CCHA, *Historical Studies,* 53 (1986) 5-20

From Marseilles to the Mackenzie the First Oblate Missions of St. Boniface

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On 25 August, 1845 Bishop Provencher of St. Boniface greeted the first two Oblates of Mary Immaculate to arrive in his diocese to undertake Indian mission work for him. The two were Père Aubert, a native of France, and Frère Taché, a native of Canada East (Quebec). Taché, only twenty-two years old and still a novice, was the only Canadian Oblate then available to send to the West. Most of the Oblate missionaries in the nineteenth century continued to come directly from France. The growth of Indian missions in the West derived almost entirely from this French personnel, with ideas and influences from Catholic thought in France outweighing that of Quebec. But Taché, who became auxiliary bishop and then succeeded Provencher as Bishop of St. Boniface in 1853, represented the continuing strength of Quebec in the West in a sometimes uneasy alliance with the French Oblates under his direction.

Provencher himself has been one of the first two priests sent to Red River in 1818 by Bishop Plessis of Quebec to inaugurate the nineteenth century presence of the Church in the far west of British North America. Plessis' instructions to Joseph Norbert Provencher and Sévère Dumoulin imposed a heavy dual responsibility on the two priests. The primary aim of their mission was "to draw out of barbarism and the disorders which result from it" the Indian nations of that vast country. The second purpose was to look after the Christians (French-Canadians and Métis) who had adopted the customs of the Indians and lived "licentiously and forgetful of their duties as Christians."[1] The two priests thus assumed responsibility for the evangelization or reevangelization of most of the peoples of the West.

In fact, however, the latter aim of the mission predominated over the former, primarily due to the constant shortage of priests. In 1822 Provencher was consecrated titular Bishop of Juliopolis, responsible for the Church throughout the whole of the West, but as suffragan and Vicar of Quebec; Quebec was still responsible for finding priests and funds to support

[1] Archives of Archbishop of St. Boniface, P1011-14. Plessis to Provencher and Dumoulin, 20 April, 1818.

Provencher in the tasks assigned to him. Provencher tried to secure indigenous vocations from among the Métis of Red River but all of these attempts failed, leaving him dependent on priests from Quebec. Some volunteered to go to St. Boniface for a time, but soon asked to be returned to Quebec; Provencher claimed they had only gotten to be some use to him when they asked to leave.

Until the arrival of the Oblates in 1845 Provencher never had more than four priests at any one time. These few priests, briefly in the West, had no time or inclination to study the native languages. They were fully occupied in the care of the French-Canadians and Métis of the Red River Settlement, who lived near the cathedral of St. Boniface or at the mission of St. François-Xavier on the Assiniboine River. Theirs was essentially a parochial ministry to those already at least nominally Catholic, rather than a mission to convert those who had never been evangelized. They carried out one of the aims of Bishop Plessis, but the other, the preaching of the Gospel to all the native tribes of the far West, was virtually ignored.

This situation worsened when, on 16 April, 1844, Rome separated both Red River and Columbia (Oregon) from the Quebec archdiocese, making each an independent Apostolic Vicariate.[2] With the separation from Quebec Provencher became solely responsible for the Church in a huge area, stretching from Red River to the Rockies and north to the Arctic. This was fur trade country, assigned to the Hudson's Bay Company under its charter in 1670 and governed by it until 1870. Outside of the small settlement at Red River the vast majority of the population were Indians, both Plains buffalo hunters and northern Woods hunters, with whom the Church had had little or no contact.

Yet the needs of the Indian missions became increasingly pressing by the 1840s as the fervour for foreign missions dominated religious thought, both Catholic and Protestant. Provencher was impelled to do more by the expansion of the Anglican Church Missionary Society and the Methodists into the field of Indian missions in Rupert's Land. This put pressure on him to make an equal effort for Catholic missions, to prevent the attachment of all the Indian tribes to the Protestant denominations. The fact that the Hudson's Bay Company refused to have competing missions established at any one post made it all the more necessary that the Catholic Church secure a foothold in as many posts as possible to preempt the mission station there.

A further incentive for Provencher to expand his Indian missions was the pressure he experienced from the Association of the Propagation of the

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[2] In token of this change Provencher's title was changed first to Vicar of Hudson Bay and James Bay, then in 1847 to Bishop of the North West (a title which he always detested); in 1852 he and Taché managed to convince Rome to call him the Bishop of St. Boniface.

