

PROMOTERS, PLANTERS, AND PIONEERS: THE COURSE AND CONTEXT OF BELGIAN SETTLEMENT IN WESTERN CANADA

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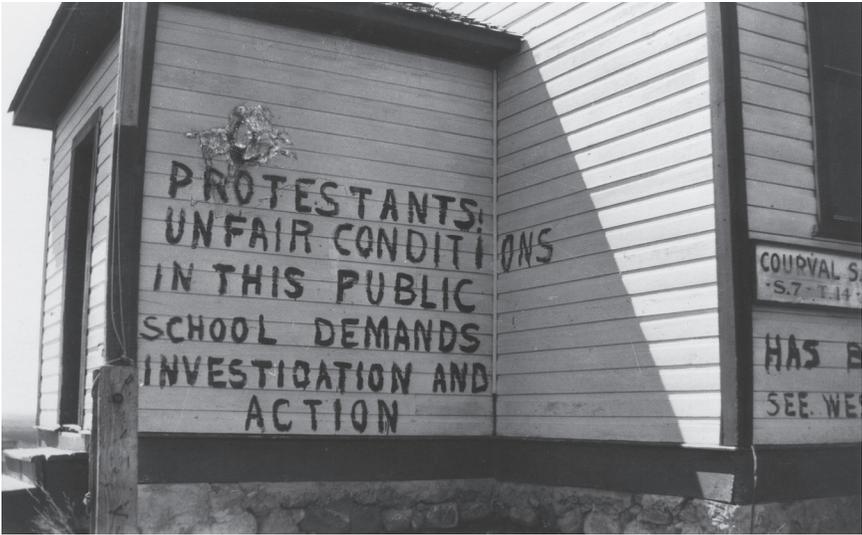
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*Graffiti on Courval School, 1920s. (Sask. Archives R-A 4819(4))
Belgian settlers felt threatened by Ku Klux Klan and anti-Catholic activities.*

LANGUAGE, RELIGION, AND EDUCATION

Issues of language, religion and education were virtually inseparable in Belgium and remained so for most Flemings and Walloons who settled in Western Canada. Linguistic debates were commonplace in Belgium where French was the official language after independence as well as the cultural language of the upper classes, the language of secondary education and of upward social mobility. In Western Canada, English imposed itself, although there was no official language designation, but French was the first European language widely spoken in the region. By the late nineteenth century in Belgium, there was a marked increase in the Flemish-speaking population and the emergence of Flemish ethnic consciousness, culminating in the recognition of Flemish as an official language in 1898. From 1830 to 1932, Wallonia followed the *jus soli* principle so that all public education was in French, but Flanders followed the *jus personae* principle so the language of education depended on the language of the head of the family. Children of Flemish labourers in Wallonia, consequently, had no access to instruction in the mother tongue, but the Flemish elite continued to educate their children in French wherever they resided. Since 1980, Belgium is partitioned into linguistic communities with no public support of the minority language. Not without significance is the fact that the deputy prime minister, Johann Van de Lanotte, whose family had lived in Cranbrook, B.C., from 1924 to 1936, advised Canadians that Belgium, with its divisions into cultural

communities and regions, was not an appropriate constitutional model for Canada to follow.¹

Just as French Canadians identified Catholicism with their “national” identity, Flemings looked to the church to support their nationalist movement. Belgians arrived in Western Canada when the Catholic hierarchy was largely Francophone and identified with selective immigration and the ideology of agriculturalism. Immigration resulted in an increasingly multi-ethnic and multilingual society, but the dominant ethos remained British and Protestant. One consequence of the new demographic character of the region was the perception of the Catholic Church as a “French church.” Walloons who settled alongside French Canadians came to share their views on language and religion, but Flemings, while remaining steadfastly identified with Catholicism, did not always appreciate its Francophone character. In Canada, educational issues often turned on Catholic/Protestant perspectives. Belgian immigrants in Western Canada rapidly became conscious of the existing conflict over religious orientation and religious instruction, as well as language of instruction, in the publicly supported schools. Flemings in particular noted that English was the language of business and government. Even after official bilingualism was instituted in the latter decades of the twentieth century, English remained the regional language of modernity and upward mobility, although bilingualism was an asset. Canada never incorporated in its constitution the absolute separation of church and state or the British model of an established church. Instead, Canadians recognized, in law or in practice, the role and contribution of organized religious groups in public institutions of education, social work, welfare and health care. It was inevitable that the Catholic Church, in particular, would become involved in linguistic issues because of this political framework and sustained immigration. The American College at Louvain [Leuven], founded in 1856, and the Séminaire Anglo-Belge in Bruges, founded in 1859, trained clergy specifically for North America. The abbé Charles Nerinckx recruited numerous candidates for Canada, among them Edouard Leo De Busschere, who served at Forget, Regina and Calgary; Achiel Marien who served in pastorates in Drumheller, Raymond, Vulcan and Lethbridge; and E. de Wilde in the mining towns of Blairmore, Coleman, Bellevue, Hillcrest, Frank and Lille.² Belgians, in the process of integration into Western Canada’s evolving society, became active in four domains: missionary work among First Nations; outreach to

Hungarian and Ukrainian Catholics; promotion of Catholic schools; and defence of the French language. In general, the clergy were more active than the laity in these enterprises.

Amerindian Missions

Belgian missionary work in the Americas began in 1493 with the labours of two Franciscans from Ath who accompanied Christopher Columbus on his second journey to the New World.³ Belgian Récollets and Jesuits were active evangelizers and explorers in New France and their activities took them into the far interior of the continent, including the upper Mississippi and Saskatchewan valleys. They continued to serve under British colonial rule beginning on Vancouver Island in the 1880s: Fathers G. Donckele and M. Van Nevil at the Kuper Island residential school, and M. Meuleman and E. Sobry at the Kyuquat Mission.⁴ These pioneer missionaries were succeeded in 1907 by the Fathers of the Company of Mary [SMM]: P. Claessens from 1907 to 1912, A. Urlings in 1912–13, and W. Lemmens in 1913.⁵ These church-operated residential schools had as their objective the assimilation of Native children: therefore the Flemish missionaries taught in English. In the denominational rivalry that came to characterize these schools, the Catholics had better funding, good facilities, itinerant priests and a well-focussed school curriculum.⁶ The precursors of Jesuit missionary work among the Blackfoot were Pierre-Jean De Smet and Nicolas Point, his assistant.⁷ In 1845, De Smet made a three-thousand-mile journey from St. Louis into the Kootenays, where he baptized over one hundred Natives, before crossing over the Rockies to the present site of Banff. Along the Bow River he met Assiniboines suffering from famine and disease. He reported: “I rendered all the services in my power to the invalids, baptized six children and an old man who expired two days after; he was interred with all the ceremonies and prayers of the Church.”⁸ He went on to Fort Jasper where he baptized forty-four persons and blessed seven marriages of Iroquois who were engaged in the fur trade in the interests of Montreal merchants.⁹

The Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI), who arrived in 1845, had the largest contingent of Belgian missionaries in the West. Most held ultramontane views but became more liberal as they came to appreciate many qualities in the life-style and belief system of the First Peoples. Bishop Grandin of St. Albert obtained permission from the Archbishop of

Mechelen [Malines] to preach in his seminaries and colleges and was able to recruit fifteen men. He confided: "I want Belgian missionaries ... they have the advantage that they can speak Flemish and that is why they easily learn English and German."¹⁰ Among his recruits were Brother Henri Scheers, who came to Lac la Biche in 1874 and continued to labour in the Native missions in the North-West Territories until 1904, and Leonard Van Tighem, who served the Blackfoot and a multilingual community at Lethbridge. Brother Victor Van Tighem of the Van Dale congregation of the Oblates left Antwerp in February 1886 to join Leonard in the North-West Territories. In serving the Piegan mission he noted that the settlers set a very bad example of civilized behaviour. As for Hayter Reed's supposedly "new improved system of farming" for promoting Native self-sufficiency, while avoiding competition in the exchange economy, Van Tighem concluded that government officials had little understanding of how to promote industry, had little sympathy for the poverty of his charges, and were more interested in protecting farmers and ranchers from any possible competition.¹¹

More than thirty Oblates served in Western Canadian missions before 1940. Their careers as teachers, community builders and counsellors were outstanding and they merit a separate publication. Roger Vandersteene, for example, had an illustrious and controversial career serving the Cree of northern Alberta until 1976. He said, "A Fleming understands better than anybody 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. The hierarchy did not countenance much departure from traditional forms so his efforts were frustrated although Cree tunes and drumming were accepted. He was installed a Cree elder and medicine man. Shortly before his death, he gave his medicine pipe to an old friend, Harold Cardinal, who had left the Catholic Church. His case illustrates in some measure the linguistic tensions that existed within the Oblate order. Most of the Prairie missionaries were Flemish while most of those in the northern region of the North West Territories were Walloon. Vandersteene worked in a region dominated by Francophones. Moreover, his Flemish nationalist activities were public knowledge, including participation in a pro-Nazi movement for the creation of a separate Flemish state.¹²

Outreach to Hungarians and “Ruthenians”

Belgian missionaries and parish priests served a wide range of ethnocultural communities, most notably the Hungarians and the Ukrainians, known at the time as “Ruthenians.” The French Oblate, Albert Pascal, even before he was named bishop of Prince Albert in 1907, advised Prime Minister Laurier that the government should recruit immigrants of diverse ethnic backgrounds and should provide advisors, teachers and doctors with appropriate language skills. Pascal had broken with French Canadian objectives, had learned several Native languages, and taught in English. It was a multicultural approach long before its time in which some Belgians shared.¹³

The abbé Jules Pirot, a Walloon nationalist, 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 I saw Hungarians, Slavs, Germans, French run to me beaming because I spoke their language.”¹⁴ The Fathers of Scheut dismissed him with the comment, “he lacks a missionary calling,” and the Benedictines at Bruges deemed him to be “a revolutionary and not what might be called an interesting person.”¹⁵ He spent two years in a parish in Namur ministering to the working-class poor where he imbibed the ideals of the Christian socialists. Somewhat ironically, this priest of humble origins and liberal views accepted to labour among the colonists of the Count of Esterhazy under a conservative prelate, Mgr Langevin, who needed a priest who could speak German and would learn Hungarian. The early assessment that he had no gift for evangelizing could not have been more erroneous because from Kaposvar he established ten missions nearby and six farther to the west where settlement was just beginning. He was also an unofficial colonizing agent, eventually recruiting his own family and eleven other Walloon families.¹⁶ The Vanderhaege family, whose grandson Guy distinguished himself subsequently in the literary field, was part of the Belgian community in the Hungarian bloc settlement. Pirot’s early ministry at Kaposvar was troubled by school controversies, but in the inter-war years he travelled hundreds of miles by buggy in summer and cutter in winter from Esterhazy to visit the scattered Hungarian settlements in Lipton, Cupar and Markinch. Pirot was fondly remembered as an avid gardener,

a good hunter, and a kindly and simple man of learning who could be most stubborn. He never lost his love of nature, writing to his friends in Belgium about the marvels of prairie flowers, colourful songbirds, delicious wild fruits, wide horizons, beautiful sunsets and dazzling northern lights.¹⁷

Belgian Redemptorists reached out to other ethnic groups soon after their arrival in the West. When the Redemptorist provincial toured the West in 1892, he saw the lack of adequate services among the various ethnic communities and he was convinced that the future belonged to those who spoke English. Initially, he sent Father Willem Godts to minister to the Germans and Flemings around Regina and Edmonton, an astoundingly immense field.¹⁸ Archbishop Langevin invited the Redemptorists to accept a charge at Brandon in 1898, with Willem Godts as superior and Edouard Verlooy as assistant, from where they could serve four missions among the Ukrainians.¹⁹ The following year, Achille Delaere of Lendeledé in West Flanders, arrived in Brandon to minister to Ukrainians and Poles at Huns Valley, Shoal Lake, Glenella and Rossburn. He noted that the Ukrainians 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. In 1894, Propaganda Fide decreed that only celibate Ukrainian priests would be permitted to serve in North America, thus effectively cutting off recruitment in Eastern Europe.²⁰ The Belgian missionaries were alerted to three dangers in their ministry: i) resistance to any effort to Latinize them; ii) the temptation to attend Russian Orthodox churches that shared the same rites and customs; iii) proselytizing by Presbyterian-trained clergy of the Independent Greek Church.

