

## **Métis Spiritualism - Darren R. Préfontaine, Todd Paquin and Patrick Young**

**Objective:** In this module students will learn about the traditional spiritual of the Métis, which has Aboriginal and Christian elements.

### **General Overview of Métis Spiritualism**

Because the Métis have Indigenous and European ancestry, a weighty subject such as Métis spiritualism and religion is not easy to categorize. Furthermore, since Métis communities are very diverse in their cultural orientation, it is impossible to discern a common Métis religion and spiritualism. For instance, many Métis orient themselves towards traditional Aboriginal spiritualism, while others are adherents of Roman Catholicism and various Protestant denominations; and still others blend Christianity with Aboriginal spiritualism. Like many in the general society, some Métis have become Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and members of other religions or New Age revitalization movements.

Historically, however, the Métis were either practitioners of Aboriginal spiritualism or Catholicism, Anglicanism, Methodism or Presbyterianism. In addition, many, most notably Roman Catholics, mixed Christianity and Aboriginal spiritualism. The Michif-speaking Catholic Métis had a more favourable opinion of Aboriginal spiritualism than the Country Born or English Métis. The folk Catholicism of the Métis' French-Canadian Voyageur fathers meshed well with Aboriginal spiritualism. The world-view of traditional Catholicism with its penchant for frequent prayer to and veneration of the Virgin, the saints and God, its ceremonial liturgy and frequent religious feasts and fests were in many ways similar to the spiritual worldview of First Nations. For instance, the Creator, *Kitchi Manitou*, parallels the role of God, and lesser spirits mirrored the roles played by angels and saints. Evil spirits such as the

*Windigo* more or less converged with the idea of Satan. The idea of “Good Works” or emulating the life of Christ through acts of charity also fused well with Aboriginal communalism. Protestantism, with its emphasis on “salvation by Faith alone” and its focus on individual redemption through God alone, was less appealing to the communitarian values of many Aboriginal peoples who believed in a host of interceding spirits.

The Métis’ Aboriginal spiritual system is an extension of Anishinabe (Ojibwa) and Nehiy(n)awuk (Cree) traditions, which in turn are derivatives of the Algonquian spiritualism that once existed from the foothills of the Rocky Mountains to the Atlantic coast of North America. At the basis of this system is *Kitchi Manitou* or the “Great Spirit” or “Creator” who created the universe, the spirit world, the land, plants, animals, and humans. In this spiritual system, it is vital to share, give and receive in order to keep the body, spirit, mind and emotions balanced. The traditional Métis worldview promoted living with the land, not exploiting it. The use of the land and its resources was that of a collective stewardship between a responsible community of resource users. In Indigenous languages, there is no such thing as inanimate objects – all things have spirits. Indeed, flora, fauna, and humans were provided with spirits, emotions, minds, and bodies, which made them equals and therefore worthy of respect.

In Aboriginal spiritual systems, the relationships between people and other living beings are characterized by spiritual connections. Maintaining and respecting this connection means continually renewing the body, mind, emotion, and spirit. By respecting the relationship between all living beings, *Kitchi Manitou* will provide for people. Those Métis who practice Aboriginal spiritualism make

offerings to, and provide thanks to the animals and plants, which give themselves to feed or heal a family. For instance, when harvesting resources, tobacco or another offering of thanks has to be given to exchange what was taken from the earth.

Christianity has long been an integral component in the spiritual lives of the Métis. In fact, before missionaries and other religious came to what is now Northern and Western Canada, the Métis were already working to bring various Christian denominations to the region. The Métis often assisted the missionaries, particularly the Roman Catholic Oblates, in their attempts to proselytize various First Nations. As a result, many Métis men and women became missionaries and nuns. For instance, Louis Riel's younger sister Sara was a *Soeur Grise* (Grey Nun) from Red River who traveled to *île-à-la-crosse*, in what is now northwestern Saskatchewan, to conduct missionary work. Sara Riel and other Métis missionaries such as Anglican Archdeacon Thomas Vincent III (1835 - 1907) administered the gospel at fur trade posts, Métis hunting and wintering camps and settlements. They also established missions, teach in schools, translate religious works into Cree, and to aid the Métis in their spiritual, economic and political pursuits.

Unfortunately, advancement within the Catholic and Anglican Church hierarchies was blocked to the Métis in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a result, most priests and nuns that worked with the Métis in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were French Canadians or Old World French. Compassionate priests such as Père Georges Belcourt, were embraced by the community, while others who were imprudent and insensitive to Métis sensibilities were disdained. These missionaries conducted services before a

bison hunt (an Act of Contrition) in the event that somebody died in the hunt and could not absolve his sins. Communion, confirmation, confession and the other sacraments were also conducted. Christmas Mass was the spiritual event of the year for Michif-speaking and francophone Métis. Priests conducted the Mass several times to ensure that everybody could receive communion.

Priests also encouraged their Métis parishioners to take part in pilgrimages in order to renew their faith, do penance and to pray for themselves and others. Two of the more famous pilgrimage sites for the Métis are the St. Laurent de Grandin, (near Duck Lake, Saskatchewan) pilgrimage in mid-July and the Lac Ste. Anne (Alberta) pilgrimage in late July. These services are conducted in Cree, French and English. The St. Laurent de Grandin Pilgrimage began in the 1880s and was dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Métis leader Charles Nolin erected the first shrine to *Notre Dame de Lourdes* (Our Lady of Lourdes) as a sign of thanks when his wife “miraculously” recovered from a fatal illness.

Traditionally, the Métis were a deeply spiritual people, who were loyal to the Church. They took all the sacraments, they prayed to the Virgin, Christ, the saints and they wore and adorned their homes with crucifixes, sacred hearts, rosaries, and other icons of the Church. The Church rewarded their faith by giving them a Patron Saint, St. Joseph (Christ’s earthly father), and priests such as Pères Belcourt, Ritchot, Lacombe, and Monseigneurs Taché and Provencher fought for the Métis’ linguistic, land and educational rights. However, unconditional respect for the priests ended when many in the Métis community believed that Père André and the other religious betrayed their parishioners’ trust during the 1885 Resistance. Priests, nuns and Protestant clergy also began having racist views towards the Métis in the mid-nineteenth century. Some

priests also assisted the authorities in removing the Métis from their road allowance communities in the 1930s and 1940s. Furthermore, some Métis had their faith tested when they became victims of sexual, physical and emotional abuse in mission and residential schools. Nevertheless, many Métis, particularly Elders, remain deeply spiritual – even if they do not attend Church or take the sacraments as often as previous generations.

Métis spiritualism is an important but neglected area of study. Elmer Ghost Keeper's *Spirit Gifting* is the first book to explore Cree-Métis spirituality.<sup>1</sup> Also, Joseph Couture has analysed Aboriginal spirituality and other aspects of traditional knowledge, specifically the role played by medicine people in First Nations and Métis communities.<sup>2</sup> Most of the literature on Métis spiritualism relates to the Métis people's embrace of various forms of Christianity rather than to their Aboriginal spiritual practices. Also, most studies involving formal religion and the Métis people centre on the role of missionaries in administering the gospel and the impact of church-sponsored residential schools upon Métis identity.<sup>3</sup> For instance, Raymond Huel has written a great deal about the interaction of Roman Catholic missionaries with the francophone Métis.<sup>4</sup> Father

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<sup>1</sup> Elmer Ghostkeeper, *Spirit Gifting: The Concept Spiritual Exchange*. Calgary: The Arctic Institute of North America, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> See Couture, Joseph E., "Explorations in Native Knowing" in John Freisen (Ed.) *The Cultural Maze: Complex Questions on Native Destiny in Western Canada*. Calgary: Detselig Enterprises, 1991, pp. 201-217 and Couture, Joseph E., "The Role of Native Elders: Emergent Issues" in John W. Freisen (Ed.) *The Cultural Maze: Complex Questions on Native Destiny in Western Canada*. Calgary: Detselig Enterprises, 1991, pp. 201-217.

