

Lifting the Veil: The Founding of the Missionary Oblate Sisters of the Sacred Heart and Mary Immaculate in Manitoba¹

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The founding in Manitoba of the Missionary Oblate Sisters of the Sacred Heart and Mary Immaculate in 1904, by Monseigneur Adélard Langevin, o.m.i., Archbishop of Saint-Boniface, may be understood as Langevin's protestation (in Jean Ségué's sense)² of his political isolation and against the ideology of anglicization and Anglo-conformity permeating the common school in the province. The relationship between Langevin and the two women who were to be known later as co-founders, Ida Lafricain from Montreal and Alma Laurendeau, a Manitoban, is particularly helpful in explaining the foundation. The forced transplantation from Montreal to Manitoba of Ida Lafricain lies at the centre of my discussion. Her transplantation prevented Ida from following what she believed was her religious call. Having traced Lafricain's resistance in and to the patriarchal, authoritarian institution of which she was a part, I analyze the "myth of foundation" as construed under the Sisters' dualistic discourse of God's will, obedience, grace, and mortification of the will.

CREATION OF THE NEW CONGREGATION AS A SIGN OF PROTESTATION

The Congregation of the Missionary Oblate Sisters of the Sacred Heart and Mary Immaculate was founded by Adélard Langevin, o.m.i., Archbishop of Saint-Boniface.³ The original inspiration was described by Sister Louis de

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All the archival materials cited in this article are in French; the English translations provided here are by the author.

²Jean Ségué, "Pour une sociologie de l'ordre religieux," *Archives des sciences sociales des religions* 57, no. 1 (January-March 1985): 64-65. See p. 4 for a discussion of this term and Ségué's stipulated definition of it.

³He succeeded Archbishop Alexandre Taché, who died in 1894. The diocese included Manitoba, the district of Keewatin to the north, and northwestern Ontario to the east up to Lake Superior, along with the district of Assiniboia to the west (southern Saskatchewan).

France as "a special working of the charism [grace] granted him to govern his diocese." In her words, "The foundation was to be, in part, an answer to the Manitoba School Question, to an urgent need of his diocese and essential to the fulfilling of his duty to his flock."⁴

Langevin heavily emphasized Catholic schooling for the development of the faith. In light of the arrival of Ukrainian, Polish, and German Catholic immigrants, he also worked to retain maternal languages as a counter-measure against Protestant proselytizing. In practical terms, Langevin consistently acted to organize as many private and parochial schools and to hire as many certificated teaching Sisters as possible. He wanted Sisters also to teach in the public system, particularly in largely Catholic communities in rural areas, where struggles over values with the Department of Education were waged through boards of trustees and in classrooms. In these communities schools were under the jurisdiction of elected boards of trustees.

Langevin dealt with linguistic demands and ethnic tensions in his diverse Catholic constituency by inviting various congregations of religious orders to come to Manitoba. Among female congregations that came were the Sisters of the Order of St. Benedict (who came from Duluth, Minnesota, and arrived in Winnipeg in 1905 to teach eastern European children at the Holy Ghost Parish), the Ruthenian Sisters known as Sisters Servants of Mary Immaculate, and the Soeurs de Miséricorde from Montreal. Fearful that teaching Sisters might be recalled from Manitoba, Langevin exercised his full authority and decided in 1912 to Canadianize the female congregations that provided formal

"La province ecclésiastique de Saint-Boniface," *Les cloches de Saint-Boniface* 1, no. 1 (January 1902): 3.

⁴Archives of the Missionary Oblate Sisters [hereafter, AMO], Sister Louis de France, m.o., Archbishop Adélard Langevin, manuscript (February 1977), 1. Charism, a personal gift for the benefit of others, has its source in Grace. It is an inspiration, a missionary vision, a means of serving the Church.

The Manitoba School Question refers to the school crisis between 1890, when provincial legislation abolished dual confessional state-supported schools, and 1896, when a settlement, known as the Laurier-Greenway Compromise, was reached. The consequent modification (1897) of the Public School Act set the legal basis for the building of the common school. The Catholic Church was not allowed to have school districts under its jurisdiction. The new legislation allowed for religious exercises under specific conditions. See Robert Perin, *Rome in Canada: The Vatican and Canadian Affairs in the Late Victorian Age* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), chapter 5, 127–57; Tom Mitchell, "Forging a New Protestant Ontario on the Agricultural Frontier: Public Schools and the Origins of the Manitoba School Question, 1881–1890," *Prairie Forum* 2, no. 1 (1986): 33–51; Gilbert Comeault, "The Politics of the Manitoba School Question and Its Impact on L.-P.-A. Langevin's Relations with Manitoba's Catholic Minority Groups, 1895–1915" (M.A. thesis, University of Manitoba, 1977).

education by detaching them from their original houses and placing them under his jurisdiction. This he did, for example, with the Chanoinesses Régulières des Cinq-Plaies-du-Sauveur, also called the Soeurs du Sauveur, who had come in 1895 from Lyon, France, and with the Sisters of the Order of St. Benedict.⁵ In addition, the Archbishop of the "absolute solutions" began his struggle to establish a new women's congregation, the Oblate Sisters, a French-English bilingual teaching congregation, thus providing yet another vehicle of Catholic education.

Letters about the creation of the congregation show a tension between, on the one hand, Langevin's religious concern, the specific needs of his Catholic constituency, and his fear of anglicization, and, on the other hand, his French/English, culturally dual view of Canada.⁶ Although several letters written between 1900 and 1902 make no reference to the French character of the prospective congregation,⁷ his correspondence from late 1902 with a St. Viateur father, J. Emile Foucher, pastor of Outremont, Montreal, makes clear that Langevin was committed to the foundation of a congregation with a strong French-Canadian character.⁸ Langevin thought a French-Canadian congregation could deal with the aftermath of the Manitoba School Question through Catholic education and through language. Thus the first Constitution of the Oblate Sisters recommends the study of French and English and, if possible, of a third language like German, Polish, or Hungarian, or an Aboriginal tongue.⁹ As early as 1909 and 1910, Langevin's talks to the Oblate Sisters referred to possible undertakings with the Hungarians and the Ruthenians, among others, none of which materialized.¹⁰

⁵Marguerite Jean, c.c.i.m., *Evolution des communautés religieuses de femmes au Canada de 1639 à nos jours* (Montréal: Fides, 1977), 151-56.

