

“Naturally I am passionate, ill-tempered, and arrogant...”: Father Matthew J. Whelan and French-English Conflict in Ontario, 1881-1922

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Conflict between French and English over control of the Catholic church outside Quebec split the church along ethnic and linguistic lines in the period from the 1880s into the 1920s. The major battle raged around the separate school system in Ontario and the use of the French language in education, escalating after the proclamation by the Ontario government in 1912 of the infamous Regulation 17, which narrowly restricted the use of French in the schools.¹ The city of Ottawa, in which francophones were a strong minority of the population – 31% in 1911² – was particularly affected. Within the Archdiocese of Ottawa, however, the French were very much a majority, especially since the archdiocese included francophone parishes to the east of Ottawa, as well as a large area on the Quebec side of the Ottawa River. There was dissatisfaction among the anglophone clergy concerning what they saw as favouritism to the French; one of their leading spokesmen was Father Matthew J. Whelan who became a figure of great controversy.

Whelan was born in Ottawa – or Bytown, as it then was – in 1853, to Irish immigrant parents. He was educated and attended the seminary in the city and was ordained in 1875 at the young age of twenty-two. He was immediately appointed curate at St. Patrick’s parish before serving as secretary to Bishop Duhamel; in 1881 he became pastor of St. Patrick’s, a position he held for forty-one years. St. Patrick’s was established in 1855, at first under the name of St. Andrew’s, to serve the English-speaking Catholics of Upper Town Ottawa, who were virtually all Irish by birth or descent.

In 1881 Whelan took charge of a parish with a recently built church and a large debt. He proved a more than competent administrator over the years, building a rectory and a parish hall, enlarging the church and making extensive renovations; in 1922, six months before his death, he burned the mortgage and declared the church debt free.

Aside from his success as a “bricks and mortar” priest, Whelan became involved in numerous controversies, what he termed his “predilection for profane things,” though asserting that “if I’m *in* the world, and sometimes up

¹ Robert Choquette, *Language and Religion: A History of English-French Conflict in Ontario* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1975), 161-247.

² John H. Taylor, *Ottawa: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Co., 1986), 211.

to my ears in it, I am not necessarily *of it*.”³ In his study of the English-French conflict in Ontario, Robert Choquette calls Whelan a bigot.⁴ The virulence of Whelan’s language supports that conclusion. Yet in his time he was one of the most prominent anglophone priests in Ontario and was widely seen as a leading spokesman for English Catholics. His complex personality and role in the conflicts of his day deserve deeper consideration.

That Whelan had a difficult personality no one realized more than himself. “Naturally I am passionate, ill-tempered, and arrogant...,” he admitted to Bishop Duhamel in November 1877, when he was curate at St. Patrick’s. He wrote this following a difficult period in the parish that saw the pastor, Father J.J. Collins, request a transfer to another parish amidst an atmosphere of great bitterness. Under those circumstances Whelan found it “impossible to check or restrain” this dark side of his character.

He suffered throughout his life from periods of ill health, which was evident even at this early age:

That since a year or more I have not felt satisfied as a secular priest, but, because of physical defects which, not improving as I had hoped, are, and must be, an obstacle in the way of ready and thorough obedience to your Lordship as I promised it at ordination; and those defects not being known to any conferees, as I do not wish them to be known, give occasion, as I have reason to know, to remarks that I am hankering after an easy position, and not willing to bear the brunt as others do, while God knows I would gladly take the most remote and most difficult mission if I could leave behind the burthen I carry and shall likely bear with me to the grave.⁵

Throughout his priestly life Whelan suffered periods of mental anguish as well as physical suffering. The cause of this is not clear from the records but it seems unlikely he was a mere hypochondriac.

In October 1881, in only the first year of his pastorate, he reported that he was having difficulty celebrating high mass and did not expect “judging from late experience to be able to do so often. In fact this duty is such an obstacle to me that I already regret that I ever assumed charge, and on that account just as soon as Your Lordship will be in a position to appoint another, I shall be ready to step down and out.”⁶ This was the first of several offers of resignation.

In April 1883 Duhamel sought to have the Oblates of Mary Immaculate take control of the parish; the order had previously been in charge from 1861 to 1866. However, the Oblate Council refused the invitation.⁷ It is not known whether this was the result of another proffered resignation by Whelan, or by dissatisfaction with his performance.

³ Archives of the Archdiocese of Ottawa (hereafter AAO), Matthew J. Whelan File (2881), Whelan to Duhamel, 11 December 1878, emphasis in original.

⁴ Choquette, *Language and Religion*, 187.

⁵ AAO, Whelan File (2881), Whelan to Duhamel, 12 November 1877.

⁶ AAO, Archbishop Duhamel General Correspondence, Register 1879-1882, Whelan to Duhamel, 24 October 1881.

⁷ Gaston Carrière, o.m.i. *Histoire documentaire de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie-Immaculée dans l’Est du Canada, Vol. VI* (Ottawa: Éditions de l’Université d’Ottawa, 1967), 149.

