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BISHOP OMER ROBITOUX, O.M.I.
1913-1986

On the evening of 12 November 1986 Omer Robidoux, o.m.i., the Roman Catholic Bishop of the Central and Eastern Canadian Arctic, boarded his final northern flight and the Canadian North lost one of its strongest supporters. The twin-engined Navaho he was aboard tragically crashed after take-off at Rankin Inlet, N.W.T., killing all passengers, including a fellow Oblate, Fa. Theophile Didier, a Grey Nun missionary, Sr. Lise Turcotte, s.g.m., and two Churchill entrepreneurs, Keith Rawlings and Dave MacVey.

Bishop Robidoux, aged 72, was born in St. Pierre-Jolys, a small French farming community 20 miles south of Winnipeg, Manitoba. Omer entered the novitiate of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate at St. Laurent, Manitoba, in 1933. His perpetual vows were made on 8 September 1937, and he was ordained a priest in his home town on 29 June 1939.

Toward the end of his novitiate as a matter of routine he was asked where he might like to undertake missionary work. His first choice was "Eskimo missions," but this was not to be until many years later. His first missionary work was with native Saulteaux Indians in Fort Alexander, Manitoba; following this, he was sent to Lestock, Saskatchewan. Beginning in 1947, the next 22 years of his life were devoted to ministry in Indian residential schools as a teacher, principal, superior and pastor in Lestock and Lebret, Saskatchewan, and in Winnipeg, Manitoba. His vision of ministry to the whole needs of the individual was evident in the many activities he avidly pursued with his students. In particular, sports and outdoor activities played an important part in the education they received at the hands of Father Robidoux, himself a former Montreal Canadien draft choice. In the summers Father Robidoux visited the various
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Guy Mary-Rousselière’s archaeological work and editorial work on the ESKIMO magazine always received the blessings of their Bishop. The Inuititut translation work undertaken by various missionaries, including Fa. Theophile Didier and Fa. Hubert Mascaret, and the adaptation of the Canadian Catechism to a northern milieu by Sr. Lise Turcotte, s.g.m., were tasks that received his ongoing encouragement and support. The Bishop would defend his missionaries and those who had gone before them from the attacks of “northern experts” unwilling to reside in the North but quick to criticize actions without a thorough understanding of the context and milieu.

The plight of the northern hunters and trappers as they faced the problems of increasing costs of equipment and the results of extensive anti-trapping propaganda in the South was a strong concern of Bishop Robidoux’s. A public statement of support and information was issued from the Diocesan office in April 1986 to benefactors of the missions and interested parishes in western Canada and Great Britain. In his opening statement, the Bishop wrote, “Hunting and trapping activities are valuable activities not only to be measured in strict dollars and cents but in cultural integrity, as a gainful activity in an already fragile economy, for nutritional purposes, and Christian stewardship of northern lands.”

The role of transportation in developing the North was a subject any passer-by could readily strike up as a topic of conversation with Bishop Robidoux. Whether it was the role of the Port of Churchill, on whose Development Board he actively served since 1973, or the scheduling and deregulation of the airline industry, there was certain to be a lively discussion.

To many individuals and northern interest groups in the South, Bishop Omer Robidoux was an enigma, a man they couldn’t conveniently label as pro- or anti-development. Perhaps some northerners can give us a clearer picture. The Arctic Co-operatives Limited wrote in their bulletin:

The nostalgic traditional heritage of the Arctic and the vigorous new North found a common friend and supporter in Bishop Omer Robidoux. With a subtly skillful blend of administration and political acumen, the Bishop led his vast diocese in its recognition of the rights of self-determination of native people. His concurrent support of two generations of Arctic missionaries required administrative and diplomatic skills to link the work of the modern Church with both the secular community and the traditional religious community in the development of northern native people.

A fellow northern Bishop, Hubert O’Connor, o.m.i., described the Diocese of Churchill-Hudson Bay “as a young man’s country,” stating, “Bishop Robidoux was not young, but he was actually about 50 in spirit.” John Hicks, an Inuk from Churchill and a former president of Nunasi Corporation, said,

the Bishop’s genius was the quality of his friendship. You could talk to him anywhere, anytime about anything. He always had time. I valued his sharp, strong yet constructive criticisms. They were always given to you face to face and never mentioned behind your back. He was our sounding board for testing out new ideas. He would always say exactly what he thought, but never press his point. We would always leave him encouraged to go ahead with our aim of economic development by our people and for our people.

Lorraine Brandson
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Diocese of Churchill-Hudson Bay