

## Faithful Companions of Jesus in the Field of Education in Brandon, Manitoba, 1883-1895

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In October 1883, five members the Sisters, Faithful Companions of Jesus, travelled to Brandon, Manitoba, invited by Archbishop A. A. Taché, OMI, to establish a foundation in the Archdiocese of St. Boniface. Their reputation as trail-blazing educators preceded them - two convents had been opened in the Diocese of St. Albert in June of the same year, part of an Oblate network of services to insure the transmission of Catholic values, culture, and education in the Northwest.<sup>1</sup> Although the arrival of the sisters signalled a desire of the congregation to further extend its mission, their stay in Brandon was an uphill struggle that lasted little more than ten years. An examination of their work in education reveals anti-Catholic sentiment in Brandon that was helping to fuel the flames of a larger battle being fought throughout Manitoba as the rights of Catholics to a denominational education were called into question.

In his recent biography of Archbishop Taché, Raymond Huel provides an historiographical framework for a study of women religious working for the Catholic Church in Manitoba during the latter part of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> He outlines the history of linguistic and school privileges granted to French and Catholic settlers in Manitoba, noting that Taché was actively involved in the establishment of Manitoba's denominational school system. Taché was also instrumental in securing those same privileges in the Manitoba Act of 1870. By the beginning of the 1880s, however, his vision for the Northwest had to be revised because immigration had

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<sup>1</sup> See J. Gresko, "Gender and Mission: The Founding Generations of the Sisters of Saint Ann and the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in British Columbia, 1858-1914," unpublished dissertation: University of British Columbia, 1999. Also see R. Bruno-Jofré, "The Oblate Sisters, A Manitoba Order: Reconstructing Early Years, 1904-1915," in R. Bruno-Jofré, ed., *Issues in the History of Education in Manitoba* (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), 511-567.

<sup>2</sup> R. Huel, *Archbishop A.-A. Taché of St. Boniface: The "Good Fight" and the Illusive Vision* (Edmonton, The University of Alberta Press, 2003). See Huel's *Proclaiming the Gospel to the Indians and the Métis* (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1996), as well as G. Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press: 1984), and T. J. Fay, *A History of Canadian Catholics* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

reduced the French and Catholic element to a minority status.<sup>3</sup> While there had not been a challenge to school privileges, Taché had detected an explosive issue, and was concerned about the future of Catholic education in Manitoba.

Huel relates that as the population of Manitoba increased and spread, Taché secured the services of female teaching congregations for the missions he had established in his archdiocese.<sup>4</sup> He became acquainted with the Faithful Companions of Jesus (FCJ) through Vital Grandin, OMI, Bishop of St. Albert, when earlier recruits stopped to rest and visit with the Sisters of Charity in St. Boniface before going to Oblate mission schools in Saskatchewan at St. Laurent and Prince Albert. A French congregation with convents in England and Ireland, the FCJs were founded by Marie Madeleine Victoire de Bengy, Viscountess de Bonnault d'Houet (1781-1858), a young widow who was motivated by a strong religious impulse to carry out work of various kinds among the poor. In 1820, after managing her late husband's estate for several years, Madeleine d'Houet decided that rather than re-marry, she was called to establish a society for the education of children, training them to lead useful, edifying Christian lives.<sup>5</sup> She patterned her Constitution after the Jesuits who taught at St. Acheul, her son's college in Amiens, and consequently became interested in missionary endeavors.<sup>6</sup>

FCJ was one of hundreds of service-oriented congregations established throughout the Catholic world during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that were for the most part responses to the evangelicalism of the time and the social dislocation that was resulting from wholesale economic change on the continent.<sup>7</sup> It was a central organization, with control exercised by a Superior-General rather than by a bishop who extended an invitation to reside in a diocese. Centralized congregations were not, as a rule, very popular with bishops. Some were fearful of administrative problems or overly conscious of their own authority while others objected

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<sup>3</sup> Huel, *Taché*, 143-173. Also see Paul Crunican, *Priests and Politicians: Manitoba schools and the election of 1896* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1974), and V. Jensen, "The Manitoba School Question of the 1890s," in *St. Paul's College University of Manitoba*, eds. G. Friesen & R. Lebrun (Winnipeg: St. Paul's College, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Huel, *Taché*, 225.

<sup>5</sup> F. Stanislaus, *Life of the Vicountess de Bonnault D'Houet: of the Society of the Faithful Companions of Jesus 1781-1858* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1913).

<sup>6</sup> *Summary of the Constitutions & Common Rules of the Society of the Sisters, Faithful Companions of Jesus* (Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, 1882), 2, FCJ Archives, Calgary (hereafter FCJAC).