He was in poor health from October 1885, and by the following May “was pretty well run down. The chief trouble this time is headache, while the old affliction shows signs of return.” He was in the middle of a five-year period without a curate and was finding the burden too much as there was “work here for three priests, and active ones at that.” He again offered to resign as it would be unfair to the people for him to continue.⁸

Perhaps his health was an underlying factor in an argument he had with Duhamel in the fall of 1886. Whelan had been trying, he said, to explain to the bishop why there was discontent among the English-speaking Catholics of the diocese, only to be accused by him of “acting in opposition to authority, and fomenting discord in the community.” That there existed “dissatisfaction and discontent, deeply rooted and widespread, among the English-speaking portion of Your Grace’s flock, it were idle to deny. Nay more, he is not a friend to Your Grace, he is not a dutiful son of the Church, who will seek any longer to conceal it.”⁹

While Whelan did not specify these grievances, there is no doubt that they pertained to French-English relations, which involved controversy over the schools as well as a feeling among some English Catholics that the French controlled the church in Ottawa. He made this plain some twenty years later when he wrote that the language and church customs of Quebec “were introduced to differentiate in the public eye the diocese of Ottawa from all other dioceses in Ontario then forming the ecclesiastical province of Toronto.” This despite the fact that English Catholics were “a more respectable minority within the diocese of Ottawa than the French Canadians of Ontario are in proportion to the whole population.” He also blamed the extension of French influence in eastern Ontario for a Protestant backlash that threatened the very existence of separate schools, an attack the brunt of which was borne by English Catholics.¹⁰

Dissension between French and English trustees in Ottawa broke out in the early 1880s over the bilingual schools. An agreement was reached in 1886 at a meeting chaired by Bishop Duhamel which established two committees based on linguistic lines, each of which would be responsible for its own schools with a proportionate share of taxes and grants.¹¹ Obituaries of Whelan claimed that he played a major role in effecting this compromise, but there is no documentary evidence for this.¹² He did, however, strongly support this agreement, which he likened to the Irish “Home rule” movement, holding that “English-speaking Catholics are not qualified to manage or direct French schools; and I hold just as strongly that French Catholics are not qualified to control ours.”¹³

Duhamel, however, had a somewhat different recollection of the argument between the two. “I must first of all state,” he wrote,

⁸ AAO, Whelan File (2881), Whelan to Duhamel, 10 May 1886.

⁹ Ibid., Whelan to Duhamel, 6 October 1886.

¹⁰ “To Cardinal Bégin and Premier Sir Lomer Gouin: Open Letter by Rev. Father Whelan of St. Patrick’s Church, Ottawa,” *The Catholic Record*, 27 February 1915.

¹¹ Choquette, *Language and Religion*, 59.

¹² *The Citizen* (Ottawa), 6 November 1922; *Ottawa Evening Journal*, 6 November 1922.

¹³ AAO, Archbishop Duhamel Register, Vol. 2, Whelan to Vicar-General Routhier, 9 December 1904.

that, on Monday last, far from making “unjust and damaging imputations”, I have tried to assure you that I have confidence in you, but, instead of accepting this assurance, you became excited and spoke in such a loud tone of voice, not to say angrily, as no priest ought to speak to his bishop, and endeavoured to make me own that I reproached you with being opposed to me or with fomenting discord. Again, as on that day, I repeat that I never said such a thing...¹⁴

Despite the provocation he had received, the bishop gave Whelan the opportunity to withdraw the resignation he had offered, which he obviously did.

In 1889 Whelan suffered several bouts of ill health. In May he noted that, after a hard winter, “I am always troubled with bodily infirmities which have their mental & moral influences as well. It is a cross heavy at all times, yet I do not look for cure, because I do not deserve that. It is patience I want.”¹⁵ In August he had severe pain due to neuralgia as well as pain from inflammation of the kidneys, the latter exacerbated by “large doses of a preparation of arsenic” he was taking for skin trouble. He felt “very much discouraged today.”¹⁶

The following day he was in an even worse state of mind:

There are times when I am a thing of loathing to myself, and imagine that I must be so to others as well. This is wrong I know, but at those times I cannot help it. I cannot get it out of mind, foolish as the thought is, that my bodily infirmities are not as patent to others as they are to myself. This is the natural effect of years of affliction of one kind, upon which the mind has been dwelling almost constantly. It explains many omissions on my part to mix in social gatherings of the clergy, or take part in public ceremonies or entertainments – omissions which have sometimes been severely judged by those not knowing the true inwardness of things.

These feelings led him to turn down the archbishop’s offer to appoint him a diocesan canon.¹⁷ There was clearly a large mental component to his health problems, which resulted in anti-social behaviour; this may go some way towards explaining why his reactions during a controversy were so consistently extreme.

An example of this occurred in November 1889 when he engaged in a vicious row with another priest, Father John Coffey, former editor of *The*

¹⁴ AAO, Whelan File (2881), Duhamel to Whelan, 7 October 1886.

¹⁵ AAO, Whelan File (2883), Whelan to Duhamel, 11 May 1889.

¹⁶ Ibid., Whelan to Duhamel, 8 August 1889.

¹⁷ Ibid., Whelan to Duhamel, 9 August 1889.