Delaere was challenged by a schismatic movement led by Stefan Ustivolski, exiled from Tsarist Russia, who passed himself off as a metropolitan bishop of the Orient.²¹ Delaere confirmed that he “has ordained about hundred men who are simple workmen who can barely read or write and who travel among the people to deceive them. Ordination costs fifty dollars.”²² The schismatic “Seraphim popes,” or preachers, warned the people about surrendering church property to the “French” episcopal corporation. In Saltcoats the schismatic priest was none other than Ivan Kamarnizki, agent for the Dominion Lands office in Yorkton.²³ Delaere’s second challenger was John Bodrug, a former Catholic cantor who had been ordained by Seraphim, who gathered some of the better-educated schismatics into an Independent Greek Church in 1904 under the direction of the Presbyterian Church and Manitoba College. This

group was able to organize for its own purposes many of the Ukrainians who resisted the Latin version of Catholicism.²⁴

In 1904, the Belgians established a monastery in Yorkton, and Delaere soon was joined by Evariste Vrijdaegs, and later by Louis Adam, Ludwig Boske, Henryk Boels, Charles Techeur, and Noel-Marie De Camp. The more than eight hundred families to whom they were to minister in twenty-three churches were not very enthusiastic at first because the Redemptorists were celibate monastics who followed the Latin rite and spoke little Ukrainian.²⁵ Two years later, Delaere received an indult from Rome permitting him to inculturate to the Ruthenian rite for a five-year period. He would follow the Julian calendar, say mass in Slavonic, administer communion in both kinds, administer confirmation immediately after baptism, wear the traditional Eastern Church vestments, but on no condition might he marry. His Walloon colleagues, Louis Adam and Charles Techeur, were not comfortable working in a Flemish establishment. Louis Adam left the congregation to become a diocesan priest serving the Ukrainians and Charles Techeur returned to Belgium and was replaced by Louis Van den Bossche.

When the Consultor General of the Redemptorists, Francis Ter Haar, visited Yorkton in August 1914, thirty Belgian priests were now serving in Canada, five of them in Yorkton following the Ruthenian rite – Delaere, Decamps, Boels, Van den Bossche, and Brother Idesbald Monstrey – to support eight Ukrainian secular priests.²⁶ A monastery was founded at Komarno, in the Interlake region of Manitoba, in November 1916 by Delaere and Van den Bossche to serve thirty-nine mission stations. Decamps and Boels opened a minor seminary in Ituna and were joined by Louis Regaerts and Petrus Ivens. The end of World War I enabled seven more Belgian Redemptorists to join their coreligionists in the course of the next few years: Richards Costenoble, Albien Van Biesen, Jozef Gherkiere, Frans Van den Bossche, Jaak Janssens, Hubert Gelin, and Albert Delforge.²⁷ Yorkton remained the central house with Komarno and Ituna as smaller units of the Vice Province under Camille Van de Steene in Brussels.

A sermon preached by Van den Bossche at Hafford in 1918, during the visit of the recently appointed Bishop Nykyta Budka of the Ruthenian rite, declared that any person who sent a child to a public school or a Ukrainian *bursa* [residence for students] was in danger of hellfire. This led to a public disturbance and a humiliating court case charging Budka

and Van den Bossche with sedition. At a meeting of the Ukrainian intelligentsia in Saskatoon in 1918, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Brotherhood was organized in order to “remove from our church celibacy, which is demoralizing our clergy and people ... to send the French-Belgian missionaries to preach the Roman faith among their own people or among the heathen.”²⁸

In 1923, Delaere began publishing a modest journal, *Holos Spasiteleya* [Redeemer’s Voice], to challenge the propaganda of Cyril Genik in *The Canadian Farmer*. Delaere was faced with two additional problems. Firstly, he found that many of the young seminarians recruited were poorly qualified academically and ill behaved, so many either quit or were dismissed. Six Flemish priests were so discouraged that they returned to Belgium. Secondly, the monastery and mission were transferred to the Toronto province of the Redemptorists, where the prevailing ideology was assimilation and anglicization. Delaere left for Belgium in the summer of 1930, after a colleague confided in a letter in Flemish: “The sun comes out after the rain, the spring comes after winter, even in Canada. But just between us, the worst is that the English will always remain English.”²⁹ This was further underscored when a Conservative anti-immigration mayor was elected in Yorkton and the Ku Klux Klan celebrated the victory by burning a cross in the centre of the town. In 1935, Albert Delforge, a remaining Belgian, was shot by a disgruntled parishioner. It seemed time for the Belgians to close this chapter of their missionary efforts. Many Ukrainians were grateful that the Belgian missionaries had provided the nucleus from which a Ruthenian ecclesiastical province developed.³⁰

Relations with Protestants

Belgians did not emigrate from a country noted for its religious diversity. The Catholic Church was in fact a national institution with which three-quarters of the population in the provinces of emigration identified closely. Members of the United Protestant Church in Belgium, did not emigrate to Canada, although from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century there was a trickle of Walloon Protestants to the United States. There was an active Jewish community in the cities which is known to have maintained some contact with Canadian Jews, notably in Montreal. Free-thinkers and agnostics were more common in the mining and industrial zones of Wallonia. In spite of this lack of significant religious diversity,

Belgian Catholics in Western Canada generally got along well with their Protestant and unchurched neighbours. Common occupational, economic and social concerns played a more prominent role than religious differences. In wartime and during the Depression, interdenominational social and charitable activities were common. Individual priests such as Leonard Van Tighem, Jules Pirot, Chrysostom of Kalmthout and Hubert Heynen reached out to the entire community regardless of religious affiliation. This toleration may have had its roots in the movement for Belgian independence when religious liberals and conservatives, along with freethinkers, united against the oppressive Dutch Calvinist influence.