<sup>7</sup> C. Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan Ltd., 1987), 18. Also see E. Rapley, *The Devotès: Women and the Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1990).

in principle.<sup>8</sup> Notwithstanding these potential difficulties, Archbishop Taché had been so impressed with the sisters' teaching credentials, as well as with their fluency in English and French, that he asked Bishop Grandin to consider letting some of them stay in St. Boniface Archdiocese. When Grandin replied that he had not shepherded them thousands of miles only to lose them at the end of the line, Taché wrote to Superior-General Josephine Petit at the motherhouse in Ste. Anne d'Auray, in Morbihan, asking her to send three or four sisters immediately, and said they should be prepared to teach English, French and piano. He added: "Our country is in a state of formation. Protestantism is making a huge effort to take over everywhere, help me please, to resist this invasion and God will bless you."<sup>9</sup>

According to Taché, Brandon was already supplied with Anglican, Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian churches and ministers who were "quite unfavorable to Catholics."<sup>10</sup> For the most part, Protestants from Ontario had settled in the rising market-centre railway city, located south and west of Winnipeg on the Assiniboine River. Taché opened a mission in Brandon the year it was incorporated, in 1882, and a small church, astutely dedicated to St. Augustine of Canterbury, was built in 1882. That winter a Catholic School Board was established, in compliance with the Manitoba School Act that called for distinct Catholic and Protestant districts. In order to attract a teaching congregation, a grey three-storey frame convent with a mansard roof was constructed in 1883. It was a notable Catholic presence in Brandon.<sup>11</sup> When the Archbishop blessed its bells on the Sunday before the sisters arrived, he spoke glowingly of them to a gathering of Catholics and Protestants who welcomed the prospect of a superior education for their children.<sup>12</sup>

Women religious were highly valued workers for several reasons. They embodied Catholic values, cost little in the way of salaries, and sought no personal gain, accepting one of the ideals of nineteenth century religious life: total abnegation of the self.<sup>13</sup> Most importantly, they were willing to work within the confines of a patriarchal setting while expanding

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<sup>8</sup> Clear, *Nuns*, 36.

<sup>9</sup> Taché to J. Petit, 12 July 1883, FCJ Generalate Archives, Broadstairs, England (hereafter FCJAE), translations from French by author.

<sup>10</sup> *Diary: Faithful Companions of Jesus: St. Laurent*, Acc. 86.1/11, FCJAC.

<sup>11</sup> P. J. O'Sullivan, ed., *By Steps, Not Leaps: St. Augustine of Canterbury Parish Brandon, Manitoba 1881-1981* (Brandon: 1981), 5.

<sup>12</sup> Taché to Petit, 3 August 1883, FCJAE; *Brandon Mail* 27 September 1883.

<sup>13</sup> See C. Coburn & M. Smith, *Spirited Lives: How Nuns Shaped Catholic Culture and American Life, 1836-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press: 1999). Also see M. Danylewycz, *Taking The Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood and Spinsterhood in Quebec, 1840-1920* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987), and E. Smyth, "Congregavit Nos In Unum Christi Amor: The Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph, in the Archdiocese of Toronto, 1851-1920," *Ontario History*, 84, vol. 3 (1992): 230-233.

their religious activities. At the request of Father Robillard, the parish priest, the sisters opened a day school and a boarding school (traditionally, a long-term means of support) in St. Joseph's Convent within a week of arriving, on 8 October. A program of reading, grammar, geography, arithmetic, French, sacred history, catechism and singing was taught, patterned after the select FCJ convents in France, England and Ireland. China-painting, stenography, needlework, lace artistry, embroidery and cut-work were also offered by the sisters. According to Lucille Hochstein, FCJ, secular, moral and religious instruction made up the curriculum of all FCJ convents.<sup>14</sup> Needlework was regarded as good moral training and proficiency at knitting and sewing was considered valuable training for the frugal, thrifty lives which girls might be called upon to lead as wives and mothers. FCJ convents in Europe were highly valued for turning out "ladies." They promised to provide the broad educational background that enabled the daughters of prosperous Catholics to take their place in society as cultured, poised and essentially feminine women.<sup>15</sup> Irish author Kate O'Brien, writing about her days at Laurel Hill Convent, in Limerick City, recalled the almost fanatical instruction in behavior, on the obligation of a lady to move quietly, to hold her back straight, to open and close doors correctly and to sit still.<sup>16</sup>

Although the FCJs preferred to operate all-girl schools, several boys were among the fifteen students enrolled at the convent for the first term, a gesture of adaptability as older boys, in particular, were not usually taught by women religious. The sisters related that the Catholic students were, for the most part, of Irish descent.<sup>17</sup> Two of the girls were Protestant, daughters of Brandon's sheriff, Stephen Clement, whose wife was from Ireland. The first boarder arrived within a week, a Protestant girl from California. Archbishop Taché inspected the school on 7 November and promised more space in the building as needed, referring to a chapel that occupied the entire floor of the convent and was used for Mass on Sundays because the Catholic population had outgrown the church.<sup>18</sup>

