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THE OBLATES AS "FATHERS, GUIDES AND PROTECTORS" OF ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

As Christians and as pastors the Oblates could not remain indifferent to the predicament of the First Nations peoples of the North West especially after 1870 when the old order based on the buffalo hunt was fading away. In an era when the larger white community was hardly aware of Native peoples, let alone sensitized to their needs, the missionary, was indeed a voice crying in the wilderness. On the other hand, as guardians by default of the Native element in the North West, the Oblates became society's conscience and admonished those who dealt with the Native community to abide by the principles of justice and equity. The Oblates did not actively seek this function of advocate, it was forced upon them by circumstances. On the remote fringes of the Canadian North West, the missionary was the only countervailing force to the fur trader. Within treaty areas, the Oblate also became the logical intermediary between Indians and an impersonal and often uncaring bureaucracy.

Prior to 1870, the presence of fur traders and their posts presented certain problems for missionaries and their apostolic efforts but the commercialization of the fur trade produced relatively minor changes in Native life and culture. Despite their different objectives, the Hudson's Bay Company and the Oblates had been able to accommodate one another. The Bay, despite its commercialization of the fur trade, nevertheless, introduced an element of stability in economic relationships. The

Oblate presence presented a potential threat to the Bay but the missionaries contributed to the *status quo* by stressing that, as Christians, Indians were morally bound to respect and honour their obligations. The arrival of free traders threatened the very nature of relationships between the Bay, Oblates and Indians not to mention exposing neophytes to nefarious influences. Thus, it is not surprising that, in their representations to the authorities concerning the welfare of Indians, the Oblates recommended that the fur trade be conducted by a single company, the HBC. In the event that free traders established themselves in a region, mission personnel remained neutral in order not to provoke either party. However, the mission insisted that Indians pay their debts to the HBC.¹

The fact that the Oblates favoured the HBC as opposed to free traders, however, did not mean that they approved of company policy at all times. In 1894, for example, the Indians at Reindeer Lake complained that the company was offering them absurdly low credits for the coming season and they asked Alphonse Gasté to intercede on their behalf. Gasté agreed to speak to the company inspector who was currently visiting the post and suggested that the credit offered to the Indians be increased. Furthermore, Indians from Churchill were not given credits and told to return to that post to trade. According to Gasté, Natives from Churchill were free to go where they pleased so long as they honoured their obligations to the company.²

The departure of disgruntled Indians from Reindeer Lake posed a threat to the stability of the mission and Gasté decided to organize a system of transportation independent of the HBC to bring the furs of mission Indians to market.³ At neighboring Pelican Narrows (Saskatchewan), Étienne Bonnard also denounced the parsimonious attitude of the Bay and the company's attempts to discredit the missionaries who were assisting the Indians by accepting their furs in exchange for the items needed for hunting or fishing.⁴ Gasté also feared the low credits given at Reindeer Lake were but the first step in another attempt to close the post and force Indians to trade at other posts where expenses were not as considerable. He went to Prince Albert to discuss the position of the mission with his religious superiors and to inform free traders of the opportunities for trade. As a result of his efforts, the Bay faced competition and had no choice but to keep its post open.⁵

While the Oblate hierarchy in principle preferred the HBC to free traders, the views of missionaries in the field were dictated by local circumstances. At Fort Dunvegan, an American free trader, the famous "Twelve Foot Davis," treated Christophe Tissier liberally with culinary delights. After preparing an epicurean meal Davis would hoist a flag as a signal and Tissier would quickly appear.⁶ This familiarity earned Tissier the displeasure of his superiors and a reprimand.⁷ For his part, Joseph Letreste admitted that free traders had rendered real services in the Peace River region by causing an increase in the price paid for furs and decreasing the cost of merchandise. Letreste claimed that free traders had brought in large quantities of tea and matches and that prior to their arrival tea was reserved for "the mouths of gods and high dignitaries."⁸

At Île-à-la-Crosse the mission and the HBC post were at odds and, as a result, the mission's supply of food was threatened. A calamity was averted by the presence of a Catholic free trader in 1897 who provided the mission with all it required and rendered many services and assistance to the missionaries. When this trader received an unexpected high price for his furs, he purchased equipment for the mission and had it shipped to Île-à-la-Crosse at his own expense.⁹ Even Bishop Émile Grouard, who was a staunch company supporter, admitted that a Catholic free trader at Sturgeon Lake facilitated the conversion of Indians in that area. Constant Falher had visited the region for ten years but had not been able to remain for any length of time because he lacked the necessary resources and had no assistance to construct an adequate chapel. The free trader allowed Falher and other Oblates to use his own residence while they conducted their mission.¹⁰

While relations between the Oblates and the Bay were generally good and a rapprochement was possible with some free traders, the presence of other elements in the North West was viewed with deep suspicion by the missionaries. The transfer of Rupert's Land to the Dominion in 1870 and the subsequent signing of treaties with Indian tribes marked the beginning of a new era in the history of the North West and this transformation troubled the Oblates. As early as 1864, for example, Albert Lacombe was lamenting the presence of white miners in the Edmonton region the majority of whom he described as "rabble."¹¹ A few years later, Lacombe admitted that it was impossible to stop the flow of whites in the West. He

claimed that they were ruining the country by their insatiable greed and, as an example, he cited the slaughter of 30,000 buffalo in the winter of 1869 between Fort Carlton and Rocky Mountain House. Lacombe argued that Indians would need special protection to cope with the presence of whites and he suggested that the government allow only one company to trade with the Indians. Although, missionaries were to be allowed complete freedom to carry on their work among Native populations.¹²

Within a short period of time, the intrusion of whites was noted further north in the Athabasca region. In 1882, Émile Grouard informed his friend Roderick MacFarlane of the HBC that a prospector had departed from Lac La Biche for Fort McMurray in search of exploitable resources.¹³ The following year, Grouard informed MacFarlane that surveyors had surveyed three townships around Fort Dunvegan. This activity produced a "land fever" and speculators had already "picked up the most beautiful places in the whole North West."¹⁴ While Grouard feared the commercial repercussions of the white presence, he was quick to note another danger it presented. The newcomers were in majority Anglo-Protestant, and as such, presented another threat to the Oblates and their work. In 1911, Grouard, as Vicar Apostolic of Athabasca, informed a relative that a large part of his vicariate had been invaded by Anglo-Protestant colonists and that civilization was accompanying them and the region would soon have railroads and telegraphs. He feared that such progress would engender much physical and moral misery.¹⁵

