

# Una provincia propia: Dominique-Ceslas Gonthier y las primeras comunidades dominicanas canadienses

## A Province of Their Own: Dominique-Ceslas Gonthier and the First Canadian Dominican Communities\*

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### Summary

This article explores the growth of the Canadian province of the friars of the Order of Preachers in the midst of major shifts in the social-political reality and in the church through the leadership of one of the first Canadian friars, Dominique-Ceslas Gonthier. In his own unique and particular way he is implicated in, and sheds light on, significant social and ecclesial issues: the Manitoba schools question; the growth of the ultramontane church in Canada; the redaction of the papal encyclical *Mirari Vos*; and the establishment the Holy See's permanent delegation to Canada. Due to his activity in these social and political issues, Gonthier leveraged himself to facilitate the establishment of new communities in the Canadian Dominican province and simultaneously its indigenization.

**Keywords:** Gonthier, liberalism, ultramontan-ism, Canada

### Resumen

Este artículo explora el crecimiento de la provincia canadiense de los frailes de la Orden de Predicadores en medio de cambios importantes en la realidad político-social y en la iglesia a través del liderazgo de uno de los primeros frailes canadienses, Dominique-Ceslas Gonthier. De un modo original se implicó en problemas sociales y eclesiales: la cuestión de las escuelas de Manitoba; el crecimiento de la iglesia ultramontana en Canadá; la redacción de la encíclica papal *Mirari Vos* y el establecimiento de la delegación permanente de la Santa Sede en Canadá. Debido a su actividad en estas cuestiones sociales y políticas, Gonthier aprovechó para facilitar el establecimiento de nuevas comunidades en la provincia dominicana canadiense y simultáneamente propiciar el proceso de indigenización.

**Palabras clave:** Gonthier, liberalismo, ultramontanismo, Canadá

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## Introduction

Two remote historical events were to have significant implications for the growth of the Dominican Order in Canada. The first is the First Vatican Council (1869-1870) and the growth of the ultramontane church in its wake. The second is the Manitoba schools question (1890-1896). Both of these events had complex political and ecclesial ramifications for the Canadian church. Adroitly navigating this complex situation provided the first Canadian Dominicans an opportunity to move beyond the ambit of the first French foundation both metaphorically and geographically.

This paper traces this movement in one of the two first Canadians to enter the Order of Friars Preachers, Dominique-Ceslas Gonthier. Gonthier would become the most significant figure in planting the Order in Canadian soil. As early as 1884, twenty-seven years before the formal erection of the Canadian Dominican Province, Gonthier wrote confidently, "...il y aura ici plus tard une province canadienne et que, sans cela, l'Ordre ne prendra jamais au Canada le développement qu'il peut et qu'il doit avoir."<sup>1</sup>

## Dominique-Ceslas Gonthier

Théophile Gonthier was born in the small village of St-Raphael, Bellchasse, on 22 September 1853. He began his formal education at the Petit Séminaire de Québec 1863 and continued to the Grand Séminaire in 1871. During his studies Gonthier formed lasting friendships with men who would become leaders in the francophone church of Canada such as Louis-Nazaire Bégin, the future Archbishop of Quebec. Gonthier's interest in the Dominican Order began when he read Dominican Bernard Chocarne's biography of the legendary preacher Henri-Dominique Lacordaire. Chocarne had first come to North America to assess whether the French Dominicans should establish a presence

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<sup>1</sup> "...there will be a Canadian province here later, and without one, the Order will never undertake the development it could and must have in Canada." All translations are my own. Gonthier, D-C (1884, March 20). *Letter to Provincial Faucillon*. J. A. Plourde (Ed.). vol. 2 Montréal (1973a : 497. An extensive collection of historical documents related to the foundation of the Canadian Dominican Province from 1830 to 1911 can be found in J. A. Plourde (Ed.). (1973a). *Dominicains au Canada, La Fondation Canadienne à Saint-Hyacinthe (1830-1886)* vol. 1 and *Dominicains au Canada, les cinq fondations avant l'autonomie (1881-1911)* vol. 2. Montréal. The documentation is also found in Provincial Archives (PADC) in Montreal. My references to primary historical materials are taken from Plourde.

in North America, and if so, where. As Prior Provincial of the Paris province, Chocarne was instrumental in finally sending brethren to establish a community in St. Hyacinthe, Quebec in 1873. It was on the occasion of Chocarne's visit to the newly formed community at St. Hyacinthe that Gonthier personally met with Chocarne and subsequently decided to enter the Order.

On 10 September 1874 Gonthier, along with fellow Canadian Hyacinthe Gadbois, took the habit in the novitiate of Abbeville, France. On 8 December 1875 he made profession in the priory of Flavigny-sur-Ozerain, where he continued his theological training. By 1878 seven Canadians were in formation in France. Gonthier was ordained priest on 7 June 1879 in Langres returning to St. Hyacinthe, Quebec that same year.

