

Belgian Catholic Relations with “Others” in Western Canada, 1880-1940

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Belgians arrived in western Canada when the Catholic hierarchy was largely francophone, identified with selective immigration and an ideology of agriculturalism. Francophone Catholics were the dominant European element in the west in the fur trade and initial settlement periods. Following the Red River resistance movement and the creation of the province of Manitoba in 1870, the Catholic Church sought to retain its prominent role through the repatriation of Franco-Americans and the recruitment of francophone European Catholic agricultural settlers. This immigration effort extended to Belgium, perceived as an orthodox Catholic realm, populated by two ethnic groups – Walloons and Flemings – and the home of the Séminaire Anglo-Belge of Bruges and the American College of the University of Louvain that trained clergy specifically for North America.

The resulting emigration did not always correspond to the clerical vision in the Canadian west. The majority of early French-speaking Walloon immigrants, for example, were more often involved in coal mining than farming and their religious views and practices usually were controversial. On the other hand, the Flemish-speakers were interested in taking up homesteads, or establishing themselves as dairy farmers near St. Boniface/Winnipeg. These Flemings were conservative Catholics, a number who also spoke French, but they were not the first choice of the colonizing clergy who wanted francophones. The immigration agents who worked with the clergy were interested in maintaining a francophone

Catholic balance with the incoming anglophone settlers from Ontario and immigrants such as the Icelanders, Mennonites and Doukhobors. The latter ethnic groups were able to establish bloc settlements that greatly aided ethno-religious identity maintenance. Belgian immigrants, however, had no ethnic reserves or bloc settlements. They also lacked what sociologist Raymond Breton has called "institutional completeness," that is, the organizations that would provide most of the services – economic, educational, social, recreational, and religious – required by members of the group.¹

St. Boniface, a francophone centre, was their port of entry and the area of greatest concentration of population. Their settlement pattern can be identified in five sectors: firstly, an urban core in St. Boniface/Winnipeg of business and labour with suburban dairymen and market gardeners; secondly, a southern Manitoba concentration of Flemish farmers around St. Alphonse, Somerset, Swan Lakes, Mariapolis, Holland; thirdly, a chain of Walloon parishes extending westwards from Bruxelles, MB to Grande Clairière, Deleau, Bellegarde (Antler), Cantal (Alida), Wauchope, Forget, laid out by the abbé Jean Gaire; fourthly, the Belgians scattered throughout francophone parishes such as Prud'homme, Ferland, Gravelbourg, Morinville, Falher; fifthly, ephemeral Belgian populations involved in coal mining at Nanaimo, the Crowsnest, Drumheller, or sugar beet growing and refining around Fort Garry, MB and Raymond, AB.

Belgian Catholic relations with "others" can therefore be further categorized under three headings: firstly, relations with the Native peoples of western and northern Canada; secondly, relations with other Catholics such as the Irish, Hungarians and "Ruthenians"; thirdly, relations with non-Catholics, notably Protestants, Mormons and Eastern Orthodox. Missionaries, among them Belgians, hard on the heels of fur traders and voyageurs, preceded settlers. Settlers arrived when the image of Catholicism in the region was that of a "French church" that was coming under scrutiny from Rome and criticism from Catholics who did not identify with a French-Canadian "nationalist" ideology. Walloons, settled among Quebec and European francophones identified with the linguistic, educational and cultural aspirations of their communities. But Flemings in rural communities, surrounded by anglophone settlers and newcomers in the process of anglicisation, maintained their Catholicism without at the same time adopting the ideology of the hierarchy and francophone clergy. In other words, the social distance from the dominant Anglo-Canadian culture, in a multicultural context, was less pronounced for Flemings than

for Walloons. In coal mining areas, the immigrant workers came from syndicalist and anti-clerical populations in Italy, Slovakia and Wallonia in particular. Even in the sugar beet culture, field and refinery workers tended to identify the Church with the capitalist owners and repressive authorities.