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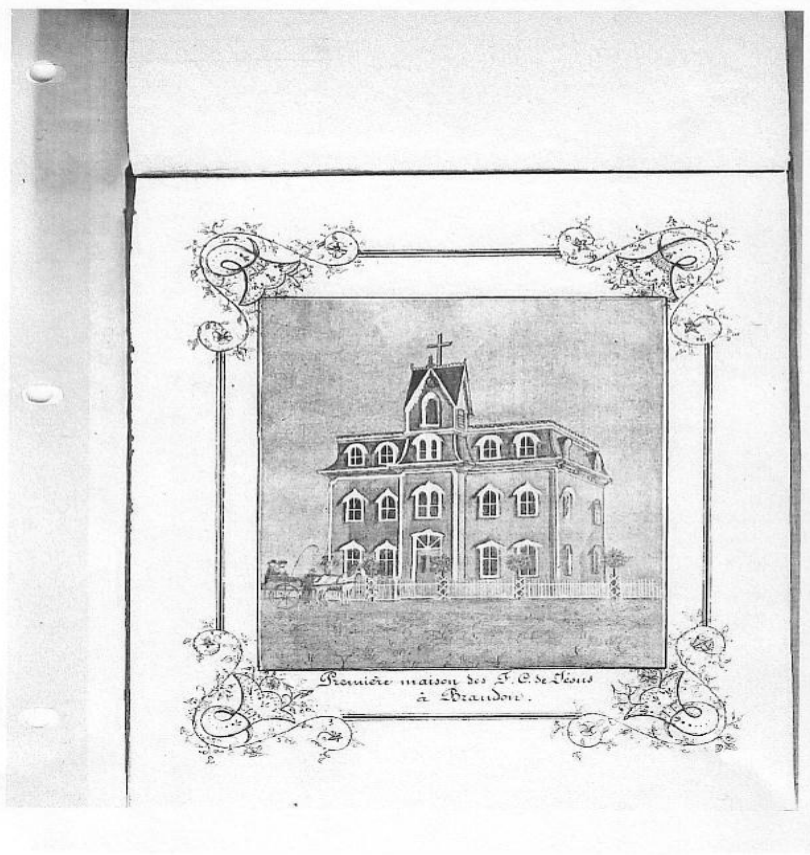
<sup>14</sup> L. Hochstein, "Roman Catholic Separate and Public Schools in Alberta," unpublished dissertation: University of Alberta, 1954, 96, FCJAC.

<sup>15</sup> M. Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 23-35, 45-55.

<sup>16</sup> K. O'Brien, quoted in Clear, *Nuns*, 121.

<sup>17</sup> Sisters, Faithful Companions of Jesus: *Annals*: (1884), FCJAC.

<sup>18</sup> *Annals*: (1883).



**"Brandon House" circa 1883**

Archbishop Taché's dealings with the FCJs were paternalistic and authoritarian, but kindly.<sup>19</sup> When the sisters first met with him, he cautioned them not to injure their health by deprivation and to write to their "grandfather" if they lacked anything.<sup>20</sup> Mother Augustine Rees, the Superior of the convent, did contact him when Father Robillard threatened to report her to the Superior-General for disputing his decisions about the amount of fuel needed to heat the convent, resulting in Taché's intervention on behalf of the sisters.<sup>21</sup> Yet, the sisters carefully maintained good relations with all and sundry, as such diplomacy enabled them to

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<sup>19</sup> Huel, *Taché*, 225.

<sup>20</sup> *The Faithful Companions of Jesus: Brandon*, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Taché to A. Rees, 5 December 1884, FCJAE.

flourish. For example, they willingly provided weekly religious training for Catholic children who attended the public school, realizing that the convent school was the anchor for parish life and activity.<sup>22</sup> And, true to his word, Taché insisted that Father Robillard vacate the chapel the following summer, adding two classrooms to the convent for the 1884 term. When classes resumed, Taché visited the convent school and presided over a ceremony that received the first Brandon postulant, an eighteen year old French-Canadian, Josephine Plante, on 8 September. She was a welcome addition, as vocations were necessary to staff and maintain any new foundation.<sup>23</sup>

Brandon's first public (or Protestant) school had opened in 1882, constructed with funds secured when city council issued debentures on behalf of the Protestant School Board. In a study of early schooling in Brandon, Tom Mitchell notes that school board members were almost exclusively from Ontario and engaged only those teachers who "were fit to shape" the moral and intellectual character of children, reflecting a preoccupation of Ontario's schools with the role of teaching in the development of character. The public school had a capacity of three hundred; in June of 1884 there were four hundred and thirty-five children enrolled, as compared to fifty at the convent.<sup>24</sup>