Upon his return Gonthier served as an itinerant preacher until 1885 when he was appointed superior of the fledgling community in Ottawa as well as pastor of the parish of St-Jean-Baptiste d'Ottawa (Plourde, 1964: 49). Gonthier was then assigned to the new community of Fall River, Massachusetts from 1894-1898, returning to the studium in St. Hyacinthe in 1898 as professor of dogma, scripture and apologetics. In 1897 Gonthier was placed at the service of the bishops of Quebec in their negotiations with the Vatican.<sup>2</sup> His personal leadership qualities as well as the esteem that the diocesan clergy and Canadian episcopate held him in made him a natural choice as the first Canadian Vicar Provincial from 1900-1903.<sup>3</sup> Gonthier served alternately as prior of St. Hyacinthe and novice master until 1913. In his later years he regularly wrote virulently anti-modernist and polemical pieces in *Le Canada français* under the names Raphael Gervais and A. de Saint-Réal, an ardent admirer of Pius X and Louis Veillot.

Gonthier died on 16 June 1917. In his necrology Gonthier was remembered by the Prior Provincial as "chef de file", "l'une des plus belles pierres de la fondation" of the Canadian province and "lumière pour ses frères".<sup>4</sup>

## Dominicans in Canada

Four friars from the Province of Paris—Louis-Thomas Bourgeois, Louis Mothon, Réginald Bernard and Simon Grappe – arrived in St. Hyacinthe in

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<sup>2</sup> In the official necrology there is no mention of Gonthier's 1897 secret mission to Rome.

<sup>3</sup> Monpeurt, R. 1900, September 2. *Letter to the Religious in America*. (Plourde, vol. 2, 1973a: 501). The vicar-provincial was the representative of the prior provincial.

<sup>4</sup> Langlais, E-M. (1918) "*Chef de file de notre province*," in (Plourde, 1964 : 49-50)

1873 in what would become foundation of the Canadian Dominican province.<sup>5</sup> The French Dominicans identified with the vision of their (re)founder Henri-Dominique Lacordaire and were associated with French liberalism. Although enthusiastically welcomed upon their arrival in St. Hyacinthe, they found it increasingly difficult to establish themselves outside of that diocese (Robillard, 2011). Their association with Lacordaire and liberalism made them suspect in an increasingly ultramontane context. The doors to key dioceses such as Montreal, Ottawa, and Quebec remained “hermétiquement fermées”<sup>6</sup> to them.

Since the mid-nineteenth century expressions of ultramontanism and liberalism had been developing that were particular to Canada, and especially Quebec (Ferretti, 1999: 92). Quebec ultramontanism, for example, was defined by the socio-political landscape of a French speaking, Roman Catholic minority in English Protestant North America (Hamelin, Gagnon, 1984: 42). But simultaneously a Roman Catholic ecclesial stronghold as the majority religion with certain privileges in Quebec. These were forms of political ultramontanism and liberalism where social and political agendas were expressed, and often justified, in theological and religious discourse (Hamelin, Gagnon, 1984: 18).

The liberalism associated with Lacordaire and espoused by the first Dominicans was neither primarily political nor to be associated with indifferentism or radical laicism. It was based on a theological anthropology informed by values such as freedom and the common good (Dias, 2017: 349-370). This liberalism certainly contrasted an ultramontanism where ecclesiology absorbed all of society.<sup>7</sup> While it may have supported a healthy separation of church and state, it did not deny the necessary relationship of religion and society.

A second Dominican foundation was eventually established outside of Canada in Lewiston, Maine in 1881 to minister to the French speaking Canadian immigrants there. The French friars, with the encouragement of the *Propaganda fidei*, were interested in developing their presence in New England beyond the French-speaking immigrant population to include an evangelizing mission to the English-speaking Protestants in Boston.<sup>8</sup> The French saw the New England foundation as a potential refuge in case of the sup-

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<sup>5</sup> An English speaking community of Dominicans from the St. Joseph Province (USA) had been briefly established in London, ON from 1861-68. See Attridge (2017: 371-392).

<sup>6</sup> “hermetically sealed,” *my translation* in (Plourde vol. 2, 1973a: 302).

<sup>7</sup> “Gallican blunder.” Gonthier (1888, December 3). *Letter to Nespolous*. Plourde, vol. 2, (1973: 308-309).

<sup>8</sup> Mathieu, A. (1880, October 11). *Letter to Fr. Baret of Boston*. (Plourde, vol. 2, 1973a: 21).

pression of religious communities in Europe or for young French religious evading military service.<sup>9</sup>

As the number of Canadian friars rose, so did tensions between French and Canadian (Laperriere, 2012). The attitude of the French toward the Canadians was one of condescension. For example, when referring to a musical performance of questionable quality in St. Hyacinthe, fr. Saintourens commented publicly, “Il faut être bête et grossier comme des Canadiens pour applaudir ces choses-là.”<sup>10</sup> In a letter to his superior in France, one French friar describes Canadians as vain, mundane, defiant and impossible to educate.<sup>11</sup>

Following the 1901 provincial chapter of the Province of Paris, Prior Provincial Bourgeois wrote to the Master General informing him that the friars felt that the Canadian foundation should remain indefinitely under the control of the French, in spite of the growing numbers of indigenous vocations.<sup>12</sup> Barring the possibility of keeping the North American foundation entirely under the oversight of the French, some French friars felt that it should be split into two: the Canadian houses could be left to the devices of Canadians and the houses in New England under the French.