<sup>3</sup> See Antoine S. Lussier, "Msgr. Provencher and the Native People of Red River, 1818-1853", *Prairie Forum*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1985, pp. 1-15. For the role of Church-sponsored residential schools see: Celia Haig-Brown. *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the First Nations Residential School*. Vancouver: Tillacum Library, 1993. In order, to better understand the experience of American Métis (Turtle Mountain Chippewa) consult Carole Barret and Marcia Wolter Britton "You did n't dare try to be First Nations: Oral Histories of Former First Nations Boarding School Students", *North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains*, Vol. 64, No.2, Spring 1997, pp. 4-25. The Canadian right also addresses the residential school experience in Western Report (Patrick Donnelly, January 26, 1998, pp. 6-11)

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Huel, *Proclaiming the Gospel to the First Nations and the Métis*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996.

Guy Lavallée, a Manitoba Métis, has recently written a Métis prayer book with prayers in Métis-French, French and in English.<sup>5</sup>

More is needed to explain the Métis' traditional syncretistic religion. Many Métis people fused traditional Aboriginal spiritualism with Roman Catholicism. Thomas Flanagan avoided discussing the hybrid spiritualism practised by some Métis people in his controversial monograph on Riel's spiritual system<sup>6</sup> More research needs be conducted to link Riel to the numerous other spiritual movements of the late nineteenth century. For instance, was Riel's spiritual vision much different than the thirst dance of various Plains First Nations? Or was it strictly in line with the late nineteenth-century millenarianism<sup>7</sup> of such groups as the Mormons or the Orthodox Hasidic Jews?

### **The Precursor to Métis Spiritualism: First Nations Spiritualism**

Métis spiritualism's precursor was First Nations spiritualism – specifically Algonquian spiritual traditions. It is not wise to simply state that all First Nations peoples subscribe to the same belief system and adhere to the same values. Such a description promotes a view of pan-First Nations spirituality, which did not necessarily exist in the past. It is impossible to outline all, or even a fraction, of the spiritual attributes of the different First Nations groups, which were influential in the birth of the Métis Nation without altering the focus of

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<sup>5</sup> Father Guy Lavallée, *Prayers of a Métis Priest: Conversations with God on the Political Experiences of the Canadian Métis, 1992-1994*. Winnipeg: Kromar Publishing Limited, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Flanagan, *Louis "David" Riel: "Prophet of the New World"*. Toronto: University Press, 1997. pp. 125-129 and 198-204. Flanagan discusses Riel's "Massinahican", a prophetic vision, which was supposedly part of Riel's new religion. Massinahican means "book" or "bible" in Cree and this tract has spiritual significance.

this project. However, there are values, beliefs and aspects of worldview, which some Plains and Woodland First Nations groups did hold in common.

First Nations spiritualism was based on several central values. Values are the way people pattern and use their energy, the guides people use in their treatment of themselves and others. There are several values, which many First Nations hold dear and true, values, which reflect and shape their attitudes. These include self-reliance, generosity, responsibility, self-respect and wisdom. A close connection to the Creator or Great Mystery (*Kitche Manitou* in Cree) is promoted to develop the courage and strength to be a better person. Respect is a basic law of life, given to Elders, to nature and to personal freedom. Kindness is to be shown to all, strangers and friends alike, and guests are always to be treated with consideration. Consideration is to be given to all people because all people were created to exist together by the same Great Spirit. The greatest purpose of a person is to serve others, to give of themselves for the greater good of humanity. And, it is important to know what is good for you and what is not, observing moderation and balance in your lifestyle.

An overriding premise within First Nations worldview is the interconnectedness of all things, physical and spiritual. There is no boundary between the two; one grades into and is subsumed by the other. This belief promotes a respect for all things and a conviction that people are members of a community much greater than humanity. Such humility is manifested in the idea that humans are not superior to nature and have the right to pillage it as they see fit; rather, they are

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<sup>7</sup> Millenarianism: A revitalization movement that attempts to resurrect a suppressed pariah group which has long suffered in an inferior social position and which has its own special sub-cultural ideology". Haviland, *Anthropology*, p. 635.

dependent on nature for all aspects of their survival. If they do not maintain this respectful membership, they will perish.

Below are values integral to First Nations spiritualism:

**Communalism and Egalitarianism:** Many First Nations were involved in a hunting and gathering lifestyle in regions with limited resources. And, while the individual was free to quest for knowledge and follow their spiritual callings, there was a decided mindset that the survival of the group was paramount to any individual's needs. To ensure that members within these groups were able to survive, people shared and redistributed food and resources. Anyone hoarding goods is hurting their group's chance at surviving through difficult times. While a regional band or tribe of hunter-gathers lives apart for much of the year, a person could always count on having some connection with people in another region because of kinship ties and intermarriage. A host family or group would treat a guest with hospitality and generosity. People would not ask for repayment understanding, implicitly, that at some point in the future they would be expected to offer the same kind of service. Prestige came from giving wealth away to help other people.

Far flung kinship ties served to provide assistance in times of distress. If the main food source in a group's hunting territory suddenly failed, that group could count on support and hospitality from another band with which they had ties through marriage and kinship. By sharing, groups ensured that they had a safety outlet in times of difficulty. If they hoarded resources and did not share, other groups might not help them if they fell upon hard times. A mindset of living for the day was prevalent because no one knew what the future might hold. If resources were available, they were shared and used.

There was little formal structure to a hunting and gathering band. Leaders were followed because they were knowledgeable and charismatic. They only lead so long as they could provide for their group. New leaders were followed when old leaders were not capable any longer. The only person who held any formal authority within a band or multifamily group was a medicine person who, by virtue of his or her ability to communicate with the spiritual realm, could influence people, heal or injure through medicine (i.e. spiritual power) and possibly influence the outcome of hunting and raiding. The decisions and undertakings of such a group of people, then, were based on group consensus, with no one person holding coercive powers over the others. Each person contributed as they could to daily activities such as resource procurement, food preparation, and shelter construction. Independence and interdependence was fostered, not the establishment of unquestioned authority, class divisions or adherence to strict rules.

**Spiritual Medicine and Healing:** Medicine in First Nations cultures did not necessarily refer to medications and concoctions. Instead, it referred to a spiritual power which, when harnessed by a trained person, could be directed to effect the wellbeing of others. The spiritual power was gained through an intimate relationship with a spirit being. Medicine power integrates people with their natural and supernatural world. All people had an opportunity to achieve a relationship with a spiritual benefactor through visions and dreams.

The ability to heal using spirit power is considered one of the most powerful forms of First Nations medicine. Healers are privy to very special knowledge, which was bestowed upon them by spirit guides and guardians. As an intermediary between the physical and spiritual realms, a healer has the power to rejuvenate an ailing person socially, physically and psychologically in

collaboration with his spirit guide or guides. However, only certain people were given the power to directly influence people's health and behaviour.