In Western Canada, people and clergy lived and worked in a predominantly tolerant secular milieu while in their church life traditional customs remained. Although the Quebec-origin clergy insisted upon wearing clerical garb in public, for example, the Belgian-trained clergy opposed it in a largely Protestant milieu to avoid being ridiculed as “men in skirts” and “men in petticoats.”³¹ Colonizing projects launched by business interests considered it normal to exclude Catholic clergy probably because the latter had organized their own recruitment campaigns.³² Protestant clergy and church boards carried out surveys of immigrant communities to determine their alleged adaptability to the moral and civic standards they associated with “Christian citizenship.” Belgians were categorized as requiring specific programs of assimilation in spite of being ranked by the government among the “preferred” immigrants.³³ In Lethbridge, for example, Father Leonard Van Tighem refused to join the Presbyterian minister’s vociferous public denunciation of alcohol abuse, gambling and prostitution, but he proceeded instead to work quietly to remedy the social environment that promoted vice in mining communities.³⁴ The Protestants were not long in seeking revenge; they prepared a petition to have the Catholic school cut off from public funding. In December 1895, the mayor, who was also a local lumber merchant, ordered the Catholic Church closed during an outbreak of measles in town. Van Tighem refused to comply, noting in his diary: “The finest piece of bigotry ever enacted yet in our town.”³⁵ At this time, the Orange Lodge and several denominational organizations pressured the Dominion government to abolish immigration agents, especially missionary colonizers.

Serious opposition came from the Ku Klux Klan in the late 1920s and early 1930s in Saskatchewan in particular. The KKK campaigned openly on behalf of the Conservative Party for the prohibition of religious garb

and symbols in school and the elimination of French from the curriculum. Directly affecting Belgian settlers was the KKK demand that all Catholics born outside Canada should be deported. Klan activities targeted Catholic schools and churches and even touched the Capuchin mission in Manitoba, as Father Chrysostom recorded in his diary: "During the night a huge cross was erected behind our grounds. By whom and for what purpose? People think that it is a warning from the Ku Klux Klan that they will put everything to the torch! May God protect us."³⁶

In southern Alberta, Belgians faced a more subtle pressure on their religious, family and community life. Coalminers and beet workers in particular felt pressure from the Mormons' aggressive evangelization through highly organized social, sports, recreational and cultural activities that attracted the youth. Van Tighem and other clergy saw the danger of young people being lured into these social and recreational activities that encouraged fraternization and possibly inter-marriage. Although Van Tighem had made several converts to Catholicism, he was distressed when a couple young women left his congregation to marry Protestants: "May God forgive these unfortunate girls ... and may not the tears of their aged parents cry for vengeance to Heaven."³⁷ Mixed marriages were a problem that Mgr Langevin had underscored as early as in 1899: "It is really devastating for me to record the large number of these nefarious marriages which make us lose a lot of Catholics."³⁸ Of course, Msgr Jules Bois in Bellegarde could report that through such marriages he had gained several converts for his parish.

There was also the presence of a few Belgian Protestants and freethinkers who challenged the image of a homogeneous Catholic community. In 1914 a Belgian evangelist, E. Petrequin, probably associated with the Eglise Missionnaire Belge in Pennsylvania, came to the Crowsnest region to preach "A New Christianity, Social and Anti-Clerical."³⁹ There were many lodges in the coal-mining town and most miners belonged to them, ignoring church sanctions, because of the insurance and social amenities they offered. Pastor J. E. Duclos, minister of Erskine Presbyterian Church in Edmonton, began a bilingual mission in Bonnyville in 1909, purchased a small farm near the village and opened a modest hospital and school. By 1916 a small congregation, that included some Belgians, emerged at this Duclosville. He then held successful missions in Cold Lake and at St. Paul-des-Métis. In Edmonton he opened a night school for adults and a boarding house for students of French Canadian and Walloon origin.⁴⁰

How large was the defection? Belgians in Canada never converted as a community as had happened in Wisconsin under Joseph René Vilatte of the Old Catholic Church.⁴¹ The 1931 census listed religious affiliation of Belgians as 24,673 Catholics and 2,912 Protestants, or more than 10 per cent higher than the ratio of Catholics to Protestants in Belgium.

Although the clergy viewed Belgians as independent thinkers and somewhat given to contention, Flemings appeared more pious and more conservative than Walloons. At the popular level, were these evaluations well-founded? Firstly, Western Canada was different from Flanders and Wallonia. “Americanism,” or the movement to accommodate to liberal concepts of democracy, popular rule and the virtual separation of church and state posed a challenge to the clergy because it introduced greater personal liberty in church affairs. Secondly, church organization and support were different. The vesting of property rights in the episcopal corporation instead of in the local parish council strengthened central control. The role of local churchwardens was limited compared to the powers of Protestant trustees. Thirdly, societal change was so rapid and pervasive that popular opinion and practices outstripped convention and teaching. A generation gap could pose profound challenges to community leaders. The Catholic Church had evolved by 1940 from a *mélange* of immigrant churches to a national multi-ethnic institution. Francophones were no longer a dominant element in the West, although still an important component. New generations succeeded the immigrant parishioners, priests and professors, and Belgians, like others, began to question clerical celibacy, the circumscribed role of women in the church, and unquestioning obedience to the hierarchy in social and personal matters. Fourthly, the charitable attitudes and actions of Protestant leaders and benefactors acted as a goad to Catholics from time to time. Diversity at the community level resulted in increasingly tolerant views of “others” on the part of neighbours. It would take a century, nevertheless, for official pronouncements by church leaders to move from labelling of “heretics” to “separated brethren.”

Belgian Parishes

Canon law provided only for territorial or geographical parishes, not ethnic-based congregations. What had no canonical provision had to be organized on a practical basis, as was done in Winnipeg for the Poles and

Germans. In 1913, Archbishop Langevin informed the Vatican that there were three rural Flemish parishes in Manitoba: St. Alphonse, Bruxelles, and Swan Lake. He also reported that there were two Flemish priests for six hundred parishioners in St. Boniface and Ste. Amélie.⁴² Two problems arose in parishes where Belgians were numerous: firstly, Francophone priests who insisted on delivering their sermons and announcements in French to Flemish parishioners; secondly, priests who spoke Flemish and used English in parishes with a significant number of Francophones. In an encyclical to the Canadian hierarchy in 1916, Pope Benedict XV addressed the problem of such divisions: “we urge all priests engaged in the sacred ministry to become thoroughly conversant in the knowledge and use of the two languages, and discarding all motives of rivalry, to adopt one or the other according to the requirements of the faithful.” This was official bilingualism before its time with no recognition of other ethnolinguistic needs and demands.⁴³

The parishes in south central Manitoba grew out of mission stations of St. Leon parish, Theobald Bitsch serving as both priest and immigration agent. In 1883, a log building used as both church and school was erected at St. Alphonse with abbé Téléphore Campeau, who began to learn Flemish, as its first resident priest.⁴⁴ The abbé Gustave Willems immigrated to Brussels in 1892 and ministered in both Flemish and French. In 1897, abbé Hubert Heynen, a Dutch priest from Limburg, was transferred from Deloraine and its missions as far west as Forget and Estevan, to Bruxelles, where he served until his golden jubilee in 1946. He ministered in both languages and brought out Catholic settlers from both Belgium and Holland.⁴⁵ In 1913 a church was built in Swan Lake with Dom Boniface Diedericks as first resident priest.