⁶AMO, Adéland, o.m.i., arch. de Saint-Boniface, to Dr. Jacques (Montreal), 10 October 1900; Adéland to Allen Guasco (General Secretary for the Propagation of the Faith), 30 March 1902; Adéland to Georgina White (Montreal), 22 March 1902; Adéland to Gravel, 30 March 1902; Adéland to the Mother General of Les Soeurs des Saints Noms de Jésus et Marie, 22 April 1902. See also Adéland, o.m.i., arch. de Saint-Boniface, "Appel en faveur des oeuvres catholiques du diocèse de Saint-Boniface, Manitoba," *Les cloches de Saint-Boniface* 1, no. 2 (15 February 1902): 25-28.

⁷AMO, Adéland to Guasco; Adéland to Georgina White; Adéland to Gravel; Adéland to the Mother General.

⁸AMO, Adéland to J. Emile Foucher (Montreal), 18 December 1902; 11 January 1903; 27 March 1903; 31 January 1904.

⁹AMO, Premières Constitutions des Soeurs Missionnaires Oblates du Sacré-Coeur et de Marie Immaculée, copy of the manuscript, St. Boniface, Manitoba, 3 July 1968.

¹⁰AMO, "Monseigneur Langevin, Quelques extraits des notes de notre soeur M. St-Charles, m.o., décédée le 10 Décembre 1945," manuscript.

The inspiration to create a new religious congregation can be interpreted as an act of protestation. Jean Séguéy used the term "protestation" to refer to acts or discourses of leaders and spiritual institutions whose effects are to reveal interests in opposition to the Church and its political stances; to the global (secular) society; or to the ways the clergy deals with secular problems.¹¹ The creation of the new congregation was, thus, Langevin's way of denouncing the ecclesiastical politics of the Manitoba School Question, and of acknowledging his political isolation. After January 1897, Rome effectively prevented the Quebec hierarchy from exerting political influence on behalf of Manitoba Catholics.¹² The prospective congregation was one way of dealing with anglicization and the prevalent Protestant culture.

In the aftermath of the Manitoba School Question, Langevin's resistance was aimed at the common school and thus the rising twentieth-century state. This is not to say that Langevin had renounced the claim and hope for "complete restitution" of a Catholic separate school system supported by public funding. That he would never relinquish. Rather, his protestation was deeply rooted in a sense of his role and his motto: "*Depositum custodi—Garde le dépôt*" and what he perceived as lack of understanding of his political circumstances by his ecclesiastical critics. Langevin would use his power and the power of the clergy in regulating social life in Catholic settings, and in mediating God's will to create a women's congregation.¹³

During the summer of 1902, Langevin decided to build a house, designed as a small convent, which he called Maison-Chapelle. It was located a few metres from the bilingual Normal School also being built at the corner of Masson and Aulneau Streets in St. Boniface and it was to be the cradle of the new Congregation. As early as December 1902, the house became the residence of two Franco-Manitoban and two pious Québécoises of poor socio-economic background. The house provided board and room for student-teachers attending Normal School and meals for St. Boniface College students. The directress of the house left amid internal conflict in January 1903. Ultimately only one woman of the original group remained. On the day of the departure of the directress, a fourteen-year-old Polish girl, Elizabeth Storozuk, from Ethelbert, Manitoba, the future Sister Marie-Gertrude, entered the Maison-

¹¹Jean Séguéy, "Pour une sociologie de l'ordre religieux," 64–65.

¹²Robert Perin, *Rome in Canada*, 127.

¹³For an account of early efforts at recruiting, see "Les débuts de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblates du Sacré-Coeur et de Marie Immaculée," *Chroniques des Missionnaires Oblates du Sacré-Coeur et de Marie Immaculée* 1, no. 1 (June 1911): 19–21.

Chapelle.¹⁴ In 1974, she described to the Oblate Sisters her encounter with Langevin. Elizabeth had been sick at Saint-Boniface Hospital and decided to work there to pay—as she said—“for my operation and be cured.” She continued:

Archbishop Langevin had come to the hospital on January 2, 1903; he saw the Sisters [Grey Nuns], there were not so many, and nurses. Then he came to a corner to speak to the people at work; we were thirty altogether. He pointed to me and said, “Who is that little girl? I haven’t seen her yet.” Sister said, “She is a little Polish girl and she wants to be a nun.” Langevin responded, “Oh well, then, she is mine. I am taking her.”

Elizabeth became an auxiliary Sister (*soeur converse*) assigned to manual work and French became her daily language.¹⁵

The date of the first entry in the “Journal de la Maison-Chapelle,” 29 July 1903, coincides with the arrival of two new recruits, Alma Laurendeau and Zénaïde Marcoux. It reads: “A touching simple ceremony took place at the Maison-Chapelle, opened in St. Boniface by Archbishop Langevin with the goal of preparing teachers.”¹⁶ Langevin was the source of the institution’s authority, providing guidelines for the rule of life, distributing tasks and roles, and indicating that the congregation would be called Oblates of the Sacred Heart and Mary Immaculate when it came officially into being by canonical erection. The religious habit was to be distinctive in having the scapular of the Sacred Heart,¹⁷ but members of the group had great difficulty in reaching agreement on the model of the religious habit and on several other matters.¹⁸ There was no sense of community at that point and no leadership within the

¹⁴AMO, Mère Marie-Joseph, m.o., “First Attempts at Organizing the Congregation of the Missionary Oblate Sisters,” translated by Sister Suzanne Boucher, manuscript, 2.

¹⁵AMO, Elizabeth Storozuk (Sister Marie-Gertrude), “Oral History of the Beginning of the Missionary Oblate Sisters as Told in 1974 When She Was Eighty-Five Years Old.”

¹⁶AMO, “Journal de la Maison-Chapelle,” 29 July 1903.