The Canadians, including Gonthier, defended the unity of the foundation and the Canadianization of its leadership.<sup>13</sup> While the debate on Canadianization continued into the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with few exceptions, the leadership in Paris and in St. Hyacinthe, shared Gonthier’s view that the foundation should remain unified.

The Canadians, however, wanted to distance themselves from the French and liberal reputation that plagued them. This reputation had a direct effect on their potential to grow the Order in Canadian soil. Further, while the “liberal” characterization may have been appropriate for the French friars, it did not reflect the Canadian point of view. Gonthier expresses frustration over the “hermetically sealed” doors of Canadian dioceses in a letter to Prior Provincial Faucillon: “Vous n’ignorez pas que certains esprits de notre chère

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<sup>9</sup> “Ceslas Gonthier.” Brassard, Hamelin, (2003).

<sup>10</sup> “One must be dumb and coarse like Canadians to applaud these things.” Morard. (end of 1889). *Report to Bourgeois*. (Plourde, vol. 2, 1973a: 311).

<sup>11</sup> Mothon, A. L. (1876, September 9). *Letter to Faucillon*. (Plourde, vol. 1, 1973a: 251-252)

<sup>12</sup> Bourgeois, L-T. (1901, September 6). *Letter to M.O. Frühwirth* (Plourde, vol. 2, 1973a: 502). Bourgeois claims that other religious communities such as the Jesuits, Oblates of Mary Immaculate, and the Redemptorists similarly maintain a European leadership of their respective Canadian foundations.

<sup>13</sup> Rouleau, F. R. (1903, May 28). *Letter to M.O. Frühwirth*. (Plourde, vol. 2 (1973a: 507).

province ont une certaine tendance dite libérale. Nous, Canadiens, nous avons une tendance opposée... Est-il vraie que pour être dominicain il faille absolument jurer par Mgr Dupanloup<sup>14</sup> et son école?”<sup>15</sup>

In 1881 Gonthier was invited by Archbishop Duhamel of Ottawa to preach the Advent mission and then the Lenten mission the following year. Duhamel had met Gonthier during his studies in France in 1878, when accompanying the saintly Bishop Moreau of St. Hyacinthe, patron of the fledgling foundation, who was visiting the Canadian Dominican students (Plourde, 1973b: 62). The invitations were welcome since the 1879 request of the Dominicans to enter the diocese of Ottawa had yet gone unanswered. Gonthier's preaching mission was a success in the eyes of the Archbishop who sent him a letter of thanks and congratulations soon afterward.<sup>16</sup> The Dominicans seized upon the opportunity to pursue their request for an establishment through Gonthier as chief negotiator.<sup>17</sup>

Fr. Matthieu, the Canadian superior, wrote to the Prior Provincial in France that their energy for a new foundation be directed to Ottawa and not Boston since Ottawa would prove to be an important city as the national capital (Ploude, vol. 2 1973a: 141). Finally on 24 August 1884, more than 10 years after their arrival, with a need for more space to house the growing number of religious, the Dominicans took possession of the parish of St-Jean-Baptiste d'Ottawa. Gonthier arrived shortly thereafter to take charge of both the parish and fledgling community. Due not only to his personal qualities, but his clear distance from French liberalism and subsequent relationship with diocesan officials, Gonthier was able to negotiate a convention with the diocese and the civil incorporation of the community in 1888.

Gonthier's attempt to distance the Order from French liberalism met a serious setback in 1888 when a French friar from St. Hyacinthe responded in print to an article critical of Lacordaire and liberalism in *L'Univers du Canada*. Although written under the pseudonym *Gallus* the series of four articles was obviously written by a Dominican, and so for many reflected the position of the Order. Gonthier laments that the articles, published without the appro-

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<sup>14</sup> Felix Dupanloup was a leader of liberalism in France.

<sup>15</sup> “You cannot ignore that certain minds in our dear province have a certain tendency known as ‘liberal.’ We, Canadians, have the opposite tendency... Is it true that to be Dominican one must absolutely swear by Mgr Dupanloup and his school...” Gonthier, 1884, September 12, *Letter to Faucillon*. (Plourde, vol. 2, 1973a: 237) note 210.

<sup>16</sup> Duhamel, 1882, March 28, *Letter to Gonthier* (Plourde, vol. 2, 1973a: 150-151).

<sup>17</sup> Mathieu, A., 1882, March 20, *Letter to Gonthier* (Plourde, vol. 2, 1973a: 149).

bation of his superiors, were inaccurate, polemical and confusing; an “*étourderie gauloise*.”<sup>18</sup> Even the French friars who wanted to rehabilitate liberalism for the Canadian context considered Gallus’ articles disadvantageous, resulting in the disaffection of the Canadian friars from the laity and the isolation of the Dominicans from the diocesan clergy.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, Gonthier was still invited to preach a retreat by the bishop of St-Hyacinthe in 1889.<sup>20</sup>

### Manitoba Schools Question

Canada was born on 1 July 1867 as the result of the confederation of the British North American colonies of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec and Ontario. In 1870 Manitoba and the Northwest Territories joined confederation. They were followed by the provinces of British Columbia in 1871, Prince Edward Island in 1873, the Yukon Territory in 1898 and Saskatchewan and Alberta in 1905.