Catholic Record of London, Ontario. He was now living at the archbishop's residence and editing a publication called *United Canada*, which on its masthead claimed to be "blessed" by the pope and "approved" by the archbishop. Ironically, when the paper was established in November 1888 Whelan was listed as a contributing editor and it was stated that the paper "will be so conducted as to promote kindly feeling, generous forbearance, and self-sacrificing patriotism..."¹⁸ In March 1889 it even praised a lecture on the Jesuits delivered by Whelan.¹⁹

The spark for the quarrel was bizarre. The Ottawa College football team was returning from winning the championship at Queen's College in Kingston, Ontario and the plan was to meet them at the station and process down Sussex Avenue to salute the archbishop's residence. The procession, however, was diverted and broken up by what Coffey referred to as the "Triangle" consisting of "men who never touch anything but to cover it with disrepute and unpopularity," who were noted liars.²⁰ Though not named, Whelan took this reference to refer to himself and wrote angrily to the archbishop denouncing Coffey as "a cowardly slanderer."²¹

The situation escalated from there. When he learned of Whelan's accusation Coffey responded in kind. "Such an epithet," he declared,

comes with ill grace, indeed, from a man who, to my personal knowledge, has basely and persistently reviled Your Grace, has ridiculed and calumniated your Vicar-general, called the Superior of the Dominicans in this city "a scoundrel", besides bitterly denouncing others of his brother clergymen of this Archdiocese. It comes, I repeat, with ill grace from a man who so loves peace as to declare to me that the sound of the Orange drum was grateful to his ears, betokening as it did to him the existence of an anti-French power...²²

These were serious accusations, and not inconsistent with Whelan's behaviour, but Coffey's credibility as a witness is questionable.

A couple of weeks later Whelan again took exception to a reference in the paper to "an unscrupulous foe as venomous in mind as he *is otherwise diseased*," which he again felt referred to him. He informed the archbishop that he would "no longer submit to such innuendo, which is as scandalous as it is malicious and cowardly, in a so-called Catholic journal approved by Your Grace and blessed by His Holiness the Pope."²³ He later acquired a letter from Coffey to another priest wherein Coffey referred to Whelan's "foul heart and demoniac tongue."²⁴

One can feel for Duhamel, caught in the middle of this vitriol. He ordered Coffey to put in the paper a notice that *United Canada* could no longer claim

¹⁸ *United Canada*, 24 November 1888.

¹⁹ *United Canada*, 16 March 1889.

²⁰ *United Canada*, 16 November 1889.

²¹ AAO, Whelan File (2883), Whelan to Duhamel, 2 November 1889.

²² AAO, John Thomas Coffey File, Coffey to Duhamel, 30 November 1889.

²³ AAO, Whelan File (2883), Whelan to Duhamel, 19 December 1889, emphasis in original.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Whelan to Duhamel, 28 December 1889.

the pope's blessing nor the archbishop's authority.²⁵ When Coffey responded with a statement that merely absolved the archbishop of any responsibility for editorials, which was what the paper's lawyers advised,²⁶ Duhamel ended the unsavoury episode by getting rid of Coffey. He requested him to leave not just Ottawa, but the country. Coffey went to the United States in January 1890. It was a clear victory for Whelan, who achieved what he had demanded, Coffey's ouster.

This situation did not cause public scandal by getting into the daily press; the same could not be said for Whelan's next battle when he crossed swords with Michael Francis Fallon, the future Bishop of London, who was at that time on the faculty of the University of Ottawa. There were two aspects to the controversy – the removal of the Christian Brothers from the English-speaking separate schools, and Whelan's plans to teach high school courses at St. Patrick's Parish School.

Whelan was a staunch supporter of separate schools and of the importance of education. On several occasions he pleaded with parents to leave their children in school for the entire term, rather than taking them out early to find work. In the modern age, he wrote,

education is a necessity, and in consequence every child in the Parish should be kept in the Parish schools until he has completed the school course... An important part of the birthright of every Canadian boy and girl is a sound elementary education, and none should be deprived of it. To be deprived of it or of any part of it is to be handicapped in the struggle of life.²⁷

He was particularly proud of the parish schools. He served on the Ottawa Separate School Board, including two terms as chairman.

The Christian Brothers were given charge of St. Patrick's Boys School in 1877, but Whelan had never been satisfied with them.²⁸ In 1882 he complained to Duhamel that the Brothers were

simply incapable; even as disciplinarians they are a failure, and I have much trouble with the boys whose conduct, even in church, is often disgraceful. Of course this is carefully noted by those in opposition to our schools and they use it as an argument to defend themselves. [If the bishop would only consider] the injury done to Catholic education by worthless teachers wearing a religious garb, probably the Christian Brothers would not continue the immunity from diocesan control which renders them so careless and inefficient.²⁹

Sometime after this date Whelan did get rid of the Brothers because, he later wrote, "they refused to comply with reasonable requirements..." When a

²⁵ AAO, Coffey File, Duhamel to Coffey, 30 December 1889.

²⁶ Ibid., Coffey to Duhamel, 2 January 1890.

²⁷ "Pupils and Parents," *The Calendar*, September 1902, 146.

²⁸ The Christian Brothers referred to are Les Frères des Écoles chrétiennes, whose Canadian headquarters were in Montreal. Their role in Ottawa is briefly described in Nive Voisine, *Les Frères des Écoles chrétiennes au Canada, Tome II: Une Ère de Prospérité 1880-1946*. The author does not discuss their relations with Whelan.