The presence of whites while it may have presented a moral dilemma for the Oblates was also accompanied by other more immediate consequences that had serious repercussions on Native society. In 1864 Isidore Clut recorded that the arrival of the brigade from Peace River had brought an epidemic to Nativity Mission. While the members of the brigade became ill and recovered, local Indians died of the disease. Clut buried eleven Indians and claimed that the death rate would have been much higher without the assistance provided by the Oblates and the Bay. On the positive side, Clut affirmed that he had never seen such fervour among the Indians since his arrival at the mission and he claimed that the pestilence had even rendered fervent those who had been indifferent.¹⁶

The incidence of disease would become a recurring theme in the correspondence of missionaries in the North West. In 1869 Henri Faraud iden-

tified measles, scarlet fever and "*la maladie napolitaine*" following one another and sometimes acting simultaneously to destroy one-third of the Native population. Contrary to Clut who believed that the epidemics were a catalyst on conversions and spirituality, Faraud feared that disease would wipe out the converts.¹⁷ A short while later, smallpox ravaged St. Albert on the eve of the buffalo hunters leaving for the fall hunt. In less than a month two-thirds of the hunters were stricken with the result that there were often not enough men to raise camp and to hunt.¹⁸ In St. Albert itself one-third of the population died and Vital Grandin recorded up to seven funerals a day. Famine was anticipated because the crops failed and there was little farm work that could be done. The Oblates rendered whatever services they could but Grandin admitted that most of those who were ill lacked basic care.¹⁹

In 1885, Alphonse Gasté accompanied a brigade from Cumberland to Reindeer Lake and was occupied caring for those who were stricken by disease. Gasté was sent ahead by the bourgeois to inform the Chipewyan that some members of their tribe had died as a result of the contagion. In the meantime, other Chipewyan came into contact with the brigade, contracted the disease and returned with it to their camp.²⁰ The Cumberland region itself was ravaged by measles and the mortality rate was very high. Ovide Charlebois reported that it was not unusual to find four to six sick persons in a hut and one dead child.²¹ During one winter at Île-à-la-Crosse, Laurent Le Goff was called upon to make 14 visits to sick Indians. Three of these were to Portage La Loche and one was 60 miles beyond that location. He estimated that these four voyages necessitates 1000 miles on snowshoes and that the remaining visits accounted for another 1500 miles of travel.²²

In addition to disease, the decline of the fur trade, the disappearance of the buffalo and the advance of white settlement in the North West had serious repercussions for the Native population. As a result of the treaties it had negotiated, the federal government assumed responsibility for the welfare of Indians and, hence, the Oblates turned to the federal authorities to ensure the welfare of the Native and Métis communities. The plight of the Blackfoot after the signing of Treaty 7 was brought to the attention of the authorities by Constantine Scollen. In 1878, as some 4000 Blackfoot gathered near Fort Macleod to receive their annual pay-

ment, Scollen enlightened Edgar Dewdney, lieutenant governor of the Northwest Territories, on the grievances and discontent of the Indians and was able to avert an open confrontation.²³

The following year, Scollen wrote to Major Irvine of the North West Mounted Police and declared that the Sarcee, Bloods and Peigans had not understood the implications of the treaty they had signed because of the absence of competent interpreters. He claimed that the Indians had signed because previously they "had been kindly dealt with" by the authorities and they were convinced that this precedent would provide them with food and clothing as the need arose. Scollen contended that outside influences also were brought to bear on the Indians and he reiterated that "they were not actuated by any intuitive comprehension of what they were called upon to do."²⁴ He stated that the Indians were now depressed and demoralized, reduced to eating dogs and wolves and forced to scatter in search of food. They could no longer live in big camps under the authority of their chiefs. Begging and stealing cattle alarmed the settlers and Scollen predicted dire consequences if there was another difficult winter. At the request of the Blackfoot, Scollen had petitioned the lieutenant governor for a plough and potatoes but this had been refused. Scollen claimed, furthermore, that the Peigans had not received the implements and seed promised in the treaty. According to Scollen, "this is too much procrastination at a time when the Indians are in extreme need."²⁵

For his part, Bishop Faraud urged the government to assist Indians who lived outside treaty areas.²⁶ Archbishop Taché petitioned the Department of Indian Affairs on behalf of Indians on reserves near Lakes Winnipeg and Manitoba who occupied land that was of poor quality. Indians at Duck Bay had applied to have their reservation moved from the island to the mainland and, at the request of the Oblates who served there, Taché recommended that the transfer be granted.²⁷

Such advocacy and intervention, however, dictated diplomacy and prudence. In 1883, Louis Soullier, the canonical visitor to Canada, remarked that in cases of Native grievances against abuses of civil authority the Oblates, as their "fathers, guides and protectors," could not refuse to provide advice and assistance. However, he reminded the Oblates of the delicate nature of such involvement and the serious consequences that could result from "rash initiatives."²⁸ A short while later, a similar caution was

expressed by Albert Lacombe in a letter to Henri Grandin. The experienced Lacombe advised Grandin to exercise prudence in dealing with matters affecting Indians and their agents. According to Lacombe, one should not act impetuously because that would result in more harm than good for the Indians as well as the Oblates. Grandin was cautioned not to believe everything the Indians alleged against their agents and not to become implicated in their complaints. Grandin's sole motive was to promote the interests of the Catholic religion and he was to do as much good as possible on the reserves.²⁹