Canada’s first census of 1871 indicates a population of 3 689 000. Forty years later, the population had doubled to 7 206 643. In 1901, 78.5% of the Canadian population was English speaking and 32% French speaking.<sup>21</sup> In Quebec 85.5% were French speaking and, of that population, overwhelmingly Catholic. Between 1870-1930 about 1 million Quebecers migrated to New England and Western Canada. Thus, French and Catholic pockets existed as minorities in a predominantly Anglo-Protestant world (Behiels, 2015).

The British North America (BNA) Act of Canadian confederation protected religious and linguistic minority rights. However, francophone and Roman Catholic minorities outside of Quebec increasingly found themselves under threat of English-Protestant hegemony. For example, the abolition of separate schools for the Acadians (francophone-Catholic) of New Brunswick in 1871; Red River Rebellion in 1869-70 and the North-West Rebellion in 1885; Manitoba schools question in 1890; Catholic schools funding question in Alberta and Saskatchewan; Ontario Regulation 17 of 1913 limiting French

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<sup>18</sup> “Gallican blunder.” Gonthier, 1888, December 3, *Letter to Nespoulous* (Plourde, vol. 2, 1973a: 308-309).

<sup>19</sup> Mothon, A. L., 1889, March 8, *Letter to Nespoulous* (Plourde, vol. 2, 1973a: 310).

<sup>20</sup> Morard, T., end of 18890, *Letter to Bourgeois* (Plourde, vol. 2, 1973a: 310-312).

<sup>21</sup> History of Canada Census, Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2016001-eng.htm>.

instruction and communication in schools, all point to the evolving interpretation of minority rights in Canada (Behiels, 2015).

The Manitoba schools question was a decisive moment for the nation and the Canadian church. Like other Canadian jurisdictions, when the province of Manitoba entered into Canadian confederation in 1870, linguistic and denominational education rights were guaranteed for minorities. In 1871 45% of the population of Manitoba was Catholic and 24% French speaking (Perin, 1990: 29). Thirty years later in 1902, the Catholic population decreased to 13% and the francophone population to 8% due to migration patterns (Fay, 2002:131). Anglo-Protestant legislators seized upon the situation of a diminished French-Catholic population.

In 1890, English-speaking legislators removed French as an official language of Manitoba, leaving only English. Furthermore, instead of two parallel school systems (English-Protestant and French-Catholic) as contemplated by the BNA Act, the Manitoba government enacted a single, non-sectarian, publicly funded school system under the public authority. The legislation was challenged as contravening article 93 of the BNA Act of 1867 and article 22 of the Manitoba Act of 1870 regarding the legitimate powers of provincial and federal governments over education and the educational rights of minorities (Curnican, 1973: 7). The ensuing crisis resulted in a series of legal challenges that made their way to the Supreme Court of Canada and then to the Privy Council in London (33-36.) The Privy Council ruled, contrary to the Supreme Court, that Catholics and Protestants were indeed given privileges with regard to education according to the Manitoba Act. The Manitoba schools question became a central issue in the 1896 federal election.

Canadian ecclesial authorities were vexed over the schools question. The Manitoba schools legislation was perceived as a threat to religious minority rights and Catholic education in Canada. In addition to constitutional and legal concerns, it raised questions about the role of the bishop in Catholic schools, the funding of Catholic education, staffing of schools and the curricular content. The entire Canadian episcopacy desired the reversal of the legislation that had removed the educational rights of the French-speaking minority in Manitoba.

In confronting the issue, English-speaking bishops in Ontario who supported the reversal of the legislation also feared that any public political agitation for Manitoba Catholics could raise the ire of the fiercely Orange, Protestant majority in the neighboring province of Ontario. Between 1871 and 1901, Catholics remained a vulnerable minority of about 16% of the

population of Ontario. By the mid-1890s, anti-Catholic sentiment was at its height in Ontario, witnessed by the proliferation of organized anti-Catholic associations (Perin, 1990: 55).

The newly elected francophone, Catholic, Prime Minister of Canada, Wilfred Laurier, together with his provincial counterpart in Manitoba, Thomas Greenway, proposed a compromise to the Manitoba schools question. Catholic education would be permitted in public schools; French could be the language of instruction in a school where there were 10 or more French-speaking students; and a Catholic school board would be re-established but without government funding. Archbishop Langevin of St. Boniface, Manitoba, along with the Canadian episcopate were unsatisfied with the compromise as in practice it did not restore the educational rights of the Catholic French-speaking minority.

The francophone-Catholic majority in the province of Quebec was highly dissatisfied with the Laurier-Greenway compromise. They stood in solidarity with the francophone minority in Manitoba, against what was perceived as an attack of the English majority on minority (linguistic and religious) rights. French-speaking political and religious leaders appealed to the equality of the two founding nations as enshrined in the BNA Act.<sup>22</sup> French-speaking bishops feared that French would disappear from the West.

In advance of the 1896 federal elections the Quebec bishops issued a *mandement* to be read from pulpits across the province instructing the faithful of their duty to vote in solidarity with the Catholic minority in Manitoba whose rights had been recognized by the Privy Council.<sup>23</sup> While the *mandement* was considered “mild” and “sound advice” (Curnican, 1973: 265-68) by the media, some bishops and clergy, such as Bishop Laflèche of Trois-Rivières, amplified its content. They claimed that Catholics could not vote for Laurier or the Liberal Party “under pain of grave sin” unless candidates promised remedial legislation on the Manitoba schools question (276).