During the early 1880s, relations between Catholics and Protestants were pleasant and differences were respected. In 1882 the *Brandon Mail* observed that Catholic Christmas services were well attended by Protestants and Catholics. It praised Catholics for their unity, zeal, generosity and "lively faith which has induced them, although low in number, to build at once a chapel and pay a liberal support to their pastor."<sup>25</sup> In 1883 the *Mail* noted the sisters were hosting a Christmas party for pupils during the holiday, and that Father Robillard's services were so pleasing that he made numerous friends in Protestant denominations.<sup>26</sup> The same priest assembled an inter-denominational choir

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<sup>22</sup> *Annals*: (1885). During their summer vacation, after obtaining permission from the Superior-General, two sisters travelled 50 miles by oxcart to Oak Lake, one of 15 missions of the parish, to prepare children for their First Communion. They lived by themselves in the mission's church for six weeks.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* Later that year a young Métis received her Child of Mary medal, another delight for the sisters as participation in sodalities and devotional societies often led to an interest in a religious vocation, *Annals*: (1886).

<sup>24</sup> T. Mitchell, "Forging a New Protestant Ontario on the Agricultural Frontier: Public Schools in Brandon and the Origins of the Manitoba School Question, 1881-1890," in *Issues in the History of Education in Manitoba*, 22-25; Sullivan, 5. According to one count recorded at St. Augustine's, the Catholic population in Brandon, in 1884, consisted of twenty families and eleven single parishioners. The first Brandon census, taken in 1885-86, indicates that five per cent of residents were Catholic, cited in Mitchell, 20.

<sup>25</sup> *Brandon Mail* 27 December 1882.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 December 1883.

in 1885. Ten men and women joined and Mother Melanie Quinn directed – one Baptist, two Methodists, one Presbyterian, two other Protestants, two Catholics and two sisters - all trained in singing. The musicians participated in Midnight Mass, publicly announced and pronounced a success, according to the *Annals*.<sup>27</sup> With over-crowding an issue at the public school and younger children attending only half days, there appeared to be little concern that many Protestant parents preferred the education given by the sisters, especially with music and French available at the convent but not at the public school.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the editor of the *Brandon Sun*, W. J. White, a member of the Protestant School Board, praised the “intellectual training” afforded at the convent.<sup>29</sup>

The ecumenical climate particular to Brandon decreased with time as its population increased. In 1884, the sisters recorded that three of the convent children made their First Holy Communion and that their parents made their utmost effort to be present at the ceremony: “for here, in consequence of their difficult position it is not usual to see the father and mother together at Church, even on Holy Days of Obligation.”<sup>30</sup> The perception of a possible reluctance by some parents to be seen attending Catholic celebrations was due to the increasingly Protestant character of Brandon. According to Mitchell, Brandon’s Ontario-bred Protestants were determined to re-create Ontario’s institutions in Brandon. Their churches were allied with organizations such as the Brandon chapters of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and the Young Men’s Christian Association, the latter operating a reading room, holding noon-hour prayer meetings, visiting the prison, sponsoring debates and finding jobs for the unemployed.<sup>31</sup> Certainly, the public school was, in fact, the Protestant school – it operated on a non-denominational basis, and by law was the responsibility of the Protestant School Board. Mitchell contends that while separate schools accommodated the distinctive needs of Manitoba’s Catholics, it was Ontario’s non-sectarian public schools that “reflected an emerging consensus among the province’s English-speaking Protestant population that a system of non-denominational, free public schools was essential to the progress and stability of the Province.”<sup>32</sup>

Mitchell argues that Brandon’s Protestant population did not have an antagonistic attitude toward the province’s dual school system until the Protestant School Board faced an increasingly difficult financial situation in the mid-1880s.<sup>33</sup> Both the convent school and the public school were financed by provincial grants and local taxes levied on taxpayers.

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<sup>27</sup> *Annals*: (1885).

<sup>28</sup> Mitchell, 25.

<sup>29</sup> *Brandon Sun* 18 January 1884, cited in Mitchell, 26.

<sup>30</sup> *Annals*: (1884), 5.

<sup>31</sup> Mitchell, 21-22.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Also see Jensen, 288-294.

Protestants attending the convent paid one dollar a month as Protestants, and by law, did not support Catholic schools through taxation. While the Protestant School Board experienced financial difficulties because of provincial cutbacks, the Catholic Board fared better – with fewer costs, women religious working for low salaries and with Protestants paying a fee. At the same time, the Protestant Board was faced with cutting teachers' salaries and looking for ways to pay outstanding construction debts acquired because an economic downturn made it difficult to secure funds at a municipal level.<sup>34</sup> Was it any wonder that eyebrows were raised, in 1887, when members of the Protestant School Board and ministers of the Protestant churches realized that ninety-seven of the one hundred and ten pupils attending the Catholic school were Protestant?

