also part of a long line of Irish Catholics who saw political activism as a key to influence and recognition within society.³ Finally, Leddy demonstrated a deep hostility towards French Canadian Catholics, undoubtedly related to the fact that the termination of his teaching career in Ottawa was at least partly due to the growing conflict between Irish and French within the Catholic Church in eastern Ontario during the early

¹ For biographical information see *The Prairie Messenger* February 3, 1949.

² Leddy married Theresa Dwyer, a school teacher and also second generation Irish Catholic from Chesterville, Ontario in 1909.

³ For different perspectives on the adjustment of Irish immigrants see M. Nicolson, "The Catholic Church and the Irish in Victorian Toronto" (Ph.D., University of Guelph, 1980); M. Cottrell, "Irish Catholic Political Leadership in Toronto: 1855-1872" (Ph.D., University of Saskatchewan, 1988); B.P. Clarke, "Piety, Nationalism and Fraternity: The Rise of Irish Catholic Voluntary Associations, 1850-1895." (Ph.D., University of Chicago, 1986); and M. McGowan, "We are All Canadians: A Social, Religious and Cultural Portrait of Toronto's English-Speaking Roman Catholics, 1890-1920" (Ph.D., University of Toronto, 1988).

twentieth century.⁴ This then was part of the cultural baggage which he inherited from his Ontario Irish Catholic upbringing and which shaped his response to circumstances in Saskatchewan.

When Leddy arrived in Saskatoon in October 1912 it was very much a frontier community. The small population of about 15,000 lived in scattered frame houses, streets were mostly unpaved and no trees had yet been planted. However he was “immediately delighted by the breezy dynamic spirit of the west, contrasting it with the staid civil service atmosphere of Ottawa.”⁵ The timing of his arrival was unfortunate though, for shortly before the war property values plummeted and he was forced to abandon the real estate business within a year. With typical adaptability Leddy next turned to selling insurance. In 1916 he was appointed business manager for London Life Insurance Company in Saskatoon and by the 1920s he had established an extremely lucrative career in the insurance business which he maintained until his retirement.

When Leddy moved west the Catholic community in Saskatchewan was undergoing rapid change. (See Table 1) Originally established by French missionaries and settlers, the early 1900s saw the arrival of English-speaking Catholics from Ontario, the Maritimes and the British Isles, and even larger numbers of Catholics from eastern Europe. By 1911 there were 90,000 Catholics in the province, less than half of whom were French. English-speaking Catholics of Irish, Scottish and English origin constituted approximately twenty percent of the Catholic population, and this group provided a ready-made support network for Leddy upon his arrival in Saskatoon. The Ancient Order of Hibernians and other Irish ethnic organizations were a valuable source of contacts, especially in Leddy’s business, but even more important was the Knights of Columbus. Through his involvement in this organization, Leddy met a large number of Catholic laymen, predominantly of Irish origin, which included many who were or would later become members of the social and political elite of the province. Among these were Emmett Hall, future Chief Justice of Saskatchewan, Joseph Foley, a lumber merchant and future mayor of North Battleford, Walter O’Regan, lawyer and member of Saskatoon City Council, and Thomas Molloy, president of the Regina Trades and Labour Congress and future Deputy Minister of Labour in Saskatchewan. Leddy’s ambition soon propelled him to the national executive of the Knights. In 1917 he was selected to organize the Knights of Columbus Army Huts project. This involved extensive travel in Canada and Europe and for his efforts the French government conferred on him the honour of Officer of Public Instruction. From 1919 to 1921 he held the position

⁴ R. Choquette, *Language and Religion: A History of English French Conflict in Ontario*, (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1975).

⁵ J.F. Leddy, “Growing up in Saskatoon,” *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, July 4, 1982.

of Supreme Knight or director of the Knights of Columbus in North America.⁶

Leddy's rapid rise to prominence within the Knights revealed his enormous energy and organizational talent, his forceful personality and his obvious need to be at the centre of events. As one commentator noted he was "confident, energetic, outspoken, clever and articulate in his speech and writing and unceasing in his efforts to further the progress of the members of his religious denomination, ethnic group, political party, business interests and family."⁷ By the end of the war he had established himself as the leading spokesman for the English-speaking Catholic community in Saskatoon, with support throughout the province.