In the midst of the crisis occasioned by the Manitoba schools questions, the Laurier-Greenway compromise, and the involvement of the clergy in the elections, both the Canadian government and the episcopate appealed separately to Pope Leo XIII. The government sent an agent<sup>24</sup> to Rome in January 1896 to address clerical interference in the federal elections of 1892, 1896

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<sup>22</sup> Behiels (2015) “Francophone-Catholic Relations.”

<sup>23</sup> Charland (1979: 12); see also, Fay (2002: 133).

<sup>24</sup> Sending agents to Rome was a common practice at the time, see Perin (1990: 42).

and in Quebec elections in general (Charland, 1979: 14). At the same time, the government sought support for the Laurier-Greenway compromise from the Holy See. Laurier and the Liberal government knew that official papal support would necessarily silence the Quebec bishops. The Canadian episcopacy, on the other hand, sought support from the Holy See in opposing the Laurier-Greenway compromise and in its demand for remedial legislation that would restore the educational rights of the Catholic minority. The response of the Holy See to address these competing interests was to send an apostolic delegate in the person of Rafael Merry Del Val.

Born, raised and educated in England into an aristocratic Spanish family of diplomats and bankers, Merry Del Val was himself a career diplomat. Since Canadian external relations with the Holy See had been normally conducted through the British government and informed by the English Catholic aristocracy who were often involved in government, the young Merry Del Val seemed a natural choice as apostolic delegate (Ferretti, 1999: 92).

Merry Del Val was the third apostolic delegate sent by Rome after George Conroy in 1877 and Henri Smeulders in 1886. Like the previous visits, the situation in Canada remained complex: the political relationship of the church with the newly established Canadian state; the rights of Catholics in specific jurisdictions; the place of Catholic, French speakers surrounded by North American English, Protestantism; an increasing division between French and English speaking bishops;<sup>25</sup> the ascendancy of Irish Catholics and their interests in determining the policies of the Holy See (Ferretti, 199: 95). Many bishops rightly feared that Merry Del Val was unacquainted with and unprepared for this unique and complex context.

### **Gonthier's Mission to Rome**

In the wake of the 1896 election campaign, lawyer, journalist and politician, L-O David, published a summary of liberal grievances against the Que-

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<sup>25</sup> For example, The Catholic Church Extension Society was founded in 1908 as national organization to support the expansion of the church westward without the participation of any French speaking Catholics, bishops or laity though French speaking Catholics constituted no less than 70% of the catholic population. Likewise, Quebec and French speaking bishops were not invited to serve on the board of governs of the Extension Society, not even Archbishop Langevin whose vast ecclesiastical province stretched across the entire west from the Archdioceses of Toronto and Ottawa to north to the Arctic and as far west as the Yukon and northern British Columbia. See, Power (2013:16).

bec (ultramontane) episcopate (David, 1896). David criticized the clergy for inappropriate political interference, misuse of spiritual power to influence voters and to promote a particular party (Conservatives). Without negating the right of church leadership to contribute to public discourse and debate, David upholds the rights of Catholics to exercise their franchise according to conscience. Should the clergy forget that the present age is one of “liberty, independence and reason” the church will lose its credibility, David charged (David, 1896:118).

In response to this affront to the episcopate, L-N Bégin, now Archbishop of Quebec, commissioned Gonthier to publish a reply. Under the pseudonym P. Bernard, Gonthier published a biting and sarcastic response, *Un manifeste libéral: M. L.-O. David et le clergé canadien*. Citing magisterial teachings, Gonthier defends the right of the church to be involved in the governance of society, especially on issues that relate to the salvation of souls such as education.<sup>26</sup> He criticizes politicians like Laurier and other Liberal Party politicians who think that neither the Pope nor the bishops should be involved in the direction of society (Bernard, 1896: 78). Further, he accuses these politicians of raising the scepter of anti-Catholic sentiments amongst English-speaking Protestants lest Catholics militate against the legislation that ended confessional schools in Manitoba. Bernard ends his tract reminding readers that the entire Canadian episcopate has demanded remedial legislation. To Gonthier’s delight, David’s book was placed on the Index of Forbidden Books in 1897.

While Canadian ecclesiastics praised Gonthier for his success, his French confreres were less enthusiastic.<sup>27</sup> Commenting to the Master of the Order on the fact that Gonthier published the response without permission, the French Provincial describes Gonthier as “un religieux qui, depuis des années, échappe au contrôle de ses supérieurs.”<sup>28</sup>

The 31 year-old Merry Del Val arrived in Canada in 1897. Liberal Senators and Members of Parliament argued that the visitation should not study the schools question as this would amount to further ecclesial interference in politics. He should, however, inquire into the interference of clergy in elections. The bishops, for their part, sought support for a remedial law on the

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<sup>26</sup> Bernard (1896:103-105). Gonthier is referring to the documents, *Imortale Dei*, *Libertas praestantissimum*.

<sup>27</sup> Bruchési. (1896, December 29), *Letter to Gonthier* (Plourde, vol. 2, 1973a: 320-321).