As events were to prove, such cautions were indeed opportune because of the complex nature of relationships between Indians, missionaries and the personnel of the Department of Indian Affairs. In addition, the volatile issue of confessional rivalries was always in the background. In 1888, Indians at Rivière Qui Barre sent a telegram to Prime Minister Macdonald complaining that they were starving and asking for a commission of inquiry. Alexandre-Marie Blanchet advised Bishop Grandin of the situation and suggested that there was an absence of good will on the part of certain Indian agents. Blanchet reported that the Indians wanted a Catholic agent in whom they would have confidence and, since all the Indians were Catholic, Blanchet supported their request.³⁰ As a result of his advocacy in favour of the Indians, Blanchet was accused of inciting them, an accusation he denied in a letter to the Indian Commissioner Hayter Reed. Blanchet claimed that he had counseled the Indians to be prudent and exercise care. He affirmed, however, that, like all citizens, the Indians were entitled to justice. Reed was informed that the Indians had held a meeting and unanimously decided to publish a letter in the *Edmonton Bulletin* denouncing him and their agent.³¹

The health of the Native population continued to be a source of concern for the Oblates and, after the signing of treaties, they made numerous requests to improve health services. As could be expected some of these requests created friction between the missionaries and the bureaucracy. In 1887, for example, Alexandre-Marie Blanchet asked for a resident doctor at Rivière Qui Barre because of the high mortality rate among Indians. When this was refused, Blanchet took the matter up with the lieutenant governor because the agent would not assist the Indians. A reply from the Indian commissioner suggested that a visit by a doctor had not revealed a significant amount of sickness whereas the agent reported

that no complaints had been made against him. Blanchet wanted to formally deny these allegations but was forbidden to do so by his superior.³²

In 1896, Henri Grandin had asked that a doctor be sent twice a year to attend Indians living around Lac La Biche. He was informed by Indian Commissioner Amédée Forget that the local agent had been contacted and had recommended that medicines be sent to the Oblates along with instructions for dispensing them. Forget's reply to Grandin was typical:

In view of this, and of the Agent's statements, and considering also the large expenditure which according to his estimate would be necessary, I have not felt that I could recommend to the Department that a doctor be sent in.³³

In his 1908 report on the Vicariate of St. Albert and Saskatchewan, Grandin expressed the fear that the Native population was on the verge of extinction as a result of the numerous epidemics and diseases that had decimated its ranks.³⁴

Even after the establishment of industrial schools the Oblates still continued to make representations to the authorities to promote the welfare of the Indians. In 1889, Lacombe wrote to Edgar Dewdney outlining various proposals to ameliorate life on the reserves. Lacombe recommended the establishment of shoe manufactures, bakeries, individual landowning and stores on reserves and recommended that Indians be employed by the North West Mounted Police. Dewdney agreed with the suggestion to establish shoe manufactures on reserves and provide the necessary instruction in that trade because this would allow Indians to utilize the hides of animals they killed and contribute to making them self-sufficient. Concerning employment, Dewdney believed that the government should do more to increase the number of Indians employed by the NWMP.³⁵

Some of the Oblate requests ran counter to government policy and, hence, were not accorded. In 1892, for example, Henri Grandin advised the minister of the Interior that a small band of Cree near Lac La Biche were being forced to abandon their reserve and go elsewhere. According to Grandin, it would be preferable if they relocated in Saddle Lake but they refused to leave. He claimed these Indians received no help from the government and he believed that this was unjust.³⁶ The Indian commissioner affirmed that it was the policy of the government to allow hunting

Indians to remain hunters so long as there was sufficient game to support them. When the hunt failed to sustain them, they were brought to a reserve where they were supervised by an agent and a farm instructor. In the case of the Indians alluded to by Grandin, they derived from a band of mixed bloods who had left the treaty. Hence, they never had a reserve and the commissioner believed that it would be a waste of money to provide them with assistance to establish themselves as farmers where they were currently located.³⁷

In 1894, Bishop Grandin supported the complaints of residents of the Blood Reserve concerning the scantiness of rations. He affirmed that the allowance of one pound of meat per day was insufficient. While he did not suggest any motives for this policy he, nevertheless, stated that intermittent fasting was injurious to health and hunger and encouraged Indians to kill their cattle. As a solution, the bishop recommended that the meat ration be increased to one and one-half pounds per day and that rations be distributed more frequently.³⁸

For his part, Bishop Émile Legal supported a petition from the Chipewyan of Onion Lake who sought to have the size of their reserve extended. Legal affirmed that these Indians had been supporting themselves for some time and were intent on doing so in the future. He claimed that the reserve was already too small and cited the fact that the hay needed to winter cattle had to be cut outside the boundaries of the reserve.³⁹ Gustave Simonin supported the chief of one of the bands on the Hobbema Reserve who contested the HBC's claim to one section of land situated in the middle of the reserve. The Indians feared that they would loose this land and did not wish to part with it at any cost and Simonin was asked to intercede on behalf of the band.⁴⁰ Indians from the Long Lake band asked Henri Grandin to support their request to have their agency divided into two parts. Grandin advised the deputy superintendent general that the request would be advantageous for all parties because it would overcome problems associated with distance, neglect and aged agency personnel.⁴¹

The Oblates also interceded on behalf of individuals. In 1892, Bishop Grandin threatened to use publicity to secure the readmission of an Indian and his wife to the Ermineskin band and the restitution of their treaty rights. Upon receiving a telegram from Dewdney to this effect Grandin informed Taché that, when confronted with publicity, the authorities

became accommodating and pleasant.⁴² In 1898, Émile Legal asked the Indian commissioner whether a member of the Saddle Lake Agency who had participated in the North West Rebellion and who had since lived in exile in the United States could return to his reserve without being molested. Legal was informed that under the terms of a general amnesty granted in 1886, rebels who were not guilty of murder could return without fear of retaliation. In the case presented by Legal, however, the individual had lived in a foreign country for more than five years and hence under the terms of the Indian Act, had forfeited all treaty rights and could be reinstated only with the consent of the superintendent general.⁴³ Further south among the Assiniboines, the chief had not received any recompense in 1886 although he had not taken part in the North West Rebellion. Since the others who had remained neutral had received gifts, the Assiniboine chief complained to the agent but a definitive answer was not forthcoming and Alexandre-Marie Blanchet alleged that confessionality was involved.⁴⁴ For his part, Janvier Danis petitioned the Department on behalf of a destitute family of four orphans. The mother was a treaty Indian who had passed away a few weeks earlier, the father was serving a life sentence and the children required assistance. Danis asked that the children be admitted to the Crowfoot Boarding School.⁴⁵

