

The Lower-Canadian Clergy and the Reign of Terror (1810)

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In 1810, Governor Sir James Craig moved decisively to stamp out what he saw as two threats to Lower Canada developing simultaneously and reinforcing each other: democracy and French-Canadian nationalism.¹ In February, for the third time in a row, he dissolved the House of Assembly. Then, between the 17th and 19th of March, his Executive ordered the seizure of the newspaper *Le Canadien* and of its files, as well as the imprisonment of its main owners, editors and propagandists, more than twenty persons throughout the Province.² Craig, in a vigorous proclamation fired a long tirade against the seditious, evil and treasonable propaganda distributed throughout the Province by “factious men.”³ This proclamation was well circulated via the newspapers, the magistrates, the officers of militia and the clergy.⁴ These events have been termed, with some exaggeration, “the reign of terror” in the historiography of this period.

Thus, at the height of a political crisis and just prior to an election, the governor decided to reinforce the secular arm with the religious power. The historical writing on this subject has perhaps too much simplified the clergy’s role and its motivations, pointing out the sole immediate interest of the Church and its traditional and rigid principle of submission to the lawful

¹ J.-P. WALLOT, “La pensée révolutionnaire et réformiste dans le Bas-Canada (1773-1815),” unpublished paper to the 1st Colloquium of GRISCAF.

² *Minutes of the Executive Council*, March 17 and 19, 1810. Hereinafter cited as *MEC*. *Public Archives of Canada*, R.G. 1, F:115.123; 141-147. Hereinafter cited as *PAC*. The government tried to discredit the newspaper on the additional grounds of its being anti-clerical and irreligious. Cf. *Archives de la Bibliothèque Nationale (Montréal)*, March 1810, MSS, feuilles volantes; *The Montreal Gazette*, March 19 and 26, 1810; *Le Vrai Canadien*, February and March, 1810; J. HARE and J.-P. WALLOT, *Les Imprimés dans le Bas-Canada, 1801-1810*, Montreal, 1967, Nos. 240, 241, 242; *Archives de l’Archevêché de Québec*, R.1, 7: 155-156; *PAC*, R.G. 4, A1, S. 79:7.

³ *Rapport sur les Archives publiques du Canada*, 1921, 144-147. Hereinafter cited as *RA PC*.

⁴ *PAC*, R.G. 4, A1, S, 83:20; *ibid.*, 82-126.

authority. A better perspective emerges if this incident is inserted into the whole question of the difficult position of the Catholic Church in Canada at the turn of the nineteenth century.⁵ From the clergy's reactions and conduct during the crisis of 1810, can be deduced first its motivations and secondly the consequences of this first clerical mixing with elections.

Craig's decision to conscript the Catholic Church in his political thrust answered the bureaucrats' and in general the Britishers' expectations. Exasperated by the growing independence of a House of Assembly and of the *Parti canadien*, they had already been calling for a stand by the clergy on the side of the government. In such a critical moment, the Britishers maintained, the Clergy could not hide behind its usual political neutrality. "When the vessel is surrounded by storms and threatened with danger, it behoves every one to assist. At this moment to be silent is to be criminal."⁶ In particular the clergy:

should arise from their slumber. They have now during fifty years, under the protection of Great Britain and ... Providence ... enjoyed the blessings of security, in independence and repose... But let not their supineness and apathy render them indifferent to their own happiness ... they have much influence on the mind of their countrymen, in religious matters their sway is unbounded; in temporal it is acknowledged, and why not in politics, the basis of which is religion, morals and law.