The ministrations of such a person involved songs, rituals, paraphernalia and medications. The most important aspect of the healing, however, was the spiritual guidance and manifestation of spirit power through the healer. The spirit being would teach a medicine person specific means of delivering aid. Some treatments involved the use of rattles and drums, others a sweat lodge and particular songs or chants, and others the specific preparation of plant and animal products.

Very precise controls were placed on the delivery of the services by the spirit being, otherwise calamities might befall the practitioner or the recipient of the service. For instance, a menstruating woman might not be permitted to touch or prepare a medication because it would taint the healing powers of the medication and bring about misfortune. People who have not received spiritual instruction in the administration of cures, as well, leave themselves open to retribution. The special guidance a spirit being gives for the application of medicine power is not to be tampered with, nor attempted to be replicated without permission.

The sweat lodge is a near ubiquitous feature on the northern plains spiritual landscape. It is a spiritual ceremony designed to promote spiritual identity and spiritual renewal and to heal and purify its participants through the graces of the spirits invoked by the Elder or healer. It can only be effective, however, when operated and directed by a person who had gained an understanding of the medicine power that promotes healing and purification, a person who has had

the proper instruction to guide the rituals, sing the songs and make the prayers. Obviously, such a person requires balance, understanding, wisdom and humility in their lives to conduct an effective sweat lodge without invoking misfortune.

To the non-Aboriginal person this view of medicine might sound odd, but there is the belief that the person is a complex being of body, mind and spirit and that disruptions in the mind or spirit can manifest themselves in the body. If the body only is dealt with, the problem can reoccur because the spirit was not tended to. Thus, it is necessary to incorporate spirituality with healing and foster a reliance on spiritual guidance.

Medicine power is present in all beings; it is an extension of the power of the Great Spirit and no thing can exist without the infusion of this power. Those people who were able to ascend all four stages of life were considered to have considerable medicine power. In the worldview of many of the Plains First Nations the stages included infancy, youth, maturity and old age. Life on the hunt was often harsh and gave no quarter; therefore, to reach old age required acquiring particularly powerful medicine as well as living life in pursuit of cardinal virtues and in synchronicity with spiritual teachings.

**Visions and the Vision Quest:** People were guided by visions they received through dreams or while on a vision quest. The vision quest was a very individualistic experience, providing the seeker with a theory about how he should live with himself and all his relations and all other creatures of the natural and cultural world. A vision was an undeniable contact with the spirit realm, a communication with a spirit protector, guide and teacher who imparted special knowledge onto the recipient. The attainment of a vision and the

importance placed on visions took precedence in the lives of many plains and woodland First Nations groups.

Both men and women were available to receive visions. Sometimes they arrived in dreams with no special preparation. Other times visions only came in special circumstances after the individual had prepared him or herself in a specially prescribed manner. Males often secluded themselves in an isolated spot for days at a time after undergoing specific instruction and purification ceremonies to fast and, hopefully, receive a vision. Women, while in isolation during their menstrual flow, were visited by spirits as well though they did not actively undertake a vision quest of the sort males did. Depending on the cultural affiliation of a male, the age at which a vision can be sought varies from childhood to adulthood.

The spirit visitation might take form in an animal revealing itself to the vision seeker, ranging from a bison to a mosquito. Spirits in human form are also reported as making contact. The physical appearance of a spirit being is not important regarding the power they can confer upon the vision seeker. The guise of the spirit is simply something the person can recognize. However, the person identified with that manifestation of the spirit benefactor. He or she might use a symbol representing that animal or being on their clothing, shields, tipi covers or personal adornment as a statement of their affiliation.

The spirit power, which is conferred upon the individual, varies. Sometimes he or she is given healing abilities, the protection of a benefactor, instructions to construct a powerful medicine bundle or special capabilities in battle and hunting. Taboos and very strict regulations, too, are imposed upon the recipient

of these visions. These help to keep the person focused on their gifts and their delivery. Infractions of such rules could result in the loss of the benefactor or even disaster. Through visions, the person receives a guide as to how to live life properly and a connection to the spiritual world, reinforcing the belief in the unity of all aspects of life.

**Treatment of the Dead:** First Nations people's treatment of the dead has varied through time and space. Some groups buried their dead with grave goods - ornamental and functional items placed with the body in the grave. Some of these burials were in an extended position (laid out), some in a flexed position (knees to chest) while others are bundle or secondary burials. The latter form involves placing the deceased person's body on a scaffold, out of reach from predators and scavengers, for a period of time until only the bones are left. The bones are collected and placed in a bag, or bundle, and this is buried.

The burials conducted by Plains Cree at times involved digging a grave about five feet deep which was lined with a robe, though most graves dug by First Nations were considerably more shallow. About one foot below the surface, two horizontal grooves were cut into the long sides of the grave into which short pieces of tipi poles were lodged. Another robe was placed over the poles and a rawhide was pegged down over the grave. People then covered the rawhide with earth. The body of the deceased, then, was not itself covered in earth but rested in an earthly chamber.

Historically documented Northern Cree and Ojibway people dug shallow graves, 2-3 feet (61-91.5 centimetres) deep, which they lined with branches, birchbark or a blanket. Sometimes the individual would be covered with branches, bark or a blanket prior to being buried. Unlike the Plains Cree grave description, it does

not appear that an open chamber was created for the grave of an Ojibway or northern Cree person. The deceased was dressed in their finest clothing. The Ojibway frequently placed the personal possessions of the deceased in the grave while the Cree did not. During the early nineteenth century, Ojibway men were buried with their silver ornamentation (gorgets, ear wheels, ear bobs and arm bands), which they valued in life.

The non-burial treatment of the dead involves cremation and scaffolding. Cremation is not a common method among First Nations groups for disposing of the remains of their deceased members. However, burned human bones are found in archaeological sites during specific time frames in the past. Individuals who died in the winter, when the ground was frozen, were often placed on scaffolds to be buried when the ground thawed and a grave could be dug. Scaffolds were built by laying poles across the forks of a large tree, resulting in a platform. The body was then wrapped in a robe and placed on the platform. To fasten the body on the platform, rawhides were wrapped around both, securely lashed with thongs. However, scaffolds might collapse due to storms or because of scavenger activity, allowing animals and the elements to distribute the remains widely or destroy them, leaving nothing behind to be buried.

It was the role of the men among the Plains Cree to carry out all the preparations for the burial, except preparing the body of a woman. The corpses of men had their faces painted shortly after death, their hair combed and were clothed in their finest garb. The hands were placed hands down, folded over the chest. The legs were bound together in a slightly flexed position until rigor mortis set in, and then the bindings were removed. People present at the burial would kiss the deceased prior to interment, particularly if it were an important

man or woman. When interred, the head of the individual pointed north. A filled pipe was placed in the grave with the corpse as was a birchbark container filled with grease.

The presence of ochre, an iron oxide used to make paints, in Precontact burials and on the bones of the deceased suggests that people were buried with similar rituals in the time prior to European arrival as well. Some graves had elaborate or rare items incorporated in them, such as eagle talon necklaces and copper ornaments. The majority of Precontact grave goods are utilitarian, however, consisting of tools and the bones of food animals and sometimes dogs. It is felt that these gifts were given to help aid the soul's transition into the afterlife.

It was customary among the Plains Cree to dispose of the tipi and the possessions of a deceased person. The possessions were sometimes placed in the grave with the person, along with food and tobacco. After the burial, mourners consisting of parents, siblings, the spouse, children's' and parents' siblings wore their hair loose, dressed only in a robe and gashed their forearms and legs. This lasted until a man of prestige, probably an Elder or respected warrior or chief, told them it was time to quit mourning. This was commonly after four days.

