



# A MISSIONARY AMONG THE FIRST NATIONS AND THE MÉTIS



*From the Red River to North Dakota.*

## AT THE RED RIVER

Father Georges-Antoine Belcourt's role at the Red River was to convert Indigenous people to Catholicism. To achieve this, he wanted to bring them together in a village rather than living as hunters in a nomadic lifestyle. He was convinced that once they adapted to "civilized" life and enjoyed greater material comfort, they would accept Christian principles more easily.

His bishop, Bishop Provencher, saw things differently. He warned Father Belcourt not to spend his time and money on projects that were contrary to the interests and normal way of life of the Indigenous people.

Father Belcourt established his first mission at Baie Saint Paul on the Assiniboine River where he built a chapel. Since he could communicate easily in their languages, he succeeded in attracting a significant number of Sauteux\* and Métis\*. He helped them build houses near the chapel and plant crops such as potatoes, corn and oats. He also opened a school. Later on, he established several other missions located farther away from Baie Saint Paul.

## A MAN OF GREAT WISDOM

Despite their cultural differences, Father Belcourt developed a very good relationship with the Indigenous people. The story of his work with them soon spread among the First Nations in the West. In 1836, a group from the Rocky Mountain Sauteux travelled to the Red River to meet the priest who was said to be a man of great wisdom and kindness. They were impressed with his ability to speak their language and with the work he was doing among the Sauteux. Indigenous people from other areas also came to the mission and took back stories about the priest whose heart had been shaped by the "Great Spirit."



Map of the Red River and North Dakota ▲

## CORRECTING AN INJUSTICE

None of Father Belcourt's missions were very successful, mainly due to the lack of financial support from Bishop Provencher. It was also hard to convince the Sauteux to adopt the life of a farmer. However, the missionary did succeed in establishing a closer and more lasting relationship with the Métis who formed the largest group in the Red River Settlement. Their culture matched Belcourt's culture more closely than that of the Sauteux. He became a friend of the Métis leader Jean-Louis Riel, father of the famous Louis Riel who is considered the founder of Manitoba.

Father Belcourt worked tirelessly on behalf of the Métis to have their rights recognized as inhabitants of the Northwest and especially to defend their right to trade furs independently. The missionary's political involvement irritated the Hudson's Bay Company, which had a monopoly on the fur trade. The Company intervened with the leaders of the Catholic Church to have Father Belcourt sent back to Quebec.



Belcourt teaching catechism to Aboriginal people ►

## IN NORTH DAKOTA

It was not long before Father Belcourt returned to the West to resume his work with the First Nations. In order to distance himself from the domination of the Hudson's Bay Company, he established a mission in 1848 on the American side of the border in North Dakota, first at Pembina and then at St. Joseph. He succeeded in attracting a good number of Métis and Sauteux, offering them the possibility of carrying out their fur trade independently of the Company.

In St. Joseph, he built a church, a school, a presbytery, and a flour mill. He even created a community of nuns composed of Métis and Sauteux women to oversee the education of the children.

For eleven years, he travelled throughout the Prairies, preaching the Gospel and attending to the Métis who hunted buffalo.

He was well liked by his flock. However, in 1859, his bishop asked him to leave his mission in St. Joseph. This decision is said to be related to accusations made by some people regarding his behaviour. His parishioners greatly regretted his departure and tried to get him back.

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. In Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action, Article 48 (ii), it is noted that "Respecting Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination in spiritual matters, including the right to practise, develop, and teach their own spiritual and religious traditions, customs, and ceremonies, is consistent with Article 12:1 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples." Try to imagine the discussion between Father Belcourt and Bishop Provencher about the lifestyle of the First Nations.
2. Why did Father Belcourt's claims irritate the Hudson's Bay Company? Were they justified?
3. If a village were to be established today, what buildings would be needed and why?

\***Sauteux:** The word Sauteux or Saulteaux is a French translation of "people of the rapids" which describes this First Nation's original settlement located near a waterway.

\***Métis:** The term Métis refers to a group of cultures and ethnic identities that resulted from unions between Indigenous and European people in what is now Canada.