The time is now come when their advice and authority ought to be exerted to undeceive the people...⁷

On the 19th of March, the Governor sent for the Catholic bishop to attend a meeting of the Executive Council. Craig informed Mgr. Plessis that "la désaffectation occasionnée dans le peuple de la province par la dissémination du *Canadien*, était rendue au point de lui faire craindre un soulèvement général," unless energetic measures were taken by the Government. Three of *Le Canadien's* owners, he said, had already confessed, from their cell, "qu'il était temps que le gouvernement prît des mesures de rigueur, sans quoi, la Province n'aurait pas tardé à être en feu." On the seized press had been found a propaganda sheet supposedly tending to demonstrate how the Government, since the Conquest, had oppressed the Canadian people. Craig expressed his astonishment and anger at "l'apathie presque criminelle du clergé": indeed, the confiscated papers of that newspaper had shown that a large number of priests subscribed to it and that it was "dans et autour des presbytères qu'on

⁵ Cf. J.-P. WALLOT, "Religion and French Canadian Mores in the Early XIXth Century," *The Canadian Historical Review*, 52 (1971): 51-94.

⁶ *The Quebec Mercury*, April 2, 1810.

⁷ *Ibid.*, March 19, 1810.

en exaltait les principes.” Finally, Craig “ordered” Plessis and his clergy to support with all their efforts the proclamation of the 21st of March “qu’il allait émaner et qu’il entendait que tous les curés publiassent eux-mêmes.”⁸ In this proclamation, Governor Craig spurred all the well-thinking subjects, the clergy in particular, to counteract the treacherous propaganda and to undeceive the population, instructing it in the “true principles of loyalty towards the King, and obedience to the laws.”⁹

It was a direct order.¹⁰ The bishop had no choice, particularly as he had no reason to doubt the general tenor of the Governor’s report.¹¹ It was thus “autant par inclination que par devoir et par nécessité” that he obeyed. In a letter to his grand vicar in Montreal, Plessis emphasized that it was absolutely requisite to dispel the suspicions that were falling upon a clergy which was now watched even more closely. Their loyalty was being put to the test.

Au nom de Dieu, avertissez bien tous ceux que vous aurez occasion de voir, qu’ils se gardent de manquer à ce qu’exige d’eux le Gouvernement... Le moment est décisif, et vous pouvez compter que le clergé s’expose aux plus grands déboires s’il faut qu’il perde la confiance que le Gouvernement lui témoigne encore une fois. Mais s’ils (some priests) préfèrent leur prétendue popularité à leurs devoirs envers le Gouvernement, je ne répons de rien. Les premiers reproches tomberont sur les coupables et bientôt s’étendront sur tout le clergé qui a déjà des ennemis dans l’administration.

To prevent suspicions, the priests should be particularly careful in their relations with “les partisans outrés de la liberté du peuple... Que dirait-il (the Governor) si quelqu’un de ce clergé montrait de l’inclination pour le parti démocratique... comme j’apprends... que plusieurs ont l’ait dans les dernières élections?”¹²

Despite a previous admonition to his clergy not to meddle in the elections “en aucune manière,”¹³ Mgr. Plessis had to reverse his stand.¹⁴ On the

⁸ *Archives de l’Archevêché de Québec*, r.l., 7:131. Hereinafter cited as *AAQ*.

⁹ *RAPC*, 1921, 147.

¹⁰ L. LEMIEUX, *L’Établissement de la première province ecclésiastique au Canada 1783-1844*, Montreal, 1968, p. 68.

¹¹ *AAQ*, r.l., 7:136.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹³ *AAQ*, r.l., 7:128; *ibid.*, 134.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

21st of March, he sent to his curés a circular letter accompanying Craig's proclamation. In it, he requested that they read the proclamation, so as to destroy in their parishioners' mind the ill effects of the seditious propaganda that had been circulated.

... vous êtes, vous-mêmes, intéressés de très près à maintenir les fidèles dans le respect et la soumission qu'ils doivent à leur souverain et à ceux qui le représentent... parce que ces principes... portent sur la plus solide de toutes les bases, savoir sur les maximes de la religion sainte... qui est essentiellement ennemie de l'indépendance et de toute réflexion téméraire sur la conduite des personnes que Dieu a établies pour nous gouverner.¹⁵

The bishop was more explicit in his letter to his grand vicars,¹⁶ but his feelings on the matter were even more clearly unveiled in his private letters. The Church had to avoid, nearly at all cost, a break with the Government, "puisque c'est de sa protection que dépend le maintien de notre culte." Craig's proclamation, he acknowledged, was perhaps inspired by "la politique ou un défaut de juste information dans les frayeurs qu'elle exprime. N'importe, notre affaire n'est pas d'examiner, mais de seconder... l'exécutif"¹⁷ || For it was "notre devoir" and the Government was scrutinizing the Catholic clergy's every move. "Et il faut avouer que le gouverneur y va de franc jeu et que sa proclamation annonce un bon coeur; mais, il m'a déclaré qu'après l'urbanité, il montrerait une sévérité extrême."