²⁹ AAO, St. Patrick's Parish File F9/8, Whalen to Duhamel, 27 March 1882.

change in the Canadian superior of the order was made, Whelan allowed them to return to St. Patrick's in 1889, feeling that the change in leadership would alleviate previous problems. Shortly thereafter, however, the former superior was returned to office and the situation quickly deteriorated.³⁰

By the 1890s complaints about the teaching of the Brothers, in both English and French schools, were so widespread that the Ontario government, at the request of the Ottawa Separate School Board, appointed a commission to examine the situation. The Minister of Education, G.W. Ross, asked Whelan to recommend members for the commission; one of his choices, Father J.T. Foley, was appointed but shortly after resigned.³¹ The commission "severely criticized" the work of the Brothers; the English section of the school board dismissed them while the French side considered following suit. The Brothers' superior in Montreal, disgusted by the report, pulled all the Brothers from Ottawa in October 1895.³² Duhamel was not happy with the loss of what he termed "nos excellents Frères" and hoped to have them back one day.³³

Whelan now had a free hand to remake the boys school. In August 1895 he announced in his parish magazine, *The Calendar*, his hopes to provide high school classes that would round off the parish system and provide this level of education to those children whose parents could not afford the fees of the colleges.³⁴ The next month he bragged that he had secured "the services of the best qualified teachers for the parochial schools... and with the staff of teachers engaged, the schools should in no respect be second to any in the city." With the rearrangements that had been made it was a convenient time to introduce the high school classes.³⁵

Whelan was successful in finding "a highly qualified teacher, of long experience" to teach the high school courses, establishing a foundation that "will make our educational system dove-tail into the common one and afford a medium by which the educational attainments of our children can be measured by the common standard."³⁶

This seems eminently praiseworthy but Fallon took exception to Whelan and his plans. In the September 1895 edition of the university magazine, *The Owl*, which he edited, Fallon sprang to the defence of the Christian Brothers, who had educated him,³⁷ denying the criticisms brought against them and concluding that "if the enemies of a system or of an order, have had the naming

³⁰ "A Meddlesome Body," *The Calendar*, November 1895, 113.

³¹ AAO, Whelan File (2883), Whelan to Duhamel, nd.

³² Choquette, *Language and Religion*, 59-63.

³³ Centre de recherche en civilisation canadienne-française (hereafter CRCCF), Fonds L'Association canadienne française de l'Ontario (hereafter ACFO), File C2/166/8, Duhamel to Frère Gemel Martyr, 30 December 1896. The Brothers returned to the Ottawa Archdiocese in 1901. This also contradicts Whelan's later claim that it was Duhamel who was responsible for the departure of the Brothers.

³⁴ "An English High School," *The Calendar*, August 1895, 49-51.

³⁵ "The High School," *The Calendar*, September 1895, 65.

³⁶ "Excelsior!," *The Calendar*, October 1895, 85.

³⁷ Michael Power, "The Mitred Warrior: A critical reassessment of Bishop Michael Francis Fallon, 1867-1931," *Catholic Insight* VIII (3) (April 2000), 19.

of its judges, the verdict is not worth the paper on which it is written.”³⁸ He also attacked the proposed high school, which would provide competition for the college high school.

Whelan vigorously defended himself against what he termed “vile diatribes.” He also defended his actions in seeking the removal of the Brothers:

Plain duty would no longer admit of delay. The precious time of children was being lost, and their chances of advancement in life were being jeopardized. The parish priest who was responsible for the Brothers being in the parish schools had to choose between sentimentality and the interests of his people. He chose the latter. And for this he is blamed, and held up to odium as an enemy of religious teachers, as if forsooth it were in the interest of Religious Communities that they should be allowed to impose incompetent teachers upon the people, and the duty of priests to abet them in so doing!³⁹

This was a defensible position, but unfortunately Whelan as usual went too far; he accused the former vice-rector of the College of having made an anonymous attack in 1889 on his own university in an out of town journal.⁴⁰ *The Owl* obtained sworn testimony refuting this claim, proclaiming that *The Calendar* “should not be so much as named among decent people.”⁴¹

Since this quarrel was being fought in public it is no surprise that other journals joined in. “The mild, meek and saintly editors of the *Owl* and *Calendar* of Ottawa,” *United Canada* sarcastically observed, “are going about with grammars and Websters revised under their arms, and razors in their boots. Who will be the next victim of slander? What beautiful examples of Christian charity they are setting for the young and growing generations.”⁴²

Such conduct could not be allowed to continue; Whelan and Fallon were quickly brought to heel. On 8 December 1895 Whelan made a public apology from the pulpit of St. Patrick’s, expressing “deep sorrow for the scandal occasioned by the miserable dispute,” and asking forgiveness from his parishioners and “all whom I have offended.” He withdrew his accusation against the vice-rector though asserting that at the time of writing he believed it to be true, and refusing “to urge as an excuse the provocation

³⁸ “That Commission,” *The Owl*, September 1895, 41.

³⁹ “A Meddlesome Body,” *The Calendar*, November 1895, 113, 116.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴¹ “The Calumny Exposed,” *The Owl*, November 1895, 149.