Relations with First Nations

Belgian missionary work in the Americas began in 1493 when two Franciscans from Ath accompanied Columbus on his second voyage to the New World. Belgian Récollets and Jesuits were active evangelizers and explorers in New France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, their activities taking them into the upper Mississippi and Saskatchewan valleys. In 1845 Pierre Jean De Smet S.J. and his assistant Nicolas Point evangelized in the Kootenays, Banff and Jasper. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, Bishops Charles-Jean Seghers from Ghent and Jean-Baptiste Brondel from Bruges, both associated with the American College at Louvain, initiated extensive evangelization of Native communities on Vancouver Island and along the coast northwards to Alaska. They recruited numerous missionaries, including the noted Father Brabant. Shortly after residential schools were introduced in the west in 1884, Father G. Donckele taught at Cowichan, and then served as principal of the Kuper Island Residential School in British Columbia from 1890 to 1907. He insisted that in addition to academic and religious subjects, children be instructed in various trades by competent lay persons under the supervision of Father Van Nevil. These pioneer missionaries were succeeded by Fathers of the Company of Mary [SMM] from 1907 to the outbreak of World War I.² At the Kyuquot Mission, Father H. Meuleman founded the school serving 450 people, was succeeded as director by Father E. Sobry in 1897, who erected a new school, church and rectory described as “unique in their kind” and without equals in western Canada. The Belgians were more interested in providing literacy skills and practical knowledge than in assimilating the Native children to the dominant Anglo culture. They were very proud of the fact their approach was apparently superior to that of their Protestant rivals because they enjoyed better funding, good facilities, itinerant priests and a well-focussed school curriculum.³

The Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI), who arrived in 1845, had the largest contingent of Belgian missionaries in western Canada. At least thirty laboured in the region before 1940, ranging from teaching at St.

Louis College in Victoria, the St. Patrick Orphanage in Prince Albert, the Blue Quills School in St. Paul, the Hobbema Industrial School, to parish charges. They learned the Native languages and composed dictionaries and grammars. Mathias Kalmès, for example, in addition to teaching at four different residential schools left seven manuscripts in Native languages. Most arrived with ultramontane views garnered in Europe and Quebec. However, they quickly became more liberal as they began to appreciate many qualities in the life-style and belief system of the First Nations. They were under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of St. Boniface but they maintained a certain degree of independence even within the Oblate order. In 1865, Florent Vandenberghe, on a canonical visit to Red River Colony, proceeded westwards to inspect the school for French and Cree children at Fort Edmonton and the mission at St. Albert. The local bishop, Mgr Grandin, saw the possibility of recruiting some clergy in Belgium, and was able to return with fifteen missionaries. He confided that he preferred candidates from Flanders because "they can speak Flemish and that is why they easily learn English and German."⁴ Among the recruits were Brothers Henri Scheers and Leonard Van Tighem. Henri Scheer went to Lac la Biche in 1874 and continued to labour in the North-West Territories until 1904. Leonard Van Tighem, a cabinet-maker, was ordained a priest in 1882, and the following year travelled three months by ox-cart from St. Boniface to St. Albert, then proceeded to take charge of an unfinished residential school at the junction of the Bow and High rivers. He taught a dozen children in the mornings and in the afternoons made doors and windows for the mission house and church. He found his small log cabin "less comfortable than an animal shelter." Raised in a pious conservative Flemish family, he was unhappy initially in primitive circumstances "among people who are near heathen, work on Sundays . . . drink excessively . . . play pool . . . blasphemies illustrate and embellish their conversation . . . they possess not even a small garden or tree."⁵ He knew little English so he found it difficult to deal with anglophone officials but was at home ministering to the Quebec Voltigeurs battalion stationed at Fort MacLeod to keep watch over the Piegan and Blood reserves during the North-West Rebellion. He felt strongly that the ranchers needlessly hoarded large tracts of land, while at the same time the Blackfoot tribes ought to have their traditional hunting and horse raiding channelled into sedentary farming. In 1888, his superiors appointed him pastor at Lethbridge, a multi-ethnic parish made up largely of immigrant coal miners. There arose a problem of prostitution centred on the Blackfoot

