

Rosa Bruno-Jofré
*The Missionary Oblate Sisters:
Vision and Mission.*

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The Missionary Oblate Sisters: Vision and Mission is Rosa Bruno-Jofré's contribution to the McGill-Queen's "Studies in the History of Religion Series." *The Missionary Oblate Sisters* is the sixty-fourth book in the series and the fourth to examine congregations of Roman Catholic women religious (the term commonly used in the literature to cover nuns and sisters). *The Missionary Oblate Sisters* is a well written, critical, and methodologically innovative study of a small and frequently overlooked congregation.

The Missionary Oblates of the Sacred Heart and Mary Immaculate was founded in 1904 in St Boniface, Manitoba by Archbishop Louis Phillipe Adelaar Langevin, Ida Lafricain and Alma Laurendeau. It was to be a bilingual teaching congregation dedicated to enhancing and protecting the religious and ethno-cultural identity of Franco-Manitobans. Within five years of their foundation, the Missionary Oblate Sisters (as the community came to be known) began working as auxiliaries to the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, an order of priests and brothers, teaching and working in residential and reserve-based schools for Aboriginal children in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Bruno-Jofré argues that this latter identity of subordination to the Oblate Fathers in the residential school experience has overshadowed not only the congregation's initial purpose as bilingual educators, but also virtually every other aspect of its history. Mirroring their re-examination of their history as part of their post-Vatican II renewal, Bruno-Jofré writes a history that focuses on the inner life of the Sisters, as individuals and as a community, in order to understand their apostolic work.

The Preface, written by community member Sister Dora Tetreault, sets the context for this study. She describes the "long journey of discovery and challenging collaboration" (xii) between the Sisters and Bruno-Jofré that resulted in this history of the Missionary Oblates. Tetreault reveals that the production of this book challenged the myth of their foundation and led the community "to understand the painful but liberating

influence of acknowledging the truth" (xiii). With the co-operation of the congregation, Bruno-Jofré drew extensively on sources housed within its private archives and conducted oral history interviews with the Sisters. To these in-house sources, she added an array of other primary and secondary materials related to the history of the Catholic Church and schools in the Canadian West to create an original work that is an important contribution to Canadian social history. Bruno-Jofré's work provides a model of religious-secular scholarly collaboration from which a fine critical text results.

In the book's six chapters, Bruno-Jofré sensitively traces the growth of the congregation. Its beginnings were inauspicious. Only one of the first four women Langevin attempted to form into a community remained at the end of the first year. By 2004, 396 women had joined the congregation. Bruno-Jofré presents tables of data from which she creates a demographic profile of the community. Its members were primarily bilingual and daughters of Manitoba and Quebec farmers. In the course of the twentieth century, the community established 118 convents and missions in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Quebec, Ontario, North Dakota, Haiti, Chad, Cameroon, Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, and Thailand. The Sisters engaged in education, domestic and nursing services, social and pastoral work.

Chapter One deals with the first three years of the congregation's development. It documents the challenges for women who felt called to establish a life as a religious within the Roman Catholic Church. The chapter includes a fine analysis of the almost draconian power of the local bishop and the psychological elements of formation. The second chapter presents a detailed analysis of how the norms of community life were institutionalized between 1906 and 1915, tracing how the founders interacted with each other to draft the constitutions that governed community.

The third chapter proceeds chronologically, presenting an excellent analysis of congregational conditions between the years 1916 to 1927, and arguing that the lack of theological education on the part of the Sisters created challenges for congregational development. In later chapters, Bruno-Jofré returns to this theme, contrasting the contemporary challenges that emerged for Sisters with a theological education who assessed their congregational past.

The fourth chapter addresses congregational governance through the analysis of two chapters of the congregation. A chapter is an assembly to which representatives are elected. Its tasks include making decisions concerning the governance and regulation of the community, and in many instances, electing congregational leaders. Here the author offers a fascinating profile of an evolving congregation.

Chapter Five unfolds as a finely grained image of the complexities of the missions of the community, with the Sisters' involvement in residential schools especially well handled. The final chapter "Establishing Bonding Memories Through The Myth Of Foundation" is an excellent critical analysis of the foundation saga as seen through the lenses of the Second Vatican Council renewal initiatives.

From both methodological and content perspectives, *The Missionary Oblate Sisters* is an original contribution to the fields of the history of education, social history and religious studies. For both a national and an international audience, it serves as a model for the writing of a congregational history that moves far beyond the hagiographic orientation that is still far too dominant in the field. The written text is complemented by over one hundred carefully selected and captioned photographs, images, maps and charts, through which one can read a visual history of this unique religious community.