Father Albert Lacombe

BORN : St Sulpice, Québec February 28, 1827

ORDAINED : St Hyacinthe, Québec June 13, 1849

DIED : Midnapore, Alberta December 12, 1916

Albert studied at Assumption College and was ordained at St. Hyacinthe on June 13, 1849. The young priest immediately went west and worked at Pembina, North Dakota (1849-1851), with Father Georges Belcourt. He then returned to Montréal and was named vicar at Berthier (1851-1852).

In March 1852, he offered his services to Bishop Alexandre Taché, o.m.i., the new Auxiliary Bishop of Saint-Boniface, and followed him to Red River. He never again left the West and spent his entire life working in the dioceses of Saint-Boniface and Saint-Albert where he was Vicar General for two Bishops.

In 1852, Father Lacombe went to Edmonton and spent part of the winter (1852-1853) with the Cree and Métis at Lac-la-Biche and then wintered at Fort Edmonton (Fort of the Prairies or St Joachim). In 1853, he settled at Lac-Ste-Anne and in 1855, he made a long trip to Lesser Slave Lake (Grouard) and to Peace River.

He began his novitiate at Lac-Ste-Anne, on May 29, 1855, and professed his perpetual vows on September 28, 1856. In 1858, he founded St. Joachim's mission at Fort Edmonton and in 1861, with Bishop Taché, he established the site for a new mission: St. Albert, Alberta, which carries his name.

In 1863, he left the mission at Lac-Ste-Anne, where he had resided since 1853, moved to St. Albert, and in 1864, he was asked to evangelize the Cree and the Blackfoot. Thus he travelled the prairies from 1865 to 1872, and in 1865, he founded the colony of 'St-Paul-des-Cris ' (Brosseau), Alberta. At the same time, he worked as peacemaker in the wars between the Cree and the Blackfoot. In 1863, he opened a flour mill at St. Albert, the first one west of Winnipeg, and he laid out a wagon trail from Red Deer to St. Albert. He also built a bridge over the Sturgeon River in 1863, the first bridge in this part of the country and he also visited Jasper (Fort of the Mountains), in 1865, 1866 and in 1871.

During a smallpox epidemic in 1871, he was appointed to the board of Health of the Northwest Territories, for the Prairie Region. In 1872, he became Vicar General of St. Albert, and in 1873, he represented Bishop Taché at the General Chapter of the Oblates.

On his return, he was named parish priest at Ste-Marie in Winnipeg (Fort Garry) and placed in charge of colonization in Manitoba. He was also parish priest (1874-1876, 1878-1880).

In 1882, he left Winnipeg for the diocese of St. Albert and became Superior of the Calgary district (1882-1886). In 1884, he founded and became the first principal of the Indian school at Dunbow (De Winton, High River), Alberta, which was granted by the federal government (1883). In that same year, he served as intermediary between the Canadian Pacific and the Blackfoot, who were opposed to the railroad going through their reserve. He was rewarded for his negotiations when the first train arrived in Calgary in 1885: for one hour, he was President of this powerful company, which continued its generosity towards him until his death.

From this time on, he usually resided in the Calgary region, although he was often on the road for the various missions given him by the government or his ecclesiastical superiors. He was principal at Dunbow (1884-1885), visiting Pincher Creek (1884), Okotoks (1885) and Medicine Hat (1883). He then lived at Fort McLeod (1887-1889) and at Calgary (1883-1886, 1893, 1897).

In 1885, at the request of the prime minister of Canada, he played an important role in the pacification of a large number of Indian Tribes, especially the Blackfoot, during the Rebellion. Responsible for the Blackfoot district, he resided either at Fort McLeod or at Pincher Creek (1884-1885, 1889-1898). In 1893, he opened a hospital on the Blood Reserve (Stand Off or Cardston) and a school in 1898. He was a member of the Board of Education of the Northwest Territories (1886-1892). He was also parish priest at St Joachim's, in Edmonton (1894-1897), built a chapel in Strathcona [Edmonton] (1895) and was in the forefront when questions pertaining to schools in Western Canada arose at the time.

As well, Father Lacombe became particularly interested in the foundation of the Métis colony at Saint-Paul-des-Métis (1895-1905); he also took part in the government commission responsible for treaties with the Indians of Athabasca and Rivière-la-Paix (1899), then in 1900 and in 1904, he went to Austria where he met with Emperor François-Joseph and traveled to Galicia to deal with religious matters concerning the Galicians of Canada.

During 1902 and 1903, he was once again named responsible for Calgary, while in 1904, we reach him in Pincher Creek which he calls his “Ermitage Saint-Michel” where he will remain for several years. However, during that time, he was director of Medicine Hat in 1905, he attended the General Chapter in 1906 and the Québec Plenary Council (1909) while also looking after the organization of a home for the aged in Midnapore, the Lacombe Home, where he will reside from 1909 until 1916.

He was revered by Indians of all tribes as one of their own, not only as their father, but as their brother, as mentioned by the Blackfoot chief, Crowfoot. The Indians called him the kindhearted man, while the faithful of Calgary called him “our knowledgeable elder”.

Many geographical entities, several monuments, among them the Château Lacombe in Edmonton, and historical sites were named after Father Lacombe.

He was buried in the crypt of the church of Saint-Albert.