¹⁷The scapular of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is a piece of white flannel cloth embroidered with the emblem of a red bleeding heart circled with thorns and surmounted with golden flames. It is said that from 14 February to 8 December 1876, the Virgin Mary, calling herself “mother all merciful,” appeared to Estelle Faguette, in Pellevoisin. Estelle Faguette (1843–1927) was a thirty-year-old woman dying of tuberculosis and peritonitis. She was miraculously cured. She spent the rest of her life spreading Mary’s message—love of Jesus through prayer, conversion, and penance or reparation—and making scapulars of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Monastère des Dominicaines, *Pellevoisin, un centenaire: Estelle nous parle* (Pellevoisin, France: Imprimerie Laboureur, 1976).

¹⁸AMO, Mère Marie-Joseph, m.o., “First Attempts,” 10–11. This is the only source of information regarding the first two attempts to create the Congregation and is based on oral accounts.

group. Differences among the members generated tensions to the point that the taking of the holy habit scheduled for 1 November 1903 had to be postponed.¹⁹ By January 1904, there were only three women in the house, Alma Laurendeau, Marie Laure Roy, and Elizabeth Storozuk.

Born in Quebec, Alma Laurendeau came very young to Manitoba with her family and taught immediately after high school in Franco-Manitoban rural communities for seven years, from 1896 to 1903. She attended Normal School during the summer and obtained a teaching certificate. She was representative of the *modus vivendi* created by Franco-Manitobans in rural areas after 1890. She began as a bilingual teacher in Barnsley, a poor community ten miles from Carman, taking a position offered by abbé Arthur Beliveau (the future archbishop), himself sent to Alma's house by Langevin. Alma had been recommended by the pastor of the Cathedral. Langevin asked her to develop the faith among her students and, through them, among their parents. He thus showed his reliance on education for the preservation of Catholicism, for Barnsley had no regular religious services. The next year she went to Fannystelle, where she placed a special emphasis on religion and faith as a basis for citizenship. In September 1898, she went to St.-Malo. In 1901 she was in Lorette and then in Ile-des-Chênes for two years.²⁰ Alma, the future Sister Marie-Joseph and later Superior General, embodied the virtues then valued by the Church in a woman: she was obedient, unassuming, eager to accept God's will as dictated by the Church.

Langevin had been carrying on correspondence with Father J. Emile Foucher, c.s.v., pastor of Outremont, Quebec. His letters to Foucher show a relentless urgency to find a mature, experienced religious woman to head up the prospective congregation. This request appears along with a passionate commitment to the scapular of the Sacred Heart, very dear to Foucher.²¹ In January 1904 Langevin called Alma to the Archbishop's house and said to her: "I give you all the weight of this project that must go on. . . . I am convinced God wants this work." Langevin needed Alma for his prospective congregation. He used the power of his spiritual position to persuade her of her duty to attain his objective, that is, to found a bilingual teaching congregation. Alma was a woman profoundly attached to the French Catholic culture of Manitoba. She had only four days to make her decision but the request had come from the Archbishop and in Alma's understanding of religious life, he mediated God's

¹⁹AMO, Mère Marie-Joseph, m.o., "First Attempts," 18.

²⁰Ibid., 14-19.

²¹AMO, Adélard to Foucher, 11 January 1903; 27 March 1903; 16 October 1903; 6 November 1903; 10 December 1903; 31 January 1904; 25 February 1904.

will.²² Alma agreed to the request and carried the responsibility for two years.²³

The "Journal de la Maison-Chapelle" begins again in March 1904. New members had joined the group and the date for the Novitiate had been established as March 24.²⁴ Ida Lafricain joined the prospective congregation on 19 March and was the experienced, mature religious woman for whom Langevin had been looking.

THE QUEBEC SOLUTION: BREAKING A CALL

The way Langevin founded the Congregation shows his isolation. He looked for Québécoises to do the work. In fact, Langevin and Father J. Emile Foucher targeted Ida Lafricain and decided to bring her to Manitoba to work with the new community.

Ida Lafricain was born in Montreal in 1871, entering in 1894 Montreal's Bethany House, a house of good works financed by Madame Poitou and directed by Father Almiro Pichon, S.J.²⁵ Ida taught catechism to mentally challenged persons, street children, and other poor youth, and visited poor families for eight years. Among the women who lived in the house was Délia Tétreault, who later founded the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception. Ida and Délia became close friends and one day Ida shared her apprehension regarding the future of the House. She recalled: "After eight years, there had not been any notable change. Nothing indicated that we would become religious some day. I said then to Mlle Tétreault: 'But, I always had the idea of working in the Missions!' She [Délia] threw herself in my arms and crying she told me: 'God has manifested his will through your mouth.'" Ida said that Délia advised her to study pharmacy at the Hôtel-Dieu hospital to prepare herself for missionary work overseas and Délia went to the Sisters of the Congregation de Notre-Dame to learn about religious life.²⁶ The testimony shows

²²AMO, Mère Marie-Joseph, m.o., "First Attempts," 21-23.

²³Sister Gabrielle Viau, m.o., *Elles étaient deux: vol. 2. Mère Marie-Joseph du Sacré Cœur, m.o.* (St. Boniface, Manitoba: 1989), 31.

²⁴AMO, "Journal de la Maison-Chapelle," first entry for March 1904 (no day recorded); also 15 and 24 March 1904.

²⁵Following Yves Raguin, S.J., Father Pichon founded Bethany House. Yves Raguin, S.J., *Au-delà de son rêve . . . Délia Tétreault* (Montréal: Fides, 1991), 49. However, according to the Notes of Père Léon Pouliot, S.J., the House was founded by Madame Poitou. Archive ASJCF, St-Jérôme BO-51, 1 Pichon (R.P.).

²⁶AMO, Sister M. François-de-Sales, "Notes recueillies sur notre chère Mère M. Saint-Viateur," no date, written before 1922. For an account of Délia Tétreault's life and

a convergence of interests, a desire to be full religious women, and a common call for missionary work. Délia's dream had been with her for a long time.