Different groups developed a variety of means to deal with the spirit of a deceased person. Some groups would change the location of the door in a house or dwelling to confuse the spirit of a dead person who might try to return to the family, while others might place food and tobacco in a grave or grave house for the spirit to keep it from wandering. Some groups believed that the ghost of a dead person lingered in the area where it died and had the ability to actively intervene in people's lives. In these instances, the family or camp would

abandon an area shortly after a death. In most cases a feast was held in honour of the deceased shortly after the death. Prayers were offered, pipes were smoked, sweat grass was burned as a smudge to ask the spirit beings to assist and guard the soul of the deceased person. Upon returning to camp in an area where a grave was, the family of the deceased would clean up the gravesite, give offerings of tobacco and food and give a feast.

**Elders:** Elders are highly respected, necessary members of First Nations society. They are guides for the people, directing them spiritually and socially. An Elder is a person who has become a balanced human being, someone who is a highly aware person, an exemplar and standing point of reference for others to gauge themselves by. Elders have comprehended the thread that binds all things together, having gained an appreciation of the spiritual nature in the perceived world.

Elders can be healers or have special spiritual connections and guidance. Some people, however, do not receive visions, songs or special spiritual guidance and protection. Yet, by living in accordance to the values held dear by their cultures, individuals can gain the proper appreciation of the physical and spiritual reality they are involved in. They become, in essence, part of the interconnectedness that is the universe. Because of this insight and appreciation, people who do not necessarily have an intimate relationship with a spiritual benefactor are, nevertheless, sought out because of their wisdom and judgment. They become exemplars because of adherence to their values, convictions and teachings.

**Symbolism:** Symbols express and represent meaning, which provides purpose and understanding in people's lives. The written word and arithmetic signs and equations are two forms of symbols that represent meanings. Two of the most

important symbols in the cultures of many different First Nations groups in Canada and the United States are the circle and the number four. The two symbols are intertwined and have and give meaning to people throughout their lifecycle.

The circle represents the passage of life, the seasons, the interconnectedness of the physical world and that of humanity. The circle is a fundamental key to the understanding of First Nations philosophy, religion and life, as it possesses the design and model for First Nations living. A circle represents life with the four cardinal directions plotted on it, with the centre representing the concept "Me". The cycle around the circle represents the development of the individual, his or her responsibilities and the object of life.

The lifecycle moves in a clockwise direction around the circle, with each of the four points representing important markers in a life. The cardinal point East represents that time which the individual is dependent, the stage of infancy. The cardinal point South is the experimental portion of life, that of youth, and represents a narrowness of vision, short sightedness and concern with the self. This is a time when a male would seek a vision and a female receives the gift of procreation by having her first menstrual cycle. The cardinal direction West represents adulthood, a time when a person is introspective. The individual, at this time, lives the vision he has acquired earlier, during youth and fulfills his or her career position within the group. The final position, North, is that of age and wisdom, the time of the Elder and exemplar within the community.

First Nations groups who made tipis attached symbolism to the different poles holding the shelter up, as well as to the pins, the hide and the ties. The

construction of a tipi, therefore, is itself symbolic of its inhabitant's values. The number of poles used by different groups to make their tipis varied; however, the values they placed on the different poles were relatively the same. The poles of a northern plains tipi represent obedience, respect, humility, happiness, love, faith, kinship, cleanliness, thankfulness, sharing, strength, good child rearing, hope, and divine protection. The pins, which fasten the flaps together, represent family solidarity, the spikes that pin the cover to the ground represent fasting and the rope that binds the poles together symbolizes relationships. The hide, which covers the structure, symbolizes warmth and protection.

### **Traditional Aboriginal Spiritual Values held by the Métis**

The Métis adapted the spiritual values of the First Nations forbearers when developing their own spiritual system. Below are values that were central to the traditional Métis belief system:

**Consensus:** The Métis, particularly those involved in a hunting and gathering lifestyle believed in consensual democracy, a way of life formed by the consent of the people, and a government formed by the consent of the governed. Each person had an equal say in the decisions, which affected the group. The group made decisions based on experience, tradition, and custom to ensure its security and the stability of the whole. Leaders were followed because they were capable, knowledgeable and made good choices. This system minimized coercion, ensured people were informed of decisions, which affected the group, and gave people the opportunity to join or leave a group as they saw fit.

**Interconnectedness:** A real emphasis among Métis groups was placed on living in connection with nature, rather than trying to dominate or control it as is held in the Judeo Christian worldview. This value is based in the concept that there is no boundary between the physical and spiritual realms; one grades into and is subsumed by the other. This belief promotes the value of interdependence and humility. Humans are not viewed as superior to nature, having the right to pillage it as they see fit. The idea of use, not control, balance and humility are widespread. The Métis applied this value when they thanked and made offerings to animals who let themselves be killed to feed a human family, as a sign of respect. Similarly, when women gathered medicinal plants or plants for food they, too, would offer a prayer of gratitude to the Creator or Great Spirit (*Kitche Manitou* in Cree, or *Li Bon Jeu* or *Kishay Menitou* in Michif), sometimes leaving an offering behind if protocol required. While Christians, many Métis still hold these beliefs which originated in the value systems of their First Nations kin and ancestors. Because people were taught to be thankful for what was provided for them, they tended to respect, not over-exploit, their resources.

**Sharing and Communalism:** Communalism is the pulling together and sharing of resources for the benefit of all, ensuring that no one is neglected. A person gives material goods, time, and labour when they are able to; when they are not able to give, they will receive from those who can give. All people are seen as being created equal and, thus, require being treated with respect and kindness. Among some Métis, the privilege to serve others with good grace is one of the greatest purposes a person can aspire to. All members of the family were considered valuable and each of their contributions were important. While people were free to follow their desires, there was decided mind-set that the survival of the group was more important than the satisfaction of any

individual's wants. A society devoted to this ideal was organized in the later nineteenth century in the St. Laurent, Saskatchewan region. It was, appropriately, called the "Society of the Generous Ones". The society was composed of the best hunters who took it upon themselves to see that the crippled, aged, and sick received a share of the spoils from the buffalo hunt. Families were united and convinced that, through respect, sharing and cooperation, true happiness was found. The philosophy of communalism went beyond the family, however, to any visitor to the home or those in need. A visitor might be invited to share a bed with a large family if they did not have extra sleeping space on very cold nights - even body heat was shared! Communalism meant that there was often little emphasis placed on property acquisition. Individuals who hoarded and did not share resources were viewed as dangers to the safety and survival of the group, particularly if they were involved in a nomadic or semi-settled economy. People who readily redistributed their wealth were viewed with respect and honour because sharing greatly aided the success of a group in both difficult and prosperous times.

**Time:** The Métis maintained a different attitude towards time and work compared with Europeans. There were no or few regimented daily routines. People ate and slept when they were hungry and tired. The concept of linear time was unimportant. Events started when enough or all the required people showed up. Work got done when it got done and did not require clock watching. Living for today was considered more important, so one had to enjoy his or her resources. Because the future was not knowable and resources could fail quickly, it was important to make use of what was at hand. Tomorrow always took care of itself.

**Respect for Elders:** The Métis have always respected Elders in their society. They are considered guides, directing people spiritually and socially. Experience, awareness and wisdom are their contributions to the group's survival and success. Respect for Elders is part of the Métis value system. Elders are important teachers, instilling not only survival knowledge but knowledge about beliefs, values, heritage and identity. Elders were consulted about problems before people acted on them, and the Elder's advice was taken very seriously.