There was a Walloon concentration west of Bruxelles, at Grande Clairière, Deleau and Bellegarde, part of Jean Gaire’s utopian dream. The Belgians at Manor attended mass in Wauchope until 1925. In 1929, a vacant bank building served the parish until a church was built in 1950. In 1974, St. Joseph’s parish, Manor, was downgraded to a mission, with the priest resident in neighbouring Carlyle, and was deconsecrated in April 2006. The descendants of the original Belgian families had moved on.⁴⁶ In southern Alberta, near Strathmore, a number of Flemings joined the settlement of Dutch Catholics of abbé Van Aaken, popularly known as Aakenstad. Leonard Van Tighem took up residence in Strathmore in 1909 as priest at the Sacred Heart parish with its core of Flemish adherents.

They organized charities in support of the Don Bosco Home in Calgary, missions in India and Peru and a special relief society to bring assistance to victims of the Depression. Here also, by the outbreak of World War II, the Belgians were lost in a multicultural community.

The largest concentration of Belgians in the West was in St. Boniface and adjacent St. Vital and Fort Garry. All Belgians, both Flemings and Walloons, originally attended mass at the cathedral. Archbishop Beliveau designated a chapel at the rear of the cathedral where a succession of priests – De Munter, Van Den Bossche, and Everard Kwakman – said mass every Sunday and gave catechism classes in Flemish in the afternoon. Some Flemish community leaders asked for a “national church” in 1911 but the proposal failed to obtain widespread support among the parishioners. The chairman of a planning committee reported: “having regard to the disposition of the large majority of Flemings: I thought it wise to abandon the project of a Flemish church.”²⁴⁷ It was an attitude that would continue to plague the project of a Flemish ethnic parish. The underlying problem was that the majority did not want to assume the huge debt load such a project would entail. In Belgium there was generous state support of the church, the absence of which in Canada immigrants did not always understand. They even resented the compulsory payment of tithes.

Eventually, in October 1917, the Flemish parishioners indicated their desire to proceed with the plan, leaving the Walloons to continue worshipping at the cathedral with other Francophones. Msgr Beliveau presided over the canonical erection of the parish: “We recognize and erect as a Catholic parish for the service of the faithful of the Flemish language of the parish of St. Boniface ... under the invocation of the Sacred Heart, the same territory as that of the parish of St. Boniface.”²⁴⁸ On Plinquet Street in the “Belgian Town” sector, a house served as a rectory with the church on the same lot. Technically, it was a linguistic parish within the cathedral parish, although the parishioners regarded it as the “national parish,” saying that “Belgian means a Fleming and speaking Belgian means speaking Flemish.”²⁴⁹ It took on a more Flemish character in 1928 when the Capuchins assumed charge of the parish and built a monastery under the leadership of Father Chrysostom.

The Flemish community did not support the Capuchins to the extent required. Catechism classes in Flemish were stopped in 1935, parents preferring English instruction for their children. In 1955, even sermons in Flemish were no longer offered because of the lack of interest. This erosion

of the use of the Flemish language may be attributed to the lack of sustained immigration to reinforce the original community, and to assimilation into mainstream society of the third generation through the school system, community pressure and the influence of the media. Flemings found English relatively easy to learn and virtually obligatory for the conduct of business.⁵⁰ Attendance and financial support declined over the years until Archbishop Baudoux, a Belgian who had great pride in the community, found it necessary to hold a consultative assembly regarding the future of the parish. There was little interest in maintaining a costly Flemish institution: therefore the committee, on which R. Bockstael represented the community, recommended closing the church and winding down parish affairs. In later years, a few parishioners and some Capuchins regretted the decision and tended to blame the archdiocese.

The Capuchins expanded their activities with a second monastery at Toutes-Aides under the rule of the mother house in St. Boniface. In addition to serving the parish that had a number of Belgian families, as did nearby Ste. Rose-du-Lac, the Capuchins undertook missions to Native peoples of the region. They received a young Native novice, Brother Arsene Spence, who was to be sent to the Detroit house, but the Americans would not accept a Canadian Indian because “past experience shows Canadians cannot conform to our life and surroundings and cause a lot of trouble.”⁵¹ When informed he could not attain to the priesthood, he left. His superior surmised: “Maybe our life seems to be monotonous. One young brother alone with older priests, who would converse mostly in Flemish even in recreation. But the instability of this Indian boy and his longing for freedom are not to be excluded from his final decision.”⁵² The cultural divide was as great between the First Nations and the Capuchins as with other religious orders. In 1972, Cardinal Archbishop Flahiff of Winnipeg asked the Capuchins to turn over their parish and several western missions to the Oblates.

In Greater Winnipeg there were numerous scattered Belgian families that worshipped in English at Holy Cross parish in Norwood, at St. Maurice in Fort Garry, and St. Ignatius in south Winnipeg. The rapid integration of Flemings into mainstream society resulted, in part, from this involvement in multi-ethnic parishes. Even an ethnic parish such as “Sacred Heart of the Belgians” in St. Boniface succumbed to local apathy and urban and occupational integrationist pressures.