In January 1901 Délia Tétreault received approval from Monseigneur Bruchési, Archbishop of Montreal, to establish the Ecole Apostolique to prepare women for missionary work in Africa and China. Délia opened the Ecole with the help of Ida Lafricain and Joséphine Montmarquet. In February 1902, she rented a small house at 900 Maplewood Avenue, Côte-des-Neiges, in Montreal, where on 3 June the Ecole Apostolique opened its doors.²⁷ These three women formed the nucleus of the future Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception. Langevin had heard of Ida Lafricain through an acquaintance of hers who visited St. Boniface. Subsequently, he visited Délia Tétreault at the Ecole. Ida accidentally overheard Langevin saying, "You will give her to me. Won't you?" After the visit, Ida recalled, Délia went to her bedroom and lay in bed. Ida tells of Délia's reaction:

Later I brought her lunch, she was all in tears. Around four I took her a glass of milk; I found her very sad, the same at dinner time. And since she did not say a word, I asked her [what was the matter]. Finally, after the evening prayer, she told me that I needed to know what was going on. I went to my room and I cried. I told her, "Please tell me what is the problem? I heard something without meaning to." "I did not want to tell you," Tétreault said, "because I was afraid that you would leave, and I lack the generosity to let you go." (Such a delicate soul!) "But you know very well that I do not want to go," I replied. This response made her so happy that she threw herself into my arms and cried with happiness. On November 21, 1902, she bought me a 10-karat gold ring, gave it to me, and said: "Here's the pledge, we will never be separated, will we?"²⁸

This dramatic testimony clearly shows that these two women did not see Ida's transplantation as God's will.

In May 1903 the personnel of the Ecole made up of nine members moved to Chemin de la Côte Ste-Catherine, parish of Outremont. There Ida met Langevin's supporter, Father Foucher, the parish priest, who became her

her relation with Father Pichon and the clergy, see Yves Raguin, S.J., *Au delà de son rêve*, chapters 2, 3, and 4.

²⁷Gisele Villemure, m.i.c., *Qui est Délia Tétreault? Mère Marie du Saint-Esprit, 1865-1941* (Québec: Bibliothèque Nationale du Québec, 1983), 23.

²⁸AMO, Sister M. François-de-Sales, m.o., "Notes recueillies," 8-9. In a letter addressed to Délia Tétreault dated 15 August 1905, Ida wrote a post scriptum saying: "You will receive shortly the ring that you have given me. Here we will wear a silver ring. Therefore, I am sending it back as I had promised with best thanks" (Archives, Missionnaires de l'Immaculée-Conception [hereafter, AMIC], Sister St. Viateur to Ma bien chère amie [Délia Tétreault], 15 August 1905).

spiritual director.²⁹ Langevin was relying on Foucher to find the right person for his prospective congregation and Foucher was certainly not displeased by Langevin's offer to have the new Sisters wear the scapular of the Sacred Heart as revealed to Estelle Faguet in Pellevoisin.³⁰ Langevin's letters to Foucher take on an insistent tone from November 1903.³¹ As soon as Langevin realized Foucher was spiritual director of the women at the Ecole, or at any rate of the local parishioners, he asked Foucher to intervene to move Lafricain. Furthermore, Langevin made clear that he needed two persons. He saw the Ecole as a source from which he could draw women. Foucher promised complete participation in Langevin's plans to move Lafricain. His letter contains a statement inconsistent with Lafricain's testimony and the unfolding events.

I tell you that your proposal has struck me in an unusual manner. It is because the woman whose services you are requesting has been suffering in a strange way and for a long time, in the environment where she is; her character is not adapting to the condition in which she is living; and in spite of profound esteem and religious admiration for Miss Tétreault's holiness of life, she succeeds poorly in controlling herself and in hiding her natural oppositions. Their temperaments are too different from each other, so much so that I have already asked myself whether she was called to the apostolate in which she is presently involved.³²

It is difficult to determine the reasons for this assessment. Apparently, Ida Lafricain was afraid of being removed from the Ecole and saddened by the prospect of having to leave, as Langevin had already requested her services. She was not inclined to be as submissive as the clergy might normally expect.³³ Foucher, for his part, was reluctant to frame his favour to Langevin, the moving of Ida, in the discourse of grace and God's will. The Oblate Sisters later used Foucher's interpretation to explain the triumph of Grace in the process of founding instead of exploring Ida's testimony and her desires. The Sisters were taking their cue from the men.

Ida's accounts of events described how Foucher began his work of moving her to Manitoba by exerting all his power in his capacity as her spiritual director. She was in charge of the class of young children taking catechism

²⁹Gisele Villemure, m.i.c., *Qui est Délia Tétreault?*, 25.

³⁰AMO, "Journal de la Maison-Chapelle," 29 July 1903.

³¹AMO, Adéard to Foucher, 6 November 1903.

³²AMO, Foucher to Adéard, 11 November 1903. Also reproduced in Mère Marie-Joseph, m.o., "First Attempts," 19.

³³AMIC, Letter from abbé Gustave Bourassa to Délia Tétreault, 8 August 1902. This letter leads us to believe that Ida did not hide her disagreement, as became clear later during her first years in St. Boniface.

lessons at the Ecole. On 31 December 1903 she took the children to the parish church. After they were done, she went into the confessional to receive Father Foucher's blessing and to thank him for his co-operation with the Ecole. As she was leaving he asked her if she had received a letter from Monseigneur Langevin. She replied: "Monseigneur has not written to me." Foucher then asked her if she wanted to go to St. Boniface and he added, "I do not want a response now but think about it." Ida recalled: "I did not want to hear and I asked myself, What will I do? What will I do? I left the confessional so upset that the children asked me what was the matter."³⁴

A few days later Father Foucher asked Tétreault to tell Lafricain that he wanted them to make a novena. Lafricain responded, "If he does not want to say why he wants the novena, I won't make it. I am the one who presides over the prayers," and she forgot about it. She humorously said later that if she came to St. Boniface, it was not because of the novena.³⁵

Langevin's letters to Foucher made clear his need to know as soon as possible whether Lafricain had decided to come and asked for the day of her departure.³⁶ At the end of February, Father Foucher reminded her that he had not yet received an answer to his question and asked if she had written to Monseigneur Langevin informing him of her decision. Ida realized she was cornered. She recalled: "I came to the house, I was pensive, you understand, I felt sick. I did not eat, I did not sleep at all. I knew that they wanted to send me to a distant country, among the 'savages' and that I would be alone. Many dark ideas came to my mind." Finally, she surrendered: "I decided to write to Monseigneur Langevin. I told him I would leave on March 12. However, I had to postpone the trip. I arrived at St. Boniface on March 19, the feast of St. Joseph."³⁷ Monseigneur Bruchési and Délia Tétreault had given her permission to move to St. Boniface. Foucher had done the work entrusted to him by Langevin. For his part, Langevin committed the Sisters to the Lady of Pellevoisin.