The bishop was also disturbed by another problem. In his circular and first personal letters, he had spurred his clergy to publish the Governor's proclamation either in the vestry or at the church's door after Mass.¹⁸ But the Anglican bishop read the proclamation and preached on the same subject in his cathedral. Pressure was building up for the Catholic clergy to do the same. If the Governor demanded it, what should be done? "D'un côté, les rituels défendent de faire au prône la publication de choses profanes. Mais qu'est-ce que l'autorité des rituels auprès du Gouvernement?" But "une publication en attire une autre," which might swiftly lead to "reconnaître la suprématie du Roi si contraire à nos dogmes." The bishop solicited the advice of his grand vicar in Montreal, Sulpician J.-H.-A. Roux. Three days later, he and his advisors, after having weighted the pro and con, would deem the inconveniences of such a reading in the church less harmful than a rupture

¹⁵ Quoted in Mgr. H. TÊTU ed., *Mandements*, 6 vols., Quebec, 1887-1890, 3:43-45.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁷ *AAQ, op. cit.*, p. 133.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 134, 138.

with the Governor and a persecution that might ensue.¹⁹

But the bishop was not so totally naive nor as cornered as it may seem. Very early, he had expressed some reservations, however timid, about the importance of the troubles forecasted by the Government. He constantly reiterated that the clergy had to silence the calumnies that were propagated against them. But, added Mgr. Plessis not without some slyness, “ce n’est pas qu’il faille nous flatter de changer l’opinion publique ni le sort des élections qui me paraît à peu près décidé, mais il faut que le gouvernement puisse dire que nous avons recommandé aux peuples de se maintenir dans leurs devoirs, ce qui peut très bien se faire par des lieux communs, tels qu’en fournit en plusieurs endroits le Nouveau Testament... Puisqu’il faut faire les choses, pourquoi ne pas s’y mettre de bonne grâce?”²⁰

It is exactly what Mgr. Plessis set out to do himself, on the 1st of April. After reading the proclamation, he launched into a solemn and vigorous sermon where he condemned not only disobedience, but even mere criticism of legitimate governments. Recalling the Canadian Church’s long tradition of loyalty, he anathematized the ideas of freedom popularized by the *Parti canadien*.

Avouons, mes Frères, que de tous les sophismes dont on a abusé, ces derniers temps, pour leurrer et égarer les nations et les disposer à la révolte, voilà peut-être le plus méchant... le plus faux et le plus absurde, je veux dire, le système de la souveraineté du peuple.²¹

Nearly eight thousand auditors heard the bishop deliver these propositions “incontestables” and proclaim the “biens inappréciables que la Providence verse depuis cinquante ans sur cette colonie,” among which the best of kings. After the peroration was sung the “Dominus salvum fac Regem,” that was repeated by a band on the tune of “God save the King.”²²

Most curés, at least in the towns and in large parishes, seem to have emulated the Bishop. For instance, around Montreal, they “have been trying each to out-do the other, in showing their attachment to our constitution and loyalty to the best of Kings... in many places it has had a powerful effect upon the good and honest misled habitants, and brought many to a sense of that duty which they had lost by the falsehoods of intriguing men.”²³ Newspapers

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 138-144.

²⁰ Many curés and some Government supporters were also conscious of the electoral trend. Cf. *PAC*, M.G. 22/6, 5-1:206; 3-2: 365; and 5-1: 241.