Belgians in the Hierarchy

The Western Canadian hierarchy, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, distinguished itself as being conservative and pious rather than scholarly and open to new social and demographic changes. A breath of fresh ideas came from priests and bishops who had frequented the American College of the University of Louvain, founded in 1857 on the initiative of Peter Paul Lefevre, Belgian administrator of the diocese of Detroit. Among its outstanding graduates were two future Pacific coast bishops of the archdiocese of Oregon, which extended originally from California to Alaska and included Vancouver Island: Jean-Baptiste Brondel of Bruges and Charles-Jean Seghers of Ghent.⁵³ In 1903, the diocese of Victoria was detached from the American church although many Catholics did not like the thought of becoming part of a French-Canadian-dominated church.

In September 1862, Charles-Jean Seghers left Louvain to take up missionary work among Native “no stockings” and settler “short stockings” on Vancouver Island. One of his first acts was to visit the flourishing mission of August Joseph Brabant at Hesquiatic on the west coast of the island.⁵⁴ Seghers, who spoke English, French, German, Flemish and several Native dialects, and read nine languages, quickly sensed a British air of superiority to everything foreign and Catholic.⁵⁵ Seghers was consecrated bishop of Victoria in June 1873, named coadjutor at Oregon City in 1878, then archbishop in 1880. In 1886 he resigned to return to Vancouver Island and then devoted himself to missionary work in the Yukon, where he was murdered.⁵⁶ Seghers was a scholar who declared that “a bishop without books is like a soldier without arms.” He left a special collection of more than four thousand books, now at the University of Victoria.⁵⁷ Jean-Baptiste Brondel came to the Oregon territory in the 1860s and in 1879 succeeded Segher as Bishop of Victoria. His episcopacy was brief because he was transferred to Helena, Montana, where there were also Belgians.⁵⁸ His auxiliaries and compatriots, Louis Lootens and Joseph Nicolaye, were passed over as his successors because the Holy See recognized that the Anglophone constituency did not want any more French and Belgian clergy and bishops.⁵⁹

In contrast to the Pacific coastal region where Belgian bishops were immigrants, on the Prairies three Canadian-educated prelates distinguished themselves and their community. Maurice Baudoux was

born at La Louvière in Belgium and came to Prud'homme, Saskatchewan, at the age of nine. He was ordained in 1929 and served in his home parish of Prud'homme until his appointment as bishop of St. Paul in 1948, and then archbishop of St. Boniface in 1952. As a Walloon who grew up in a predominantly French Canadian and French parish, he engaged in the traditional Francophone struggle for language, educational and cultural rights. In St. Boniface his constant defence of minority rights and promotion of inter-cultural harmony won him the distinction of being the first Western Canadian prelate to receive an honorary degree from a Protestant institution, United College in Winnipeg.⁶⁰ Archbishop Baudoux's successor was also a Belgian, born in southern Manitoba. Antoine Hacault, grandson of pioneer Louis Hacault and Leontine Tilmont of Bruxelles, was ordained in 1951, named auxiliary bishop in 1964, and then coadjutor with succession rights to Archbishop Baudoux in 1972. Like his grandfather, he was conservative in his views and habits.

From Swan Lake, Rémi De Roo, son of Raymond De Roo and Josephine De Pape, second generation Flemish Canadian farmers, was raised by the Ursuline nuns in Bruxelles after his mother's untimely death. He was ordained in 1950, served as parish priest at Holy Cross in Norwood, a multi-ethnic parish, and rose to episcopal rank in 1962. As Bishop of Victoria he was active in the peace movement and human rights issues. He became particularly outspoken on economic issues and was perceived as the most liberal and outgoing member of the episcopacy. He was named to the Pontifical Commission for Culture and was a major contributor on social affairs and economic policy for the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. Although he was temporarily disgraced for an alleged mismanagement of diocesan funds, he was vindicated subsequently and his important contribution to Catholic social thought was honoured. The intellectual trajectory of the two Manitoba-born bishops is illuminating: Hacault was a descendant of a controversial outspoken Walloon journalist and became a conservative administrator, while De Roo was a descendant of a conservative farmer and became an outspoken liberal reformer. That the Holy See named Hacault to St. Boniface and De Roo to Victoria was not haphazard.

In the Second Vatican Council, Baudoux assembled a group of young consultants who later became bishops: Remi De Roo at Victoria, Antoine Hacault at St. Boniface, and Noel Delaquis at Gravelbourg. This group made a special contribution as Baudoux addressed the Council

seven times and his team submitted twenty-three written texts. Among the innovative ideas they presented were the use of the vernacular in the mass and breviary, the updating of pastoral care, and the importance of Biblical studies. They were strongly supported by Cardinal Soenens of Brussels and Cardinal Liénart of Lille.⁶¹

Religion in Education

Belgians were involved in two historic struggles known as the “Manitoba School Question” and the “Territorial School Question.” Public education was originally under the control of the several colonial administrations that came together to form the Dominion of Canada in 1867, with territorial additions thereafter. The division of powers under a federal system of government left public schooling in the jurisdictional domain of the provinces. In Manitoba and the North-West Territories there was originally a dual confessional system of public schools, Protestant and Catholic, each in control of its own curriculum, teacher training, inspection system, and languages of instruction. The Pacific coastal colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia had a common non-sectarian system with instruction in English. When the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan were created in 1905, they adopted a separate school system, based on the Ontario model. This system set up common non-sectarian schools and permitted within each school district the organization of a separate Catholic or Protestant school if numbers warranted. All schools followed a common curriculum and teacher-training program in this system. Belgian immigrants came into a situation that was in transition and open to acrimonious conflicts. The Public Schools Act, 1890, abolished the Catholic public school system in Manitoba, creating a single public system out of the Protestants school sector. Although the act seemed unconstitutional, the federal government avoided disallowing it, preferring to let the courts decide if there were appeals.⁶² These actions were undertaken because the libertarian rhetoric of the Protestants held that only public schools promoted unity and freedom.⁶³ At that moment, an ultra-conservative Catholic journalist from *Le Courrier de Bruxelles*, Louis Hacault, was touring the West with a Belgian delegation. He had carried on a vociferous campaign in the Belgian press against “godless schools,” Free Masons and agnostics. He quickly turned to denouncing the same “enemies of virtue” in Manitoba, but his loud

protests made little impact on government officials. Catholic officials were somewhat embarrassed by the vituperation of his allegations: "Although it seemed the theories were pushed somewhat to the extreme, he advanced nothing without some proof, and if it was difficult to accept some of his ideas, it would have been very embarrassing to attempt to refute them."⁶⁴ The schools in the parishes continued to operate much as before without the official Catholic designation. In the St. Boniface region, where the majority of the new arrivals were concentrated, the schools operated largely in French under the supervision of T.A. Bernier, former provincial Superintendent of Catholic Schools. Bernier was a friend of the archbishop, a correspondent of the Société Saint-Raphaël, and an immigration agent working on the Belgian file.

