

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH
AND
THE METIS NATION

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I Introduction

This paper will examine the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Metis people during the early history of the Metis people and through the Rebellions in 1870 and 1885. Part I will deal with the early years of contact between the Metis and the missionaries. Part II will deal with the 1870 Rebellion in the Red River colony and its aftermath. The final section will look at the relationship between the clergy and the Metis people during and immediately after the Rebellion of 1885.

II Early Contact

A. H. Tremauden reports that the French Metis in the Northwest had a deep respect for Christianity even before the first missionaries arrived in Red River in 1818.¹ This respect had been fostered by their European fathers who had brought their own religious beliefs with them when they had come to the Northwest. These beliefs were not centered in a physical Church or clergy but were in the minds and hearts of the voyageurs.

When Father Provencher arrived in the Red River settlement in 1818, he wrote to a friend;

Our Bois brules give us great hope,
they are easily taught, they are generally
intelligent and they will read in a short
time.²

This receptivity for the Roman Catholic faith however was accompanied by what the missionaries considered a lamentable lack of understanding of the concepts and ideals of Christianity. The religious tenets of the Metis were based more on Indian beliefs than on Christian beliefs.³ The missionaries perceived their task in the same way it had been interpreted in other parts of the continent--to Christianize and civilize the native people.

The priests were in a significant way, the vanguard of of the non-native civilization which was advancing westward.

Whereas, the traders had accepted and in many cases adopted the values and life-style of the native people for their survival in Rupertsland, the new farming settlers found the values and life-style of the native people disruptive to their way of life. J. N. Provencher, Bishop of Juliopolis, reported that in 1817, Lord Selkirk had seen the need for the Metis to have instruction in moral principles and had responded by petitioning for missionaries for the colony.⁴ "The Hudson's Bay Company believed that the missionaries working amongst the halfbreeds and Indians would raise the moral standard of the people and ensure a greater degree of social stability."⁵

This period was a very turbulent one with the savage rivalry between the Northwesters and the "Company of Adventurers" culminating in the bloody massacre at Seven Oaks. The use of alcohol as a trading tool was rampant. The age of native dominance in the fur trade was over and the company officials regarded the Indian way of life a hindrance rather than a help in the business transactions in the Northwest.

The task of the missionaries was not only to "Preach the Word" but to be the harbingers of the new value system and new way of life. It soon became evident that the priests were not only concerned with the spiritual domain but were determined to influence the temporal as well. The Roman Catholic clergy did not separate secular from spiritual education and established parish schools as an extension of their missionary work. Thus, the parish church and parish school formed the central core of the community. In the words of Tremauden, "part of the missionary approach was to group as many infidels as possible around the cross or the parish."⁶ This centralizing tendency "contributed toward settling the Metis on the soil."⁷ This further encouraged the Metis to live in groups, build houses, fence fields and take up a sedentary life-style.

Even when the priests were following the Metis on the buffalo hunt as Mr. Lagasse had in 1820, they were predicting the annihilation of the buffalo and were attempting to encourage that farming could supplement the hunt and alleviate the threat of famine which was always with the hunters. Some Metis were converted to part-time farming while others retained the hunt as their only source of livelihood. The coming of the Protestants in 1820 with their farming communities for sons of Hudson's Bay men brought competition to agricultural development.⁹ Bishop Provencher established a model farm to teach agricultural techniques and to make the mission self-supporting.¹⁰

According to Tremauden, "For the missionary, the Metis had everlasting reverence."¹¹ Such was the reverence of the Metis for their priests that they would not dream of debating their advice ..."¹² The advice of Provencher was sought and respected.¹³ As early as 1822, there is evidence that the clergy used their influence to manipulate the Metis for political purposes.¹⁴ The Pembina Mission, was established south of the Red River settlement and close to the border with the United States. The heirs of Lord Selkirk and the officials of the Hudson's Bay Company were fearful of the influence of the American ideas of free trade and democracy on the Metis people. They demanded that Provencher evacuate the mission and bring the Metis people living at the Mission back to the Selkirk settlement. At first the Bishop resisted but eventually bowed to the political pressure and withdrew the priests from the mission. The mission was abandoned and the Metis returned with the priests to settle on farms at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. This was the first recorded example of direct coercion of the Metis by the Church to achieve a political end. It demonstrates both the faith the Metis had in their priests and the implicit respect for political authority which the Churchmen ultimately exhibited.