Faith. This group of laity, founded at Lyons in 1822, funded most of the foreign missions of the Church in the nineteenth century. It soon became an international organization, with branches all over Europe and some in North America; one was founded in Quebec in 1836, due in part to suggestions from Provencher. The Propagation of the Faith wanted all its contributions used to convert those who had never been evangelized and did not consider parochial or diocesan work, such as that at St. Boniface and St. François-Xavier, to be its mandate. Thus Provencher was urged to begin more extensive Indian missions if he wanted to continue to receive support from the Association.

To undertake effective Indian missions, however, required a number of priests who would be willing to dedicate their lives to the missions and Provencher had no such source. Quebec no longer had the obligation to support him with priests, although some still volunteered from there. Conscious of this and of the lack of indigenous vocations, yet pressed to expand the Church into Indian missions, Provencher saw only one possibility – that of asking a religious order to take over the Indian missions of his diocese. The only possible religious orders of men whom he could ask were all based in France; therefore he would have to ask a French order.

Foreign priests had been barred from entry into British North America after the Cession of New France in 1763, a regulation aimed primarily at priests from France. A few *emigré* priests had been allowed in during the French Revolution but for the rest the Church in British North America depended on its own vocations. These were always inadequate, even in the settled parts of Canada. In 1841 Bishop Bourget took the bold step of inviting both the Oblates and the Jesuits from France into the Montreal diocese and the British government made no objection to this. Provencher hoped that Sir George Simpson, Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, would be equally amenable if he imported French priests into Red River.

Accordingly, Provencher wrote to Simpson in 1843, shortly before leaving Red River for an extensive visit to Quebec and Europe. He told Simpson of his need to bring priests, probably from France, to serve in his diocese; Provencher assumed Simpson would not oppose this, mentioning that no objection had been made in other British possessions. Simpson, however, did object most vociferously and claimed that the situation in Red River was very different from that in other British territories in North America. He feared American intrusion into this unguarded boundary region, peopled by Indians and Métis who had very little regard for the boundary as a restriction on their movements or their trade, and governed by the Hudson's Bay Company without the support of any armed force. He was suspicious that French priests might complicate the situation further and

absolutely refused to countenance the introduction of a foreign clergy into Rupert's Land.[3]

Provencher then tried to find priests in Quebec in the summer of 1843 but secured only two, Mr. Laflèche and Mr. Bourassa, who agreed to accompany him back to St. Boniface in the summer of 1844. The Grey Nuns also agreed to send a contingent of sisters to his diocese. Although Provencher was very grateful for this help, it did not solve his problems regarding Indian mission work. He felt more sure than ever that only a religious congregation from France could provide the manpower he needed.

He travelled on to France where, despite the opposition expressed by Simpson, he asked the Jesuits to aid him. New France had set the precedent in North American Indian missions and it was natural for Provencher to think first of the Jesuits. In addition, he knew that the Belgian Jesuit Père De Smet had just begun his Indian mission work for the diocese of St. Louis, and French Jesuits had recently arrived in Montreal. He had optimistic grounds for hoping, therefore, that the Jesuits would respond favourably to his invitation. But the Jesuits, although growing in numbers in France, were unable to spare men for Provencher and refused his request.

For some reason Provencher did not ask the Oblates to help him while he was in France that winter of 1843-44. He had met Mazenod, the founder of the Oblates and Bishop of Marseilles, in 1836 and had found they shared a mutual interest in the support of foreign missions by the Propagation of the Faith. He also knew of the Oblate work in Montreal in the home missions and lumbercamps. But the Oblates were still a very small congregation; perhaps he thought that if the Jesuits could not help him, a smaller group would be even less able. The Oblates also, of course, had no experience or background in Indian missions to draw his attention to them.

When he returned to St. Boniface in 1844 Provencher's situation in regard to priests worsened through the death by drowning of Mr. Darveau, one of his most promising priests and one of the few who had engaged in Indian missions. In this crisis Provencher finally decided to ask Mazenod to send Oblates to help him. He may have become more aware of their work in Montreal on his return trip; perhaps he had talked to one of the Oblates who expressed an interest in Indian missions. In any case, Provencher wrote to Mazenod himself and also asked Bishop Bourget to intercede for him. The Oblate lack of experience in Indian missions was not a real drawback, since no other Catholic order had this as yet in the nineteenth century. The primary need was to provide priests for the missions, and this the Oblates

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[3] Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA), D5/8, fo. 288-9. Provencher to Simpson, 7 June, 1843. HBCA, D4/28, fo. 49d-50. Simpson to Provencher, 9 June, 1843.

promised to do. They could be expected to learn more while they gained practical experience in the field.