Ida Lafricain was thirty-three years old at the time and adapting to her new reality was not easy. Langevin and Foucher had decided that she was the right person for the foundation in Manitoba without regard to what she felt was her spiritual calling or to her personal feelings. A simple event shows the extent of male domination. She had to change her name, as was customary in most congregations, so on 22 March, after the examination of candidates Ida addressed herself to Langevin:

³⁴AMO, "Notes recueillies," 10.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶AMO, Adélarde to Foucher, 31 January 1904; 25 February 1904; 6 March 1904.

³⁷AMO, Sister M. François-de-Sales, "Notes recueillies," 10–11.

"Your Grace, the other postulants have their names, what is going to be mine? I had thought about the name of Saint Joseph but I see that it is already taken." He responded, "You will be called Sister Saint Viateur." "But for what reason?" asked the postulant. "I thought," replied the Archbishop, "that it was understood and that you knew something about it: it is because of Father Foucher, cleric of St. Viateur, who has directed you here. I think that is going to please him."³⁸

So she became Sister Saint Viateur, compelled to take a name honouring the cleric who along with Langevin had contrived to move her to Manitoba, who had helped to end her work with Tétreault's apostolate, and who had caused her to give up her spiritual path. The women at the Ecole had thanksgiving as the main characteristic of their spirituality, but an Oblate Sister had to embrace reparation as a central element in spiritual life, making amends to God and to fellow humans for sin or wrongdoing in order to restore equity. As spiritual director, Foucher had exercised great power over her understanding and discerning of God's will. One can only imagine her doubt, and the fear she was no longer following divine guidance, torn as she was between her strong inner inclination and forceful external direction.

TAKING THE HABIT: IDA IN THE NEW CONGREGATION

The ceremony of habit investiture took place on 24 March 1904.³⁹ Ida described the ceremony as both comic and sad.⁴⁰ Some postulants had to leave, either to light the candles or to join the choir, and then come back for the ritual of investiture. The whole ceremony was in French. This was the beginning of the new Congregation. The main elements of the Catholic discourse of the time were there: submission, humility, mortification, sinfulness. The document for the canonical erection of the novitiate gave as reasons for the creation of the new congregation requests coming from various parts of the diocese for religious teachers to direct schools among whites and Aborigines. It also mentioned that the congregations of teaching women in Canada refused, for lack of members, to start new foundations. At the end of the ceremony the Archbishop formally appointed Sister Marie-Joseph, Alma Laurendeau, as Directress and named Sister Saint Viateur, Ida Lafricain, as Assistant. Langevin also distributed functions among the other four novices.⁴¹ The group began a year of formation in preparation for taking vows of chastity, obedience, and

³⁸ AMO, Mère Marie-Joseph, m.o., "First Attempts," 28.

³⁹ "Les débuts de la congrégation," 21.

⁴⁰ AMO, Sister M. François-de-Sales, "Notes recueillies," 11-12.

⁴¹ AMO, "Les débuts de la congrégation," 24.

poverty and promising observance of the Constitutions (which were taken to Rome in 1906).

The spirituality of the new Congregation was in the making. The Sisters shared with the Oblate Fathers devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, with reparation as the main element. Langevin, however, brought into the devotion the scapular as revealed to Estelle Faguet in Pellevoisin thereby linking the motherhood of Mary with the spirituality of the Heart. They shared with the Oblate Fathers devotion to Mary Immaculate. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception (proclaimed by Pius IX in 1854) meant that Mary was conceived and born without original sin and therefore did not share with other human beings, particularly women, the sinfulness inherited from Adam and Eve. The Sisters also shared with the Oblate Fathers the commitment to evangelize the poor. Monseigneur de Mazenod, founder of the Oblate Fathers, used the expression "âmes abandonnées," which referred to both the evangelization of the unfaithful and the provision of spiritual help to the people, "le petit peuple."⁴² This element of the charism, an effect of the industrial revolution in Europe, was strongly, although not exclusively, present in the Manitoban missionary/colonizing work. It nourished the Sisters' mission among the Aboriginal peoples as auxiliaries to the Oblate Fathers.⁴³ In a stricter nominal sense, the Oblate Sisters had a commitment to the poor, stated in their first Constitution (1906) and revealed in their approach to parish and even private schooling.

Four days after the ceremony, Ida wrote to Foucher about her spiritual and emotional torment during the event:

People say that the ceremony was beautiful. All the guests, and they were numerous, were happy. The Archbishop was jubilant. As far as I was concerned, my heart was too sad to be able to rejoice in this celebration, but these past few days I feel somewhat better. I try to recover my spirit and to put all my worries into the Heart of Our Lord, which is not always easy. I try to reason with myself by saying that all is well since everything is led by divine Providence. However, my poor human nature rebels against suffering and is not even willing to hear about it.⁴⁴

⁴²Hermenegilde Charbonneau, o.m.i., "Les pauvres et les âmes abandonnées d'après Mgr de Mazenod," in "Actes du congrès sur le charisme du fondateur aujourd'hui, Rome, 24 Avril-14 Mai, 1976" edited by Marcello Zago, o.m.i., *Vie oblate* 36 (March-June 1977): 131.

⁴³The Oblate Fathers had authority over the Missionary Oblate Sisters in the residential schools and the missionary work with the Aboriginal peoples.

⁴⁴AMO, Ida Lafraicain to Foucher, 28 March 1904.