<sup>28</sup> “a religious who, for many years, escaped the control of his superiors.” Boulanger, R., 1897, January 8, *Letter to Master of the Order Frühwirth*, (Plourde vol. 2, 1973a: 321).

Manitoba schools question and a dismissal of the Laurier-Greenway compromise. In view of an impending encyclical on the Manitoba schools question, Merry Del Val's study was to inform Pope Leo's position on the matter.

The government mounted a concerted charm offensive in its reception of Merry Del Val, who was duly impressed. Merry Del Val's position was informed by Laurier and his Liberal government as well as the bishops of the Toronto province, with Archbishop Walsh of Toronto at its helm (Hamelin, 1984: 53). Accusations of political interference and spiritual coercion leveled against the Quebec bishops and clergy were naively believed by Merry Del Val who, unlike his delegate predecessors, did not personally investigate the accusations. Although at the center of the controversy, the bishops of Quebec were barely consulted by Merry Del Val.<sup>29</sup>

During the course of his visit it became obvious that Merry Del Val did not share the position of the French-speaking hierarchy. Ever the diplomat, he tended toward supporting the compromise, fearful that any remedial legislation would have negative repercussions for the English-speaking Catholic minority in Ontario and Atlantic Canada – a fear shared by the Ontario bishops. At the conclusion of Merry Del Val's visit, the Quebec and Manitoba bishops responded with their own offensive.

Having earned the trust of the episcopate in his defense of their perceived ultramontane tendencies against L-O David, the French-speaking bishops sent Gonthier to Rome to serve as their agent in the summer of 1897. His would be a secret mission lest the disagreement between the Canadian episcopate and the Pope's delegate break into open hostility. Gonthier's mission had a threefold purpose: to block the appointment of a liberal bishop to the see of Montreal; to prevent the establishment of a permanent apostolic delegation to Canada; and last, to protect the interests of the bishops on the Manitoba schools question. Gonthier would have no formal letters with regard to his mission. Instead, he would claim to be in Rome on the business of the Order. In the letter of Bishop Moreau to the Master of the Order requesting that Gonthier be placed at the disposal of the bishops, he suggests that if this were possible, the soon to be named bishop of Montreal might consider opening the doors of the Archdiocese of Montreal to the Dominicans.<sup>30</sup> After Gonthier's arrival in Rome, Merry Del Val personally visited the Master of

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<sup>29</sup> For a detailed analysis of Merry Del Val's visit, and report, see Perin (1990: 113-129).

<sup>30</sup> Bégin, 1897, August 27, *Letter to M. O. Frühwirth*, (Plourde, vol. 2, 1973a: 232).

the Order trying to convince him to neutralize Gonthier's mission. Soon after Merry Del Val's visit, the Master received a kind letter from the newly appointed Archbishop of Montreal praising both Gonthier and the Dominicans in Canada (Perin, 1990: 119).

Gonthier's strategy was to influence the redaction of Leo's encyclical by discrediting Merry Del Val's report, which "essentially indicted the episcopates of Quebec and Manitoba," (Charland, 1979: 56) and promoting the position of the Quebec episcopate (56). He would accomplish this in two ways: amassing confidential letters from bishops, clergy and lay leaders criticizing the visit and its findings and by quietly directing the Catholic press, who were sympathetic to the episcopate's position, to disobey the gag order placed upon them by Merry Dal Val at the conclusion of his visit.<sup>31</sup> Gonthier would use back-channels to present the Canadian bishops' case to curial officials in various dicasteries, especially *Propaganda fidei* and the Vatican Secretariat of State.

It did not take Gonthier long to gauge the temperature in Rome regarding the goals of his mission. Meanwhile, his friend Paul Bruchési had been appointed Archbishop of Montreal and not the liberal Bishop Émard. It seemed that Merry Del Val's reading of the Canadian situation was received with sympathy by Vatican authorities. While the concerns of the bishops about the educational rights of the Catholic minority were deeply shared by the Holy See, the manner of dealing with Laurier-Greenway compromise was not. The Holy See opted for a more diplomatically prudent approach than the Archbishop Langevin of St. Boniface, Manitoba and the French-speaking bishops would have liked. Furthermore, by October 1897, Gonthier communicates his fears that the Holy See would indeed establish a permanent delegation to Canada. Gonthier writes that this would undermine and humiliate the bishops, weaken the faithful, and result in the loss of credibility of the Holy See in the eyes of the clergy and laity (Charland, 1979:84).

Gonthier received Archbishop Bruchési of Montreal in Rome in November 1897 to prepare him for his meetings with Vatican officials and eventually Leo XIII to discuss the impending encyclical. He shared with Bruchési arguments and errors in Merry Del Val's report on the Manitoba schools question and what the bishops were expecting in Leo's encyclical. Following the meetings, some for which Gonthier was present, Bruchési reported that the

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<sup>31</sup> Merry Del Val imposed a silence on catholic newspapers at the conclusion of his visit in July 1897.

Pope felt that if there was to be any reversal or radical improvement of the legislation, it would not be the result of the bishops lobbying, but the laity reclaiming their rights politically (93).