The establishment of schools provided the Oblates with the opportunity to make representations on behalf of pupils. In 1914, Pierre Moulin, urged the Department to assist a former pupil at Hobbema. This graduate had done well since leaving school, had married recently and wished to establish himself on the reserve. Moulin described the individual as one of the best pupils and suggested that he be provided with a good plough and disk harrow.⁴⁶ Some years later Moulin asked the superintendent of Indian Education to pay the board and tuition for two students who had successfully completed their grade eight exams. Since the school did not provide instruction beyond that level Moulin wanted to send them to another school.⁴⁷ For its part, the Department wished to assist deserving students but wanted to know whether the parents were "sufficiently interested" to pay at least part of the cost.⁴⁸

The authorities were aware of the esteem in which the Oblates were held by the Indians and, hence, sought the services of the missionaries to promote government policy. Albert Lacombe and Constantine Scollen were used as interpreters during the negotiation and signing of treaties to

convince the Indians that the Dominion did not want to deceive them but enhance their welfare. In 1883, the Blackfoot stopped surveyors from staking out the CPR line on their reserve. Lacombe immediately advised Lieutenant Governor Dewdney of the incident and called a meeting of the chiefs at the mission. Lacombe distributed sugar, tea, tobacco and flour and counseled the chiefs to allow the surveyors to continue their work and promised that Dewdney would come and reach an agreement with them.⁴⁹

Two years later, in the midst of the North West Rebellion, the government wished to ensure the loyalty of the Blackfoot and Dewdney asked Lacombe to be present at a meeting at Blackfoot Crossing for the purpose of reassuring the Indians. In the presence of Lacombe and Dewdney, Chief Crowfoot declared that the government had nothing to fear from the Blackfoot. The good news was telegraphed to Macdonald who announced it to Parliament.⁵⁰ Constantine Scollen met with the chief and headmen of the Peace Hills Reserve and using "the strongest language," advised them to control their people.⁵¹

While the Oblates insisted that Indians uphold duly constituted authority, they were not prepared to contribute to the spoliation of Indian interests. In 1905, a rancher near the Blackfoot Reserve wished to rent part of that reserve to pasture his cattle. The agent was in favour of the proposal and tried to enlist the support of Jacques Riou by stating that the rancher's wife was Catholic and would be generous towards the mission. Riou refused to lend his support to the venture because it was in the interests of the Indians to keep their best fields of hay.⁵² In 1924, Jean-Louis Le Vern denounced the renting of part of the Peigan Reserve to a political friend of the government despite the unanimous opposition of the residents. Le Vern claimed that the Peigans were correct when they declared that the government had acted like a highway robber in this transaction.⁵³

In addition to their concern for the material welfare of the Indian population, the Oblates also attempted to safeguard and promote those of the Métis whose condition was even more precarious. With the disappearance of the buffalo and the advance of settlement in the North West, the socio-economic status of the Métis decreased significantly. The Oblates began to make representations to the authorities to halt this decline. Bishop Grandin urged the government to extend privileges granted to the Manitoba Métis to those of the Territories. He also advocated the enact-

ment of hunting laws to prevent the destruction of the buffalo and providing assistance to those Métis who agreed to abandon nomadism and became farmers.⁵⁴ In an attempt to protect the Métis against the destructive influence of the ever-increasing white presence in the North West, Grandin and the Oblates suggested that the Métis opt for reserves rather than individual homesteads. In this way, the Oblates hoped to avoid the experience of the Manitoba Métis who had chosen scrip and later abandoned their lands when they found themselves at the mercy of speculators, acquisitive white farmers and the controversy and confusion surrounding land claims under the Manitoba Act.⁵⁵

Despite the efforts of the Oblates to intercede on behalf of and protect the Métis, the problems encountered in Manitoba followed the Métis as they sought a new life in the District of Saskatchewan. There were difficulties in having Métis lands surveyed into traditional river lots and in confirming ownership of these lands. Métis who had left Manitoba encountered problems in obtaining the land they were entitled to under the Half-Breed Grant. As in the case of Manitoba, Métis in the Territories sold their scrip for cash and this profoundly distressed the Oblates who preferred to see the Métis as sedentary farmers. The Oblates did not comprehend the Métis desire for "immediate cash" and, although they were motivated by the best of intentions, the missionaries did not understand the "complexities of the situation" that existed on the eve of the Rebellion and, hence, were not able to provide the best of advice.⁵⁶ In the end, the impatient and frustrated Métis rejected the Oblates whom they regarded as too closely associated with the procrastinating authorities and turned instead to Louis Riel.

Grandin was convinced that the Métis had committed a serious error in asking Riel to return from exile and champion their cause and interests and he and his missionaries became increasingly suspicious of the Métis leader's motives as time passed. In the midst of a volatile situation, the Oblates were attempting to preach moderation to the Métis and maintain them in state of obedience while urging the federal government to redress the legitimate grievances of the Métis.⁵⁷ As the defenders of orthodoxy and legitimate authority, the Oblates energetically denounced Riel's leadership and the armed rebellion that erupted. Nevertheless, the Oblates admitted that extenuating circumstances had provoked the Métis to take up arms. Grandin alleged that English-speaking residents had attempted

to steal Métis lands by means of illegal activities and that in purposely overlooking these tactics the government had further exasperated the Métis.⁵⁸ Another Oblate suggested that the government's refusal to employ the Métis on reserves or as interpreters was responsible for the disenchantment. The Métis were fully qualified to serve as agents and farm instructors and would not require the services of interpreters to carry out their duties.⁵⁹

With respect to Riel's role and leadership in the Rebellion, the Oblates found it impossible to identify any mitigating elements and their views were very critical and hostile. In assuming the mantle of the prophet Riel presented a direct challenge to the legitimacy and function of the Oblates as the authoritative representatives of the Church. Thus, the Oblates countered by affirming that Riel was a false prophet who had usurped their priestly function. More significant than the challenge which Riel may have presented to the Oblates and their ministry was the fact that his creative doctrines had succeeded in indigenizing the Christian message and presenting it in a form that was meaningful and relevant to the Métis and the crisis their society was facing.