²¹ Reprinted in J. HARE and J. P. WALLLOT, *Confrontations/Ideas in Conflict*, Three Rivers, 1971, pp. 165-174.

²² *The Quebec Gazette*, April 5, 1810.

²³ *Ibid.*, April 12, 1810.

published letters coming from numerous parishes relating how the priests had done their “duties” with great zeal.²⁴ In numerous parishes, the curés read themselves the proclamation from “la Chaire de vérité” and preached on loyalty, stressing the fact that the Catholic religion is “essentiellement fidèle à la Royauté et au Gouvernement établi,” recalling the French revolutionnaires’ efforts to “décatholiciser” France. A few even exhorted “leurs paroissiens, en faisant un nouveau choix de représentants, d’écarter les gens turbulents et suspects, et d’élire de préférence des personnes paisibles, loyales, amies de l’ordre et du gouvernement.”²⁵

Some more truthful or shrewder curés squarely admitted that despite their best efforts, their parishioners were too warm for the *Parti canadien* to change their mind.²⁶ Other curés did not hide their uneasiness or their fear for the future, in view of the Church’s direct involvement.

Mais, Monseigneur, après l’éclat que vient de faire le clergé, nous ne devons plus nous attendre qu’à une haine implacable de la part du parti révolutionnaire et si, malheureusement, le même choix avait lieu, nous nous trouverions exposés à toutes sortes de persécutions de la part des mauvais membres, et de la Chambre elle-même, s’ils en composaient la majorité, nous serions probablement traduits à leur barre pour recevoir sentence; ce sont les termes qu’ils ont déjà employés dans la dernière session, dans un ordre envoyé à Mr Henry, de Laprairie, pour s’être intéressé à l’élection de Mr. Sewell, et à plusieurs autres personnes, pour le même sujet. Nous espérons que notre Grandeur voudra bien nous mettre sous la protection du Gouvernement et de son Excellence le gouverneur en chef.²⁷

In the summer, the Governor wrote to his secretary that Mgr. Plessis, after returning from pastoral visits, had acknowledged “that some of his curés had not behaved quite as they ought to have done.”²⁸ But even had they wanted to, the faithful did not always submit tamely to the curés’ discourses. In some parishes, “les auditeurs n’ont point été sages.”²⁹ Elsewhere, others

²⁴ For example, cf. *The Quebec Gazette*, March 23, 29, April 5, 12, 1810; *The Montreal Gazette*, April 2, 9, 23, 1810.

²⁵ *The Montreal Gazette*, April 2, 1810.

²⁶ *AAQ*, c.g., 6: 53, 54, 55, 58, 61.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

²⁸ Sir James Craig to H. W. Ryland, Quebec, August 6, 1810, Quoted in R. CHRISTIE, *A History of the Late Province of Lower Canada*. 6 vols., Quebec, 1848-1854, 6: 128.

²⁹ L. G. LABADIE’S Journal, *PAC*, M.G. 22/12, 1, 18: 183.

tore down “malicieusement... sur la porte de l’église... la proclamation de Son Excellence le Gouverneur en Chef”³⁰ Of greater consequence perhaps was the fact that in certain parishes the Government’s propagandists were thrown out of the parsonage by captains of militia and other supporters of the *Parti canadien*, and the curés did not intervene in any way.³¹

On the whole, the clergy officially supported the Government. It does not quite follow that their priests were grossly naive victims of the Government’s propaganda or that they solely obeyed temporary interests. If Mgr. Plessis could not steer any other course at that moment, he could not, however, really profit from it. He and his Church were largely helpless. By principle, obedience due to the lawful Government, and by necessity, preservation of the Church’s autonomy, they had to earn and keep the State’s good will without becoming subservient to it. But by letting themselves be used, even occasionally, as an instrument of Government propaganda, they ran the risk of being concretely assimilated to the State and of being discredited among the population. They could not regularly support the Executive without breaking up with many faithful. They had to keep at bay this Government that wanted to subordinate them for political ends and was constantly nagging them.³² On the other hand, the Catholic Church could not side with the *Parti canadien*: such a move was prevented by the doctrine of respect towards the established authority, the Bishop’s opposition to “democratic” principles and the more imminent threat of State’s intervention in its business.