In order to maintain instruction in French and religion, *écoles libres*, or "free schools," were organized in some localities supported by voluntary donations and funds raised by the clergy from the wider Catholic community. Msgr Langevin had encountered the term "free schools" in Belgium signifying self-supporting institutions distinct from those benefiting from state support. In St. Alphonse, abbé Campeau had the school continue with the voluntary labour of students and financial sacrifice of the parents. The students undertook to gather wood for fuel, haul water, shovel snow, till the school garden and clean the classroom. In Bruxelles, abbé Willems transformed the public Ecole Ste. Marie into a "free school" in 1895 and personally taught the curriculum set out by the province. Dr. Alphonse Verwilghen sacrificed time from his medical practice to teach English to pupils and adults who wanted to learn the dominant language of the wider community.⁶⁵ The Lorne municipal council, which included Belgian members, gave an annual grant to these schools. Flemings united with Walloons in demanding a Catholic education, although a few were in favour of the non-sectarian system. The archbishop opined "we count on changing their minds."⁶⁶ Gradually, some rural Catholic schools frequented by Belgian children accepted the public non-sectarian system and inspection.

Appeals were made to the consul general to organize support in Belgium for the beleaguered Catholic schools. Jules de Bernard de Fauconsol noted "what discreet reserve I am obliged to observe in this Canadian political question." It would be impolitic to advertise in Belgian newspapers for contributions to a Manitoba Schools Fund. On the other hand, he observed, "the most practical method, in my opinion, would be to

send the abbé Willems to recruit emigrants in Belgium and perhaps bring back money.” He offered to contact the Minister of the Interior “to obtain for him a free return ticket, and the position of an immigration agent.”⁶⁷ Following the accession to power of the Liberals under Wilfrid Laurier in 1896, negotiations were initiated with the Manitoba government, resulting in a compromise known as the Laurier-Greenway Agreement, 1897. It introduced a system of bilingual public schools alongside the common schools.

In the North-West Territories the erosion of the dual confessional system was incremental and aroused less public outcry than in Manitoba. In 1901, a Department of Education was created and all schools were subject to this central administration. Although the legislative trend was clear, application in specific cases could be somewhat different. In Lethbridge, in 1889, Father Leonard Van Tighem opened a school and brought the Faithful Companions of Jesus to operate the boarding institution. The local newspaper deplored the move, advocating a single public school to assimilate the immigrants’ children because “many of them bring hatred of Government, hatred of liberty, and hatred of humanity.”⁶⁸ The social leaders in the community belittled Van Tighem’s work among the “foreign element” and proceeded to attempt to block his efforts to obtain Territorial funding for his school. He responded: “there are now [1893] over eighty children attending of which a dozen are Protestants. Thus has the so-called separate school become more public than the public school.”⁶⁹

The Walloons in Bellegarde believed they would encounter fewer difficulties in organizing a Catholic public school because they formed a religiously homogeneous community, unlike Lethbridge.⁷⁰ In September 1899, they organized Bellegarde Catholic Public School No. 50 but encountered difficulties in recruiting and retaining suitable teachers. They persisted in their efforts and were successful in retaining their Catholic instruction through both the school crisis and the municipal restructuring crisis that followed. The crisis in the North-West Territories was resolved differently than in Manitoba. Both jurisdictions had originally followed the Quebec model of a dual confessional system. Manitoba eventually moved to the Maritime model of a single non-sectarian public system while the Territories, upon attaining provincial status in 1905 for Saskatchewan and Alberta, adopted the Ontario model that permitted a separate Catholic system alongside the common schools.

Belgians found themselves supporting different school system depending upon the provincial jurisdiction in which they lived.

Language and Education

The Canadian West was originally a jurisdiction known as the Mer de l'Ouest, with headquarters at Fort Kaministiquia [Thunder Bay, Ontario], frequented by Montreal-based fur traders and itinerant Catholic missionaries. Its Métis population adopted French as its European language. After the British conquest, the region became the territory of a royal charter company, the Hudson's Bay Company, that permitted the Earl of Selkirk to found a small Red River colony at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine rivers, where the Catholic mission of St. Boniface developed. Following the sale of the territory to the Canadian government in 1869, Louis Riel's provisional government maintained the established bilingual character of the settlement, and this passed over "in practice," but not law, into the constitution of the province of Manitoba, 1870.

Religious rights and linguistic rights were confused because Catholics often used their schools to offer instruction in French. European immigration resulted in demands for recognition of languages other than English and French as mediums of instruction, on the one hand, and measures to assimilate the "new subjects" through an integrationist Anglo-conformist curriculum and school system, on the other hand. In Bellegarde, for example, the inspector's report in 1903 was very critical. It said: "The teaching is mainly in French and the pupils are not gaining much ability to use English." The solution proposed was clear. "They are not likely to improve in the use of English unless English is used and the pupils are required to use it.... There seems to be no necessity for the constant use of French."⁷¹ During the first provincial election in Saskatchewan in 1905, the archbishop reminded parishioners in a letter read from pulpits that the Conservative Territorial government had increasingly restricted French and Catholic instruction from 1885 to 1901. The publication of the pastoral letter was widely viewed as clerical interference in secular affairs. Bellegarde voters supported the Liberal candidate, a clear indication that these Walloons followed the example of their French Canadian neighbours.⁷² The Liberal government that came to power in 1896 in Ottawa was seen as open to increased immigration and a resolution of the Manitoba School Question. The Laurier-Greenway Agreement provided

for a system of bilingual schools, shifting the emphasis away from religion to language. Clause 258 of the revised Manitoba Public Schools Act, 1897, provided that “when 10 of the pupils of any school speak the French language, or any language other than English, as their native language, the teaching of such pupils shall be conducted in French, or such other language, and English upon the bilingual system.”⁷³ The English-French bilingual schools would serve the Walloons as well as a number of Flemings who also spoke French. Rome was convinced that the clergy should adopt a more conciliatory approach.⁷⁴ On the other hand, Roman authorities supported the efforts of Hacault and others to work secretly for restoration of the Catholic schools.⁷⁵