reserve south of the town, which “made it easy for female members of the tribe to slip into town in the evening, or for whites to come out” to the reserve. The Protestant clergy thundered against the immorality of Van Tighem’s congregation, so he supported a North-West Mounted Police plan to appoint band leader Calf Shirt a police scout to deal with the situation. The result of the investigation, to Van Tighem’s delight, was that it was Protestant males who were identified as the chief offenders.⁶ Besides his manual skills and scholarship, Van Tighem was an avid horticulturalist. He tended a productive orchard and vegetable garden using irrigation, proving to the ranchers that the region could grow more than coarse grasses. With the help of Captain R.B. Deane of the North-West Mounted Police he founded the first school of agriculture south of the Red Deer river.⁷

His brother, Victor Van Tighem, as a lay member of the Oblates, came to the Piegan reserve near Fort MacLeod in 1887, planted a large vegetable garden to feed the school’s children, learned English in order to teach the few who attended classes more or less regularly. These children followed the example of their parents and were, he concluded, “only good for eating, drinking and smoking pipes.” The disappearance of the bison had encouraged dependency on government food aid and prompted Van Tighem to observe that “they like us due to their self-interest.” Nevertheless, when Hayter Reed of Indian Affairs introduced a supposedly “new improved system of farming” for the reserves to promote self-sufficiency, Van Tighem noted that only small hand tools such as hoes, rakes, sickles, scythes were issued and herds were limited to a few cows for household purposes. He concluded that government officials had little understanding of how to promote industry, had little sympathy for the poverty of his charges, and most certainly were more interested in protecting farmers and ranchers from any possible competition from the Natives were they to become proficient farmers.⁸

Roger Vandersteene began his illustrious and controversial career studying Cree at Grouard in 1946 with the conviction that “a Fleming understands better than anybody else that the language of a people is its main artery.” The Cree called him Ka Nihta Nehiyawet, which translates as “the one who really speaks Cree.” His understanding of and admiration for Cree symbolism and spirituality led him to create a syncretic Cree liturgy, an innovation that won the respect of his parishioners but disturbed his conservative superiors. Although Cree tunes and drumming were accepted, his other innovations were rejected. He was installed a Cree

elder and medicine man and before he died in 1976 he gave his medicine pipe to an old friend, Harold Cardinal, who had ceased attending mass. It was common knowledge that Vandersteene was an ardent Flemish nationalist who had participated in an alleged pro-Nazi movement for the creation of a separate Flemish state. It is also significant that the Belgian missionaries in the Prairie missions were mostly Flemings, while those in the northern missions were almost all Walloons. Vandersteene as a Fleming among the northern Cree was in a francophone region with francophone superiors who disapproved of his independent approach to mission work.⁹

Relations with "Other" Catholics

Belgian missionaries and parish priests served a wide range of ethno-cultural communities. The French Oblate, Albert Pascal, future bishop of Prince Albert, advised Prime Minister Laurier in 1896 that the Dominion government should recruit immigrants of diverse ethnic backgrounds and should provide advisors, teachers and doctors with appropriate language skills. Pascal departed from French Canadian objectives, had personally learned several Native languages, and taught in English. This was a multicultural approach, long before its time, which a number of Belgians shared.¹⁰

An example of this outreach to other ethnic groups was the ministry of the abbé Jules Pirot, a Walloon nationalist, who served the Hungarians at Kaposvar (1904-15) and Esterhazy (1919-54) in their mother tongue while writing poetry in his Walloon dialect. He believed that all groups valued their mother tongue and this should receive some official recognition. "How often in a country where English predominates," he said, "I saw Hungarians, Slavs, Germans, French run to me beaming because I spoke their language."¹¹ Early assessments by religious superiors in Belgium that Pirot possessed no ability for evangelization could not have been more erroneous. From Kaposvar he established ten missions nearby and six further west where settlement was just beginning. He was also an unofficial colonizing agent, bringing out eighteen Walloon families, including his own family and the Vanderhaeghes, whose grandson GuyVanderhaeghe would have a distinguished literary career. During his pre-war ministry at Kaposvar, he was firmly opposed to Hungarian bilingual schools and this controversy ended after Pirot volunteered to serve as a chaplain with the Canadian ambulance corps in France during