Understandably, the Protestant Board sought to reverse the trend. The sisters related a sudden withdrawal of four older Protestant boys within a month of the arrival of the Salvation Army, in March of that year, quite a loss as few advanced students were enrolled at the convent.<sup>35</sup> Then, discord was increased by three seemingly unrelated incidents. In mid-June, Methodist ministers from across the country convened in Brandon. Learning that so many of theirs were attending a Catholic school, they protested in public and private, warning parents that sooner or later they would regret having entrusted their children to the sisters, telling them, among other things, that faith and morals would be quickly lost.<sup>36</sup> About the same time, one of the older convent students, Emma Clement, decided not only to become a Catholic, but to enter the novitiate. The sisters claimed that her announcement came as a surprise, that in fact she had been unhappy with her situation when she arrived, and “voiced her unhappiness” in no uncertain terms, often testing their patience.<sup>37</sup> However, Emma's father, “a gentleman who had always professed the highest esteem for us, and who had always acted as a true friend of our house, a very rare thing, alas, in this country,” attributed Emma's “little project” to undue influence.<sup>38</sup> Adding insult to injury, he withdrew his five children from the school.<sup>39</sup>

The sudden departure of Emma under such circumstances caused quite a stir in Brandon, according to the sisters, who experienced “sorrow, disappointment, and embarrassment.”<sup>40</sup> Then, to support these attacks, Reverend Charles Chiniquy, an ex-priest who had become became a Presbyterian minister, arrived in Brandon. It is not clear whether he was

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<sup>34</sup> Mitchell, 27.

<sup>35</sup> *FCJ: Brandon*, 13.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

invited or simply passing through on a speaking tour.<sup>41</sup> Chiniquy was quick to describe “any convent as a den of all that is bad and corrupted.”<sup>42</sup> Previously unpopular, Chiniquy’s views were now beginning to find favour with many local parents. With the re-opening of classes on 18 August, only fifty-two children registered; where there had been twelve boarders before the holidays, only six had returned to the convent.

Looking to recover the congregation’s fortunes, the FCJ Superior-General appointed Irish-born Mother Philomena Higgins as Superior in Brandon, replacing Mother Augustine, who chose to return to England rather than remain in the mission. Mother Philomena, who would serve as Superior-General from 1914 until her death in 1947, had arrived in Brandon a year earlier, in 1886, after teaching in the missions at St. Laurent and Calgary for three years. She was born Frances Ann Higgins in 1857 at Liscannor, within sight of the great Cliffs of Moher. She had entered the FCJ novitiate from the Limerick City convent at the age of sixteen. She proved to be adept in languages, easily mastering French and German in her years of formation in France, a talent that would be invaluable in her work with the immigrant population in the Northwest.<sup>43</sup>

Women who headed convents in the late-nineteenth century, especially newer foundations, were chosen for their strength and negotiating ability because they were frequently moved from one setting to another as the need arose and typically encountered many diverse work and learning experiences in a variety of situations.<sup>44</sup> While FCJ Superiors were normally at least forty years of age, Mother Philomena was barely thirty in 1887. Nonetheless she was expected to carry the full burden of decision-making in a relatively new mission with all the dexterity of a more seasoned administrator. She had already developed solid and lasting bonds of friendship with other congregations in Manitoba, dating from when Bishop Grandin told his recruits that in Canada the different religious orders contacted each other “in order to share the good to be done.”<sup>45</sup> While staying with the Sisters of Charity in St. Boniface in 1883, she had visited Winnipeg’s Convent of the Holy Name where she admired its curriculum that gave equal attention to both the English and French

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<sup>41</sup> Mitchell, 31-32.

<sup>42</sup> *Annals*: (1887), 23; See P. Laverdure, “Charles Chiniquy: The Making of an Anti-Catholic Crusader,” *CCHA Historical Studies*, 1987, 39-56.

<sup>43</sup> P. Higgins, *Some Memories*, presented by Therese de Rance, FCJ, 1 March 1994, at 137 Anniversary of the birth of Philomena Higgins, 5<sup>th</sup> Superior-General of FCJs, FCJ Archives, Dublin, Ireland. Also see A. Maguire, *Sower of Seeds [sketch of Philomena Higgins, FCJ]*, Sainte Anne d’Auray, copy in FCJAC.

<sup>44</sup> Coburn & Smith, 4-9.