**Symbolism:** Symbols express and represent meaning, which provides purpose and understanding in people's lives. A symbol is a figural expression of beliefs and values. One of the most important symbols among the Métis is the infinity sign, a sideways figure 8. The flag of the Métis contains an infinity sign. It became a nationalistic symbol of the Métis when they asserted their rights to hunt bison during the Skirmish at Seven Oaks in 1817. The flag today maintains the infinity sign and a background of solid dark blue. The infinity sign represents the joining of two nations and the existence of the people for eternity. This symbol represents a unification of peoples who are striving towards self-government, a land base and a preservation of culture and heritage. Symbols such as this are a source of pride for people because they represent values and ideals, which are important to a people.

**Death and Treatment of the Dead:** Beliefs relating to death and the treatment of the dead vary between Métis communities. Most communities have Christian funerals and the deceased are buried in graveyards with all the concomitant religious rituals and services. However, many of the beliefs associated with death and the treatment of the dead are influenced by ideas passed on from various First Nations kin and ancestors and involve displays of respect.

A wake, which is a vigil held for a deceased individual before their funeral, is sometimes better attended than the church funeral service held in the church. The wake is a commemoration of the deceased and marks a rite of passage. It is an opportunity for family and friends to pay their respects to the deceased individual on a casual, more personal level than they could during the more regimented ceremony of a funeral service. The church services are considered important, but among many Métis the wake is the most important and respectful treatment of the dead. During a wake, people might offer prayers to the deceased, smoke tobacco as an offering of respect, or give a feast in the deceased's honour.

There were and are many different beliefs associated with the spirits of deceased, and how to keep them from wandering among or influencing the living. For instance, a family might bury a deceased member according to church practices and services. However, to keep the spirit from wandering back to the family, they would place food and tobacco in the grave and change the location of the door in their house. In other instances, individuals were not buried on certain days or at certain times in the belief that bad luck or death would befall other people.

## **Christianity: The Beginnings of Formal Religion among the Métis**

### **Mobile Mission**

The two main historic religious influences on the Métis and Country Born people were the Catholic and Anglican missionaries, who were present in the northwest by 1820. Lord Selkirk requested Monseigneur Plessis of Québec to send missionaries to Red River in 1817. It was felt that the Catholic missionaries

would be able to help restore peace in the region after the Skirmish at Seven Oaks and to raise the moral standards of the Métis and First Nations, ensuring a greater degree of social stability. The Catholic mission was initially more successful than the Anglican mission in its efforts with the Métis because of its willingness to venture forth on the plains with the bison hunting Métis.

The missionaries sought to bring Christianity and "civilization" to the Métis. The clergy stressed that Christians adhered to peace, good behaviour and obedience to the laws of both Church and State. The Church, therefore, sought to convert people to Christianity, instruct them in the doctrines and principles of the Church, regularize marriages, baptize children and adults, introduce agriculture and a settled way of life.

The Oblate Fathers of Mary Immaculate, a brotherhood of the Roman Catholic Church, were among the most influential missionaries to involve themselves with the Métis. They arrived on the Prairies in 1845, approximately twenty-five years after the introduction of a resident clergy at the Red River settlement. Arriving from French Canada, France and Belgium, their aim was to assist the far-flung Aboriginal missions. Working diligently with the Métis, many of the Oblate priests became well-respected members of Métis communities and succeeded in attracting some mixed-blood men to religious service. Father Albert Lacombe was one such Oblate who traveled extensively to communities throughout the present-day Canadian West and became a dedicated and well-respected friend of the Métis and First Nations peoples.

Protestant missionary work began the Canadian West after the arrival of Anglican clergy at Red River in 1820. Their primary aim was to establish and

maintain already initiated settlements for the Country Born sons of Hudson Bay Company men and impart on them Christianity, European ideals, and an agricultural economy. Because their focus was on operating with settled mixed-heritage and retired trading families, Protestant missionaries did not involve themselves with the nomadic Prairie Métis to the same degree as did the Catholic mission.

In the Prairie West, initially, it was difficult for missionaries to carry out their mandate of conversion and consistent religious instruction because of the fleeting nature of Métis settlements and their nomadic way of life. While the Country Born at Red River took to agriculture quite readily, the Métis peoples did not. The Church's aims were thwarted time and again when Métis families took part in the semi-annual bison hunts and abandoned their fields. This was not because of lack of ability or an "immoral and lazy" character, as many priests believed but because, economically, hunting produced more yields and it was part of Métis culture. And, the conditions in Red River, as elsewhere during the period when farming was being introduced, were disastrous for agriculture (drought, grasshopper infestations and flood) with thirty years of recorded crop failure between 1812-1870.

The Catholic missionaries were also present in greater numbers, though they were, initially, woefully understaffed to minister to the large and widespread Métis population in the present-day Canadian West. The Catholic Mission set a precedent by sending its missionaries out on the prairie with roving Métis hunting groups to introduce to them formal Christian practices and ideals. The Anglican missionaries were less energetic in their efforts in this regard and less of an impact on the nomadic Métis groups. Furthermore, the Catholic

missionaries recognized, in time, that overzealous preaching and intolerant attitudes would isolate their congregations and, thus, had learned to make concessions when opportune. Some Anglican missionaries, however, were more adamant in their views and demands causing some alienation among their followers.

In such an environment, "country" marriages, which were arranged according to the custom of the country or *à la façon du pays* were not tolerated by the Roman Catholic Church. They wanted to solemnize those "irregular" relationships, which European and Métis men had entered into with First Nations and Métis women. The Catholic Church viewed marriage as a sacred alliance, which lasted the lives of the partners. This view was at odds with that of the Métis where country marriages lasted only as long as the partners were willing to stay together. Even if a couple had been together for many decades, well committed to one another, the marriage was "irregular" in the Church's viewpoint. Additionally, the Catholic Church forbade the practice of cousin-marriages, which was an acceptable Métis marriage practice.

Baptisms were important because, in the eyes of the Church, a person who is not baptized remains in a state of original sin and is not a child of God. Converting people to Christianity made it easier to assimilate them and turn them to a settled, agrarian way of life.

It became apparent to the Catholic clergy, soon after their arrival in the present-day Canadian West that it would be difficult to convince the Métis to take up farming implements and become an agrarian people. Therefore, two mission mandates were developed. Farming would be introduced and emphasized to

those Métis living in settled areas. To convert Métis who lived a nomadic life to Christianity, to provide religious instruction to children and regularize unions made according to the custom of the country, other missionaries became somewhat nomadic themselves, traveling with and between groups inhabiting the prairie. Many of these missionaries become well-respected members of the hunting parties.

Before a bison hunt, the missionary would conduct a service for the hunters to ask for the protection of the riders, as the hunt could be dangerous and people did die or become injured. After the hunt, respected missionaries would be given the choicest cuts of meat, such as the bison tongue. The missionaries were able to cater to the Métis' religious needs, conduct important services, and provide religious instruction for the children while on the prairie. However, to be effective and be accepted by the nomadic groups, the missionaries had to modify their agenda, allowing some flexibility in their aims and their mandate to convince people to adopt an agricultural lifestyle.