In many ways the Oblates were ideally suited to the task of Indian missions in North America. Mazenod had founded the Oblates in 1816 as a home missionary group to reevangelize the poor of Provence in the aftermath of the French Revolution. He chose as their motto *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me* (He has sent me to preach the Gospel to the poor). The poor referred to were the spiritually poor – a category which included the uninstructed Catholics of Restoration France, but which could also by extension include those, such as the North American Indians, who had never been exposed to Christian teaching.

Although the Oblates had no experience in Indian missions their home methods could readily be adapted to foreign missions all over the world. In France Mazenod had insisted that they preach in the local language, Provençal: this ability to communicate provided the solid foundation of their home missions and would do the same in the foreign missions.

The methods of the home missions of Provence could also be readily transferred to the North American Indian missions. Oblate home missionaries would visit a parish, carry on an intensive program of instruction and religious services in a period of two weeks or more, and then move on to repeat the process in another place. During the mission period, they preached several times a day, gave instruction, heard confessions, visited each home and regularized marriages. Thus the priests evangelized not only by teaching doctrine but also by stressing the moral code necessary to live out that faith, the need for the Sacraments, and the rules of the Church which bound its adherents.

The Oblate mission to evangelize the poor, their emphasis on using the local language, and their techniques of the home missions were equally applicable to the Indian missions of St. Boniface. The natives, who had never heard the Gospel preached, were considered the poorest of the poor because of this and especially suited to the Oblates' vocation. They spoke many different native languages; this called on the linguistic aptitudes of the Oblate missionaries, already developed in Provence. The hunting life of the Indians meant that missionary contact with them would be necessarily limited, the priest would have to make as much impact as possible in a short time, and he would frequently encounter the problem of polygamous marriages as a barrier to Christianity. These circumstances bore many similarities to those of the Restoration missions of the Oblates, although, of course, the contact with peoples of a different culture who had never been exposed to Christian teaching was a new factor for them.

The need for home missions had declined in France over the years as normal parish life under the direction of a curé was restored. The earlier

fervour for these was replaced by the zeal for foreign missions which captivated French Catholics, both lay and religious. Because of this, those with a call to the missions responded to the foreign rather than home mission field and Mazenod's small congregation did not increase in size. Mazenod had always been interested in expanding into foreign missions, but had lacked both means and opportunity.

It was not strange, therefore, for Mazenod to accept Provencher's pressing invitation. In fact, Mazenod looked on the request as a providential one, an opening for the Oblates to enter the untilled field of North American Indian missions. As the first religious order on the scene they could hope to become the recognized experts and extend over the whole of North America. The popularity of the foreign missions in France meant that those working in the field would draw financial support from the Propagation of the Faith; the publicity given to missions by the Propagation would then help to draw vocations to the small congregation of Oblates. While following their motto to evangelize the poor, the Oblates could increase in numbers and be able to pursue more opportunities in foreign missions.

Thus it was a combination of interests on the part of the Oblates and of Bishop Provencher which resulted in the arrival of Aubert and Taché in St. Boniface in 1845. It was a move which appeared to be mutually advantageous. Provencher would gain the reliability of a religious congregation to staff his Indian missions, while the Oblates would exercise their zeal in Indian missions and draw further priests to share in that labour as Oblates. Both the Oblates and Provencher would benefit from the increased support to be derived from the Propagation of the Faith as the number of Indian missions in his diocese increased. The presence of the Oblates would at last enable Provencher to counter the Indian missions of the Anglicans and Methodists with Catholic missions staffed by the Oblates.

Provencher had not entirely neglected the Indian missions of St. Boniface in the previous years and therefore had some experience to guide the Oblates. In 1833 Mr. Georges Belcourt, a secular priest from Quebec, had begun a mission to the Sauteux Indians, on the Assiniboine River just west of the parish of St. François-Xavier. Belcourt also made mission trips to Indians as far away as the Pas, Fort Pelly and Rainy River and had tried to establish another fixed mission at Wabassimong on the Winnipeg River.