The success of Riel, the prophet, alarmed the Oblates who, as a result of their orthodox convictions, were unable to recognize or accept his prophetic role as a supplementary and legitimate expression of the Catholic faith. To the traditionalist Oblates, Riel was a threatening religious outsider and he was accordingly denounced in no uncertain terms. Riel was described as an apostate, a heretic, a fiendish instrument of Satan who deceived and deluded the gullible Métis. Riel's religiosity was denounced as theatrics and many Oblates convinced themselves that Riel was insane.⁶⁰ Insanity proved to be a convenient Oblate explanation for Riel's actions because it was unequivocal and could be comprehended readily by all. Insanity made it possible for the Church to readmit Riel to the fold because he had not been responsible for his actions during the Rebellion. More important to the Oblates, however, was the fact that as an interpretation insanity relegated Riel's religiosity to the rank of an inadvertent and temporary aberration from the one true Catholic faith.

To further minimize the extent of Riel's influence over the Métis, the Oblates declared that very few of them had been actively involved in the Rebellion and understood the consequences of their actions.⁶¹ In their petitions to the authorities after the Rebellion on behalf of the impris-

oned Métis, the Oblates declared that the Métis had been forced or duped into taking arms by Riel or by others who had incited them to promote their own interests. Consequently, the Oblates urged the government to impose the slightest possible penalty on those who had been imprisoned.⁶² Grandin asked the government to reprieve Métis prisoners and to grant an amnesty to those who had fled to the United States. Grandin also used his influence on the minister of the Militia to secure the release of Maxime Lépine, a member of the Exovedate, the provisional government established by Riel.⁶³

In the years following 1885 there was a growing estrangement between the "first born of the faith in the West," and the Oblates, their traditional pastors. In some areas the Métis were purposely avoiding meeting the missionaries while in others they were alleging that the Oblates were deceiving them or that the Oblates had provoked Riel into rebellion to lessen his influence over the Métis.⁶⁴ In 1898, Grandin remarked that the estrangement of the Métis was still very evident and that their prejudice against the Oblates led them to believe any accusation against the missionaries.⁶⁵ Reports that some Métis had confided the education of their children to a Protestant minister so disconcerted Grandin that he implored God "to forgive the Métis and remember their previous good dispositions."⁶⁶

In addition to the spiritual impoverishment noted by the Oblates, the material well-being of the Métis also declined after 1885. There was widespread poverty among the Métis and this was complicated by the alienation of their lands. According to Grandin, the Métis who lived around towns quickly succumbed to terrible vices such as drunkenness and immorality. Others were leaving the settled areas to avoid white civilization and continue their traditional lifestyle. While this was preferable to the experience of the urban Métis, Grandin believed that, sooner or later, white settlers would invade those frontier areas and again dispossess the Métis.⁶⁷

Given the importance of discontent associated with land claims as a factor that had contributed to the Rebellion, the Oblates urged the authorities to quickly resolve land claims when the Scrip Commission began its hearings.⁶⁸ The Oblates assisted Métis claimants by acting as interpreters, providing documentation from mission registers and records and interceding with the authorities. Given their own preferences for a sedentary Métis community, the Oblates attempted to convince them to

accept land scrip. The Oblates urged the Métis not to sell their land scrip but often this advice was not heeded.⁶⁹ Problems arose even when the Métis accepted land scrip. In the Cumberland district, Ovide Charlebois reported that, in opting for land scrip, the Métis gave up their right to live on land set aside for Indians and since there were no other unoccupied lands in the region the Métis decided to leave and go elsewhere. With their departure Charlebois estimated that the mission lost three-quarters of its population.⁷⁰ In Pelican Lake in 1909, the scrip buyer had succeeded in purchasing seven of the eight scrips given to the Métis by offering alcohol as an inducement.⁷¹

Given their concern over the alienation of Métis lands the Oblates supported the government's proposal to offer a block of land to the Métis of Duck Lake to establish a special colony under the administration of the Métis residents. Three Oblates were present at a meeting in Batoche in 1890 to study the plan and there were insinuations that they favoured the proposal in order to divert Métis lands to French Canadian farmers. Vital Fourmond reassured the Métis as to the motives of the Oblates and, at a second meeting, a majority voted for the establishment of the colony. However, at a general meeting of the Métis in the district the motives of the Oblates were again questioned. These innuendoes and allegations that the colony would be nothing more than an Indian reserve contributed to the defeat of the proposal.⁷²

While the government's proposal to establish a Métis colony at Duck Lake was not accepted by the Métis, the Oblates remained confident that sedentary agriculture would provide a solution to the distress and poverty facing the Métis community. In 1895, Albert Lacombe sent a memorial to the federal government describing the plight of the Métis in the North West. To improve their well-being Lacombe asked the government to grant four sections of land to the Episcopal Corporations of St. Albert, St. Boniface and Prince Albert for the purpose of establishing a religious settlement and an industrial school for the Métis. In addition, the government was asked to lease four townships to the bishops for subdivision into plots and distribution to Métis families to enable them to become self-sufficient farmers under the direction of managers appointed by the clergy.⁷³

The government shared Lacombe's concern over the Métis and since his proposal involved no financial obligation on its part, the plan was

accepted and land was set aside for the colony at St. Paul, Alberta.⁷⁴ Lacombe announced his proposal in an open letter to the Métis of the North West. He promised the Métis that they would become happy and self-supporting if they were once again willing to heed the advice of "the priest who is your true friend."⁷⁵ Grandin encouraged the Métis through a pastoral letter in June 1897 that urged the Métis of St. Paul to have confidence in themselves and reminded them that they were equal to any other. The bishop declared that, if the Métis were courageous and energetic, St. Paul would become a model colony and its residents worthy of admiration.⁷⁶