<sup>45</sup> M. Greene, *Reminiscences: An Account of the Coming of the Sisters, Faithful Companions of Jesus to Canada*, related in October and November, 1922, FCJAC.

languages.<sup>46</sup> Higgins' closest confidante, though, was the Superior-General, affectionately called *Notre Mere*, who imbued in her "daughters" the spirit of their foundress, Madeleine d'Houet, and her mandate that each foundation keep the deposit of their traditions intact and unchanged.<sup>47</sup> According to the sisters, the convents in far away countries were as near to the Superior-General as the rest, as she was able to dispense advice – about everything from suggesting remedies for illnesses to upgrading diplomas and managing the convents – through a constant exchange of letters.<sup>48</sup>

Mother Philomena quickly tackled the financial problems that were looming over the convent, beginning with a budget that was already close to the bone. She suggested that Catholic taxpayers should be willing to pay tuition, a concern for the parish priest, who was aware of the financial circumstances of his parishioners. When Mother Philomena stood her ground, he went to Archbishop Taché with a list of the children enrolled, marking off those who were too poor to pay, those who could pay, and those who had parents paying taxes to the school.<sup>49</sup> An entrance fee of five dollars was decided upon. Shortly thereafter, the *North West Review* published promotional ads for the convent. Board and tuition for a term were twelve dollars a month, with a deduction for two or more students in a family. Music was three dollars a month for instrumental lessons, one dollar for vocal instruction, and five dollars for private singing lessons. Drawing lessons were one dollar a month; painting and illuminating were five dollars a month. Payments were to be made two months in advance. Pupils coming from other institutions needed a certificate of good conduct from the establishment they left.<sup>50</sup>

As a religious in a diocese, Mother Philomena was automatically entitled to a certain amount of respect from bishops, priests and lay Catholics. For the most part, she was treated with deference, and worked side by side with authorities both ecclesiastical and civil. When the *Brandon Sun* implied that the convent was receiving education grants it did not deserve, saying that five teachers taught an average of twenty children at the convent, she turned to Archbishop Taché, who responded by way of a letter published in the *North West Review*. He corrected inaccuracies, demonstrating that there were eighty-seven children enrolled, with three sisters on staff, and another teaching music, ornamental drawing, painting, embroidery and fancy needlework for "young ladies of refined dispositions."<sup>51</sup> In turn, when the archbishop asked the sisters to join with

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> J. Becel, *Constitutions de La Société des Soeurs Fidèles Compagnes de Jesus*, (Vannes: Imprimerie Galles, Rue de la Prefecture et Place du College, 1879), introduction.

<sup>48</sup> "Recollections of Zoe Girod, FCJ," file 86.3/4, FCJAC.

<sup>49</sup> Sullivan, 19.

<sup>50</sup> *North West Review* 9 November 1887, cited in Sullivan, 19.

<sup>51</sup> Taché, cited in Sullivan, 19.

the other religions in January 1890 by preparing a program of musical and dramatic entertainment in aid of the Brandon hospital, they questioned the time involved in such a project, but agreed to participate.<sup>52</sup> They understood that a visible contribution serving a community need would help to alleviate Protestant suspicion and prejudice. It was a clever move, and a *Brandon Times* reporter touring the convent later that month, in view of the earlier attacks concerning grants by the *Sun*, assured readers that religious instruction was not imparted until 3:30 p.m., when one half-hour of religion was offered only to the Catholic students.<sup>53</sup> He continued:

They teach English, including grammar, composition, reading with geography, Miles Canadian History and bookkeeping as well as French, which is free for all who want it. Also Object lessons and elementary science. Singing lessons: half hour a week; all can take part. Girls take sewing and boys take linear drawing. The convent is in a healthy portion of one of the healthiest centres in the country. It is scrupulously clean and neat. The dormitory has twelve iron cots, excellent mattresses. There are at present twelve boarders, but will be more in good weather. Amount received from government in 1888, \$295.30; 1889, \$425.50. Fees: boarders \$12 a month; music, two lessons a week, \$1 a month. Outsiders \$1 extra. Music room has Heintzmann and Newcombe piano.<sup>54</sup>

Nonetheless, the growing anti-Catholic bias in Brandon continued to take its toll. Attendance at the convent dropped again that term, to eighty-two children, fifty-nine girls and twenty-three boys, with the sisters admitting they had to strain every nerve to make ends meet.<sup>55</sup>

When the Greenway government abolished dual and denominational school systems as well as a second language instruction in Manitoba in March of 1890, Brandon parents faced the prospect of paying twice for a child's education: once in compulsory public school taxes and again in tuition to privately supported Catholic schools.<sup>56</sup> Undaunted, Archbishop Taché called upon Manitoba Catholics to bear the burden necessary to ensure that their children received a Catholic education. In Brandon, a meeting was held on 30 April in St. Augustine's to protest against another article in the *Sun* saying that Catholics did not want separate schools.<sup>57</sup> And, displaying a full measure of optimism, the sisters borrowed money to buy a lot behind the convent, adding "Nazareth Cottage." The new building had a spacious kitchen, a pastry shop for home economics, a refectory, bathrooms, cellars and hot water heat, at last a place with even

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<sup>52</sup> Acc. 86.18/40, FCJAC.

<sup>53</sup> Cited in Sullivan, 17.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> *Annals*: (1890).