At first Belcourt's zeal delighted Provencher but the two men were soon at odds over the proper method of evangelization. Their conflict reduced itself to the classic dilemma of nineteenth-century mission thought, how to combine the inculcation of Christianity with the spread of western civilization. It cannot, of course, be separated in this instance from the very deep personality conflicts between Provencher and Belcourt – conflicts which led each to state his position in extreme terms.

Many thinkers of the nineteenth century were convinced that Christianity could not be preached to nonliterate and nonagricultural peoples, and that some measure of western civilization had to precede Christianization. Belcourt was a strong advocate of this school of thought; he insisted that the Sauteux must first adopt a settled village life before any real evangelization could occur. The combination chapel and school he built at St. Paul was to serve as the nucleus and training-ground for this "civilizing" process. He would provide seeds and implements to the Sauteux, show them how to farm and only then educate them into the Catholic faith.

Provencher, on the other hand, maintained that the Gospel could be preached and the Indians won to Christianity without any preceding changes in their way of life. The missionary should travel with the Indians, live in their camps and instruct them there, rather than trying to gather them to an agricultural life around a fixed mission. This can be categorized as an itinerant method, as opposed to the sedentary method advocated by Belcourt. The type of missionary contact advocated by Provencher put the stress of adaptation on the missionary rather than on the Indians. It called for a way of life much different from that of a curé in a Quebec parish, but one which was similar to that of the itinerant home missionaries of France.

Apart from his disagreement with Belcourt over how to evangelize the Indians, Provencher also thought that Belcourt did most of the work of the mission himself, rather than persuading the Sauteux to alter their way of life. Thus, even if he had agreed with Belcourt's method of mission work, he found it did not work in practice. Perhaps most importantly, Provencher found Belcourt's mission far too costly for his very limited financial resources.

In 1846, however, Belcourt asked to return to Quebec and did so in 1847, ridding Provencher of his "turbulent priest." During his last year in St. Boniface, Belcourt taught the Sauteux language to the new missionaries, thus forming some kind of a bridge between the early Indian mission work of St. Boniface and that undertaken after the arrival of the Oblates.

After his experience with Belcourt, one of the few secular priests from Quebec willing to work in the Indian missions, Provencher could only hope to find the Oblate priests more amenable to his ideas of missions and more willing to subject themselves to his authority. Mazenod, their founder, was himself a bishop and for most of his life had combined the functions of diocesan bishop and religious superior. He assured Provencher that his men were bishop's men above all – which must have been comforting to Provencher after his experience with Belcourt.

The Oblates visited Belcourt's Sauteux missions and soon agreed with Provencher's assessment of them as unsuccessful and offering little hope for the future. This judgment was based not only on the methods of Belcourt but

probably more on the character of the Sauteux, who were regarded as almost impervious to mission teaching. Their very proximity to Red River was the biggest drawback to their evangelization, since they were exposed to the worst of white society and to the use of liquor with consequent demoralization.

The northern regions of the diocese offered better hopes of successful mission work. There the Indians were isolated from European contact by both geography and way of life. They lived in small bands in the woods for most of the year and gathered in larger numbers only at trade times. They were not exposed, as the Plains Indians were, to an affluent life-style and to the endemic horse-wars which supported it. These factors were considered so inimical to missionary endeavour that little hopes were expressed for the conversion of the Plains tribes in the near future.

A further aid to missionary impact in the north was the fact that the Chipewyan and other northern tribes were not exposed to the trade in liquor which had so demoralized the Sauteux and Plains tribes. The Hudson's Bay Company had withdrawn liquor as an article of trade in northern regions where it had no competition from freetraders. The Chipewyan, too, had never been so attached to liquor that they would trade for it, although they had willingly accepted it as a gift. Prohibition appears to have been successfully enforced; no comments were made to indicate that liquor was actually in use at the time of trade. This absence of liquor was a factor very favourable to mission work among the Chipewyan and one which was often remarked on by the missionaries.

A more positive incentive to move to the north for missionary work was expressed in the reports sent to Bishop Provencher about the Chipewyan Indians of Î1e à la Crosse by his missionary priest, Mr. Thibault. Thibault had some experience in mission work with both the Sauteux and the Plains Indians and thought the prospects of success with either were very poor. The Chipewyan at Île à la Crosse, on the contrary, were the most eager to embrace the faith he had ever seen. Thibault was unable to speak Chipewyan but gave his mission in Cree, taught some of the Chipewyan their prayers in French and confessed those who spoke Cree; the rest were very upset that they could not also confess. Thibault received a similar reception from other tribes of the Dene people at Portage La Loche. This convinced him that all the peoples of the north, as far as the Pole, were in a state of readiness to be evangelized. He wrote to Provencher and urged him to concentrate on these northern missions, the most hopeful ones in the whole diocese; he should send priests there who could learn the language as soon as possible. These would reap a rich harvest of souls.