The Church’s “neutrality,” impossible in times of acute crisis, as in 1810, could not really satisfy the Government, whatever happened. If the clergy succeeded in influencing the population, the Executive would infer the necessity of taking over such a powerful and necessary ally. If they failed, it would conclude that the priests had not exhibited sufficient zeal for the Government.

The Church was not gaining either among the faithful. If the ordinary clergy was much closer to their flock’s political preoccupations and convictions, the hierarchy was expounding ideas contrary to the Canadian leaders’ objectives in the House of Assembly.³³ Even for the more moderate

³⁰ *The Quebec Gazette*, May 3, 1810.

³¹ Cf. numerous reports in *PAC*, R.G. 4, A1, S, 82: 139-140; 83: 228.

³² For a more detailed study of these efforts against the Church cf. A. G. DOUGHTY and D. A. MGARTHUR, eds., *Documents relatifs à l’histoire constitutionnelle du Canada 1792-1818*, Ottawa, 1915, pp. 387-417; *PAC*, M.G. 11, Q113: 214-216; R. CHRISTIE, *A History of the Late Province of Lower Canada*, *op. cit.*, 6: 127 f. and 222 f.; H. TÊTU, ed., *Mandements*, *op. cit.*, 3: 59 ff; *AAQ*, r.l., 7: 301 ff

³³ Cf. footnote No. 6 and *Archives de la province de Québec*, g.c., papiers Tardieu de Lanaudière, b. 2.

French-Canadian bourgeois leaders, e.g. D.-B. Viger,³⁴ who were imbued with the Encyclopedists' and the English philosophers' principles, civil government resulted from a free association of citizens defining their relationships with a charter. Moreover, in Lower Canada, because of the general economic equality among French Canadians, the electoral franchise was set very low. If, like the English, they were celebrating the "people's" power and considered its opinion "comme la seule légale et ... respectable,"³⁵ they were actually talking of the real people, thus of popular sovereignty, whereas in Great Britain, the "people" of Blackstone and of Burke comprised but the richer classes, notably the large land-owners.

The Catholic hierarchy and the leaders of the *Parti canadien* thus expounded widely divergent conceptions of government, even though these were all inspired in part by the British institutions. The breach between the two élites was enlarged by the events of 1810. On the other hand, the struggle between the Executive and the *Parti canadien* was preventing a sharp decrease of the Church's influence in education, social security and even in its own affairs.

As during the American Revolution or the agitated years between 1793-1797, the Church did not succeed in shaping the faithful's conduct in matters that they considered of a secular nature. Moreover, the active and known sympathy of some curés for the *Parti canadien* could not be hidden under "lieux communs" about loyalty. Up to what point was this intervention of the Church not a formality, and understood as such by a large number of people? However that may be, the "crisis" did not precipitate immediately a complete break between the lay élite and the Church hierarchy, although it announced it for the not very distant future. And after the war of 1812 would start a shift already foreseeable: the English Government and the British bureaucrats in the colony would become more and more the Catholic Church's protectors against the anticlerical and laicist views and projects of the lay leaders in the Assembly. Only crucial problems threatening the whole fabric of the French-Canadian society, as in the case of the project of Union in 1822, would temporarily reconcile the clergy and the Canadian laity. London would come to recognize the Catholic Church's autonomy. But if nothing was done against it in England prior to 1812, it was perhaps, in part, because the very limited power of the Canadian clergy over the faithful in the early nineteenth century was already understood as there: an interesting facet of this episode, to be added to Mgr. Plessis's cunning, a Bishop too often represented as a simple, pious, conservative and overly loyal prelate.

³⁴ "Considérations sur les effets qu'ont produit en Canada la conservation des établissements du pays." Reprinted in *Confrontations, op. cit.*, pp. 27-58.

³⁵ *Le Canadien*, March 10, 1810.