The St. Paul colony was administered by Adéodat Thérien who believed that the residents were to live by the fruit of their labours and not expect the colony to support them like Indians on a reserve. Thérien categorically denied allegations that he had no choice but to feed the impoverished Métis at St. Paul.⁷⁷ In the meantime, the colony's expenses continued to mount and this alarmed Lacombe who insisted on retrenchment. For their part, the Métis did not appreciate Thérien's parsimonious ways and they alleged that he was allowing large sums of money destined for the use of the colony and its residents to stagnate in the bank.⁷⁸

A short while later, Thérien admitted that the Métis no longer had confidence in the Oblates and were seeking other leaders because they suspected the motives of the missionaries. He thought that the material status of the Métis could not be improved without gaining their confidence and convincing them that it was necessary that they unite with the clergy.⁷⁹ As could be expected, Grandin was very saddened by the defiant attitude of the Métis and the sordid motives they attributed to his missionaries. He reiterated that the Oblates were not attempting to employ panaceas to alleviate the status of the Métis but provide them with effective assistance to ensure a better future for them and their children.⁸⁰

In the meantime, the colony struggled on and the Oblates hoped the government would provide an annual subsidy to allow them to continue its operation. Unfortunately, this grant was not forthcoming and special collections undertaken for the benefit of the colony were not enough to meet current obligations.⁸¹ There were also problems associated with the shortage of skilled personnel to erect and maintain mills in the colony that destroyed the little faith the Métis had in the Oblates as managers.⁸² Then on 15 January 1905, students who no longer wished to attend the

boarding school set fire to the building and destroyed it with the loss of one life. The Oblates continued to support the colony as best they could but four years later, on 10 April 1909, they withdrew and the colony was opened to French Canadian settlement. The admission of French Canadian farmers together with earlier allegations that the Oblates had profited at the expense of the Métis at St. Paul intensified the disenchantment with and alienation of the Oblates that had been growing since the Rebellion and Riel's execution.

Disenchantment was also voiced by the Métis of Saint-Laurent de Grandin (Saskatchewan) who, in 1896, petitioned the superior general of the Oblates and complained about the dismemberment of their parish. The Métis stated that when the Oblates came to establish the mission they built the church and heeded Bishop Grandin's advice to establish themselves around the mission. With the spread of immigration new parishes were established, and this was to the detriment of St. Laurent's interests. In the end, Bishop Émile Pascal decided to dismember the parish despite an earlier promise not to do so. The residents no longer had a resident clergyman and had to travel long distances to perform their religious duties. They predicted that spiritual ruin would be accompanied by temporal ruin. The Métis accused the principal of St. Michel's School and other Oblates of unduly influencing the bishop and they asked the superior general to give them justice. The 75 petitioners indicated their determination to take the matter before Leo XIII if necessary.⁸³

As events were to demonstrate, the Métis would be confronted by problems far more serious than the dismemberment of the parish of St. Laurent de Grandin. In his report to the 1908 General Chapter, Henri Grandin wrote that Métis missions that had few contacts with whites were holding their own whereas in those that did, the economic well being of the residents declined and lost the piety inculcated by the pioneer missionaries.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, the Oblates were prepared to continue ministering to the Métis. In 1921, Grandin asked Joseph-Amédée Angin to visit Wolf Lake and evaluate the possibility of visiting this mission on a regular basis. The Métis were to build a chapel and were to be informed that if Angin were to visit and instruct them they in turn would have to demonstrate good will and furnish whatever they could to assist him.⁸⁵

In the twentieth century, the plight of the Métis worsened and the Oblates were hard pressed to alter this state of affairs. In 1924, Adéodat

Thérien wrote to the government of Saskatchewan to alleviate the plight of the Métis at Onion Lake. He also advised his provincial of the "lamentable condition" of the Métis of Alberta and Saskatchewan and their dismal prospects for the future. The former director of the ill-fated colony at St. Paul des Métis was hard pressed to offer a solution. He claimed that experience had demonstrated the futility of giving land to the Métis because they quickly alienated or abandoned their farms. Their efforts as farmers were mediocre because they lacked initiative and had no sense of husbandry. Thérien claimed that the Métis should have been given reserves with agents, instructors, residential schools to initiate them to agriculture and sedentary life. However, the Métis did not want this and Thérien alleged that the lure of the old ways negated their efforts and those of their missionaries.⁸⁶

Thérien complained that the federal government would do nothing for the Métis whereas provincial governments seemed disposed to act but, in fact, did little. Confronted with this inactivity Thérien suggested that the government set aside a block of land where the Métis could settle. He also recommended that Métis who married Indian women should be free to join his spouse's reserve. Thérien claimed that marriages between the Métis and Indians would be to the advantage of the latter who were declining as a result of consanguineous marriages. According to Thérien, children from marriages between Métis and Indians were more numerous, more robust and better formed than those of unions between Indians. He also suggested that a Métis who had given his daughter in marriage to an Indian should be able to live on the reserve with his son in law in his old age.⁸⁷

Concern over the plight of the Métis was raised in the 1931 report on Oblate missions among Native populations in Canada. The section of the report on the Alberta-Saskatchewan province lamented the fact that the Métis were disappearing as a result of absorption into other ethnic elements as a result of inter-marriage or incorporation into the Indian community because of a similar lifestyle. The Oblates noted a parallel spiritual decline among the Métis and attributed this in part to their migratory habits. Other factors which contributed to the loss of spirituality were "godless schools," the spectacle of immoral whites and the temptations offered by their society. Worse yet, was the fact that governments cared little about the fate of the Métis. This disinterestedness was con-

demned and the Oblates argued that the Métis should not be placed on the same level as other groups in the West. The Métis had to be accorded special treatment to make the transition to a sedentary life and that this status was well merited would have contributed to making the Métis a "race of honest and useful citizens."⁸⁸ In addition to the disinterestedness of governments, the scanty resources of the Oblates imposed serious limitations on the work that they could undertake among the Métis. Within the Alberta-Saskatchewan province Indian and Métis missions were not self-sufficient and funds from other Oblate sources had to be used to offset the annual deficit.⁸⁹