<sup>56</sup> R. Perin, *Rome in Canada: The Vatican and Canadian Affairs in the Late Victorian Age*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990) 129.

<sup>57</sup> Sullivan, 22.

and warm temperatures, they related.<sup>58</sup> Whereas in September 1890 there were ninety children enrolled, with seventy listed as Catholic, in 1892 there were one hundred and eighteen children enrolled at the convent, and almost all were Catholic. Writing to Mother Philomena, Archbishop Taché remarked: “It is to me a great consolation to see that the storm raised against our schools, especially against that of Brandon has failed to injure it.”<sup>59</sup>

It was the opinion of many in Brandon, the *Mail*'s editor included, that the government had interfered with some rights or privileges the Roman Catholics had been granted at Confederation.<sup>60</sup> Charles Cliffe suggested that a compromise could be in order, even a modification of the Act.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, he set out the *Mail*'s policy, stating:

We would like to see all vestige of sectarianism abolished in our schools and the systems reduced to one general system having secular education alone in view, leaving to the churches and clergy the inculcation of those religious views denominations seem to think necessary in the country: individual wish and individual opinion have nothing to do with the question.<sup>62</sup>

When the Privy Council determined, as a matter of law, that no injustice had been done the minority, the *Mail* quickly pronounced itself the voice of Protestants in Brandon, declaring:

Catholic children are entitled to secular education, but certainly not religious education; if the Roman Catholics will not submit to a system of schools that separates them, the fault is theirs not that of the Protestants.<sup>63</sup>

When Catholics in Manitoba contended that under the guise of public schools, Protestant schools were continued, Cliffe argued:

We hold that so long as any form of religious instruction is observed in the Manitoba schools, and as long as text books, especially histories, are used that embody a religious bias they have a right to complain; but with those grounds for complaint removed they must be induced to submit.<sup>64</sup>

Brandon continued to become more and more Protestant, almost anti-Catholic, so much so that “anyone known to be Catholic had a hard time getting a job.”<sup>65</sup> According to the 1891 census, Brandon's population was overwhelmingly Protestant (more than ninety-three percent) while

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<sup>58</sup> *Annals*: (1891).

<sup>59</sup> Taché to Higgins, 5 November 1892, FCJAE.

<sup>60</sup> *Mail* 12 April 1894.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 October 1890.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 November 1892.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Annals*: (1893).

Catholics represented less than six percent of its residents.<sup>66</sup> Catholic parents were, more often than not, unable to pay tuition at the convent and chose public education for their children. Because Mother Philomena had little success when she had approached the clergy for loans,<sup>67</sup> to supplement their dwindling income, the sisters solicited contracts from Brandon's Mayor-elect James Smart, who was a proponent of common schools, to artistically decorate speeches that were presented to prominent visitors by the citizens.<sup>68</sup> One instance indicates a fair amount of bias on their part as they decorated a scroll for General Booth of Salvation Army renown. They related:

We could not afford to have conscientious scruples. So, with a fairly nice painting of the Infant Jesus (not our very best one, be it understood) on the outside, and many a golden flourish round the great General's initials on the inside, we sent the address, in a rather mercenary spirit we confess, on its mission and ... well ... we were paid for it!<sup>69</sup>

Historically, the congregation was rather practical in economic matters; choosing not to face deterioration, the Superiors-General moved the sisters to another location. When Madeline d'Houet had settled her sisters in Ireland, for instance, she used her own resources to move them from Oughterarde in County Galway to Limerick City after one year, when she realized that the possibilities of boarders and future vocations would be at a minimum in Oughterarde.<sup>70</sup> In the Canadian missions, although the sisters had gone from St. Laurent to Calgary for a safer location, they had also relocated because a boarding school was not going to be sustainable at the St. Laurent de Grandin mission. When Mother Philomena, who had been appointed Canadian Provincial in 1893, met with the Superior-General Marie de Bussey in France during the summer of 1894, she

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<sup>66</sup> *Census of Canada*, 1891. The population of Brandon was 3700 including eighty-six non-treaty Indians with no entries as to their religion. Presbyterians accounted for 28.27 percent of Brandon residents; 24.83 percent were Methodist; 23.88 percent were Anglican; 8.62 percent were Baptist; 3.35 percent were Lutheran; 3.16 percent were Congregationalist. Among the less represented faiths were the Salvation Army, Brethren and Disciples of Christ. Catholics represented only 5.43 percent of the population. Aside from the music teacher, the sisters, the priest, and J. C. Kavanaugh, the postmaster, most of the Catholics worked in trades – a tin smith, a hotel manager and hotel keepers, a barber, carpenters, laborers, house painters, a clerk, domestics, a drayman, a music teacher, a brakeman, carriage painters, a dressmaker, a stableman, a stonemason, a photographer, tailors, a shoemaker, a railway master, a telegraph operator, several farmers, and the brewer. Also listed were twenty-nine Russian Jews including a rabbi, four Freethinkers and eight without a specific religion.

