



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of October 22, 2018,
Month of the Most Holy Rosary

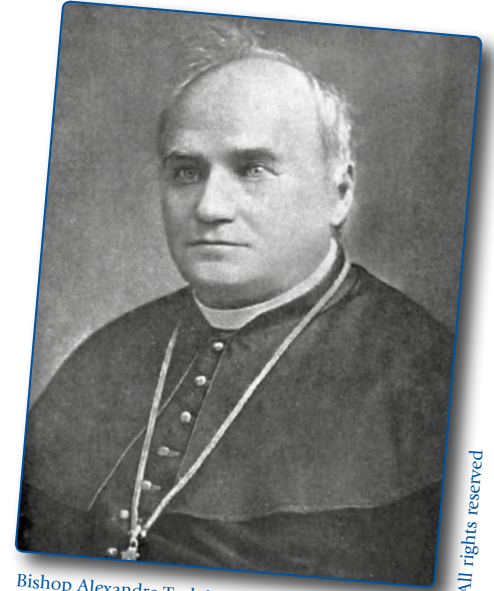
Dear Friends,

ON August 25, 1845, a young missionary who was not yet a priest—or even a deacon—appeared before Bishop Provencher, the bishop of far northern Quebec, in Canada: “A subdeacon! But I need priests!” exclaimed the prelate... “They are sending me children, but I need men!” Bishop Provencher would soon entrust his vast diocese to this “child” to whom he was giving this cold reception. This would be the beginning of the period of evangelization of the Canadian North by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI), known as *L’Épopée blanche*.

Alexandre-Antonin Taché was the third child of Charles Taché and Louise de la Broquerie. Through his father, he was descended from Louis Joliette (1645-1700), the explorer of the Mississippi; through his mother, he was related to Venerable Marguerite d’Youville, the foundress of the Gray Sisters (also known as the Sisters of Charity), who would take care of the orphans of the North. Alexandre was born on July 23rd 1823, in Fraserville in Quebec, and was baptized the same day. His father died three years later, leaving his wife widowed at the age of twenty-eight. She never remarried, raising her children in her parents’ home in Boucherville with the help of an unmarried brother. In 1832, the family settled in the manor in Sabrevois. Madame Taché supplemented her excellent education with regular study. In the heart of a quiet and pious home, she introduced her children to botany, astronomy, history, and philosophy.

The influence of a gaze

In September 1833, Alexandre entered Saint-Hyacinthe, one of the minor seminaries where the boys of Quebec received their education. Alexandre was an energetic boy and a brilliant student. He finished his studies in philosophy at the age of eighteen before “taking the Lord for his chosen portion and his cup” (cf. Ps. 16:5), at the major seminary in Montreal. The bishop of this city, Bishop Bourget, had just returned from France with six missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, whom the congregation’s founder, Bishop Eugene de Mazenod, the bishop of Marseille, had given to help him. The young seminarian’s gaze fixed on the missionaries: “There are gazes that have a profound influence on one’s entire existence,” he would later say; “mine that rested on Fathers Honorat and Telmon contributed in no small manner to the direction of my life.” Indeed, in this gaze he discovered a call to become an Oblate himself. In 1844, while teaching mathematics at Saint-Hyacinthe



Bishop Alexandre Taché, OMI

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and pursuing his theological studies, he revealed his plans to his mother. She consented with faith. However, after her son entered the novitiate in Longueuil, she fell gravely ill. To obtain his mother’s healing, the novice vowed to serve in the most difficult of missions, those of the Great Northwest. The illness suddenly left, and the patient was saved.

The territories of the Canadian Great Northwest or of the Red River, still called “Rupert’s Land,” cover a region nine times the area of France. The white population at that time did not exceed four thousand souls. The “English” and the “French,” so named according to the language they spoke, came from a number of countries. They served the “Honorable Hudson Bay Company,” a fur trade company that made enormous profits and exercised its authority in the name of Britain. The native population included fifteen thousand “Métis”, or half-breeds. Tall and tireless, they were excellent horsemen, particularly skilled at hunting. Their ancestors had prophesied to them the arrival of unmarried men in black robes, who would lead them to God. Thus they gave a favorable welcome to the missionaries, for whom they became indispensable guides. Fifty thousand indigenous people, or Indians, belonged to five groups—the Algonquins, the Assiniboine (Sioux), the Blackfoot, the Montagnais, and the Inuit. They lived from hunting and fishing, and traded pelts at the trading posts (run by the Hudson Bay Company) for Western goods. The plains Indians followed the herds of bison; their abundance, which provided food with little work. Promiscuity and

the absence of hard work resulted in great moral degradation. The forest Indians were almost always isolated and constantly busy trying to survive; they welcomed Christianity.