Following the implementation of the terms of the Laurier-Greenway Agreement in 1897, former Catholic public schools and “free schools” transformed themselves into English-French bilingual schools. Flemish parents in St. Boniface living along the banks of the Seine River petitioned their school board for an English-Flemish bilingual school, but the board was unable to supply qualified teachers. The request was never taken up subsequently. In the St. Alphonse, Somerset and Swan Lake area, seventeen one-room rural English-French bilingual schools were organized.⁷⁶ Louis Hacault led a press campaign on the premise that it was impossible to separate French instruction from a Catholic curriculum and environment in both Canadian and Belgian publications.⁷⁷ Abbé Jean Gaire also took up the fight to raise money for schools through articles in a bulletin called initially *Les Annales du denier du Manitoba*, in *Le Défenseur du Canada catholique et français*, and in *La question des écoles ... appel à la France et la Belgique*. Although the Francophone communities retained much of their cultural identity under the bilingual school system, the church was less assured about other ethnocultural groups such as the Flemings.

With the outbreak of World War I there were numerous expressions of fear the country was becoming “balkanized,” through inadequate instruction in English language and literature and inappropriate civic attitudes. John W. Dafoe in the *Manitoba Free Press* expressed this sentiment: “There is a real danger that Canada may become a multilingual country, inhabited by different peoples, speaking different tongues, and cherishing divergent national ideals.”⁷⁸ In this charged atmosphere, the newly elected Liberal government of T.C. Norris in 1915 considered abolishing the bilingual system and introducing compulsory school attendance. Charles Newcombe, Superintendent of Schools, conducted an investigation of

the schools. The tenor of his report did not support the charges made by the *Manitoba Free Press* and the *Winnipeg Tribune*. Newcombe found some “administrative difficulties,” such as a tendency in the English-French schools to use French as the medium of instruction throughout the day for the primary grades, but he made no recommendation for abolition of the bilingual system. There was also the problem that only one bilingual school existed in some multilingual settlements, so that one or two Belgian families had access only to an English-Ruthenian bilingual school. In Bruxelles and Grande Clairière the teachers lacked frequent contact with native speakers of English. There were 126 English-French rural and village schools with 234 teachers and 7 393 pupils. In St. Boniface Provencher School, with ninety-eight Belgian pupils, and St. Joseph’s Academy, with sixty-five Belgian pupils, pupils were taught by religious orders and were performing efficiently: “at a relatively early age, acquiring ease and fluency in the use of English.” In Ste-Rose-du-Lac village school, the students had a better understanding of English than the teacher and had reached a “fairly good” standard. At Ecole Ste-Marie in Bruxelles, although both teachers were English-speaking, junior pupils were unable to converse in English. However, in all schools, virtually all children were fluently bilingual by Grade 8, contrary to assertions appearing in the press and voiced publicly and in the legislature by opponents of the system.⁷⁹

Newcombe’s findings were also supported by inspectorial reports of the period for southern Manitoba. In 1915, rural school districts near St. Alphonse, Somerset, Swan Lake, St. Leon and Holland were added to the inspectorial duties of an Anglophone, Dr. D.S. Woods, whose comments on “twenty districts, comprising 30 departments serving children of French and Belgian extraction” were revealing. He wrote:

The convent schools are outstanding examples of attractive surroundings, comfort and neatness. I was particularly pleased in the latter type of school with the sense of respect, courtesy and good manners of the children. In English composition and conversation good progress has been made in St. Alphonse, Bruxelles, Somerset, the senior room of Lourdes. And the junior room at St. Leon, and also in the following rural schools – Cleophas, Faure, Montcalm and Pike Lake.⁸⁰

Nevertheless, the Norris government proceeded to repeal the bilingual clause. The *Manitoba Free Press* did not believe in “abolishing the French language from the schools” because the French were entitled to “special treatment” as a founding partner. The *Winnipeg Telegram*, on the other hand, found no convincing argument for abolition and believed the Liberals were influenced by “extreme influences” within the party.⁸¹ The government alleged that Robert Fletcher, Deputy Minister of Education from 1903 to 1939, had found the bilingual system in “near collapse.” Fletcher later denied such a view:

By 1916 the schools were producing young people with a fair knowledge of English. There was a marked improvement in this respect in the secondary schools in French communities, and the leaders among the French set themselves the task of seeing that their young people destined for the teaching profession measured up to the required standards.⁸²

Immediate implementation of the full scope of the legislation did not occur. Belgians everywhere continued to support bilingual schooling. The Belgian Club sent a letter of support to opposition members of the legislature. In 1917, the inspector in Deloraine reported on the last bilingual classes: “Flossie school, in a Belgian settlement in the Turtle Mountains, continues to do excellent work. Here the pupils speak with scarcely a trace of accent.” The convent school in Bruxelles continued to operate under public school jurisdiction and drew the commendation: “It would not be fair at this point to overlook the success that has been made by the staff of Bruxelles village school, where in three years time the pupils from the lowest to the highest grades have learned to speak English very well.” In all the Belgian rural school districts, the inspector in 1918 found that “considerable effort had been made to better physical conditions” and teachers were upgrading their qualifications.⁸³

In both Saskatchewan and Alberta, communities tried to staff their schools with teachers of their own ethnolinguistic group. This usually satisfied Walloons settled in Francophone communities. The practice was tolerated because it was assumed by some educators that English could be taught best to non-English speakers through the medium of the mother tongue. This assumption was challenged by Norman F. Black in *English for the Non-English* (Regina, 1913), who asserted that success would

be achieved only through the exclusive use of English in the classroom, school premises and community activities. This idea was taken up by school inspectors, as demonstrated in one report: “Teach the children to speak, to read and to write English – this is our first and great educational commandment. Our second commandment is like unto the first – through the common medium of English within our schools build up a national character.” French Canadians combined language and religion; English Canadians combined language and nationalism.⁸⁴