The precise reasons for the Chipewyan readiness to accept Thibault's preaching must remain speculative. Thibault himself attributed it to the

naturally good "dispositions" of the Chipewyan. They appeared to conform to the ideal of the noble savage portrayed in so much mission literature, anxious to hear the word of God and willing to keep it. The more secular-minded fur traders attributed the missionary attraction to the Indian love of novelty and to some extent this was especially true of the Chipewyan. They had a reputation for willingness to adopt new techniques into their culture without altering those innovations in any way. They had engaged in the fur trade, had accepted European styles of clothing to some extent, had adopted European guns and tools and become fond of the imported tobacco and tea. It coult be expected that some, at least, would be willing to accept the new religion brought to them if it could be preached to them in their own language, and that they would then adopt it without seeking to adapt it in any way.

This was all the more likely because the Chipewyan considered Thibault to possess great spiritual power, the attribute most highly valued in their society. The Chipewyan were not exclusive in their religious beliefs, as Roman Catholics and Protestants were. They had no concept of heresy and welcomed any religious practice which offered improved contact with the spirits who guided their lives. This openness to other religious customs paved the way for the Chipewyan to express a quick acceptance of Christianity, but it also hindered them from considering Christianity as a way of life which prohibited other religious customs and beliefs. Their initial enthusiasm, which was all that Thibault saw, did not in fact mean the complete and exclusive adoption of Christianity and the abandonment of native religion which would be demanded of them by future missionaries.

Religion to the Chipewyan was a form of "medicine." Through the proper observance of religious customs and taboos man reached a balanced relationship with the spirits who controlled his existence and gave him the food and health needed for life. In times of famine or epidemic the balance had been upset in some way, perhaps by unwitting transgression of a taboo; good medicine was required to restore the balance and placate the spirits. The Chipewyan had traditionally sought to solve the problems of failure of the hunt by recourse to the use of magic and offerings to appease the anger of the spirits which controlled the hunt. This placation was often accomplished through the public acknowledgment of transgression of taboos, a practice which might explain their desire to confess to Thibault and their sorrow when the language barrier made this impossible.

Thibault's claim to great spiritual power and a close relationship to the Christian God made it natural for them to seek his help, even though he and his God were strangers to them. With no concept of heresy and with their willingness to adopt new spiritual measures if they offered hope, there was every reason for them to listen intently to Thibault. In sum, then, Thibault's great success with the Chipewyan appears to have derived from his own

effective presence, from their traditional ability to accept innovations and from their dependence on spiritual powers in times of stress. Whatever the motivation, the actions of the Chipewyan led Thibault to view them as the best prospects for Catholic missionary activity in the diocese of St. Boniface.

Another incentive to concentration of Catholic mission work in the far north was the prospect of forestalling the Methodists and Anglicans who made efforts to expand into the same field. The Anglicans already had a mission at Lac la Ronge and hoped from there to influence the whole district. The Methodist missionary Mr. Evans had been on his way from Norway House to Île à la Crosse before Thibault's trip; unfortunately he had accidentally shot and killed his Chipewyan interpreter, Thomas Hassall, *en route* and had been forced to return to Norway House. If Evans had reached there before Thibault the Catholic Church would probably have been unable to establish a mission at Île à la Crosse, since the Hudson's Bay Company tried to prevent the presence of competing missions at one post; if it had not begun there, it might never have expanded so rapidly and completely over the Athabasca and Mackenzie Districts. It is small wonder, then, that the Oblates considered the events leading up to their entry to the north as providential.

In addition to its population of Chipewyan eager to be taught the Catholic faith after their first contact with it, Île à la Crosse offered geographical and transportation advantages as a centre for northern mission work. It was near Portage La Loche which linked the watersheds of Hudson Bay and the Arctic, where the Hudson's Bay Company boat brigades from the Athabasca met those from Red River. As such, it was the ideal spot from which to make contact with the Dene of the Athabasca and Mackenzie Districts.