The evangelization of Rupert's Land had begun in 1818, at the request of a Scottish Protestant, Lord Selkirk. Convinced that only the Catholic Church could ensure the permanence of the Franco-English colony, he had sent for Bishop Provencher, assisted by several priests. Saint Boniface Cathedral, a modest stone church, made an impression on the natives. The rustic episcopal palace also made it possible to lodge some nuns and to offer proper hospitality. In 1844, Bishop Provencher went to Marseille to beg Bishop de Mazenod for assistance. Unable to refuse when it was a matter of evangelizing the poor, the bishop offered him Father Aubert and Brother Taché, who had volunteered for this mission.

Praying on the water

Trois-Rivières, Quebec was separated from Saint Boniface (today a suburb of Winnipeg) by more than two thousand kilometers of water, which had to be traveled in a bark canoe. It took sixty-two days to cover this distance. The missionaries celebrated Mass on Sunday, but on other days, they prayed on the water. The journey gave frequent opportunity to meditate on the grandeur of nature. The team docked at each trading post, where the missionaries always received a warm welcome at the hands of the Honorable Company. When Brother Taché presented himself to Bishop Provencher in 1845, the prelate almost immediately ordained him a deacon, then a priest. The new Father Taché made his vows as an Oblate just before his first Mass. He spent the following winter at the bishop's palace in the company of Fathers Lafleche and Belecourt, who gave the young missionaries an intensive course in Saulteaux, the language of the Saulteaux Algonquins. The Indians were great orators, and the missionaries needed to acquire a perfect knowledge of their languages in order to have a real and deep influence. The following year, Fathers Taché and Lafleche were sent 1,600 kilometers further north, to Île-à-la-Crosse, with the mission to go as far as they could among the tribes who were open to the light of faith. The mission was dedicated to Saint John the Baptist. The priests stayed at the trading post, where a blind Indian taught them two languages—Cree and Montagnais. "Cree is not a difficult language," observed Father Taché, "but the pronunciation of Montagnais is more difficult than I could ever imagine." Soon Father Lafleche, less able to walk, prepared a garden and a cabin that would serve as the missionaries' home. But this hard work resulted in an infirmity that would leave him lame, in spite of Father Taché's constant care.

The missionaries proclaimed Christ, Who promises Heaven to the converted, and warned against the sins which lead to Hell. They explained the demands of Christian morality, in particular with respect to

marriage, for polygamy, which was common among the Indians, prevented the reception of Baptism. The sacred liturgy was celebrated with all the splendor possible, and everyone was invited to attend. As soon as the first wooden churches were raised, both Christian and pagan Indians went to them with reverence and happiness, first terrified at the sound of the bells, and then filled with wonder at the religious chants. The missionaries taught the most gifted neophytes to read, who in turn taught others. Later on, the Fathers would print prayers and a catechism. With their orphanages and schools, the Sisters of Charity, who had joined the Fathers in 1844, educated children, who would have a great deal of influence on the rest of the population. Material and cultural progress gave Christianity a solid base of credibility, which helped the Indians follow the missionaries' teachings.

During his meeting with the world of culture, at the Collège des Bernardins in Paris on September 12, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI highlighted the deep reason for mission: "Christians of the nascent Church did not regard their missionary proclamation as propaganda, designed to enlarge their particular group, but as an inner necessity, consequent upon the nature of their faith: the God in whom they believed was the God of all people, the one, true God, Who had revealed Himself in the history of Israel and ultimately in His Son, thereby supplying the answer which was of concern to everyone and for which all people, in their innermost hearts, are waiting. The universality of God, and of reason open towards Him, is what gave them the motivation—indeed, the obligation—to proclaim the message. They saw their faith as belonging, not to cultural custom that differs from one people to another, but to the domain of truth, which concerns all people equally."

Possessing nothing, but happy

In 1848, young Father Faraud, an Oblate, arrived at the mission. The religious life there was fervent and humor was gay—stories, songs, and laughter punctuated the missionaries' manual labor. "Long live the North and its happy inhabitants! We are poor and possess nothing, but the happiness and satisfaction which are often absent from the palaces of the great, reign in our cabin!" wrote Father Taché. Soon however, the Revolution of 1848 in France threatened to dry up the funds that were coming from there, and, in their biennial letter, the superiors let the missionaries of the Great North know that they were considering calling them home. Concerned for the eternal salvation of those they were evangelizing, the Fathers responded, "Just provide us some wine and bread for the altar. Wild beasts will suffice for our garments, and fish for our sustenance, but, we beg you, do not call us back!"