The contribution that the Roman Catholic clergy made to the stability of the Red River community was demonstrated by the

fact that the Hudson's Bay Company which was almost to the man a Protestant, provided a stipend and free transportation and rations for the Roman Catholic clergy from 1825.¹⁵ Although the officials remained ambivalent to agriculture and education for native people, the Company maintained supportive of the clergy because of the control that they exerted over the native population. "The missionaries were an investment, a dividend was expected."¹⁶

The effect of the missionaries is seen in the description of the Red River settlement by S. J. Dawson in 1859:

... that the settlement should have advanced but slowly is not to be wondered at, considering how far removed it is from the civilized world, but there has been progress, and that of a most pleasing and satisfactory description and I question if at this moment it would not compare favourable with any rural settlement of equal extent in Canada.

... as they live at present they generally grow enough for their own use and they are possessed of cattle, sheep and horses which demand some measure of attention; but they have also their hunting season.¹⁷

The Metis way of life was slowly changing. Schools were training both Metis boys and girls; the buffalo were moving farther west and the Metis remaining at the settlement were more dependent on farming. The major economic base had shifted from buffalo to land.¹⁸ The economic impetus had shifted from the native people to the Europeans.

III The Red River Rebellion 1870

According to Stanley, the French halfbreeds could never have carried out their successful resistance had they not had the advice and support of their clergy.¹⁹ However, the question still remains whether the clergy were actually supporting the Metis claim to nationhood or were using the Metis cause to influence the development of the Northwest into a French Catholic domain in the model of the province of Quebec. There is much

evidence to support the latter claim. In writing to George Etienne Cartier, Bishop Tache had expressed the doubt that the French race and Catholic religion would survive in the Northwest if the Northwest joined Confederation.²⁰ According to Stanley, the Roman Catholic clergy feared that the French-Catholic Metis would suffer the same fate as the Acadians unless some definite guarantees were secured for their rights from the Canadian government.

It is important to understand that by 1870, the Roman Catholic clergy had established an impressive flock in the Northwest, had a network of missions fanning out from the Red River into the hinterland in all directions, and had become involved in education and health services through the efforts of the Oblates and the Grey Nuns. It has been maintained by Chalmers that by 1870, the Roman Catholics had a viable education system in Red River which was based on the Quebec model with local modifications.²¹ The Roman Catholic clergy had an immense stake in the future of the Red River and risked losing all if an Anglo-Protestant government determined the course of action. Thus, it was to their advantage to throw their lot with the halfbreeds rather than the Canadians and to work towards constitutional guarantees for French language rights and for the Catholic religion in any annexation of the territory by Canada.

The priests were also conscious of the need for them to keep the trust of their Metis flock. Father Lestanc feared that once the Metis began to believe "that the Church also was in sympathy with the Government of Canada, it might lead to weakening the influence of the clergy in a religious point of view."²² Thus, they had to steer a course which allowed them to negotiate with the Ottawa politicians but did not alienate the Metis people. Thus, when Abbe J. N. Ritchot was reluctant to go as a delegate to Ottawa, Bishop Tache encouraged him to go to placate the Metis and to assure that the Roman Catholic position was maintained in the negotiations. The influence of

Tache and Ritchot on the negotiations may have been considerable. Stanley questions whether the seventh point of the List of Rights which demanded separate schools was included at the instigation of Riel and formally passed by the Provisional Government or inserted by the clergy.²³ If the clergy did insert the clause, it is evident that they were using the Metis for their own ends.

The Canadian government attempted to prey on the faith the Metis had in the clergy by choosing to send the very Reverend Grand Vicar Thibault to Red River to explain to the people the "liberal intentions of the Canadian government." His choice was deliberate for not only had he lived and worked for more than 36 years in the North West but as Sir John Young wrote to Granville, "He has much influence being greatly beloved and holding a high position in the Roman Catholic Church."²⁴

Adams maintains that missionaries are more valuable in their service to the colonizers if they are unaware of their political function. It would appear that Riel and his followers were more conscious of the political function of the clergy than they were themselves. In a letter to Tache, September 30, 1870, Louis Riel and A. Lepine analyzed Tache's role in the Red River Rebellion in the following way:

(1) your highness has run the risk of being fooled with promises. And from being deceived yourself, you have put, everyone who believed you in the same position.

(2) And after this trick has obviously played with people's faith, your highness still believes that he is working in the interest of the country, by encouraging the Metis to have confidence in a government which is certainly hostile, no matter what you say.²⁵

In another letter, Riel and Lepine were even more forthright,

From the beginning the Canadian government has not doubted you and it is evident that they have used you to trick us.²⁶

In a further examination of the role of Bishop Tache, in May, 1907, Joseph Riel, brother of Louis Riel, wrote,

... Mgr. Tache was a great missionary and if he wouldn't have meddled with politics, his figure would have shone.