<sup>67</sup> E. Grouard, OMI, to Higgins 18 March 1893, FCJAE; A. Maisonneuve, OMI, to Higgins 22 April 1893, FCJAE.

<sup>68</sup> G. Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1984), 216; Mitchell, 29.

<sup>69</sup> *Annals*: (1895) 32.

<sup>70</sup> See Clear, *Nuns*, 23, 35-37.

learned that the congregation had been offered several secure contracts from American bishops to teach in parochial schools. The FCJs wanted to make inroads in the United States and did not have English-speaking sisters available so Mother Philomena was asked to consider closing the Canadian foundation “doing the least for souls.”<sup>71</sup>

Mother Philomena was reluctant to leave Brandon, where she had been Superior for eight years. She decided to persevere as long as it was “practicable,” adding “things might mend; bigotry has done its worst, and has tried to turn us out.”<sup>72</sup> She admitted that Protestants drew aside from them “lest they should be contaminated,” even though the sisters had taught many of their children.<sup>73</sup> On occasion, the children, sometimes along with their mothers, had taunted the sisters as they walked along the streets, their distinctive clothing eliciting a range of fantasies.<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, four young women had entered religious life from Brandon and two sisters were buried from the convent. In a bid to gain another firm foot hold in the Archdiocese of St. Boniface, she had opened another convent at Rat Portage, in Lake of the Woods country, in 1892.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, negotiations were also beginning for a foundation even further east, in Quebec, in response to a need to settle French-speaking sisters who were not suited to a frontier life but needed to avoid persecution in France.<sup>76</sup>

Mother Philomena knew that dependence on the Protestant population in order to make the convent self-sustaining had been a problem in common for the sisters in Prince Albert and in Brandon. In January 1895 she agreed to have her sisters teach at the Industrial School at Duck Lake, in the Prince Albert area.<sup>77</sup> The sisters in Lethbridge had earlier considered closing their school because of staffing problems, but thus far, the Superior-General had listened to Bishop Grandin’s urgent pleas for a convent in the southern Alberta town. The sisters in Edmonton were well settled and teaching in nearby Strathcona. And, Calgary’s Sacred Heart Convent housed the “principal” school in the Northwest Territories, with Bishop Grandin planning to open a Catholic Normal School in the Calgary convent.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> *FCJ: Brandon*, 18.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Conditions of Rat Portage*, Acc. 86.18/143, FCJAC. Noteworthy, in the contract Higgins stipulated that salaries would be ensured for two years, at which time the Congregation was free to leave if it desired.

<sup>76</sup> Grandin to Girod, 24 March 1899, 24 November 1899, FCJAC.

<sup>77</sup> S. Majeau, ed., *Journeying through a Century*, (Edmonton: Technical Graphics, 1983).

<sup>78</sup> Hochstein, 96. Also see M. P. Lupal, *The Roman Catholic Church and the North-West School Question: a study in church-state relations in western Canada, 1875-1905* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 152.

Although she was bound by the dictates of her Superior, Mother Philomena was not completely subordinate to those of the Archbishop of St. Boniface, Adélard Langevin, OMI. Her relations with Langevin were cordial – she had represented the congregation at his recent consecration. Like his predecessor, he was deeply concerned about Catholic education but, unlike his predecessor, he had not yet acquired a personal interest in or attachment to the Brandon institution. He appeared to have been caught off-guard, expressed surprise, a certain degree of bewilderment, and said he was “deeply depressed” on learning that, with few Catholics attending and enrolment down to thirty, Mother Philomena had abruptly decided to close the convent at the end of the school term.<sup>79</sup>

By the mid-1890s the demographic imbalance between Catholics and Protestants, coupled with the relentless anti-Catholicism levelled at the sisters had succeeded in marginalizing St. Joseph’s Convent in Brandon, rendering it unable to sustain itself and causing the mission to fail. And the opposition of Protestants to Catholic schooling in Brandon was clearly symptomatic of the controversy over educational rights taking place throughout Manitoba.<sup>80</sup> Preoccupied with Taché’s larger struggle with the consequences of legislation on language and educational rights of minorities, Archbishop Langevin, unwittingly allowed an important English language Catholic school to slip through his hands, as Mother Philomena Higgins opted for new and more lucrative opportunities in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin.

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<sup>79</sup> Higgins, *Circular Letter*, 1896, 2, Acc. 86.5/47, FCJAC. St. Joseph’s Convent remained vacant until 1899 when three sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, in England, arrived to teach in Brandon.

<sup>80</sup> Crunican, 5. Also see B. Clarke, “English-Speaking Canada from 1854,” in *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada*, eds. T. Murphy & R. Perin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 261-359.