Gonthier remained in Rome after the publication of the long awaited encyclical, *Affari vos*, on 8 December 1897. The encyclical was a disappointment and from then on his mission was to strategize on how to block the establishment of a permanent apostolic delegation. While the French-speaking bishops saw a permanent delegation as an affront to their leadership, both within the country and in relation to the Pope, Gonthier's opinion was that it was simply regarded as "une appendice obligé de la primauté pontificale."<sup>32</sup> A permanent delegation was not necessarily a judgment on the Canadian episcopate. While the bishops could denounce the letters from Canadian politicians soliciting the establishment of a permanent delegation to Ottawa, Gonthier thought it more effective to say nothing and let it pass since he had it on some authority that the Vatican could not actually finance a permanent delegation.

In *Affari vos* Leo praises the Canadian bishops for their protection of educational rights calling the 1890 Manitoba schools legislation "noxious"<sup>33</sup> but warns against rejecting any and all improvements to the Laurier-Greenway compromise on principle.<sup>34</sup> He also instructs clergy not to interfere in partisan politics since the church is tied to no political party (Perin, 1990: 66). Its reception by the bishops was mixed. The anglophone bishops of the province of Toronto simply repeated the salient points of the encyclical in an accompanying pastoral letter.<sup>35</sup> On behalf of the francophone episcopacy, Archbishop Bégin also published an accompanying pastoral letter.<sup>36</sup> Without noting the absence of a condemnation of the Laurier-Greenway Act or the call for remedial legislation, Bégin reminds the faithful that in a previous encyclical

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<sup>32</sup> "...an obligatory appendage of pontifical primacy." Gonthier (1898, February 12, *Letter to L-N Bégin*, (Charland, 1979: 119).

<sup>33</sup> Leo XIII, 1897, December 8. *Affari Vos*, 4. Retrieved from [http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_l-xiii\\_enc\\_08121897\\_affari-vos.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_08121897_affari-vos.html)

<sup>34</sup> *Affari Vos* 9.

<sup>35</sup> Pastoral Letter of the Archbishop and Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Province of Toronto publishing the Pope's Encyclical Letter *Affari Vos* on the Manitoba School Question (1897).

<sup>36</sup> Pastoral Letter of His Grace the Archbishop of Cyrene, Administrator of the Archdiocese of Quebec: promulgating the encyclical letter, *Affari vos*, of His Holiness Leo XIII to the archbishops, bishops, and other ordinaries of the Canadian confederation in communion with the Apostolic See (1897).

regarding Catholic schools in Austria and Switzerland, Leo had already condemned any form of neutrality or indifferentism.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps Gonthier's mission to Rome was doomed to failure from its inception. The Vatican was already divided on how to respond to the Manitoba schools question. At the same time that a divided Canadian episcopate was lobbying the Holy See, the Laurier government was also lobbying for the preservation of the Laurier-Greenway Act and the establishment of a permanent delegation of the Holy See to Canada. Absent from the encyclical was the call for remedial legislation that the Quebec bishops, and their agent Gonthier, lobbied tirelessly for. Finally on 1 July 1899 the Holy See announced the establishment of a permanent delegation in Ottawa.

In spite of the relative failure of Gonthier's mission to Rome, he had succeeded in establishing relationships of trust with the Canadian episcopate.<sup>38</sup> The Dominican could neither be accused of holding radical French "liberal" positions nor an "authoritarian" ultramontanism.<sup>39</sup> Gonthier was clearly opposed to the Vatican's evaluation and handling of the Manitoba schools question. Within the Dominican foundation Gonthier emerged as the representative of the Canadian friars because of trust placed in him by the Canadian church.<sup>40</sup>

## Montreal

Since their arrival in St. Hyacinthe the French Dominicans had wanted to establish themselves in an urban center such as Montreal or Quebec. However, their entry into the diocese was blocked by the intransigent ultramontane Bishop Ignace Bourget (1840-76) of Montreal who suspected the French Dominicans of being imbued with liberal ideology. Bourget also clashed with the Sulpicians, also predominantly from France, causing the local Dominican superior to write to his Provincial in France: "Français, c'est être suspect."<sup>41</sup> Bourget actively excluded the preaching ministry of the Dominicans in the

<sup>37</sup> Pastoral Letter of His Grace the Archbishop of Cyrene, no. 2. The letter refers to Leo XIII. (1897). *Militantis ecclesiae*. Retrieved from [http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_l-xiii\\_enc\\_01081897\\_militantis-ecclesiae.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_01081897_militantis-ecclesiae.html)

<sup>38</sup> Adam, C., 1897, December 23, *Letter of Vicar Provincial to Prior Provincial Monpeurt*. (Plourde vol. 2, 1973a: 337-38).

<sup>39</sup> O'Malley (2018: 61). O'Malley distinguishes between liberal and authoritarian ultramontanism.

<sup>40</sup> Adam, C., 1897, December 31, *Letter to Monpeurt*. (Plourde, vol. 2 1973a: 338-340).

<sup>41</sup> "French is to be suspect." Bourgeois, L-T. (1875). *Report of superior of the Canadian foundation to the provincial chapter of 1875*. (Plourde, vol. 1, 1973a: 179).

diocese. Bourget's successor, Bishop Edouard Fabre (1876-96) was more conciliatory, permitting the Dominicans to preach in the diocese and even the establishment of the Dominican Third Order. However, it was not until the installation of Gonthier's friend and collaborator, Paul Bruchési, that the Dominican friars were permitted and even invited to establish a community in Montreal. Upon his return to Canada from Rome, Gonthier was personally invited by Archbishop Bruchési to preach in the cathedral of Montreal.