Not surprisingly, given his former career, Leddy had a deep interest in education and spent several terms on the Saskatoon Separate School Board. But he soon shifted his attention to the problems facing young Catholics in Saskatchewan with respect to university education. Leddy and other English Catholic laymen were keenly aware of the value of university education and its impact on social advancement. In examining the situation at the end of the World War I, they estimated that Catholics, who constituted one seventh of the population of Saskatoon, were vastly under-represented in the city's professional classes. Of the twenty six dentists only one was Catholic, two of fifty doctors, three of fifty lawyers and one of the ninety college teachers.⁸ This they attributed to the low Catholic enrollment at the University of Saskatchewan and they predicted that the "present small enrollment will mean that Catholic representation in all these fields will be small, and that Catholic prestige and influence in these important professions, and beyond them, will remain insignificant."⁹ But while Leddy and his colleagues saw university education as the key to "prestige and influence," they had very strong reservations about the dangers which the secular orientation of the existing provincial university posed to the faith of their children. Their preferred solution was to establish a separate college for Catholic students, affiliated with the provincial university, but under the control of the Catholic church.

Leddy immediately established himself as the driving force behind the campaign for a federated Catholic college and formally broached the subject when Bishop Pascal of Prince Albert visited Saskatoon in July 1913. Although

⁶ *Columbianism in Saskatchewan, 1907-1982*, (N.P.: Knights of Columbus State Council, 1982), pp.182ff.

⁷ M. Sanche, *Tree of Eden, Tower of Babel: The Controversy Over the Establishment of St. Thomas More College at the University of Saskatchewan, 1913-1936*, (M.A. Thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1989), p.32.

⁸ Archives of the Diocese of Saskatoon, St. Thomas More Files, Laymen's Meeting Record, 1918.

⁹ Ibid.

Pascal apparently endorsed the project initially, it subsequently ran into fierce opposition from other members of the French-Canadian hierarchy in Saskatchewan. Thus began a protracted and often bitter conflict between English and French Catholics, initially over education but with implications which went far beyond higher education. The French position on education was articulated most forcibly by the Quebec-born Olivier Mathieu, first Bishop of Regina. Based on his experience as Rector of Laval University in Quebec City and sensitive to the cultural pluralism of the Catholic community in the west, Mathieu envisaged a number of classical colleges catering to the different ethnic groups, feeding into one large Catholic University in western Canada. Given Mathieu's belief in the preservation of the French language and culture as the key to the maintenance of a strong Catholic church in the West, there was little doubt that this system would be controlled by the French, that priority would be given to the French language and that it would involve as complete a segregation of Catholic students from the secular world as possible. As Mathieu insisted "the less our children mix with those who do not have the faith, the more and better they will preserve their faith, which will be the salvation of their souls."¹⁰

English Catholics in Saskatoon led by Leddy, shared both Mathieu's concerns about the dangers of secular influences and his insistence on a religious dimension to education. But they rejected the extreme cultural separation which the bishop's approach envisaged since they believed it was both inevitable and desirable that Catholics participate in the larger community. The approach they preferred, modelled on the federation between St. Michael's College and the University of Toronto, provided the best of both worlds, they insisted. It would make available some classes such as philosophy and history from a Catholic perspective and provide a clerical presence to fortify the faith of young Catholic students. At the same time it would allow Catholic students to avail themselves of the best education in the province. Once their university education was completed Catholic students would thus be confirmed in their religion and they would be adequately equipped to participate in the larger society. Leddy expressed this position succinctly in a speech to the Saskatoon Convention of the Knights of Columbus in 1920.

The future of the Catholic Church in this province depends on the quality of its people and its relations with the non-Catholics. Catholic higher education will create a leadership strong in its faith, confident in its abilities and equipped to wield the influence necessary to fulfill the Church's mission in this new society. By associating with students of other religions our youth will develop those acquaintances that are vital to their future success and through those contacts will also mitigate the hostility which exists among many Protestants

¹⁰ Sanche, *Tree of Eden*, pp.24-27.