⁴² *United Canada*, 9 November 1895.

given,” which seems a subtle way of doing just that. He also apologised “for all uncharitable or unseemly things I may have written during the heat of the discussion,” again hardly a whole-hearted expression of regret.⁴³

This was reported in the press, which also published Fallon’s apology in the form of a letter. He deplored “the scandal occasioned by our recent regrettable public discussion,” asking “an indulgent pardon for my share in the offence.” Like Whelan, he managed to make his apology less than abject: “I regret also that I allowed to appear in print remarks that were perhaps unnecessarily harsh and bitter, and that may have given offence to persons to whom, for any reason or for no reason, they have been applied.”⁴⁴

Whelan was more contrite in private, writing Vicar-General Routhier that distinct and apart from the truth or the falsity of those miserable charges and counter-charges, I confess with shame and sorrow that I am guilty of a grave offence against ecclesiastical authority and discipline in discussing them as I have done... I regard this trouble, in so far as it affects myself, as a judgement of God upon my head, for not having more earnestly pressed His Grace to accept my resignation immediately after my father’s death...⁴⁵

This last statement refers to yet another offer of resignation from Whelan in August 1895, though he had asked that it only be put into effect after his father’s imminent death.⁴⁶ No reason for resigning is given. In September Duhamel again offered the parish to the Oblates but was once more turned down, the General Council citing a lack of manpower.⁴⁷

Given Whelan’s penchant for public controversy and his talent for verbal abuse it is not to be wondered at that he became a prominent and divisive figure during the tumult that followed the government’s adoption of Regulation 17. The question of bilingual schools became caught up in the wider battle over ethnic dominance within the Canadian church, and ultimately the survival of separate schools. As Franklin Walker wrote in his pioneering study of the separate school system:

Both sides believed there were at stake national interests, cultural identity, intellectual progress and religion itself. The English-speaking Catholics were the minority among Ottawa Catholics, while the French-speaking Catholics were the minority among Ontario Catholics. Each group fought with all the self-rectitude of embattled Justice.⁴⁸

The imposition of Regulation 17 was not an isolated event but rather the culmination of a long history of English-French conflict over the school system and of internal church conflict between the two language groups.

⁴³ *Free Press* (Ottawa), 9 December 1895.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ AAO, Whelan File (2883), Whelan to Routhier, 6 December 1895.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Whelan to Duhamel, 9 August 1895.

⁴⁷ Whelan File (2883), Whelan to Routhier, 6 December 1895.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Whelan to Duhamel, 9 August 1895.

⁴⁷ Carrière, *Histoire Documentaire, Vol. VI*, 149.

⁴⁸ Franklin A. Walker, *Catholic Education and Politics in Ontario*, Vol. II: *A Documentary History* (Toronto: The Federation of Catholic Education Associations of Ontario, 1964; reprinted 1976), 229.

Duhamel fought a long and successful battle against the English bishops of Ontario, who sought the division of the Ottawa diocese at the Ontario-Quebec border, with the Ontario portion becoming a suffragan of Toronto. In Ottawa several issues arose. The two sides fought for control of the University of Ottawa, with an attempt by the English under the leadership of Father Fallon to claim the university for their own ending in failure. The agreement over the division of the schools reached in 1886 broke down in the 1890s, when the French gained a majority among the trustees, resulting in great bitterness among the English, who felt that their money was subsidizing the French system. A number of francophone educational associations were formed, culminating in a major convention in 1910, which demanded equality for French education in Ontario.⁴⁹ In 1915 Whelan would bitterly denounce this growing French militancy.

Concerns about the bilingual schools led to a government investigation which revealed that, while some schools were quite good, others were not up to standard and in some the use of English was virtually non-existent. The policy the government introduced to counteract this was drastic: English instruction would begin as soon as a child entered school, while instruction in French would cease after grade 2. Officially called “Instructions No. 17,” the edict was generally known as “Regulation 17” and became to francophones “a symbol of brutal oppression.”⁵⁰

Their reaction to it was dramatic. Despite the opposition of some English trustees, the Ottawa Separate School Board voted to resist Regulation 17. Board chairman Samuel Genest went so far as to say that he would prefer to see separate schools disappear than to have French removed from the schools.⁵¹ The disappearance of separate schools was precisely what anglophones feared; statements such as Genest’s only increased their resolve to oppose the French and insist on obedience to the government’s policy. Some anglophones did in fact support the cause of bilingual education but those who were opposed were convinced that the French were placing language rights ahead of religious rights.⁵² Archbishop Neil McNeil of Toronto, writing to the Franco-Ontarian Bishop of Haileybury, expressed his belief that Ontario Protestants “are determined to see the law obeyed, and, if they cannot do this in any other way, they will abolish the Catholic schools altogether.”⁵³

The situation in Ottawa escalated quickly. In October 1913 all government grants to the Ottawa Board were cancelled; in some classes students walked out when inspected by an anglophone. Whelan and several other Irish priests met with the English trustees to plot strategy. They chose to press for the separation of the English separate schools from the bilingual ones, taking their case to Archbishop Gauthier, who had taken charge of the see in 1910 following Duhamel’s death in June 1909.

⁴⁹ Choquette, *Language and Religion*, 9-43, 59-78.

⁵⁰ Walker, *Catholic Education*, 266-7.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁵² Michael Power, *A Promise Fulfilled: Highlights in the Political History of Catholic Separate Schools in Ontario* (Toronto: Ontario Catholic School Trustees Association, 2002), 206.

⁵³ CRCCF, Fonds ACFO, File C2/87/11, undated, McNeil to Bishop E.A. Latulipe.

In April the board sought the authority to raise funds to establish independent schools; the English countered by obtaining an injunction from the Ontario Supreme Court against such action. In June 1914 the Ottawa board closed all its schools, leaving 8,000 pupils without schooling in September; this action was overturned by the Ontario Supreme Court.⁵⁴

The stakes were high, and the rhetoric on both sides became more embittered. In January 1914 Whelan complained to Gauthier that recent statements about him in *Le Temps*, a local French paper, were “false and libellous.”⁵⁵ In January 1915 the Archbishop of Quebec, Cardinal Bégin, Quebec Premier Lomer Gouin, and the Quebec legislature all came to the defence of the Franco-Ontarians. Angered by what he considered outside interference in Ontario affairs, Whelan published a lengthy open letter in the *Ottawa Evening Journal* on 13 February.⁵⁶ In doing so he threw a large quantity of gasoline on what was already a raging fire.