Communication with Red River, though necessarily infrequent, could also be maintained from there through the Hudson's Bay Company transport system. This enabled Provencher to supply goods to his missionaries and, more importantly, to keep the close supervision over them which was an essential of the highly-structured nineteenth-century Roman Catholic Church. This ability to supervise the northern missions increased when Taché became auxiliary bishop and religious superior of the Oblates. He lived at Île à la Crosse and directed the northern missions from there until 1853 when Provencher died. In 1858 Bishop Grandin took up his residence there and directed the northern missions as auxiliary to Taché. The presence of a bishop in these northern missions reflects the great importance they held within the diocese of St. Boniface at the time.

The combination of the natural predisposition of the Chipewyan to religion, added to the geographical and strategic advantages which Île à la Crosse gave the Catholic Church, led Provencher to accept Thibault's strong

recommendation to concentrate on the northern missions – which, in effect, meant the abandonment of the earlier missions around St. Boniface. In 1846 the first of his Oblate missionaries, Taché, left St. Boniface to begin his mission work among the Chipewyan of Î1e à la Crosse with one of the secular priests from Quebec, Mr. Laflèche, as his companion. The Oblates did not as yet have enough priests in St. Boniface to supply a fellow-Oblate as companion to Taché.

Provencher was willing to undertake this mission on his own and to commit his own slim financial resources to it. He was delighted, however, when Sir George Simpson offered free transport to the two missionaries and free lodging for them at Îe à la Crosse until they could build for themselves. This was not only a great financial relief to Provencher but also a sign that Simpson accepted the fact that Provencher had invited a foreign religious order to work in his missions despite Simpson's strongly-expressed opposition. Such recognition by the Governor also gave the Catholic mission of Î1e à la Crosse the security of official acceptance and protection from competing missions.

The actual establishment of the first mission at Île à la Crosse owed much to this very material assistance from Simpson. Such help did not, however, give Provencher a free hand to move his missionaries wherever seemed best to him. The rules of the Hudson's Bay Company still required missions outside of Red River to be authorized by the Company and the attitude of the Company to further extension of the Catholic missions was often ambivalent. They were often regarded as cheaper (and therefore preferable) than the Anglican missions and less inclined to affect the fur trade culture of the Indians. On the other hand, some animosity was present for priests who were doubly foreign, as French and Roman Catholic, to the English Protestant men of the Hudson's Bay Company.

These rules, regulations and wishes of the Company proved, however, an inadequate barrier to the zeal of the Oblate missionaries. Taché himself visited Lake Athabasca in 1847, only a year after his arrival at Île à la Crosse, and he and his fellow Oblates soon pushed farther and farther north. The missionaries would often visit a post, make contact with the Indians, warn them against heresy and return to keep contact. The Company was then obliged to accept the presence of the missionary in order to keep the loyalty of the Indians trading at the post.

By 1860 the OMI missions had reached almost all of the Athapaskan-speaking groups living west and north of the Chipewyan – the Yellowknives, Beavers, Dogribs, Hares, Slaves and Loucheux – and had made attempts to reach the Eskimos. Almost every fur trade post in the Athabasca and Mackenzie Districts had a resident Oblate missionary or received frequent visits at trade time from the Oblates. Many small churches or chapels, built

by the labour of Oblate priests and brothers, dotted the landscape near the posts. Gradually the Christmas ceremonies at these churches began to draw the Indians to come at that time of year, thus altering their traditional winter round – one of the few direct cultural changes effected by the OMI in the early years of their mission work in the north.

Each mission established by the OMI was not an end in itself but served as a bridgehead for further expansion. Each group of Indians contacted roused hopes for the conversion of the next group, and each dialect learned furthered opportunities for more contacts. Not all of these missions were permanent missions with resident priests. The Oblates maintained the mobility demanded of them by Provencher's vision of missions; they were able to visit most of their missions at the times when the Indians gathered to trade and were able to hasten to any spot they felt threatened by the Anglicans.

In the brief period of a mission, seldom more than three weeks, the pattern of evangelization of the Indians followed that developed in the home missions of France. On arrival the missionary was greeted with shots fired in welcome, the usual gesture in fur trade country. He would then shake hands with each person, just as in France he had made sure to visit each house in the mission parish. As in France the priest struggled to remain unperturbed by any poor reception, hoping that further contact would bring the Indians around. Taché insisted that the Indians would listen only to those who liked them and would avoid any who seemed to dislike them; the first requirement, therefore, was for the missionary to be sociable. During the time of the mission he had to drop everything else and make himself available to the Indians at all times.