towards our faith.¹¹

This conflict between the English and French Catholics over higher education also reflected two very different visions of the Catholic church's future role and position in Saskatchewan. The French envisaged a significant degree of separation, both religious and cultural, for Catholics. They were particularly concerned about the preservation of the French language and culture as a guarantee of the survival of Catholicism, and they fought hard to maintain their primacy within the church hierarchy in the province. English Catholics on the other hand, led by the vocal Irish, advocated considerable integration in linguistic, cultural and social spheres. They generally argued that all Catholic groups should be assimilated into the Canadian mainstream through the adoption of the English language and Anglo-Canadian cultural values. Moreover they saw themselves as the ideal group to preside over this process. From their perspective the identification of French language and culture with Catholicism threatened the social acceptance and political rights which they sought to develop and provided fuel for those who sought to deprive the church of its existing rights. In short, Leddy and his fellow English-speaking Catholic laymen felt that the French jeopardized their social, political and material advancement in Saskatchewan.¹²

Two very different visions of the future of the church in Saskatchewan, one assertive and integrationist, the other defensive and separatist, thus emerged from the debate over university education and became part of the larger conflict between French and Irish for control of the church in Saskatchewan. At the forefront of this dispute and apparently oblivious to the sensibilities of those who disagreed with him, Leddy was frequently criticized by the French hierarchy for assuming responsibilities which rightfully belonged to the bishops.¹³ His typical response to these criticisms was that he was simply fulfilling his duty as a faithful Catholic to advance the educational interests of the church. In private, however, he was more blunt, claiming that French intransigence forced him to be more aggressive.¹⁴

The inactivity and outright hostility of the French clergy, Leddy complained, left him and other English laymen little choice but to act independently, for if "left to Bishop Prud'homme and the French clergy mighty little progress or

¹¹ Saskatoon Knights of Columbus, Miscellaneous Records, 1920.

¹² R. Huel, "The Irish-French Conflict in Catholic Episcopal Nominations: The Western Sees and the Struggle for Domination Within the Church," Canadian Catholic Historical Association, *Study Sessions*, vol.42, (1975), pp.51-70.

¹³ Sanche, *Tree of Eden*, pp, 70-77.

¹⁴ National Archives of Canada, C. Murphy Papers, J.J. Leddy to C. Murphy, May 6, 1931.

advance would [be] made. The French for some reason [look] upon it as something inimical to French interests.”¹⁵ No such problems would have arisen, Leddy insisted, if an English rather than a French bishop was in place, and he next threw himself into the campaign to secure the appointment of an English-speaking bishop in Saskatoon. Those efforts finally paid off in the early 1930s when a major shift to English control of the Saskatchewan hierarchy occurred. In 1930 Archbishop Mathieu was succeeded by J.C. McGuigan from Edmonton; four years later the diocese of Prince Albert and Saskatoon was divided, and an English-speaking bishop, Gerald Murray, was appointed to head the new diocese of Saskatoon.¹⁶ True to Leddy’s prediction the new bishop soon gave his approval to the federated college proposal. After negotiations were completed with the university and the Basilian Fathers, St. Thomas More College was formally established in 1936.¹⁷ This clearly represented the triumph of the Irish-led English-speaking Catholic vision of higher education over that proposed by French Canadians. It was also a personal triumph for J.J. Leddy who had devoted much of his time and energy over the previous twenty years to the dream of a federated Catholic college catering to English-speaking Catholic students in Saskatoon.

Perhaps the best indication of Leddy’s energy and ambition was that during the period he was on the national executive of the Knights of Columbus and spear-heading the campaign for the Catholic college in Saskatoon, he was also actively involved in Saskatchewan provincial politics. From 1923 to 1937 he sat on the executive of the provincial Conservative party and acted as fundraiser, organizer, campaign strategist and occasionally as public speaker for the party in the Saskatoon area.¹⁸ This affiliation with the Conservatives which he first developed in Ontario, ran counter to the general pattern of Catholic and immigrant support for the provincial Liberal party dating to the creation of the province in 1905. In a sense, however, this was consistent with the views which Leddy expressed on education and other issues. He believed that supporting the Conservatives was the best route to individual and collective advancement for English Catholics in Saskatchewan. As an acquaintance of his recalled:

J.J. always said that the Conservatives represented the better elements of society and that we would benefit by establishing good relations with those people. Besides that, he claimed we had much more in common with them

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ D. Robertson, *The Sword of St. Paul: A History of the Diocese of Saskatoon, 1933-1983*, (Saskatoon: Episcopal Corporation of Saskatoon, 1982), pp.25-27.

¹⁷ Sanche. *Tree of Eden*, pp.111-125.