Langevin left for Rome and the Holy Land on 12 April 1904 for six months. It was a terrible time for Ida. She promised herself not to leave until Langevin came back. Her letters to Foucher showed her spiritual struggle and her unhappiness. She read the signs, firmly convinced the *Ecole Apostolique* and Délia Tétreault's project were "willed by God" and that they would succeed. Langevin wrote to say it was Providence that had led her West ("that he saw this written in letters of fire").⁴⁵ Her profound rebellion is expressed in comments about the habit. She wrote to Foucher in May 1904: "I would like you to see us: we look like real towers." She found the habit "very ugly."⁴⁶ The main features of the habit had been chosen by Langevin, and as did in other cases, it sought to desexualize the woman in the context of an angelic asceticism conceived by men. She expressed her dislike for everything, including the priests and the pious exercises that, she said, took most of their time. Langevin had regulated the exercises: four hours every day in the chapel. She mentioned the recitation of the office of the Blessed Virgin, the rosary, the way of the cross during those hours. On Thursday, she continued in the same letter, "We have a holy hour from eleven o'clock till midnight. In addition, on the vigil of the first Friday of the month, the adoration began at eight o'clock in the evening until the next morning."⁴⁷ She saw very early the negative impact of the excessive amount of spiritual exercises on the life of a small apostolic congregation.

Langevin's political situation within the clergy worsened her crisis. By early August 1904 she had discovered two things: one, that the thought of Délia Tétreault's apostolate, with her day and night, appealed to her more than that of Archbishop Langevin; two, that she had doubts as to the success of the foundation. Furthermore, her doubts, she wrote to Foucher, were shared by the Vicar General and by all the priests of the Archbishop's house, except the chaplain of the *Maison-Chapelle*. Langevin had appointed the chaplain as her spiritual director but she was unable to open up to him. She found him very young "in every way" and "extremely exaggerated." She wrote: "Since the Archbishop left, he has repeated, at least twenty times, that the whole Apostolic School would be transferred from Outremont to St. Boniface, that it did not function any more and that Archbishop Langevin had convinced Miss Tétreault to leave the province of Quebec." The priest, fearful that Sister Saint Viateur might decide to leave, repeated again and again the story of the amalgamation. When Sister Saint Viateur laughed about it, thinking he was teasing her, the priest severely reproached her for her lack of faith in his words. She

⁴⁵AMO, Adélard to Mes chères filles, 24 April 1904.

⁴⁶AMO, Sister St. Viateur to Foucher, 1 May 1904.

⁴⁷Ibid.

then pretended she believed him to calm him down. From that day on, she became very cautious as to what she told him.⁴⁸ She remained attached to Foucher through her first year, but her isolation was already in train. By August, Sister Saint Viateur could not understand Tétreault's changed disposition toward her.

Sometimes I am tempted to believe that she does not have the freedom to write to me. If she could see how disappointed I am when the mail is brought at night and that there is nothing for me! Nonetheless, I try to accept this trial as best I can, but I often cry.⁴⁹

Her ties with Tétreault had been severed. The silence was only sporadically broken from 1905.⁵⁰

Sister Saint Viateur wrote a letter to abbé Gustave Bourassa, ecclesiastical authority of the Ecole Apostolique, asking his permission to return to the Ecole. His response contained stern words, to judge by her transcription of the letter:

If you do not succeed in overcoming these obstacles and these difficulties, I shall conclude that you are not called to religious life, and that you will have to return to your family. Make all the best efforts to identify with your house, and do not say "chez nous" any more when speaking of L'Ecole Apostolique; this is not befitting on any account.⁵¹

Despite Bourassa, Sister Saint Viateur had decided to leave and to stay with her family, and asked Délia Tétreault to help her to find a job as a nurse at the Hôtel-Dieu in Montreal.⁵² There is no way of knowing Délia's response, if there was one.

In a letter to Foucher on 18 February 1905, Langevin acknowledged the crisis during his absence and appreciated Sister Saint Viateur's perseverance because "Miss Tétreault's memory was haunting her day and night and that made her sad, sometimes to the point of death."⁵³ Langevin was grateful to Foucher because his letters helped Sister Saint Viateur "enormously and strengthened her determination to stay here till death, through obedience if not through personal taste." "Peace and happiness reign in the house," he added.

⁴⁸AMO, Sister St. Viateur to Foucher, 7 August 1904. Also, Sister Gabrielle Viau, m.o., *Elles étaient deux*, vo. 2, 36.

⁴⁹AMO, Sister St. Viateur to Foucher, 7 August 1904.

⁵⁰Sister St. Viateur destroyed the first letters she received from Délia Tétreault. Letters they exchanged later were formal and devoid of any personal sentiments.

⁵¹AMIC, Sister St. Viateur to Ma chère amie [Délia Tétreault], 23 August 1904.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³AMO, Adélaré to Foucher, 18 February 1905.

He then raised the central theme of his letter. He wanted Délia Tétreault to send members from her *Ecole Apostolique* to Manitoba. That would be, in Langevin's words, "a confirmation of Miss Tétreault's apostolate extending and blossoming in our regions where there is so much good to be done." Langevin insisted that he was addressing this thought both to Foucher, given his influence on Tétreault, and to Tétreault herself through Foucher's services. Langevin added: "Sister Saint Viateur is thrilled with joy at the thought of this flow from Montreal" and quoted her saying: "This would fully reconcile me with a departure that I still have a hard time understanding." Langevin also said in the letter that Sister Marie-Joseph had twice requested him to nominate Sister Saint Viateur as directress of the community. He quoted Sister Marie-Joseph (directress at the time): "It will be the means to attach her more firmly to our project and to improve the relationship between the two houses."⁵⁴ There is a clear reference here to the *Ecole Apostolique*. Sister Marie-Joseph understood Langevin's wish to appease Sister Saint Viateur without creating dissension. This practice of invisible power helped to reinforce self-sacrifice and to suppress the will.