Ability with languages was essential for successful mission work with the Indians. The Oblates had the tradition of preaching in the local language, as in Provence; thus the use of a native language was not new to them but had proved a most useful tool in the past. Linguistic facility was especially important in the extension through the Athabasca and Mackenzie Districts, where many different languages and dialects were in use. Natural ability counted for a great deal and those who could not learn to speak at least one of the native languages suffered great personal anguish from this handicap. The Oblates had the further advantage of the presence of the French-speaking Métis, "the people in between," who had ties of blood and language to the French and to the local Indians and could help the Oblates acquire fluency in the dialects. This knowledge of the language proved a great asset to the OMI, for the Indians looked on it as a sign of power. This was especially important when the Church Missionary Society began to compete in the Athabasca and Mackenzie regions, since for many years these men used interpreters.

The missions lasted roughly the same length of time as had the home missions in France, usually about three weeks. They took place at times of spring and fall trade. For many Indians this was their only contact with the priest and it was important for the missionary to make his instructions as striking and as comprehensive as possible in this brief visit. Unlike the home missions, the Indian missions had no parochial structure or curé to look after their needs once the mission was over. The Dene were left for most of the year to their own devices to maintain their new faith.

Most of the missionary work depended on oral communication. Instructions were given each day of the mission, confessions were heard and prayers were taught. The questions and answers of the catechism were stressed; these could be learned by rote. Some of the neophytes were also taught to read and given small books to help the rest of their bands remember what was taught during the winter. Most of these books were printed in syllabics, although this was even more expensive than ordinary printing. Books could not be produced until the language was known sufficiently well to put it down on paper – and until the missionary had time for it. This introduction of literacy was a cultural change but one aimed directly at contributing to the process of evangelization as such rather than as a measure of civilization to precede conversion.

The stories from the Bible were told, with some apparent stress on the Old Testament. The OMI also quickly adopted the Catholic ladder as a method of instruction. This was one aspect of their missions which was indigenous to North America, having been constructed first by Mr. Blanchet in Oregon, in an effort to overcome the barrier posed by his lack of knowledge of the numerous native languages. This was a chart which portrayed religious history since the time of Adam in pictures and through an ingenious chronological scale. At the proper points on this scale were printed pictures of the Ten Commandments, the Seven Sacraments of the Church, the Flood, the Garden of Eden, the Reformation (with the Protestant churches going astray from the climb up the ladder). This proved so successful that the Church Missionary Society minister, Mr. Kirkby, tried to copy it for the Anglicans – his version showing the Catholic Church breaking off in the wrong direction. The Catholic ladder served to extend the teaching of the faith when the priest was not present by assisting some of the first native converts to remember the instructions and to pass them on to others, acting as catechists in the long periods of no contact with the priests.

The Oblates also developed a kind of calendar to remind their neophytes of the Sundays and feasts which they were to observe in their long absences from a priest. Père Séguin illustrated this calendar for his family as it was in May: 11111X111X111X11111+XX11+1++X111X1. The bars represent the days of the week, the Xs represent Sundays and feast days, the + indicates fast days. The special mark over the second X showed it was Ascension Day,

while the mark over the fourth X meant Pentecost. A needle was attached to the calendar and each day was pierced as it passed.[4] In this way the converts could practise their faith and follow the rules of the Church even while they spent months in the woods. This was another adaptation to the special circumstances of the northern missions, so different in this respect from the home missions of France.

The sermons of the missionary were the primary tool of evangelization and occupied several hours per day. Père Petitot gave one mission for a month, during which he preached three times each day. The morning sermon was devoted to dogma, the next one to sacred history, and the evening sermon concentrated on morality. Thus the Indians received an intensive course of instruction in the content of the faith, in its developments over time, and in the rules of practice of that faith.

As in France, many of these sermons stressed the perils of the last judgment – a forceful argument with a people so often at risk from fearful epidemics. Père Clut referred to the assistance given to his preaching by «la mort, missionnaire éloquente ».[5] Some of the Indians resisted this, however, finding it unnecessary to sadden themselves prematurely over the spectre of death which came to all.