¹⁸ Diefenbaker Archives, J.G. Diefenbaker Papers, Saskatoon File, 1920-1940.

than with the French and other nationalities who voted for the Liberals.¹⁹

Leddy therefore believed that supporting the Conservatives would help English-speaking Catholics to establish themselves as part of the social mainstream in the province and to this end he developed close relations with several leading members of the Conservative party. These included Dr. J.T.M. Anderson, who Leddy supported financially and nominated for party leadership in 1924. This position became increasingly difficult to sustain in the late 1920s however, as Saskatchewan politics polarized along sectarian lines due to the activities of the Ku Klux Klan. Of particular embarrassment to Leddy was the fact that the Conservatives under Anderson sought to capitalize on the religious passions generated by the Klan, by adopting an increasingly anti-Catholic stance especially with respect to Separate Schools.²⁰

This obviously put Leddy in an extremely awkward position and greatly hindered his efforts to sell the Conservatives to his fellow Catholics. Nevertheless, he maintained his support for the party, retained his executive position and even campaigned for Anderson in the bitter 1929 election. For a self-styled “two-fisted Catholic,” this support for a party which ran on an explicitly anti-Catholic platform and which enacted legislation injurious to Catholic educational rights once in power, makes little sense.²¹ Nor, apparently, was it a position supported by the circle of English Catholic laymen with whom Leddy was associated. He had a plausible explanation for his idiosyncratic stance, however, and not surprisingly it stemmed directly from the relationship between French and English Catholics in Saskatchewan and the implications of this for the English Catholic community. Leddy’s analysis of political developments in Saskatchewan was that the outburst of anti-Catholicism was the result not so much of Protestant bigotry but rather of what he called “radical French racialism.”²² Similarly, he attributed the sudden popularity of the Klan to the general perception that French aggression was on the increase and was being

¹⁹ Interview with Patrick Grimes, February 11, 1994. Patrick Grimes, who currently resides in Prince Albert, came to Saskatchewan in 1927 from Northern Ireland. He was a member of the Knights of Columbus from 1930 until 1975 and was an acquaintance of J.J. Leddy.

²⁰ F. Kyba, “Ballots and Burning Crosses: The Election of 1929,” in *Politics in Saskatchewan*, N. Ward and D. Spafford, (Toronto: Longmans, 1969), pp. 105-122.

²¹ For a detailed discussion of Conservative changes to the Separate School system see R. Huel, “The Anderson Amendments and Secularization of Saskatchewan Schools,” Canadian Catholic Historical Association, *Study Sessions*, 44, (1977), pp. 61-76.

²² National Archives of Canada, C. Murphy Papers, J.J. Leddy to C. Murphy, May 6, 1931.

pandered to by the provincial Liberals. To a colleague in Ontario he offered the following explanation:

The arrogant manner in which the hierarchy and the clergy [they were all French] arrogated to themselves as rights those things which were merely privileges, and privileges granted by the Liberal government for political purposes, produced a deep resentment in the hearts of even the fair-minded Protestant people which ... broke forth into the religious flight which reached its climax in the 1929 provincial elections.²³

Caught between “French racialists” on one side and “extreme Ku Kluxers” on the other, he felt it his responsibility to remain within the party to act as a broker between the English Catholic community and moderate Protestants. Above all he had tried to make Catholicism acceptable to Protestants by trying to ensure that the

ill-advised action of the Catholic hierarchy would not be misunderstood and taken as the Catholic attitude when it actually had as its motive the promotion of racial ideas?²⁴

And his only regret was that the

Anderson crowd ... in their effort to block French aggression in the province ... went too far and invoked legislation that involved all Catholics.²⁵

A year after the 1929 election Leddy became embroiled in another public controversy when the death of Senator Ben Prince created a vacancy for a Saskatchewan representative in the upper chamber. Prime Minister Bennett announced that the position would go to a Catholic and Leddy immediately began lobbying for the appointment. In pressing that claim, he pointed to his long record of service to the party and the fact that he was one of the very few prominent Catholics in Saskatchewan to have fought the “lone and losing battle.” Moreover, he noted that he was recognized as a representative or spokesman for English Catholics in Saskatchewan, that he was supported for the position by the entire community, and that he had also been endorsed by some of the most prominent members of the English Catholic hierarchy throughout the Dominion.²⁶ When Leddy discovered his main rival for the position was Arthur

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., and National Archives of Canada, R.B. Bennett Papers, J.J. Leddy to R.B. Bennett, March 28, 1928; January 23, 1929; Bennett to Leddy, March 17, 1930.