World War I. He returned to Esterhazy as parish priest in 1919, where he served for thirty-five years while extending his labours to the Hungarians at Lipton, Cupar and Markinch. He was fondly regarded not only as a devoted pastor, but also as a model horticulturalist, a great hunter, a kindly and simple man of learning who could be most stubborn. He never lost his love for the natural beauty of the Prairies, writing to his friends in Belgium about the marvels of prairie flowers, colourful songbirds, delicious wild fruits, wide horizons, flaming sunsets and dazzling northern lights.¹²

Somewhat different was the experience of the Belgian Redemptorists who were asked by Archbishop Langevin in 1893 to take charge at Brandon of four missions of the “Ruthenians” [Ukrainians] and Poles at Huns Valley, Shoal Lake, Glenella and Rosburn. William Godts and Edouard Verlooy undertook the task and were soon joined by Achille Delaere of West Flanders, who was sent to Galicia in 1898 to learn Polish and Slovak. The challenge was that these Ukrainian Catholics had their own liturgy in Old Slavonic, rites common to the Eastern churches, a married secular clergy, yet were in full communion with Rome since 1596. Four problems awaited the Belgians: first, resistance to any effort to Latinize them; second, the attraction of the Russian Orthodox Church whose rites the “Ruthenians” from Galicia shared; third, the proselytizing of Presbyterian-trained clergy who had established a puppet Independent Greek Church; and last, a strong hostility between Poles of the Latin rite and Ukrainians of the Greek rite. Moreover, Delaere found soon after arriving in the west that he should have learned Ukrainian instead of Slovak. The Belgians could not count on help from Eastern Europe because the Propaganda Fide decreed in 1894 that only celibate priests were permitted to minister in North America. When two more Belgian Redemptorists arrived in Brandon in 1902, they were assigned to the English work

Delaere found a formidable adversary in a schismatic/heretical movement: “the people are very spoiled by this kind of Doukhobors that [Bishop] Seraphim has pretended to ordain. The battle will be a long one.” This renegade Orthodox priest, who styled himself a metropolitan bishop, “has ordained about one hundred men who are simple workmen, who can barely read and write, and who travel among the people to deceive them.” His contempt for these itinerant lay preachers was captured in the phrase, “Ordination costs fifty dollars.”¹³ The Presbyterians took advantage of the situation, gave some elementary training to the least ignorant at Manitoba College and then organized the Independent Greek Church in 1904, when

Seraphim left Canada. At this time, Delaere was joined by four Belgian Redemptorists and they founded a monastery at Yorkton, but he recognized that if they were to enjoy any success they needed to adopt the Ruthenian rite and preach in Ukrainian.