He began by deploring the expansion of francophones into Eastern Ontario beginning in the last century. In Whelan’s eyes they were “belligerent invaders” who forced French on English students. He asserted that only the hierarchy of Ontario had the right to attack a regulation of the Ontario government. He argued that the Archdiocese of Ottawa should be separated at the provincial border, thus hiving off its Quebec portion. He reiterated the argument that the school board should be split in two, and he insisted that Regulation 17 be enforced. In the most controversial part of his statement he attacked the late Archbishop Duhamel, who he claimed had “joined hand and heart with the invaders. Indeed it was he who organized and directed their forces in prosecuting the “work of colonization” as it was then modestly called.” Though Duhamel “never relaxed in his propaganda for race and language supremacy,” all would have been forgiven and forgotten by the English except for “the arrogant pretensions, the insolent threats and the violent activities of the racial-mad party his dominant policies had evoked.”⁵⁷

Response to this diatribe by francophone groups and individuals was immediate and furious. A letter of protest to the archbishop from the French clergy was signed by 80 secular and 69 religious priests. They protested the public outrage to Duhamel’s memory, praising his piety, charity, sense of justice, hard work and regard for all his flock and asserting his impartiality in the administration of the diocese. They denied that he was responsible for a race war among them, that he favoured French schools over English or sought to force French on English students. They declared that the accusations against Duhamel were calumnies against themselves as well, meant to intensify the current struggle. They demanded that reparation be made and Whelan prevented from continuing his nefarious role.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Choquette, *Language and Religion*, 176-82; Walker, *Catholic Education*, 281-83.

⁵⁵ AAO, Whelan File (2883), Whelan to Gauthier, 12 January 1914.

⁵⁶ Choquette, *Language and Religion*, 184-86.

⁵⁷ “To Cardinal Bégin and Premier Sir Lomer Gouin,” *The Catholic Record*, 27 February 1915; on francophone migration into Eastern Ontario see Chad Gaffield, *Language, Schooling, and Cultural Conflict: The Origins of the French-Language Controversy in Ontario*, (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1987).

⁵⁸ AAO, Whelan file (2880), Letter of protest, nd, 1915.

A form letter was sent from the various French parishes in the archdiocese denying that the French Canadians were the aggressors in the school question and denouncing the consequent diminution of respect for authority among the children and the scandal given to non-Catholics. The French, they asserted, would not be treated as pariahs in Ontario.⁵⁹ In the view of one member of the Ottawa Separate School Board, Whelan's letter "can have no other results than *Firstly*, to deepen the racial antipathy between French and English-speaking Catholics; *Secondly*, to diminish the esteem of Catholicism amongst the Protestant population of this country by revealing the unchristian spectacle of hateful division, and unworthy ambitions; *Thirdly*, to obstruct the settlement of the bilingual school question."⁶⁰

Whelan did have his defenders. The *Ottawa Evening Journal* felt that "while the letter has greatly irritated some of the extremists of the French-speaking side, it is considered by English-speaking Catholics to have been a necessary and timely reminder to Quebec that the question is not a religious one."⁶¹ *The Catholic Record* of London, Ontario, co-edited by Whelan's old ally Father James T. Foley, believed that Whelan was "preeminently qualified" to put the English case and that his letter "should be read as throwing much needed light on a local phase of a question which is of vital and practical interest to every part, indeed to every citizen, of Ontario."⁶²

The extremity of the negative reaction, hardly surprising under the circumstances, led Whelan to consider legal action. *Le Temps* retracted two articles it had published on Whelan in which it referred to him as the worst enemy of the French Canadians, described his letter as "a marvel of incoherence and raving" and accused him of betraying the secrets of office which he was obliged to protect as the former secretary of Archbishop Duhamel.⁶³ Whelan's lawyer, M.J. Gorman, told the archbishop that he had advised Whelan that:

...the letters which have been published as having been signed by various members of the clergy, were even more libellous than the statements in "Le Temps", and he informed me that, if he were free to commence actions against them, he would have done so

⁵⁹ AAO, Whelan File (2882), French parishes to Gauthier, February 1915.

⁶⁰ CRCCF, Fonds ACFO, File C2/100/9, Unidentified Member of Ottawa Separate School Board to Gauthier, 27 February 1915.

⁶¹ *Ottawa Evening Journal*, 16 February 1915.

⁶² "Father Whelan's Open Letter," *The Catholic Record*, 27 February 1915.