In the meantime, the Métis were becoming increasingly conscious of their identity and heritage and no longer ashamed of Riel's leadership. They began to speak out against those Métis, like Louis Schmidt, who had been assimilated into the French Catholic community and had denounced Riel and his movement.⁹⁰ The Métis also condemned clerical influence over their affairs and rejected traditional Catholic interpretations that were critical of Riel. This nationalistic consciousness and militant sentiment culminated in the creation in St. Vital in 1909 of the *Comité Historique de l'Union Nationale Métisse* that later commissioned a journalist and author, Auguste-Henri de Trémaudan, to compile a more accurate representation of Métis history and the role of Riel especially in the Rebellion of 1885.⁹¹ As de Trémaudan began his research, the *Comité Historique* took exception to the *Histoire abrégée de l'Ouest canadien* written by the noted Oblate polemicist, Adrien-Gabriel Morice. In February 1925, the *Comité Historique* prepared a report on errors it had identified in Morice's book and asked the author to correct them.⁹² When Morice did not reply, the *Comité Historique* asked the *Association d'Éducation Canadienne Française du Manitoba* to cease purchasing the book for use in schools and awarding it as prizes. The *Comité Historique* also refuted Morice's interpretation of the events of 1885 in a lengthy letter published in *La Liberté*.⁹³ This communication provoked an equally extensive reply from Morice and, in the month that followed, the protagonists exchanged their missives through the intermediary of *La Liberté*.⁹⁴

The final chapter in this controversy was written some ten years later when de Trémaudan's *Histoire de la nation métisse dans l'ouest canadien* was published posthumously. The author died before completing a special chapter on the events of 1885 and the *Comité Historique* decided to

publish the results of its own research and interviews of eyewitnesses at Batoche as an appendix to the volume. In this 45-page document, the *Comité Historique* categorically refuted allegations that the Rebellion had been ill advised and premeditated, that the Métis had occupied and profaned the church at Batoche, that missionaries and nuns had been held prisoner at Batoche and that Riel had apostatized and created a new religion. The Appendix also suggested that in 1885, the Oblates had acted as informants for the authorities, approved of the actions taken by the government and tacitly agreed to sacrifice Riel's life.⁹⁵

Morice, who regarded the St. Vital Métis as insolent, amateur historians, found many things to criticize in de Trémaudan's book. He suggested that de Trémaudan had been ill when he wrote the book and that he had relied on Métis gossip rather than critical sources. Nearly half of Morice's 92-page critique was devoted to the Appendix that he regarded as a personal insult. Morice claimed that the only valid historical sources were the letters of contemporary missionaries and the evidence they gave under oath at the trials of the rebels. He went on to defend the actions of the Oblates in 1885 by alleging that they were opposed to Riel's movement because they foresaw its disastrous consequences. Morice dismissed allegations that the clergy had not attempted to secure clemency for Riel by declaring that it would not have been wise for them to do so because this would have aroused and intensified the fury of the Orange Lodge and nullified the influence of petitions for clemency.⁹⁶

The polemic between Morice and the *Comité Historique* is indicative of the growing estrangement between a significant segment of the Métis community and the Oblates after 1885. In the events of 1885 the *Comité Historique* and its supporters discovered a glorious past and traditions as well as individuals who had promoted and defended Métis interests. Thus, 1885 became a source of pride to the Métis because it represented their legitimate aspirations as a nation led by indigenous leaders who shared the same ideals. In the twentieth century, the Métis had become of age and were no longer willing to accept being amalgamated and, consequently, marginalized within the larger French-speaking Catholic community.

With respect to the Oblates and the Native community, the parting of the ways was not as evident or as dramatic as it had been in the case of the Métis. There had been messianic and prophetic individuals who had

appeared among the Chipewyan and other northern Indians in the period 1859–1889. The Oblates were aware of the potential threat presented by indigenous prophets and, as the representatives of orthodoxy, they responded accordingly. The individual who appeared at Île-à-la-Crosse in 1859 claiming to be the “Son of God” was ridiculed along with his teachings in an attempt to undermine his stature and influence among his followers.⁹⁷ To the Oblates, these prophetic impulses were aberrations from the true faith and inspired by Satan. The prophets were deemed to be “unfortunate visionaries” whose pride had been manipulated by demonic influences. According to Taché, the “Son of God” and other prophets were insane individuals because they believed in the deification of humans, rejected the greatness of God and purported to understand matters that were beyond the competence of humans.⁹⁸ The indigenous prophets became “religious outsiders” within the mainstream of Catholicism and hence were identified as heretics by the Oblates who could neither recognize nor accept the prophetic impulse as a legitimate expression of spirituality.⁹⁹

As the representatives of orthodoxy, the Oblates judged devotion and piety by rigid criteria. Religious enthusiasm aroused the suspicions of the missionaries. Émile Grouard noted the presence of a fervent convert at Sturgeon Lake who exceeded the customary limits of devotion by imitating the missionary’s costume and actions. This behaviour amused other Indians who referred to this individual as “pope.” According to Grouard, naiveté and idiosyncrasy had been responsible for this person’s zeal and he identified a potential danger in unrestrained enthusiasm.¹⁰⁰ The Oblates also perceived a threat in the activities of Jean L’Heureux, an errant French Canadian who lived among the Blackfoot and engaged in catechetical activities. L’Heureux gathered the Blackfoot for prayer, instruction and singing of hymns that he had translated and this earned him the title of “false priest.” L’Heureux was still suspect by the Oblates despite the services that he rendered to the missionaries especially as a recruiter for the Dunbow Industrial School.¹⁰¹

Despite the appearance of prophets and other “religious outsiders” the challenge to the Oblate from within the Indian community came not in the realm of spirituality but that of politics. Following WWI, Indians who had served in the armed forces took the lead in organizing a movement to improve their status and to protect their interests. In 1919, Frederick