While living with a camp of people or upon meeting a camp, the missionary might conduct a great many services. Children born between visits of the clergy would be baptized and confirmed, while adults in groups who had not been contacted previously might desire this service. One of the biggest jobs the missionary carried out was the catechism. The children in camps on the prairies and in the forests were not introduced to many religious ideas because they did not attend formal schools. Therefore, the missionary had to impress upon them the ideas, the meanings of the words and the rituals of catechism. Missionaries spent a significant amount of time visiting the sick and dying, a pursuit common to both resident clergy and those visiting nomadic groups. Accounts are written

of priests from the Wood Mountain and Cypress Hills (in present-day Saskatchewan) area traveling 322 kilometres in tempestuous conditions to assist the dying and administer last rites. Funeral services, too, might be held for individuals who had passed away prior to the arrival of the priest. Hearing confession was another duty of the missionary. A group's confessions might be numerous, particularly if they did not have a priest or missionary among them often. The delivery of the mass and the Eucharist were also important services the missionary which he would perform when meeting with a group.

The contrast of cultures was a great hurdle in clergy-Métis relationships. The European educated, "civilized" Euro-Canadian and European clergy had a difficult time understanding the ties Métis people had to bison hunting, fishing, trapping - their nomadic or semi-settled lifestyle - the belief system and their communal values. Seasonal subsistence activities, which took the family away from the settlement frustrated the priests because they did not understand that farming was foreign to the Métis traditional way of life and was not as profitable.

The clergy had a difficult time accepting the active social life of the Métis, which involved boisterous parties, dancing, drinking, music and gambling. These were part of Métis identity and helped to bind families together. In the eyes of the Church so much time invested in these social events kept people away from farming, attending services and practicing Church principles. But, for a group who was used to living day to day and where family and friends were the surest indication of personal wealth, these activities remained important and were not limited. However, the clergy did make a conscious effort to discourage the use of alcohol among their followers. They recognized that some traders were

pushing it on the First Nations and Métis and the social problems it promoted. Drunken excesses resulted in increased crime and family discord. They refused to back down on this point, sometimes refusing religious services to those who participated in the liquor trade.

The Church and, in general, European and Euro-Canadian society maintained a conviction that they were superior to the Métis and First Nations. Their mission, of course, was to bring civilization to these people through agriculture, education, and religion. White civilization was understood, by European and Euro-Canadian people, as the pinnacle of culture and humankind, as was Christian religion. Not understanding or appreciating Métis culture, the missionaries sought to supplant Métis views with their views on property acquisition and a settled lifestyle, the superiority of white civilization, and the Christian faith. The Church sought to give to the Métis a strict set of laws to guide them in choosing right from wrong, a moral code which outlined desirable behaviours. They regarded the Métis as a lost group who needed shepherding; the Métis, of course, were well guided and had no need of a foreign body trying to direct their lifestyle, beliefs and history.

While profoundly Christian, the Métis viewed priests and the clergy on the whole suspiciously as intruders in their midst until their trust and respect was earned. Nevertheless, the Red River Métis asked for the introduction of missionaries into the colony but were unhappy with the often strict promotion of values and regulations which were at odds with their cultural practices. Additionally, many Métis took offense that the clergy were bent on teaching in French or English and disapproved of children who used Cree, Michif or other Indigenous languages. Those missionaries and priests that were of Métis

ancestry, though, were capable of achieving greater trust upon their introduction into settlements and camps and were less abject to speaking and ministering in the local languages than their European or Euro-Canadian counterparts.

What the Métis were seeking in their religious leaders was compassion and understanding, religious instruction and involvement in their communities. Those clergy who were sociable, accepting and motivated to work with the people were those who had the greatest impact and community approval. For instance, at Red River in the period 1820-1826, the Anglican priest, Reverend John West was resolute in his views and blunt and tactless in his mannerisms, succeeding in alienating many of his potential parishioners. His replacement, a priest by the name of Reverend David Jones, was more patient, kind and sincere and was able to greatly increase the numbers attending church services and Sunday school.

There are accounts of parishioners consciously deciding not to pay their tithes and contribute nothing to the church if the priest was not accepted or popular with the inhabitants. In some instances, people would sign and send petitions demanding that poorly received priests be recalled from their communities. Those priests who were well received by the Métis could count on consistent attendance at church services and many contributions, monetary and otherwise.

The involvement of the clergy in the lives of the Métis was initially designed to manipulate the nature of Métis lifestyle. However, in developing favourable relationships with representatives of the Christian church, the Métis embraced many elements of Christianity and became active in the church and followed its

teachings. Conversely, those priests and missionaries who made an honest effort at becoming involved in the lives of the Métis families and the community could expect to receive greater returns. Those Métis who had favourable opinions of the clergy would go to great ends to gain a resident priest or visits from missionaries. For instance, in 1841, a Métis by the name of Picher traveled to Red River from Lac Ste. Anne (near present-day Edmonton, Alberta) to request the presence of a priest at the settlement.

The prime directive of missionaries was, ideally, charity, aid to the oppressed and the propagation and maintenance of church doctrine. From the collections, the clergy provided financial support as well as food and clothing to less fortunate people in the community. The clergy received the greatest support and acceptance in communities where the priests or missionaries learned and taught in the locally spoken languages and acknowledged prevailing and persistent Métis beliefs and values. For instance, Father Remas, a Catholic priest at Lac La Biche, learned Woods Cree to operate more efficiently with the people of the area. By the end of his first year, 1853, he had performed 72 baptisms, 7 marriages and 4 burials. While it must have frustrated members of the clergy, accepting that their influence was limited and they were not able to sway everybody to their way of thinking aided their reception into the community. In cases where there was an honest effort on the part of the clergy to work with and for the people, they received cooperation and respect.

If compassionate and understanding, priests became highly valued members of the community and many of the important events in Métis life (births, weddings, funerals) involved participation in religious services whereas prior to the arrival of missionaries, Métis people conducted their own celebrations and

services. Priests and nuns, such as the Sisters of Charity known (the Grey Nuns) ran schools, organized picnics and sports days, held suppers and assisted in humanitarian efforts. Though cultural differences frustrated and sometimes lead to judgmental attitudes on the part of the missionaries and nuns, they often wrote of their conviction to aid the Métis and their affection for their students and parishioners.

While agents of change representative of the European presence in Canada, many of the resident clergy supported their Métis membership. In fact, Bishop Taché and Father Noël-Joseph Ritchot advocated the Manitoba Métis claims to the government in 1869-1870. After this period, some priests sought to protect their Métis parishioners against the tide of incoming European civilization and the foreign culture that came with it. As long as the Métis recognized the clergy as community leaders and counselors, the priests and missionaries were willing to aid and speak favourably of their parishioners in their directives.

### **The Development of Permanent Religious Infrastructure among the Métis**

When bison herds dwindled and trapping, hunting and fishing could no longer support a family, people became tied to settlements on a more permanent basis. It was then, more than ever, that people consistently attended services and sent their children to the church-run residential and day schools. Where people became settled, permanent missions were established with a resident clergy and, oftentimes, a convent. Consistent religious services were given and the priest sought to become a leader of the people, guiding them spiritually as well as economically. Through his presence and his elevated position in the community he tried to introduce the people to formal education, gardening and agriculture

and European values. People attending church services recited the rosary prayer, sung hymns, were given Mass and religious instruction, and catechism was held regularly.