But in politics, he was unhappy because he found himself facing politicians without word or honour. But why did he let himself be fooled so many times?

If he had listened to his advice and remained in Rome, the Provisory Government being placed on the strictest legality and having nothing to divide them; the union would have rendered them strong and the delegates would not have come back from Ottawa with false promises and Sir John's government would have been forced to give them what they wanted.²⁷

Most damning of all was the following comment:

... if the question had been settled in 1870 and would have been without well-meant intervention--but unfortunately Mgr. Tache had provoked the false promises from Ottawa--there is a great possibility that the 1885 uprising would have never existed.²⁸

Despite the fact that Fr. Lestanc aided in drawing up the list of rights, that Fr. Ritchot was one of the delegates sent by the Provisional Government to Ottawa to negotiate and despite the fact that Bishop Tache petitioned for amnesty for the resisters, the evidence shows that the Roman Catholic clergy ultimately denied their involvement and used their influence to the aid of the Canadian government. According to Tremauden, before a Federal Commission in 1874, Fr. Ritchot denied being at the centre of the Metis movement. Tache's denial of the Metis was even more blatant. Not only did the bishop ask Louis Riel and A. Lepine to exile themselves but said, "As bishop, I order you to go." Joseph Riel's diary and Louis Riel's correspondence show that it was only the Bishop's command which drove Riel into exile. Thus, Bishop Tache used the full weight of his office against the Metis leader and served to impose eastern Canadian

control in the Red River as Macdonald could never have without his assistance. This betrayal was painted very poignantly in a letter to Fr. Morice, May 20, 1907, by Joseph Riel:

Who was to blame when we suffered? You say the Canadian government? Yes, but who was their spokesman? ~~It~~ wasn't it, Mgr. Tache, since he was later rewarded for his work during this time by the government ... when he commanded, he always leaned on his authority as a bishop We suffered from his mistakes but had to obey anyway.²⁹

IV The 1885 Rebellion

After the Red River Rebellion, Riel and Lepine wrote to Tache from exile:

Discouraged the Metis are leaving gradually because you keep telling them that things are going well and they can see the contrary.³⁰

From the Red River, the Metis people dispersed throughout the Northwest. The missionaries who resided with the Metis in new communities such as Duck Lake, St. Albert, St. Laurent, etc., aided the Metis in petitioning the government for their rights. According to Tremauden, petitions were forwarded by the following: Bishop of St. Albert, Bishop Monseigneur Grandin, April 5, 1875; Fr. Andre, January 16, 1883; Fr. Vegreville, 1884; and by Monseigneur Tache in his capacity as Metropolitan Bishop.³¹ He further asserts that it is sheer pretense to suppose any petition "winged its way to Ottawa without approval of the local Missionary."³² As in the early years in Red River initially the priests identified themselves with the demands of the Metis. Fr. Andre's words in 1881 are typical,

... the entreaties of the halfbreed population about Duck Lake and St. Laurent join their earnest prayers to call your special attention to the unsatisfactory state of the lands question in the country.³³

He followed this with another petition in 1883 which pointed out that none of the Metis farms in the Duck Lake or St. Laurent district fit the township system. Finally, Fr. Andre was party to the petition which was made to Riel to return to Canada. This petition said in part,

The opinion here is so pronounced in your favour and you are so ardently desired, that it will be a great disappointment to the people of Prince Albert if you do not come. So you must absolutely come; you are the most popular man in the country and with the exception of 4 or 5 persons everyone awaits you with impatience. I have only to say to you, come quickly.³⁴

As in Red River, initially the clergy gave the Metis every indication that they were supporting the Metis claims. However, unlike the situation at Red River, the opposition of the clergy was overt and vocal as Riel tried to organize the Metis against the government. In the words of Stanley, the most serious opposition with which Riel had to contend was the Roman Catholic clergy in the Northwest.³⁵ Riel attempted unsuccessfully to secure the support of the clergy in his movement. In September 1884, the Metis openly charged the clergy with opposition to their movement and expressed a failing confidence in their leadership. Bishop Grandin replied that the Church had always been the foremost advocates of the Metis cause but refused to countenance the secrecy of Riel's actions.³⁶

As in Red River, the government used the privileged positions of the priests to obtain information and plant seeds among the Metis. Fr. ~~Alexis~~^{ANDRE} was in constant correspondence with Lieutenant-Governor Dewdney.³⁷ He encouraged the government officials to use him as an intermediary if they decided to bribe Riel to leave the country. In the fierce opposition of the clergy to Riel the Roman Catholic clergy pitted themselves against Riel and abandoned what they had formerly seen as the legitimate grievances of the Metis people.