Two years later, Delaere received an indult from Rome permitting him to adopt the Ruthenian rite for a five-year period, follow the Julian calendar, say mass in Slavonic, administer communion in both kinds, administer confirmation immediately after baptism, and wear the traditional Eastern Church vestments. But on no condition was he to marry, nor were his colleagues included in this indult. The Ukrainian community was disappointed that the priests could not marry and was indignant that the episcopal corporation held the title to all church property, the practice everywhere in Canada outside Quebec. Delaere sensed continuing hostility and confided to his Provincial in 1908: "What disillusionments and mortifications! What interior and exterior struggles one has to carry out here. It is so depressing to have to work for a backward, headstrong, and quarrelsome people, a people without any inclination and without respect for the priest."¹⁴ His compatriot, Hendrik Boels, was also permitted to pass over to the Greek rite, but still the Ukrainians perceived the situation as one in which they were served by foreigners in a Latin Church context. Delaere was sensitive to the need for a Ukrainian Catholic diocese, quite distinct from French-dominated hierarchy reminiscent of Polish domination in the Galician homeland. He was encouraged somewhat by the fact that the American episcopacy, dominated by the Irish who insisted on creating an anglophone American institution, had to accept Rome's intervention and appointment of a Greek Catholic bishop. This prelate, Bishop Ortynsky, predicted that unless the Canadians organized a Ukrainian diocese "the great masses will be swallowed up by schism [Orthodoxy] or by Protestantism."¹⁵ The council of Catholic bishops meeting in June 1909 identified two problems: the danger of introducing a married clergy; and the territorial rather than ethno-cultural diocesan organization. At the local practical level, Delaere, as superior in the Yorkton district, was faced with trying to have a parish erected to serve both Poles and Ukrainians in the Rama and Dobrovoda districts. He thought of having two priests, a Latin rite and a Greek rite priest, but the Poles objected vociferously. When Nykyta Budka was appointed bishop of the Ukrainian Catholics in July 1912, Delaere's problems were not resolved entirely. Budka was a Ukrainian nationalist who did not hide his feelings that foreigners, like Belgians, did not

understand Ukrainians. Delaere thought that it would be wise to organize a distinct Eastern rite branch of the Redemptorist order. In 1913, he obtained permission from Rome to establish a Ukrainian Catholic monastery in Yorkton to house five Belgian Redemptorists who had passed over to the Eastern rite. By 1914, there were three married priests serving the Ukrainian Catholics, all married before converting to Catholicism.

When a Belgian priest in a sermon at Hafford in 1918 declared that those who sent their children to a public school or a Ukrainian *bursa* were in danger of hellfire, the Ukrainian intelligentsia meeting in Saskatoon organized the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Brotherhood. Its objective was to “remove from our church celibacy . . . [and] to send the French-Belgian missionaries to preach the Roman faith among their own people or among the heathen.”¹⁶ Eventually North American seminarians circumvented the celibacy rule by going to the Soviet Union for ordination. More troubling was the reorganization of the Independent Church by Wasyl Swystun, widely believed to be an atheist, under the title Independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church. A training school for teachers and clergy, with some Anglican support, was organized by Swystun in Saskatoon. The Redemptorists redoubled their efforts as more monks arrived from Belgium, Noel Descamps was named superior at the Yorkton monastery, a second house was founded at Komarno to serve the Interlake district of Manitoba by Achiel Delaere, and a third monastery was established at Ituna under Louis Van den Bossche.

Storm clouds remained on the horizon. In April 1921, Joseph Bala, a Ukrainian Redemptorist, arrived at Yorkton and the parishoners of Ituna and Goodeve in particular wanted the Belgian missionaries to relinquish their charges. Bishop Budka calmed the storm by appointing Bala pastor at Ituna. The superiors in Belgium thought that instead of continuing in parish work the Belgians ought to turn to preaching missions. The Ukrainians continued to clamour for their own ethnic clergy until in August 1928 the Yorkton Belgian Vice Province was suppressed, on orders from Rome, and the English-speaking Canadian Redemptorists took over. The Belgian Redemptorists, including Delaere, returned to Belgium. Bishop Budka tendered his resignation. Delaere felt lost in his native land and proceeded to Galicia. In 1931 it was decided to attach the monasteries at Yorkton and Ituna to the Galician Vice Province and so Delaere returned to Saskatchewan to end his days in obscurity and prayer.

The Flemish parishoners in St. Boniface petitioned for and obtained

their own ethnic parish within the cathedral parish in October 1912. Ten years later, it took on a deeper Flemish character when Capuchin monks from Blenheim, Ontario, established a monastery next to Sacred Heart Belgian Church, took charge of the parish, and began language classes and cultural activities. This isolated them from the francophones. When the parish was closed in 1955 because of insufficient support, most Flemings joined anglophone parishes. The Capuchins, meanwhile, had opened a monastery at Toutes Aides to serve northern Metis communities and served a parish in a multicultural working-class parish in Transcona, a railway hub.