Ogilvie Loft, an Ontario Mohawk, founded the League of Indians of Canada for the purpose of giving Indians a greater voice in determining their destiny and the disposition of their lands. Loft's agitation displeased the Department of Indian Affairs and it placed him under police surveillance and sought to silence him by stripping him of his Indian status.¹⁰²

For their part, the Oblates also were suspicious of these attempts to unite Indians because lay movements presented a potential challenge to the influence of the Church. In 1920, a circular written by Loft inviting Indians to join the League reached reserves near Fort Frances, Ontario. The principal of the residential school had prohibited Indians from joining this allegedly "socialist" organization and, when fire destroyed the local church, it was deemed to be an act of vengeance against the opposition of the Oblates to the League.¹⁰³ When the League met on the Thunderchild Reserve in 1921, Henri Grandin, the Alberta-Saskatchewan provincial, asked some of his missionaries to attend the proceedings. He informed Joseph Guy that the meeting had generated much discussion on the best means of educating children. While "nothing too exaggerated" had been said against the Department, Grandin wondered who was behind the movement to unify Indians but he took comfort in the fact that a Métis Oblate, Patrick Beaudry, had been elected Alberta president of the League.¹⁰⁴

The following year, Grandin advised Henri Delmas that the Oblates had to be prudent in their response to the League. Grandin had been advised by Deputy Superintendent General Scott that the League was systematically opposing the Department and that Loft was regarded as the enemy of the Department. Grandin suggested that the Oblates should not become involved on behalf of an individual they did not know and they should not alienate the Department.¹⁰⁵ Grandin's concern had been heightened by the actions of Jean-Louis Le Vern who had written to Loft and sent money collected for the League on the Peigan Reserve. Le Vern also complained to Loft about the manner in which Department personnel were treating residents of the reserve.¹⁰⁶ Loft in turn sent a copy of this communication to Scott and the latter, in describing the former as an "agitator," was surprised that Le Vern collected money for the League and blamed Department personnel for "certain alleged inattention." Scott warned Grandin that harmonious relations were not promoted when the

principal of the school was in "hostile correspondence with an outside person."¹⁰⁷

In 1930, the Alberta and Saskatchewan sections of the League adopted the name, League of Indians of Western Canada. On the Thunderchild Reserve, John Tootoosis traveled and organized on behalf of the League to provide better education for Indian children. He was told by Ernest Lacombe that little good would come out of such efforts because too many persons already were unemployed as a result of the Depression.¹⁰⁸ Although a Roman Catholic, Tootoosis had been critical of the Indian residential school system and the role of the clergy and he continued his organizational work on behalf of the League and later the Union of Saskatchewan Indians. His activities and criticism irritated Théophile Bouchard in Delmas, Saskatchewan, who warned parishioners in his Christmas sermon that Tootoosis should be excommunicated for his opposition to the Church.¹⁰⁹ Some years later, on behalf of Saskatchewan Indians, Tootoosis prepared a brief for the Joint House of Commons and Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, which met in the period 1946-48. At this time, another Indian organization, the Queen Victoria Treaty Protective Association, was started on the neighbouring Poundmaker Reserve. Tootoosis suspected that Bouchard was the driving force behind the association and that its objective was to divide the Indian movement and defend Oblate interests in residential schools.¹¹⁰

Thus by the 1930s, the First Nations were expressing their discontent with the status quo and they resented the paternalism and tutelage inherent in the grand design that church and state sought to impose on them. It is indeed ironic to note that Indians initially demonstrated a keen interest in Christianity and the establishment of agriculture on reserves. With respect to the latter, Sarah Carter has demonstrated that government policies "made it virtually impossible for reserve agriculture to succeed because the farmers were prevented from using the technology required for agricultural activity in the West."¹¹¹ If the circumstances facing most farmers in the West left much to be desired, government policy made the situation worse for Indians. In the end, Indians were willing to use the new technology and ways of whites to allow them to overcome the loss of the hunt but they resisted all attempts aimed at undermining their culture.¹¹²

Indians also welcomed Christianity and education because of their inherent power and potential. As in the case of reserve agriculture, there was a disparity between theory and reality and initial optimism gave way to the "Onset of Doubt" described by John Webster Grant.¹¹³ For the majority of Indians, Christianity had produced neither a liberation nor true and equal membership in the Christian community of believers. For its part, the educational process was not rooted in the needs and aspirations of the First Nations. Residential schools were to assimilate the young to a new culture and to depreciate Indian traditions and values. This too was unacceptable to Indians and while they were initially on the "defensive," they later found the resources to adopt a stronger "offensive" position through the organization of their own institutions such as the League of Indians. In this "offensive" stage Indians from the residential schools used the skills acquired in those institutions to begin the revolt against paternalism and colonialism. The disenchantment between Native and Oblate would reach its apogee in the third quarter of the twentieth century as a consequence of a collective conviction within the Indian community that the Oblates, through their activities and residential schools, had participated in a programme of cultural genocide aimed at depriving the First Nations of their language, traditions and identity.

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23. PAA, Fort Macleod, *Codex historicus*, 1878, p. 17.

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28. *Acte général des visites canoniques faites dans le vicariat de Saint-Albert*, p. 24.
29. PAA, OMI, PP, A. Lacombe 1886, Lacombe to Grandin, 25 juin 1886.
30. PAA, OMI, Rivière qui Barre 2, *Codex historicus*, mission Saint-Alexandre, 27 fév. 1888, pp. 27–28.
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32. Ibid., 3 fév. 1887, pp. 6–8.
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49. PAA, OMI, Cluny 13a, *Codex historicus*, mission de la Sainte-Trinité des Pieds-Noirs, pp. 20–22.
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106. PAA, OMI, Adm., Brocket IRS, Correspondance 1922–24, Levern to Loft, 18 Jan. 1922.
107. *Ibid.*, Scott to Grandin, 2 Feb. 1922.
108. Sluman, *John Tootoosis*, p. 163.
109. *Ibid.*, p. 191.
110. *Ibid.*, pp. 195–201.
111. Carter, *Lost Harvests*, p. ix, p. 13.
112. *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.
113. Grant, *Moon of Wintertime*, ch. 9.