By March 1885, Riel had definitely broken with the Roman Catholic clergy. The priests met and decided that Riel was non compos mentis and should not be admitted to the sacraments. On March 15, Fr. Vital Fourmond, priest at Batoche preached on the folly of revolt at this time and rebuked the leadership of Riel who was not present. He went on to announce that "all who took up arms against the established authority would be refused the sacraments."³⁸ Here again the clergy used their ultimate power over the Metis peoples' lives to coerce them into rejecting Riel and their fight for their rights.

Riel confronted Fourmond claiming that, "You have turned the pulpit of truth into one of politics, falsehood and discord in daring to refuse the sacraments to those who would take up arms in defense of their most sacred rights!"³⁹ Riel continued to say that if the priests would not sustain the people, the people would go forward without their priests; they would be their own priests.

The clergy had put the Metis in the regrettable position of having to choose between their immortal souls and their belief in the justice of their claims. Being good Catholics, the Metis were tormented by the choice that the clergy forced on them. However, despite the clergy's attempts to win over the Metis, they remained loyal to Riel. Joseph Riel explained the Metis position:

Since we had begged our priests not to abandon us and they refused us their religious guidance, we confessed to ourselves and God forgive us if we did not have the selfishness of hiding our sins.⁴⁰

Tremauden stresses the confusion which the Metis people experienced when they were deserted by their priests. They could not understand how the missionaries who had encouraged and approved of the Metis cause and had convinced the Metis that their claims were justified could turn against them. It appeared that the decision to take up arms forced the missionaries

to attempt to turn the tide and prevent civil war. The missionaries hoped that the denial of the sacraments would prevent bloodshed. However, it is evident that this was the final stroke in the long fight which the clergy had waged against Riel. Therefore, it does not hold that the taking up of arms explains the opposition of the clergy to the Metis uprising. The clergy's denial of the sacraments proved to be the final disillusionment for the Metis. While the Metis retained their faith after the Red River Rebellion, after the Metis' defeat in the Northwest Rebellion, the spiritual and temporal power of the Church crumbled. Howard states that the destitute and disillusioned Metis neglected religious duties and withdrew their children from the parochial schools. Young people mocked the priests and left the Church. The result was that the missions were closed and Diocesan centre was moved to Prince Albert.⁴¹

The clergy castigated Riel and heaped the blame for the Metis peoples' misfortune, unhappiness and disillusionment on his head alone. Typical was a letter written by Fr. Fourmond, July 16, 1885:

They have our antichrist in the person of Riel against whom we have had to struggle to destroy his deadly influence on our poor people As a horrible result of the diabolical plans the blood of whites and that of our dear and zealous brothers flowed when the Indians under his orders, murdered them.⁴²

Fr. Andre in a letter of June 24, 1885, said:

Riel's name is in great discredit amongst them (the Metis). Riel is like a cloud in the clear sky, his presence is upsetting everything in this happy country.⁴³

On June 12, 1885, a Collective letter addressed to the Province of Quebec:

We priests of the districts most affected by the Rebellion to wit: Saint Laurent, St. Antoine, Grandin, Duck Lake and Batoche (since it is there in the centre

of our people that Louis David Riel has established his liberal headquarters) desire to attract the attention of our nationals in Canada and elsewhere to the authentic Metis.

Louis David Riel does not merit any sympathy of the Roman Catholic Church nor of its members, having usurped our offices of Priests and denied our people of the advantages and consolations we should have offered them. He did this in his personal interest.

Therefore, we believe that the Church and the Canadian people could sympathize with us and our people who are more to be pitied than hated for allowing themselves to be led astray.

Numbers of our people live in the greatest misery. Riel and his council have seized everything they possessed. General Middleton has saved nothing in his efforts to alleviate the misfortunes and sufferings of our populations; consequently, he deserves our sincere thanks. But if we do not receive other help our people will die of hunger. We beg French Canadians to accord us their sympathy and entreat the Canadian government to temper justice with mercy when dealing with those who erred.⁴⁴

Fathers Andre, Touze, Moulin,
Fourmond, Vegreville, and
Lecoq.