⁶³ "Carnet Divers," *Le Temps*, 16 February 1915; "La Lettre de l'Abbé Whelan," *Le Temps*, 24 February 1915.

promptly. The necessity may yet arise of our making an application to Your Grace for permission to take these proceedings.⁶⁴

Archbishop Gauthier was in a very difficult position. Although bilingual he was, despite his surname, an anglophone who had previously been Archbishop of Kingston. His appointment to Ottawa had been considered a blow to the French, who had strongly pushed for a francophone successor to Duhamel. He found himself caught between two irreconcilable forces. He had to respond to Whelan's actions and the resultant uproar, and did so on 22 March by issuing a circular to the clergy. He addressed his priests "with a grief-stricken heart," deploring the discord prevalent in his archdiocese. "Alas!" he exclaimed, "how far removed are we from the recognized normal standards of a Diocese...It is needless for me to proclaim that I deplore and I deprecate, those public declarations which tend to disturb the peace, the mutual good will, and that blessed harmony which should abide in our midst." He asked them "to refrain from all public discussion on those vexed questions," and forbade them from publishing "anything whatsoever in the press against any bishop or any priest, either openly or covertly, under pain of grave sin and even at the risk of incurring canonical censure which I reserve to myself the right to inflict as the circumstances may dictate."⁶⁵

This episcopal response did not satisfy the French, who considered it a mere slap on the wrist for Whelan. According to one editorial there had been no denouement to the incident as Whelan had neither apologised nor been denounced by the authorities. They could not understand why the archbishop did not accede to French-Canadian demands to disavow the odious actions of Whelan, avenge the memory of Duhamel and make reparation for the revolting injustice to his episcopal dignity, and console a race struck to the very heart by the disturbing fanaticism of a priest.⁶⁶

In July 1915 the government dismissed the Ottawa Separate School Board and replaced it with an appointed three-man commission, two of whom were anglophone. The French fought their case all the way up to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London, which on 2 November 1916 upheld the validity of Regulation 17, stating that any constitutional guarantees were made to religious minorities, not racial groups, leaving no legal basis on which to claim discrimination against the French language. The Committee did, however, rule the appointed commission illegal and ordered the reinstatement of the elected board.⁶⁷

The seriousness of the issue led to its submission to the Vatican. In fact both sides had already appealed to Rome for support.⁶⁸ The Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Stagni, prepared a lengthy report for the pope setting out the background to the dispute and giving his views on the latest developments, including an open letter from the francophone pastors of the archdiocese

⁶⁴ AAO, Whelan File (2880), Gorman to Gauthier, 4 March 1915. Under church law a priest could not sue a fellow priest without the permission of his bishop.

⁶⁵ AAO, Gauthier File, Circular to the Clergy, 22 March 1915.

⁶⁶ AAO, Whelan File (2882), clipping, *Le Prévoyant*, May 1915. This periodical was the official organ of L'Union St. Joseph du Canada.

⁶⁷ Choquette, *Language and Religion*, 189, 201.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 181-84.

denouncing Regulation 17, followed by a similar letter from the English pastors supporting it.⁶⁹ The latter was signed by Whelan and four other priests, and read from the pulpit on 29 August 1915.⁷⁰ Both letters clearly violated Gauthier's circular of the preceding March.

Stagni considered Whelan's open letter "disgraceful," having the appearance of "rebellion against constituted ecclesiastical authority, a challenge, that is, to a Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church launched by a simple priest." Particularly scandalous was his attack on Duhamel. However he saw Whelan's resentment of interference from Quebec as "representative of the point of view of the English Catholics of Ontario..."⁷¹ "Thus, as things stand," he summed up,

we have the priests pronouncing themselves publicly left and right on such a delicate and controversial point and at the same time the episcopal authority is silent. On the one hand the French parish clergy denounces the regulation as a violator of the most sacred rights; on the other hand the English clergy qualifies it as a wise and necessary measure. In any case it is not principally this difference of opinion in the clergy which should be noted here. Rather it is the fact that the priests have arrogated – have dared to arrogate – to themselves the task of publicly pronouncing on a matter on which their bishops have maintained, and continue to maintain, rigorous silence.⁷²

Stagni had sympathy for Archbishop Gauthier, who he considered "an excellent and very conscientious prelate," though also a "timid and peaceful man..." While he felt Gauthier was "afraid to attempt the smallest step in order not to be entangled in the knots of the bilingual schools question," Stagni realized "that there are insurmountable obstacles to an effective intervention on his part."⁷³

Rome did not move quickly. It was not until 8 September 1916 that Benedict XV sent a letter to the Canadian hierarchy. It was a carefully balanced response. Deploring the split in the church, the pope praised bilingualism and bilingual training for the clergy, urging them to use both languages when necessary. He supported the use of French in the schools, while recognizing the right of the Ontario government to demand a suitable knowledge of English. He urged the bishops to seek reconciliation.⁷⁴

In response to this plea the Ontario bishops scheduled a meeting for 24 January 1917. Gauthier was aghast when he interpreted a conversation with

⁶⁹ John Zucchi, ed. *The View From Rome: Archbishop Stagni's 1915 Reports on the Ontario Bilingual Schools Question* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), xlvi.

⁷⁰ AAO, Whelan File (2882), Whelan to Gauthier, 19 June 1919, enclosing "A Statement on the Ottawa School Question".

⁷¹ Zucchi, *View From Rome*, 37.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 39-40.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 101, 103.

⁷⁴ Choquette, *Language and Religion*, 201.

Whelan several days earlier to mean that Whelan planned on publishing another letter. Despite the fact that this would have contravened his 1915 circular, Gauthier, rather than forbidding Whelan to do so, sent him a pleading letter. “A letter from you at the present juncture,” he wrote,

would aggravate the trouble that afflicts me now. I am a sick man, an old man, and find it already impossible to cope with what I have to suffer. I beg of you then as your abp. [*sic*] to help me by your silence and by abstention from any public declaration bearing on the controversy... let me make a final appeal to you – I know your desire is to help me to bear the terrible burden laid upon me – and surely not to hurt me. I have therefore all confidence that you will yield to the promptings of your good heart, and your well known loyalty to your abp.⁷⁵

This letter gives the impression that Gauthier was afraid of Whelan and the havoc he could wreak. In the event, Whelan did not publish a letter; whether or not he had intended to do so, and was dissuaded by Gauthier’s plea, is unknown.