Marcotte, a French Canadian from the Gravelbourg area, he was furious. Writing to Charles Murphy, an Irish Catholic senator from Ontario, he predicted:

You know as well as I do what will be made by the French people of the prestige which Marcotte's appointment would give them. It will simply be used to further advance French interests only and to foment racial discord to a greater extent than ever. They will interpret it as a victory over Anderson and will be more aggressive than ever. It simply means religious war in this province for years to come, and a war in which the English-speaking Catholics will have to do the fighting. The appointment of an English-speaking man to this position could be fraught with no such danger. He would better understand the Protestant mentality and would be regarded as a part of an organization created for the purpose of combatting the things for which Anderson stands.²⁷

Despite Leddy's best efforts, however, the appointment ultimately went to Marcotte, a decision which he attributed to the transparent efforts of the federal Conservatives to appease Quebec. Understandably disappointed at this rejection and obviously convinced that no future rewards awaited him, Leddy withdrew from active involvement in provincial politics shortly thereafter.

In his analysis of this conflict between the Irish and French over episcopal nominations in the West, Raymond Huel argued that it was caused primarily by a "struggle to ensure the domination of one cultural tradition as opposed to another."²⁸ Margaret Sanche has further suggested that the conflict was the result of "ethnocentric providentialism" stemming from two very different senses of religious mission transported West.²⁹ The validity of both of these insights is confirmed by this brief examination of John Joseph Leddy's career and it also illustrates the impact of these forces on the response of one prominent individual to events in Saskatchewan. Although there are obvious dangers in generalizing from a particular case, this examination does suggest a number of broad conclusions about the English Catholic community in the West at this time.

Perhaps what Leddy's response to events reveals most strikingly is the extent to which the descendants of Irish Catholic immigrants had adopted the values and outlooks of the Anglo-Canadian majority by the early twentieth century. Despite a strong consciousness of their Irish origin, they clearly identified with the linguistic majority in insisting that English would be the dominant language outside Quebec and that Anglo-Canadian cultural values would be the norm. Thus while English-speaking Catholics in Saskatchewan demanded control of their own educational institutions, they sought to do so in

²⁷ National Archives of Canada, Murphy Papers, J.J. Leddy to C. Murphy, April 11, 1931.

²⁸ R. Huel, "The Irish-French Conflict," p.53.

²⁹ Sanche, *The Tree of Eden*, pp. 6-18.

a manner that would be acceptable to Protestants and attempted in every way possible to establish good relations with the larger Protestant community. Building such bridges was the essence of Leddy's approach to provincial politics and also influenced his educational activities. The most revealing insights into his motivations for establishing St. Thomas More College was his comment that "nothing in my opinion has done more to win the respect of the educated Protestant than has this work."³⁰ Furthermore, if John Joseph Leddy was in any way typical, it must be said that English Catholics in Saskatchewan were an ambitious and aggressive group, with a strong desire for social advancement and recognition, both individually and collectively. Clearly, the stereotype of impoverishment, disease and dislocation which have been attributed to Irish famine emigrants bore no relation to the reality of their grandchildren's lives in Saskatchewan.

It was no doubt at least partly due to this past that English Catholics in Saskatchewan were so fiercely hostile towards those they believed might jeopardize the realization of their collective goals. From Leddy's perspective the activities of French Canadians within the church, in education and in politics were detrimental to the interests of the English Catholic community in Saskatchewan. For him these were not merely abstract issues, since they affected him in a profoundly personal way almost on a daily basis. They impinged on his business activities, his political aspirations, his children's education, and his personal relations with individual Protestants. Although Leddy was obviously a man of extreme views with a flair for controversy, it is clear that his attitude towards French-Canadians was consistent with the response of the larger English-speaking Catholic community in Saskatchewan to their French co-religionists.

Table One

**POPULATION OF SASKATCHEWAN
1901-1931**

	1901	1911	1921	1931
TOTAL	91,279	492,432	757,510	921,785
CATHOLIC	27,651	90,092	147,342	233,979
FRENCH CATHOLIC	23,251	42,152	46,031	50,700
OTHER CATHOLIC	4,400	47,940	101,311	183,279

³⁰ National Archives of Canada, C. Murphy Papers, J.J. Leddy to C. Murphy, April 11, 1931.