Devotion to Mary was stressed in the Oblate missions, not only because of the general current of devotion in the contemporary Roman Catholic Church but also because of the personal convictions and special orientation of the Oblate Congregation. A further factor in the north was the use made by the Oblates of devotion to Mary to raise the status of women in Dene society. Recognition of the role of Mary in salvation history and in the Church was expected to improve the lot of other women. Special prayers to Mary were scheduled in May, as in other parts of the world. The Dene were grouped into congregations of Mary, with special prayers to say, and medals to remind them of their devotion, just as was customary in France. But the change this wrought in the attitudes of Dene men to their wives was one which the missionaries found very slow to take effect.

The Oblates also tried to conduct religious ceremonies with as much splendour as possible. Processions played a vital role in this, as they had in France. The converts were formed into congregations, “special interest groups,” who walked together under their own banners in these processions. This had been a characteristic of the earlier home missions of Provence, where the colour and ritual of such processions as that of the Penitents enlivened the course of the year.

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[4] Archives Deschâtelets, Séguin papers, pp. 38-9.

[5] Archives of the Archdiocese of St. Boniface (AASB), T2890-2, Clut to Taché, 1 July, 1864.

Music was an essential part of each mission. The missionaries often composed their own hymns in the native language but with French tunes. They also claimed the Indians preferred their French music to that of the English Protestants. Not all of the hymns of Europe were acceptable to the Dene, however. The mournful dirges of the *Requiem* and *Dies Irae* were thought too similar to *jonglerie,* or "bad medicine."

The Oblates quickly adopted the idea of temperance societies among their Indians who became exposed to the use of liquor. Many of the Indian men worked on the Company boats and became accustomed to some use of liquor there. The temperance movement attempted to improve individual morality rather than social conditions; it owed much to the influence of Father Matthew's crusade in Ireland, which had spread to Quebec in the mid-nineteenth century. It involved taking a pledge to abstain from liquor, reinforcing this by the obligation to say certain prayers daily and by the grouping of members into congregations where they could sustain each other, much like the modern Alcoholics Anonymous. These congregations had special banners to carry in church processions and medals to wear as a sign of their pledge. As with other devotions, this group, too, numbered many backsliders.

The OMI also used holy pictures as a teaching aid in their missions, as the Jesuits of New France had in theirs. The nineteenth century improvements in printing methods made these more available in large numbers. They were European designs and used in the European Church as well, but some adaptations to Athapaskan tastes were forced on the OMI. The Indians preferred those pictures which included animals but refused to accept those with a serpent, which they considered bad medicine. This meant that the popular European images of the Immaculate Conception, with Mary's foot on the serpent's head, were unacceptable in the north. Those Indians who did take them cut off the bottom part. Again the Church Missionary Society felt obliged to adopt some of the Catholic techniques of missions. Kirkby recommended the use of pictures (from England) in these northern missions to express the Gospel truths. "Among the Irish, the lower orders of English, and heathens similar to the Indians here they would produce the very best effects."[6]

As in France, a cross was erected with a good deal of ceremony to mark the closing of a mission. Occasionally this could not be carried out, however, when the ground was too frozen – a local difficulty not experienced in France.

In their extension throughout this vast field of Indian missions in the diocese of St. Boniface the OMI had followed their own customs and the

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[6] Church Missionary Society, A93. Kirkby Journal, 18 June, 1861.

outlook of Provencher on mission methods. The question of cultural change through agriculture was not a viable option in the north and even the CMS missionaries accepted this fact. Some attempts at schooling, one of the primary ways to achieve cultural change, were made by the OMI but these were usually short-term and had little lasting effect; the more intense program of acculturation through education lay in the future, when government funding made it possible.

In some respects the acculturation process affected the Oblates as well as the Dene. As their familiarity with the native cultures and languages grew, they adapted their methods of missionary work to conform to Dene customs, using music, pictures and sermons which would most appeal to the people. No thought was given, of course, to any further adaptations of religious practice, since these would have appeared as heresy in the context of contemporary religious thought.

The north was the ideal place to serve as laboratory for Provencher's belief that Christianity could be preached to the Indians and accepted by them without first altering the rest of their culture. Such a system was, of course, very acceptable to the Hudson's Bay Company, which depended on the rich fur resources of these regions, harvested by the Dene, for much of its trade. It was also well-adapted to the Oblates' spirit and training; their missionary methods, developed in southern France, were well-suited to their itinerant life and brief periods of contact with the Dene. In this light Provencher's call to the Oblates to undertake Indian missions and his subsequent decision to concentrate those forces on the northern extreme of his diocese can be seen as an almost perfect conjunction of character and circumstance – the stuff of interesting history.