Within settlements, though, the Anglican priests and missionaries used the pastoral visit to reach and recruit many people. This technique was invaluable, particularly in the early history of the Red River Settlement, in advancing the Evangelical Anglican cause among retired Scottish HBC employees, Swiss settlers and Country Born families. Anglican missionaries, through these visits, were able to offer spiritual aid to families who were suffering with grief after the loss of loved ones. On these visits, they also helped provide necessities to families if the breadwinner had passed away. In becoming involved with families in this way, sometimes on a daily basis, they were able to involve more members of the settlement in the Anglican Church. The establishment of Anglican Sunday schools, also, had the effect of introducing older children to Christian religious tenants and providing them with some competence in reading and writing in English

Local people built chapels when they were to receive a visit from a missionary or gain a resident priest. The members of settlements who did not have religious instruction felt it was necessary to erect a house of worship. Focusing all their efforts on cutting and collecting trees, in two days twenty four men during the winter of 1876 had enough timber in place to build a church 60 feet (18.3 metres) long, 30 feet (9.14 metres) wide with walls 12 (3.66 metres) feet tall. They set about building foundations, making pews, laying a split log floor and plastering walls. The entire interior took just over one week to be constructed. Other chapels were much more modest, constructed from knotty aspen chinked

with mud and hay with straw roofs and level dirt floors, such as the first built at Coulee-Chappele in southern Saskatchewan. Not only did people donate their time, money and labour to the construction of such buildings, some donated the land upon which they were built free of charge as a gift to the Church. People, old and young, male and female, undertook these efforts willingly, and the arrival of a priest was a joyful event. Not only would the local Métis build the chapel, they oftentimes would construct the priest's lodgings, which might be adjoined to the church, out of their own expenses. Such was the case at Willow Bunch where the Métis constructed a church and dwelling for the local priest, Father St. Germain, in the 1880s. Father St. Germain was a well-respected man in the community and was devoted to the local Métis. There are accounts that the Métis were very quick to aid recently arrived missionaries.

Convents were built when the resident clergy solicited enough community and monetary support. The convents acted as boarding schools, and nuns taught classes to the local children. The various sisterhoods were devoted instructors and nurses, focusing their efforts towards community service and charity. The most influential sisterhood was the Sisters of Charity Order of Grey Nuns. The nuns became very attached to their students, and while sometimes blinded by cultural misunderstanding, they tried to provide the Métis with the best care and support they could.

The Grey Nuns arrived at Red River in 1844. As permanent settlements and missions grew in the Prairie West, the Grey Nuns followed and opened schools, visited the sick, cared for orphans and undertook other charitable efforts. By 1866, they opened mission schools at Lac Ste. Anne and Lac La Biche (in present-day Alberta), at Ile à la Crosse, (in present-day northwestern Saskatchewan) and

at Fort Providence (in the present-day Northwest Territories). They have been noted for their devotion to their work with the Métis and their involvement in Métis education. Going beyond elementary education, they sought to teach music and art as well as domestic skills, succeeding in drawing Métis girls into religious service with sisterhoods. The Grey Nuns were noted for conducting their religious and educational programs in a manner compatible with the preferences of a majority of Métis people who were Catholic in faith and French speaking. As part of their charitable work, the Sisters operated orphanages out of their lodgings and acted as nurses, treating the sick among the Métis.

However, their students sometimes saw the nuns as being very strict and intolerant of Métis culture and language. The Church's mandate was to teach in French or English in a formal setting and to impart on the students European ideals and behaviours. To the Métis, such a strict format for learning, intolerance for Michif, Cree, Chipewyan and other First Nations languages, and limits on their freedom were foreign concepts. For many generations, Métis children learned experientially and were not separated from family members for extended periods of time. Being confined for several hours a day was difficult to adapt to, resulting in feelings of intolerance towards the nuns who, because of their cultural background, could not understand why many children were having a difficult time adapting to residential schools and convent life. Those children, however, who grew up under the care of the nuns or had an introduction to similar values and concepts through their parents, were less apt to have major difficulties adapting.

Children who attended church-run schools, operated by nuns such as the Faithful Companions of Jesus, Franciscan Missionaries of Mary and the Sisters of Charity (Grey Nuns), were given a formal Christian education and many became quite devout. While the Catholic Church operated the convents and schools, Protestant children were accepted into the residences and attended many of the same services, sometimes becoming members of the Catholic faith. Many of the children who came under the care and tutelage of Sisters were very young and were, thus, influenced a great deal by the nuns. Children in the nun-operated orphanages and residential schools started their mornings with prayers and mass prior to going to classes. During the day children would attend catechism classes. Bible stories were told and read to impart Christian steadfastness to the children. Church services were held in the evenings and on Sundays. Those children who attended residential schools were given instruction in sacred teachings as much as they were in secular teachings.

Those Métis families who were settled in communities often attended church with their children and the children's attendance in schools did not cause a great divergence in culture and values. Those children whose parents were not as settled, however, were more often subjected to an educational and religious regime quite foreign to them and their families. The long periods students spent separated from their families at an early age resulted in them being heavily influenced by the Church. The parents, with whom the children had infrequent contact, became less influential in their lives and less able to pass on their lifestyle and heritage. The chasm generated between parents, who were not Christian or who were but lived a more traditional lifestyle, and children during the residential school period in the west and north resulted in generations of Métis who could no longer converse (children were commonly not allowed to

speak Cree or Michif in school), who did not follow the same lifeways and had divergent values and beliefs.

### **The Métis' Religious Life**

Religious events fulfilled important social and psychological functions in many people's lives. It provided comfort in the belief that supernatural aid was available to them in times of crisis. It also fostered social relations, maintaining cohesion and solidarity among the Métis. However, in more recent times, the emphasis placed on religious activities and rituals is not as great as in the past. This has resulted in a process of isolation between religious and secular spheres of life, deemphasizing the importance of religious ritual. However, adherence to religious principles and attendance of church services are still important to the Métis. Religion was something, which was practiced at home, not just in the church, by all members of the family. For instance, at New Year's in Red River, fathers would receive blessing from the priest at church, which they, in turn, would confer upon their families when they returned home.

Many people were pious, recognizing the holy days of Good Friday, Palm Sunday, Easter, and Christmas and attending pilgrimages. Mass was given in some settlements, such as Calgary in the late nineteenth century, two times a day and it was not unusual to have five a day. In other regions, such as St. Laurent, Manitoba, people attended Benediction every night during the month of May. Older Métis people in central and southern Saskatchewan recall a time when they went to confession every day and attended church weekly or several times a week, in addition to making pilgrimages and going to retreats.

Christmas mass was of particular importance and people would attend at all costs, regardless of the weather.

The procession of the Blessed Sacrament was another important Catholic event, taking place on the feast of Corpus Christi in June. People representing different associations within the parish, the altar boys, the choir and the congregation would leave the church in a procession, followed by the priest carrying the Blessed Sacrament. Within the procession people recited the rosary prayer, sung hymns and recited the litany of the Sacred Heart. They would sojourn at a temporary altar where the priest would give the Benediction and special prayers for the community.

Among the Catholic Métis families in St. Laurent, Manitoba, the main devotion centred around the Virgin Mary, with the recitation of the rosary in the home almost every night. Other prayers, such as the litany of the saints and prayers for the dead were also common. During the period of Lent, people would give up a favourite food or a bad habit for 40 days before Easter as a means of remembering Jesus' 40 days of fasting in the desert. And, to keep people focused on their remembrance, no dances or entertainment would be held. The local priest often chose this time to make visits to the families in the parish. To protect themselves from thunder and lightning storms, people would sprinkle holy water in their homes, particularly around the windows. Some people built "family" shrines, erecting statues to saints or Mary in small grottos in secluded spots behind their houses.