The following year, Father Lafleche was summoned to Saint Boniface. Having been sounded out by Bishop Provencher to become his coadjutor, he made known

his infirmity, which rendered him incapable of this duty. "I do have Father Taché," thought the aged prelate, "but he is still quite young. Nevertheless, he is a man of great talent who knows the country, the missions, and the languages. What is more, he is an Oblate, and only the Oblates agree to dedicate their entire lives to these difficult missions; is it not best to take their leader from among them? This Father is only twenty-seven years old, but it is a defect for which the Holy See will grant a dispensation, and which will correct itself all too quickly." Soon, the change of coadjutor was asked of Rome, while word was sent to Bishop de Mazenod. The latter did not receive the letter until after learning of the official nomination by Rome, just when he had decided to withdraw the Oblates from the Northwest missions. Immediately, the humble prelate suspended his decision and summoned Father Taché. After a long journey during which he scarcely stopped to see his mother, the missionary stood for the first time before the Father of his religious family, who greeted him: "You will be a bishop." "Excellency, I wish to remain an Oblate." "What? Can the fullness of the priesthood exclude the summit to which a religious man may be called?" Straightening up, Bishop de Mazenod added, "No one is more a bishop than I am, and neither is anyone more an Oblate! Do I not know the spirit I wished to inspire in my congregation? You will be a bishop, I wish it; I also appoint you regular superior of our members at Red River." In the face of the tears of the chosen one, the bishop added, "Console yourself, my son, your selection was without my knowledge, but it saves the missions for which you have already worked so hard. Some letters had represented these missions to me in such an unfavorable light that I had decided to call you all back, and then I learned of your appointment to the episcopate. I wish that you, like me, obey the Pope. I will give myself the joy of consecrating you myself." The ordination took place in Viviers on November 23, 1851. After a pilgrimage to Rome, to which he would return four times in his life, and a round of meetings on behalf of the missions, Bishop Taché left again for Canada.

Forty below zero

During five consecutive winters, the new bishop crossed the 700 km that linked the missions of Caribou Lake and Lac Sainte Anne on snowshoes, even continuing on to Lake Athabasca. On one of these journeys, the apostle counted sixty-three nights under the stars, in a cold of 40 degrees below zero Centigrade. At Île-à-la-Crosse, he discovered that during his absence, some of his Indians had turned away from the true faith. He met with them one after the other, addressing them with reproaches, advice, and prayers, bringing them back to the faith forever. He taught his missionaries not to expect refined politeness from the Indians, for before civilizing them, one had to accept coarseness from them. In the different mission locations, the bishop and his companions spent their time in prayer, study, and ministry to the Indians, and in manual labor,

particularly farming, which realized a considerable yield. At times, grasshopper invasions ravaged the harvests, and fires reduced years of work to ashes. Bishop Taché then became a beggar—he went to the dioceses of eastern Canada, and even to the old continent, to seek the means to survive and rebuild. He devoted himself to the lowliest tasks, but the care of souls was always his preferred task, and he lavished time on each Indian who wished to speak with him.

Transportation was a crucial problem for the missions. Bishop Taché supervised the loading and distribution of supplies, which he labeled with his own hands. He knew that any delay or loss meant additional suffering for his missionaries. At the time dependent on the Honorable Hudson Bay Company, which was abusing its monopoly, the bishop strove to establish an alternative means of transport. In 1858, the first steamboat was put into service in the North, and more and more the railroad would facilitate travel.

What has been done!

In 1865, when he thought about the mission of the diocese of Saint Albert, the bishop, full of pride, would exclaim: "It has not yet been four years that this site was chosen, and what has already been done! Beautiful buildings erected; spacious and well-cultivated fields already producing abundant harvests. The houses around the house of the Lord form a group that dominates the entire landscape: the little river that can be crossed on a beautiful bridge; the lake at the foot of the mountain that provides the wood for building; we know not what to admire more, the beauty of the land or the colossal work of its apostles... Yet, those who dream of ridiculous systems do not want priests to be men of the age. Let them come, these enemies of Revelation. There is still enough darkness that each may try his system; let them do more for the ignorant Indians than the poor priest does; let them civilize them more, and more quickly—then we will believe in their reformative mission. But, as long as they enjoy the benefits that Christianity has brought to the world, let them not blaspheme against God, or His holy law, or His sacred ministers!"