The clergy consciously fostered the idea that Riel was a traitor who had attempted to set himself up as religious leader. Tremauden sought to answer the clergy's charges in his interviews with Metis people. The charges that Riel had:

(1) denounced the faith; (2) founded a new cult; (3) installed himself as Confessor; and (4) compelled the Metis to abandon their faith were totally without substance. However, the clergy had been so fierce in their purporting of these charges that the Metis had been forced to keep silent the evidence that such allegations were untrue.⁴⁵ Tremauden found that the Metis people who knew the truth were wrenched by the position of maintaining silence. Edward Boyer spoke of the mental anguish:

We are torn between the respect we owe our Priests and the teaching body, and the trust we must have in our parents. On the one hand, the words of the Priest and the Instructor teach us a story that makes us blush in shame and bow our children's head. On the other hand our parents tell us that things did not happen thus. They say: "He never renounced our faith; we never abused the priests. We have always been Catholic and Riel always advised us so."⁴⁶

As can be seen Tremauden's ~~conclusion~~^{CONCLUDED} that the Roman Catholic clergy "resorted to all means of undermining the insurrectionist movement."⁴⁷ They reported to the Canadian government officials continually; they acted as informants for General Middleton; they used their positions as respected advisors to attempt to pit the Metis against each other; they used their control over the Metis' spiritual life to influence the Metis' political behaviour; they acted as government commissioners after the rebellion; they received submissions from the rebels; and they disarmed the Metis.⁴⁸ Finally, the clergy castigated Riel and helped foster the myth that Riel was a traitor and had used the Metis people for his own sick delusion. In their position as teachers, the Roman Catholic clergy maintained the myth which inferiorized the Metis for almost a century.

V Conclusion

In the final analysis the clergy were control agents acting on behalf of the surging European civilization. Their efforts to Christianize, civilize and educate must be viewed as a contribution to the development of the Northwest for the agents of the European culture and not as they have been so often painted as defenders of the native cultures. In the words of Howard Adams,

The part played by the priests in the colonization of the native people was as destructive as that played by the soldier and the fur trader. Missionaries were extremely effective in undermining the strength and

spirit of the native society. Conversion to Christianity was a powerful force in the⁴⁹ destruction of native culture and religion.

He maintains that the most valuable missionaries were those who were totally committed to their mission and were unaware of their temporal functions. Since they believed that God had commanded the clergy to save the souls of the heathen savages, the conversion which resulted in the destruction of native culture was regarded as God's will.⁵⁰ Thus, they carried with them the concept of European supremacy and their mission of raising the native people from their heathenism resulted in the inferiorizing of native culture, values, and life-style.

In examining the relationship between the Roman Catholic clergy and the Metis people from the first contact to the period immediately following the 1885 Rebellion, it must be concluded that in the final analysis the clergy were agents of social control for the Canadian government. When the pursuance of the Metis cause came in conflict with the goals of the established, the clergy deserted their Metis flock and threw their lot in with the government.

FOOTNOTES

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3. Ibid., p. 55.
4. J. N. Provencher, "Memoir of Account," The Beaver, Spring, 1973, p. 17.
5. Sealey and Lussier, p. 55.
6. Tremauden, p. 59.
7. Tremauden, p. 60.
8. Ibid., p. 25.
9. Sealey and Lussier, p. 56.
10. Tremauden, p. 63.
11. Tremauden, p. 36.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., p. 63.
14. Ibid., p. 62.
15. Provencher, p. 20.
16. Frits Pannekoek, "The Reverend James Evans and the Social Antagonisms of the Fur Trade Society, 1840-46" in Religion and Society in the Prairie West, ed. by Richard Allen, Regina: University of Regina, 1974, p. 4.
17. "The General Report on the Progress of the Red River Expedition - 1859", Smithsonian Institute Report, pp. 23-4.
18. Sealey and Lussier, p. 71.
19. George F. G. Stanley, The Birth of Western Canada, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961, pp. 60-1.
20. Ibid., p. 61.
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22. Stanley, p. 69.
23. Ibid., p. 114.
24. Quoted in Stanley, p. 88.
25. Tache's Papers, Vol. 55, AMNSIS microfilm.
26. Ibid.

27. Riel's Papers, Vol. 56, AMNSIS microfilm.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Tache's Papers
31. Tremauden, p. 260.
32. Ibid.
33. Stanley, p. 253.
34. Ibid., p. 299.
35. Ibid., pp. 309-10.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., p. 316.
38. Joseph Howard, Strange Empire, Toronto: James Lewis and Samuel, 1974, pp. 378-9.
39. Ibid.
40. Riel Papers, Vol. 56, AMNSIS microfilm.
41. Howard p. 484.
42. Tremauden, p. 402.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., p. 399.
45. Ibid., pp 389-399
46. Ibid., p. 393.
47. Ibid., p. 399.
48. Howard, p. 484.
49. Howard Adams, Prison of Grass, Toronto: New Press, 1975, p. 28.
50. Ibid., p. 29.