Mothers regularly introduced their children to religious teachings at an early age and prepared them for communion. Nuns played a large role, too, in preparing

the children to receive these sacraments. The child typically went to their first communion and confession at about age seven or eight while Confirmation, the ceremony conducted by a Bishop, which officially recognized the person's membership in the Church, was given at age twelve. These are community events and celebrated at a Sunday Mass.

Religious pilgrimages have been an important part of the spiritual life of innumerable Métis people. A pilgrimage is a religious journey to a sacred site. During annual religious observances, such as the Feast of Saint Anne on July 26th, people sojourn by the thousands at pilgrimage sites where shrines have been erected to various saints, the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ. People attend to renew their spiritual faith, their connection with other like-minded people, and to socialize. The large prayer services, masses and processions provide a feeling of community. In some instances, people come in the hopes of being miraculously healed from disabilities and sicknesses.

Pilgrimages draw people from far and wide, of all races, ages and denominations. Some people have attended the events for decades, renewing friendships they made at previous pilgrimages. In the past, people came on foot, on horse or on carts from miles around. More recently, people drive for hundreds of kilometres in automobiles to attend the services. Yet, some people will still walk for kilometres to the pilgrimage sites as a sign of their devotion. While walking, people focus their thoughts on their religious ideals and teachings, praying as they march towards their destination. The pilgrimages involve many different services, such as Mass, baptisms and prayer services.

The pilgrimage to St. Laurent de Grandin, Saskatchewan is a major religious event in the lives of many Métis in Saskatchewan and Alberta. It takes place July 15-16. The event is focused around the Virgin Mary – the Virgin of Lourdes. Various churches post signs to inform people when and where the pilgrimage takes place and what it is all about. People hold a walk to the shrine site from the town of Duck Lake, a distance of approximately 16 kilometres. This pilgrimage has been an ongoing event since the 1880s. Charles Nolin erected the original statue of the Virgin of Lourdes at the site in 1885 in thanks for the recovery of his wife from serious health problems. Since that time a shrine, sanctuary and chapel have been erected at the site dedicated to *Notre Dame de Lourdes* (Our Lady of Lourdes).

This pilgrimage attracts clergy, nuns, and church members. Priests come from all over the diocese to give multi-lingual Masses and penance services. The bishop of the diocese, from Prince Albert, conducts the English Mass, gives a sermon about the Virgin Mary and delivers the consecration to the Virgin Mary. In the past, people would sing the *Ave Maria* all night long on July 15 while at the pilgrimage site. The hundreds of voices would carry through the night air and across the river to the people waiting to cross in the morning. The singing of the *Ave Maria* was accompanied by a candlelight procession, which involved hundreds of people carrying candles from the main shrine to the chapel at night, lighting up the darkness with hundreds of candles. At set intervals during the procession, the congregation would stop for prayer services. The Blessing of the Sick attracts many ill and disabled people on who are seeking a miraculous healing. Some individuals claim to have been cured of their ailments and have left their canes and crutches behind at the altar.

Youth pilgrimages also occur at St. Laurent on a Sunday in September. Entertainment, social activities and religious services are combined to bring together youth in a fun yet devotion-oriented educational experience. Adults act as group leaders, musicians, security and instructors during the pilgrimage.

Institutionalized religion had a large impact on many Métis individuals with many choosing a religious vocation. For instance, Métis women have become members in various Sisterhoods, such as the Order of Grey Nuns, and were instrumental in providing formal education to the settled Métis as well as First Nations. Several Métis men became missionaries and priests. Métis priests, such as Reverend Fathers Henry Budd and Napoleon Laferté, traveled between settlements to perform services when residents did not have a resident clergy or church. Many of these Métis clergymen were zealous in their work, traveling extensively in huge districts and making important inroads for the Church in spreading Christianity. European and Métis missionaries and priests, such as Father Pierre Moulin in northern Alberta, worked to translate the bible and other literature into Cree syllabics.

However, while Métis men did become priests and missionaries, their advancement within the Church was limited because of their heritage. For instance, the Church Missionary Society (part of the Church of England) of London initially decided to develop a self-supporting Native clergy in the James Bay region. Prominent members of the clergy in Canada, though, did not implement London's bidding effectively, eventually deciding against promoting Country Born ministers into higher-level positions.

Archdeacon Thomas Vincent III was one such Métis clergyman; he was rejected for the position of Bishop of Moosonee in 1893 because of his mixed racial background. This was not because of a lack of skill on the part of the Métis ministers but, more so, because of intolerance on the part of European and Euro-Canadian clergy and a lack of respect from European Christians in Canada. Reverend Henry Budd (1812-1875) was one of the most well known Anglican Métis missionaries in the mid-nineteenth century. He was born to First Nations and Métis parents at Norway House, Manitoba. He received a formal education and was baptized at the mission in Red River. He initially became a teacher in Red River but later began working among Native peoples in the area northwest of the settlement, eventually establishing a mission at The Pas, Manitoba. Fluent in both Cree and English, Budd influenced many people in The Pas, La Ronge, Stanley Mission and Cumberland House regions before establishing a mission in 1850 at modern-day Nipawin, Saskatchewan. From this station, he ministered to people around Prince Albert and the semi-settled groups along the Saskatchewan River.

Archdeacon John Alexander MacKay (1838-1923) was born in Moose Factory, Ontario to the man in charge of the Hudson's Bay post. After being ordained an Anglican priest in 1862 in Winnipeg, he worked in a similar region as Reverend Budd. His first mission was at The Pas, Manitoba while he later went to operate in Stanley Mission, Saskatchewan. His influence was considerable, helping the community to become largely self-sufficient by instructing the members in gardening, agriculture and raising cattle. While in Stanley Mission he translated scriptures into Cree, later authoring a Cree dictionary. Being a scholar, he later became a Cree tutor and professor at Emmanuel College in Prince Albert and in

1900 went on to become the superintendent of First Nations Missions for the Anglican Church.

### Questions and Activities:

- 1)** What orders of the Roman Catholic Church had the greatest impact among the Métis and other Aboriginal people? How was their evangelic message suited to the Métis?
- 2)** What were the aims of the clergy in the community in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? What was their attitude towards their Métis charges in the community?
- 3)** How did the Church meet the educational needs of the local Métis?
- 4)** How did the Church attempt to integrate the Métis in the non-traditional economy?
- 5)** Do you think that they were successful or do you believe that the Church attempted to assimilate the area's Métis by making them adjust to Euro-Canadian lifestyles?
- 6)** In assessing the legacy of Church-run residential schools, what were some of the positive aspects and what were the negative ones?
- 7)** What are some of the main concepts in First Nations spiritualism? How are these similar and different from Christian concepts? How were the Métis able to mix the two worldviews into a distinct spiritual system?
- 8)** How is the role of an Elder different and similar to a priest, minister or rabbi?
- 9)** Is the sweat lodge ceremony have parallels in Christian, especially Roman Catholic, rituals?
- 10)** Why do you think Catholicism was an easier fit with First Nations spiritualism than Protestantism?
- 11)** How is the traditional First Nations view of the natural world different than the Christian? Has this been a cause of controversy in how Aboriginal and Europeans and Euro-Canadians have interacted with each other?
- 12)** Study other world spiritual systems and compare them with what you know of traditional Aboriginal and Christian spiritual systems. Are the spiritual systems of Asia such as Taoism, Shintoism, Siberian Shamanism closer to Aboriginal spiritual systems than the monotheistic faiths such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam?
- 13)** Why do pilgrimages such as the one at Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta still have a big impact upon Aboriginal people?

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