Relations with non-Catholics

Belgians did not emigrate from a country noted for its religious diversity. This was reflected in the overwhelming adherence to Roman Catholicism of those who came to western Canada. A few Belgian Protestants went to the United States, a few Belgian Jews settled in Montreal, and among the Walloon miners there were a few agnostics and atheists. In the European Catholic hierarchy, the Belgians usually took the tolerant liberal position on dogmatic and diplomatic issues. In general, Belgians in Canada, both the clergy and laity, adopted a more liberal position on issues than either their French Canadian or Irish coreligionists. However, they were discriminated against, as were other Catholics, by the colonization boards and societies, the school systems, the Conservative party, the Protestant clergy and organizations (including temperance societies), and the Ku Klux Klan. The latter, in supporting J.T.M. Anderson's electoral campaign in 1930, called for the deportation of all Catholics born outside Canada. The young John G. Diefenbaker was the voice of moderation in Conservative ranks at this time. The Belgian Capuchin monastery in Manitoba had a fiery cross erected on its grounds in 1931.¹⁷

Most Protestant efforts directed at Belgians were ineffective. The Belgian evangelist, E. Petrequin, who followed miners from Pennsylvania to the Crownstest, met with little success.¹⁸ Pastor J.E. Duclos of the Presbyterians held successful evangelistic campaigns in Edmonton, Bonnyville, Cold Lake and St. Paul-des-Métis, which attracted a few Belgian families.¹⁹ The lodges attracted Belgians, in spite of church warnings, because they offered insurance. The left-wing socialist organizations and political parties also enjoyed some success because they

agitated for better working conditions, including safer work sites.

Most opposition was less overt. In southern Alberta, coal miners, beet growers and workers felt pressure from Mormons whose highly organized social, sports, recreational and cultural activities all attracted youth. As a highly disciplined and generally progressive group, Mormons pursued aggressive evangelization through fraternization. Leonard Van Tighem, as pastor at Lethbridge, was particularly concerned about inter-marriage with non-Catholics. The Apostolic Delegate Diomede Falconio carried out a survey of the region in 1900-01 to gauge the extent of such proselytization. Not surprisingly, in March 1908, a papal encyclical on the dangers and prohibition of such marriages was read from all Catholic pulpits.²⁰

Finally, mention must be made of the Belgian bishops in western Canada who initiated relations with “others” and those more recently who contributed enormously to renewal and outreach. Charles-Jean Seghers and Jean-Baptiste Brondel of the archdiocese of Oregon, later of Victoria, were outstanding architects of a multi-lingual and multicultural colonial church. The so-called “Belgian connection” at the Second Vatican Council, consisting of Archbishop Maurice Baudoux of St. Boniface, his successor Antoine Hacault, Bishop Remi De Roo of Victoria, and Noel Delaquis of Gravelbourg, made a notable contribution. They submitted no fewer than twenty-three written texts and among their innovative ideas were the use of vernacular languages in the mass and breviary, updating of pastoral care, and the promotion of Biblical studies. Cardinal Soenens of Brussels gave them effective support. Baudoux had promoted multicultural media rights, Hacault the bilingual projects, and De Roo the liberalization of social and economic policies. They all worked on ecumenical projects as well. It was an extraordinary example of outreach to the wider western Canadian community.²¹

The skein of historical events we have identified was composed of threads of nationalistic, ethnic, linguistic, denominational, racial and cultural sentiments. Walloon and Flemish nationalists encountered Hungarian, Polish and Ukrainian nationalists in an environment in which French-Canadian nationalism was challenged by powerful Anglo-conformist forces. Cree and Slavonic struggled with Latin imposition. Roman and Greek Catholics were opposed by Orthodox, Presbyterians and Mormons. In this melee, the Belgian clergy were able to retain their own flocks and reach out to the wider community.

Endnotes

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