On 19 February, Sister Saint Viateur wrote Foucher asking advice.⁵⁵ She recalled: "I wrote to Foucher and expected to receive permission to leave. How great was my disappointment when I read that he was sure of my good disposition and wanted me to persevere."⁵⁶ She told Langevin what she thought about the project, and expressed doubts about the profession of vows in March 1905, to which the Archbishop responded by postponement. She wrote that in suggesting that women come from Tétreault's house, she was trying to see through Langevin's own eyes. She had shared her concerns with the Vicar General, who told her that the new Congregation was not needed. She wrote: "He went as far as to say that if we commit ourselves through religious vows, we allow that we may become a source of problems for the Archbishop later on."⁵⁷ When she received Foucher's response on 19 March 1905, a letter later destroyed, she made up her mind to let go of her sadness. She said, "I began to feel more at home."⁵⁸ Foucher had also decided that she should address her concerns to her new spiritual director and advised her to write less often.⁵⁹ She accepted she was caught in a system whose limits she had tested in vain.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵AMO, Sister St. Viateur to Foucher, 19 February 1905.

⁵⁶AMO, Sister M. François-de-Sales, "Notes recueillies," 12.

⁵⁷AMO, Sister St. Viateur to Foucher, 19 February 1905.

⁵⁸AMO, Sister M. François-de-Sales, "Notes recueillies," 12.

⁵⁹AMO, Adélarde to Foucher, 19 April 1905.

In April Langevin expressed his annoyance to Foucher, angered by Sister Saint Viateur's drawn-out resistance, but satisfied with Foucher's use of coercive power, a satisfaction that he masked in religious language.

Sister Saint Viateur must have resigned herself to stay here, because until now she has only pitched her tent. She has shown a lot of faith and generosity after some shuffling and unyielding resistance that made me suspect, in spite of her intelligence, a lack of vision, and in spite of her generosity, a lack of courage. . . . She has remained silent after your letter because it was the bitter chalice that the angel of the Lord was presenting to her.⁶⁰

However, by April 1905, Sister Saint Viateur was the new directress and according to Langevin applied herself more than ever. He could now count on her. Langevin and Father Camper, o.m.i., became Sister Saint Viateur's immediate directors.⁶¹ She developed a profound sense of authority, nourished by Langevin's trust. He later described her as being "of perfect obedience,"⁶² although it is difficult to verify that "perfect obedience" since Sister Saint Viateur destroyed her letters to Langevin when they were returned to her after his death.⁶³ In 1910 he decided that she should be called Reverend Mother Superior. In a rather literal secular sense, judging by his role in daily life and his relation to the young small Congregation, he was paternal. As older Sisters recalled, there were not many of them and they were like a little family of which he was the father. Institutionalization soon began and the myth of foundation grew.

THE MYTH OF FOUNDATION

The myth of foundation is contained in the stories about the foundation. The myth was constituted of rituals, events, and symbols commemorating the treasured facets of the foundation, merged in a sort of sacred memory.⁶⁴ However, this memory was conceived and communicated in the dualistic, patriarchal spiritual discourse that dominated Catholic spirituality. That spirituality

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²*Elles étaient deux: vol. 1. Mère Saint Viateur, m.o.* (St. Boniface, Manitoba, 1967), 22.

⁶³Sister Margerite Viau, m.o., archivist, reported that both Sister Saint Viateur and Sister Marie-Joseph destroyed the letters they had written to Langevin when they were returned to them after Langevin's death. Sister Saint Viateur also destroyed some of the letters from Foucher.

⁶⁴Lawrence Coda, s.m., Raymond Fitz, s.m., et al., *Shaping the Coming Age of Religious Life* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), 55.

had strong traces of Jansenism, as its preoccupation with angelicalism and mortification showed. The Sisters built the myth using spiritual concepts such as the will of God, grace, sacrifice. The harder the sacrifice, the more pleasing it would be to God. The redeeming value of suffering and denial of the self were major contributing theological concepts; denial would bring spiritual fruitfulness, an abundance of fruits for the apostolate as the work of God. Growing out of this framework, the Sisters developed their own interpretation of the foundation and the roles of Langevin and the two co-founders, Sister Saint Viateur and Sister Marie-Joseph, who became the first and second General Superiors. Along with the institutionalization of the Congregation's life, the Sisters began to write their own history, thus building the official collective memory. For many years the main version of the myth of foundation was that published in the *Chroniques des Missionnaires Oblates du Sacré-Coeur et de Marie Immaculée*. In the 1950s, Mère Marie-Joseph (Alma Laurendeau) compiled articles from the *Chroniques*, letters, and oral testimonies and prepared a document, also translated into English, entitled *First Attempts at Organizing the Congregation of the Missionary Oblate Sisters*. It was only in 1967 that the Congregation worked on the biography of Ida Lafricain. Even then, the account showed the rigidity of pre-Vatican times and remained faithful to well-established official memory.

From early on, the Sisters saw the foundation in connection with the Manitoba School Question and its unjust solution. The Sisters wrote in 1917 that Langevin understood this injustice to be an offence that burnt into the heart of God, and for this reason God made explicit his will for the foundation. It became an act of reparation in the Sisters' spiritual tradition.⁶⁵ The tradition implied the element of protestation.

The relation of the foundation to the school question was interpreted in two distinctive ways, according to available manuscript versions. For example, Sister Saint Viateur was described in an early portrait as being as committed as Langevin to the Catholic cause and to the conservation of "our French language and our rights." The text read: "The boiling blood of French Canadians that circulated in the veins of our glorious Father and Founder also flows through the whole being of his spiritual daughter, Sister Saint Viateur."⁶⁶ Other manuscripts related the issue of justice to Langevin's Catholic zeal. Thus, Sister Louis de France made clear that it was the controversial question of the schools of Manitoba that brought into being the Oblate Sisters. She emphasized, however, that the Sisters were not a French community. The article of

⁶⁵"En esprit de réparation," *Chroniques des Missionnaires Oblates du Sacré-Coeur et de Marie Immaculée* 2, no. 13 (September 1917): 201.