In his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, Saint John Paul II underscored the civilizing aspect of the Church's missions: "by their loving presence and humble service..., [missionaries] are working for the integral development of individuals and of society through schools, health-care centers ... these works of charity that reveal the soul of all missionary activity: love, ... the principle which must direct every action, and end to which it must be directed" (December 7, 1990, no. 60).

In the 1860s, the development of missions in the North required a new organization. Bishop Taché addressed the issue from Saint Boniface, and obtained from Rome the foundation of new bishoprics. He

himself was appointed archbishop in 1871, even though his health had seriously deteriorated. He sought to cultivate unity of heart and mind with the new bishops. The responsibilities they took on and the difficult problems they encountered sometimes put them in opposition with one another. He wrote to one of them: "We need to be more united, and yet we are more divided each day. If you have the chance, I believe that you would render an immense service to the Church by working to reunite these distinguished Lords." Unity among missionary bishops is vital for evangelization, as well as for all Christian communities. It fulfills JESUS' prayer: *that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee* (Jn. 17:21).

A delicate mission

In 1870, Bishop Taché participated in the First Vatican Council. Shortly thereafter, the Canadian government entrusted him with a delicate diplomatic mission. The Red River lands had just been handed over by the Hudson Company to the Canadian Confederation to become the province of Manitoba. In spite of the pleas of Bishop Taché, who had foreseen the turmoil that would arise if the populations were not prepared, the process was carried out without their having been consulted. In fact, when the representatives of the federal government came to take possession of the land, they came up against the provisional government established by the Métis. Wishing to avoid civil war, the government asked Bishop Taché to intervene. After receiving a promise of general amnesty, Bishop Taché achieved initial success. However, political pressure from certain English in Ontario led the federal government to renege

on its verbal promises, thus discrediting Bishop Taché, and provoking an uprising that would have to be put down by the army.

Schools were always primary among the bishop's concerns. In response to certain politicians who reproached him for not having done more for education, he would write: "I am not afraid to declare that any reasonable and impartial man, in examining what we are doing, must acknowledge that the result obtained surpasses that which our resources would seem to have allowed. The fact is that if we did not have dedicated individuals who have freely devoted themselves to this task, as difficult as it is meritorious, it would be absolutely impossible to maintain our schools." Up until the late 1880s, the educational system guaranteed denominational instruction (Catholic or Protestant) in the language of the populations concerned, who were funding their own schools. But around then, Canadian legislation moved towards lay education, in the majority language, with centralized funding. In 1888, Bishop Taché obtained from the prime minister a promise to maintain separate schools in the two languages, but this promise would be broken in 1890 and publicly denied in 1892. The bishop then took to the defense of Catholic parents' freedom, but in vain. He witnessed in tears and prayer the ruin of this work that had been dearer to him than life itself. On June 22, 1894, Bishop Taché finished on this Cross a life entirely dedicated to the salvation of the souls he loved so much. Nevertheless, the missionary had experienced the joy of seeing the progress of the evangelization—a great many natives had been converted, following the example of their chiefs, won over by the charity of the "Praying Tall Men."

On the occasion of World Mission Day in 2013, Pope Francis declared: "We must always have the courage and the joy of proposing, with respect, an encounter with Christ, and being heralds of His Gospel. JESUS came among us to show us the way of salvation and He entrusted to us the mission to make it known to all to the ends of the earth. ... It is important never to forget a fundamental principle for every evangelizer: one cannot announce Christ without the Church. Evangelization is not an isolated individual or private act; it is always ecclesial. Paul VI wrote, 'When an unknown preacher, catechist or Pastor, preaches the Gospel, gathers the little community together, administers a Sacrament, even alone, he is carrying out an ecclesial act.' He acts not 'in virtue of a mission which he attributes to himself or by a personal inspiration, but in union with the mission of the Church and in her name'" (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, December 8, 1975, no. 60). "And this gives strength to the mission and makes every missionary and evangelizer feel never alone, but part of a single Body animated by the Holy Spirit" (Message of May 19, 2013).

The example of Bishop Taché is an encouragement to accomplish the particular mission the Lord entrusts to each of us. Through the humble fulfillment of the duties of our state, the Church is built up for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Let us not fail to do good while we have the time (cf. Gal. 6:9-10).

Dom Antoine Marie o.s.b.

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Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval (English ed) ISSN : 1956-3906 - Dépôt légal : date de parution - Directeur de publication : Dom Antoine Beauchef - Imprimerie : Traditions Monastiques - 21150 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain.

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