Bruchési conducted negotiations regarding the establishment of a community in Montreal directly with Gonthier and not his French superiors.<sup>42</sup> In fact, on 4 December 1900 Bruchési called Gonthier personally to offer the Dominicans entry into the Archdiocese. This was a welcome invitation for the Dominicans to establish themselves in the new cosmopolitan center of French-speaking Canada. Bruchési actively encouraged the Canadianization of the Dominicans and opposed the direction of the Canadian foundation from Paris.<sup>43</sup> Gonthier writes to the Provincial warning him not to send any friar unknown to Bruchési as superior in Montreal as Bruchési was already suspicious of the French Dominicans,<sup>44</sup> especially since some French Dominicans in St. Hyacinthe had "conspired" with Merry Del Val against the Quebec episcopate.<sup>45</sup>

## Quebec City

From their arrival in 1873, the Dominicans considered Quebec City a natural center to establish a community. It was the political, cultural and intellectual center of Quebec. Unlike some other dioceses, Quebec was friendly to the liberal ideas associated with the French Dominicans. Shortly after their arrival, the Dominicans were invited to participate in the events commemorating the 6<sup>th</sup> centenary of the death of St Thomas Aquinas on 11 March 1874 at the cathedral and at Laval University. The superior of the new Dominican foundation, fr. Bourgeois, served as preacher. Present at the festivities were Lieutenant Governor Caron, Archbishop Taschereau, the Prime Minister of Quebec and the Mayor (Plourde, vol. 1, 1973a: 172-173). Initial vocations, such as Gonthier's,

<sup>42</sup> See the correspondence of Gonthier from November 1900 to April 1901, (Plourde, vol. 2, 1973a: 346-365).

<sup>43</sup> Argaut, J., 1898, January 30. *Letter to Monpeurt*. (Plourde vol. 2, 1973a: 340-41; See also Laperrière (2012: 12).

<sup>44</sup> Gonthier. 1901, January 21. *Letter to Monpeurt*. (Plourde, vol. 2, 1973a: 356-357).

<sup>45</sup> Gonthier, 1897, November 11, *Letter to F-R. Rouleau* (Plourde, vol. 2, 1973a: 333-34; 304).

were drawn from the diocese with the encouragement of the local clergy and even Archbishop Taschereau himself. Yet 25 years after their arrival, and after several failed attempts, the Dominicans were still not present in the city.

The growing ultramontanistism amongst the clergy of Quebec in the years subsequent to the arrival of the liberal Dominicans was one reason for the delay. Other reasons such as the material poverty of the Dominicans to sustain a new foundation and the reluctance of the bishop to commit the diocese to provide support for too many religious communities were also significant factors. Finally on 30 December 1899, Gonthier broached the question of a foundation in Quebec City with his mentor and friend Archbishop Bégin. In his New Year letter to Bégin, Gonthier first establishes their personal connection, reminding him that it was he that encouraged Gonthier to join the Order, before outlining the reasons why a Dominican foundation in Quebec City would be beneficial.<sup>46</sup> Only one week later Bégin acceded to Gonthier's request.

Like in Ottawa and Montreal, Gonthier led the negotiations with Archdiocesan officials on behalf of the Dominicans over the course of the next several years until the erection of a community in 1906.

## Conclusion

Gonthier found himself in the midst of major shifts in the social-political reality of the nation as well as the church both locally and universally. The Manitoba schools question revealed an evolving relationship between francophones and anglophones in Canada and between French and English speaking Catholics and their bishops. The episode reveals that the Canadian church, from its earliest days, was not homogenous and that ecclesial commitments were not merely theological or doctrinal but largely determined by cultural, linguistic and contextual issues.

Another major shift witnessed by the life and times of Gonthier was the growth of the ultramontane church in Canada and its implications for the French-speaking church in particular. While papal primacy was never questioned by the bishops, the judgment of his delegate certainly was. The encyclical *Mirari Vos* and the establishment of a permanent delegation that Gonthier tried to prevent heightened the Quebec clergy's "deep sense of alienation" (Perin, 1990: 69). The establishment of a permanent delegation of the

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<sup>46</sup> Gonthier, 1899, December 30, *Letter to L-N Bégin* (Plourde vol. 2, 1973a: 406-407).

Holy See to Canada reoriented relations amongst the bishops and the bishops with the Holy See. At the same time, the local episcopate was no longer the mediator between church-state relationships. Instead the Holy See and the state become interlocutors.

These political, demographic and religious shifts facilitated the Canadianization of the Dominican foundation in a 'prise de conscience' of the Canadian friars that the society and church that they lived in was unique and complex. The French liberal vision of the French friars could not easily be imported and imposed in Canadian soil. Gonthier was diligent worker, who inspired trust and cultivated relationships. He understood the complexity of these situations and navigated them adroitly in his interactions with the local ecclesial authorities. Through his direct involvement in the foundation of important communities in Ottawa, Quebec and Montreal, he was able to secure the establishment of an independent Canadian province in 1911, six years before his death, even as he found it increasingly difficult to adapt to the evolving situation in which he found himself.

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