⁶⁶AMO, Sister M. François-de-Sales, "Notes recueillies," 14.

the first Constitution that requested the Sisters to learn English, French, and, if possible, a third language, should, in her words, "lay aside forever the ghost of the French foundation. It showed the Catholicity of the Archbishop."⁶⁷ The writings of Sister Dora Tétreault, a Manitoban, writing from the perspective of a later date, espoused the concepts of justice and remedy in a broad Catholicity.⁶⁸ Yet, in the official version of this component of the foundation, the reference to the French question is in almost parallel discourse with work in all other cultural communities.⁶⁹ These dissonant traditions, strong in early years, are rooted in the origins and composition of the Congregation. The Quebec mentality and Québécois understanding of Manitoban religious life conflicted with the mentality of the Sisters from the West and of Sisters of French background who came from the United States.

Another component of the myth has been the suffering of Monseigneur Langevin, his tribulations not only in his role as Archbishop but more specially in his role as founder. According to the tradition, the foundation was the product of grace; it was the will of God, but that will was not clearly delineated. Langevin had to look for the details in God's plan. It was a painful search. He told the Sisters in 1915 how, in the midst of a profound anguish, he talked to the "Bon Dieu" asking for direction. The Sisters acknowledged the depth of the humiliations he had suffered, generated by early failures in the founding. He said to the Sisters on his last visit before his death:

I felt around me the laughter, the criticism, and I drank every day drafts from my chalice of bitterness. The humiliation was good for me; this is a great means of personal sanctification. But, on the other side, I tried to know the will of God, and the "Bon Dieu" has given me convincing proofs that he wanted your existence. Yes, I want to tell you as I face eternity: it was not I who did this work, but it was the work of the Bon Dieu.⁷⁰

Several years later, Mère Marie-Joseph du Sacré Coeur wrote: "The Sisters who heard those words had the intimate conviction that the 'petit arbre' of our religious family, had, itself, its divine seal because its roots were watered by

⁶⁷AMO, Sister Louis de France, m.o., "Archbishop Adélarde Langevin," 2.

⁶⁸AMO, Sister Dora Tétreault, m.o., "Archbishop Langevin, Our Founder," manuscript, 1986; AMO, Sister Dora Tétreault, "The Founders of the Missionary Oblate Sisters," manuscript, 1992. See also Sister Gabrielle Viau, m.o., "Louis Philippe Adélarde Langevin: sa carrière d'archevêque," manuscript, paper presented at the Meeting of the Associates, 28 April 1986.

⁶⁹See for example, Soeur Gabrielle Viau, m.o., *Elles étaient deux: vol. 2. Mère Marie-Joseph*, 22, 28.

⁷⁰AMO, Sister Dora Tétreault, m.o., "Monseigneur Langevin: son charisme," 3.

the blood of the heart of our venerated founder."⁷¹ The spiritualization of Langevin's role left little room for Sister Saint Viateur's suffering. There was no room even to understand the psychological dimension of her pain. There was still less room to understand the overpowering workings of patriarchy in the process, and the place of women as subordinates in the spiritual scheme.

Ida Lafricain's transfer and sacrifice have been important components of the myth. According to the myth, it was divine Providence that made possible both her encounter with Délia Tétreault and the sacrifice of the separation, a sacrifice that would nourish their respective missions. The Sisters reinterpreted Foucher's letter to Langevin in which he talked about supposed differences between Tétreault and Lafricain and firmly incorporated in their common memory the idea that Lafricain, who had worked with the poor in Montreal, dreamed of work in a local place, while Tétreault dreamed of missions in the entire world. The discourse concealed both the fact that Lafricain and Tétreault had shared a common call, and Lafricain's commitment to Tétreault's project. It also obscured the profound spiritual and personal relationship between the two women. It obliterated any possibility of referring to the forceful intervention of Archbishop Langevin and Father Foucher in separating Ida from the *Ecole Apostolique*. It ignored her resistance to their efforts as well as her determination to be faithful to her inner self. Instead, Ida Lafricain's moving to Manitoba was conceived as the triumph of grace, and Father Foucher was seen as the man she found at the right time to allow her to enter in the plans God had for her. Grace was also effective, again according to the tradition, because of the confidence Lafricain had in Foucher, her spiritual director.⁷² The Community incorporated in their myth the image of Sister Saint Viateur described by Langevin in later years, as "being of perfect obedience."⁷³ In laudatory terms, a Sister wrote in a biography of Lafricain that she found it hard to obey when she did not understand why a thing had been asked of her. She was, indeed, a strong, intelligent woman with a "virile character" and an acute sense of authority, hers and others'. According to the biography she was intelligent, but also obedient, and she abandoned herself to God's will.⁷⁴ In other words, obedience made her womanly and virtuous. This interpretation was dominant until recent years.

The character of Sister Marie-Joseph, the other co-founder, and her spiritual legacy of faith, devotion, docility, and obedience were clearly delineated in the tradition of the congregation. She was often described as an introvert,

⁷¹Quoted in Sister Dora Tétreault, m.o., "Monseigneur Langevin: son charisme," 3.

⁷²*Elles étaient deux: vol. 1. Mère Saint-Viateur*, 10.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁴*Ibid.* AMO, Sister Eva DeGagné, m.o., "Mémoires écrits en 1988-89."

having a docile heart and a calm character. She was portrayed as profoundly oriented toward the love of God, and ready to endure the pain and sacrifices arising from the circumstances surrounding her. Lnagevin described her as an elite person.⁷⁵

The notion of co-foundation became the cohesive element of the myth. Accordingly, the myth developed an underlying idea of co-operation and mutual support. This idea helped to hide the patriarchal structure of ecclesiastical power and veiled the dualistic, authoritarian spirituality the Sisters learned as their relation to God and to their deepest selves. The pursuit of justice for the Catholic people of Manitoba, a fundamental element of the foundation, was permeated by an institutionalized spirituality that saw women as secondary creatures in a greater plan.

⁷⁵*Elles étaient deux: vol. 1. Mère Saint Viateur*, 8. (There is a description there of Mère Marie-Joseph.) Oral tradition of the congregation. Sister Gabrielle Viau, m.o., *Elles étaient deux: vol. 2. Mère Marie-Joseph*, 45, 110–19. Notice that this biography was written in 1989; it shows changes in the way of interpreting Mère Marie-Joseph's spirituality.