Following their meeting the bishops released a letter to the clergy and laity of Ontario. It enjoined them to respect the laws of the civil power, but also asked the English to give sympathetic consideration to the aspirations of their French-speaking fellow citizens. It asked for all to “pray for harmony and to do nothing that would tend to disturb it.”⁷⁶

Despite this plea the dispute dragged on with neither side willing to yield. On 7 June 1918 the pope issued a second letter supporting the right of the French to protest against Regulation 17 but only “without any form of rebellion and without recourse to violent or illegitimate methods,” an implicit condemnation of their tactics. Legal action should not be taken without the consent of the appropriate bishop. Benedict’s 1916 support of bilingualism was reiterated, and the bishops were charged to seek to preserve peace among their people.⁷⁷

Peace did indeed seem to be in prospect. An increasing number of Anglo Canadians, Catholic and Protestant, expressed sympathy for the French position. In April 1919 a meeting of the entire Canadian hierarchy recommended concessions in English-French school districts, including separate financial committees for each language group.⁷⁸

Father E.J. Cornell, an Oblate and Ottawa school trustee, went further, promoting the separation of the Ottawa Separate School Board into two boards, one for each language group. He gained the support of Archbishop Gauthier. This idea had been suggested previously and each time had been rejected by the government on the grounds that it would create a new class of school based on race. Cornell received the same answer.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ AAO, Whelan File (2882), Gauthier to Whelan, 19 January 1917.

⁷⁶ AAO, Gauthier File, C.H. Gauthier, et. al., “Pastoral letter arising from meeting of January 1917.”

⁷⁷ Choquette, *Language and Religion*, 213.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁷⁹ Walker, *Catholic Education*, 308-10.

Whelan, breaking with his erstwhile allies, strongly opposed this solution. Writing to Gauthier, Whelan described it as “a revamping of an old scheme which was rejected by your venerable predecessor as unworkable. Your Grace already knew that I had refused to be a party to it in its new form, because it was considered unjust and not possible of realization.”⁸⁰ Whelan’s opposition seems to contradict his previous position as he had supported the same solution in his contentious 1915 letter.

The only rationale for this seems to be his assertion, in a letter to Education Minister H.J. Cody, that the plan “contains no provision for restraining the French section of the Board from continuing to resist Departmental Regulations – in fact leaves them perfectly free.” He also took the opportunity to undercut any influence Gauthier’s support might have with the minister, condescendingly referring to the archbishop as “a venerable and saintly old man, whom the bilingualists have hectored and harassed since he came here, [who] is so depressed that any settlement acceptable to them, appeals to him, and he is influenced by their misrepresentations.”⁸¹

On 23 May 1919 Whelan was summoned to the Apostolic Delegation to explain his opposition and he “defended as best I could, my attitude towards that scheme and all similar schemes which meant continued antagonism to the Provincial Government.” Asked to put his thoughts in writing and to suggest a plan of his own, on 28 May he provided this to the Delegate and “commended a Government Commission, as provided for in 1917 by act of the [Ontario] Legislature, as the only satisfactory solution, if accepted in good faith by all interested parties...”⁸² Whelan is here referring to an act respecting the appointment of a commission for the Ottawa separate schools, which was assented to on 12 April 1917.⁸³

On 11 June Whelan’s views were published in the *Ottawa Evening Journal*. He stressed that while elected school boards were suitable under normal conditions a commission was needed now. “If accepted by all parties in good faith,” he stated, “a Commission would speedily bring order out of chaos. It would have the support and, if necessary, the financial assistance of the Government. It will be composed of unprejudiced Catholic laymen of business experience... and racial friction and scandals incident to election would be avoided.” The issue, he concluded, “is essentially a language question, one with which religion has nothing to do.”⁸⁴ He did not seem to consider that the commission previously appointed had been ruled illegal by the Privy Council.

Whelan was now virtually isolated in his recalcitrance, at least among the clergy. He was quickly attacked in the press by Fathers Cornell, Fay, and Fitzgerald, his erstwhile supporters who had co-signed the open letter of August 1915. They now took the high road. “The very worst will happen again,” they believed, “if the government follows the dictation of those who are preaching

⁸⁰ AAO, Whelan File (2882), Whelan to Gauthier, 14 May 1919.

⁸¹ Library and Archives Canada, Willison Fonds, vol. 32, Whelan to Cody, 22 May 1919, 23743-45.

⁸² AAO, Whelan File (2882), Whelan to Gauthier, 19 June 1919.

⁸³ 7 Geo 5th chapter 59.

⁸⁴ *Ottawa Evening Journal*, 11 June 1919.

anything but charity, and are creating dissension, instead of adopting the only proper course to settle our school troubles.” They called on “the writer” – Whelan – to join them in following the pope’s instructions to work for unity.⁸⁵

Whelan wrote to the archbishop, referring to “the indecent conduct and tactics of certain promoters of the Father Cornell conciliatory scheme,” and called their response to his statement “a torrent of personal abuse and vituperation,” a complaint which coming from him seems rather ironic. He declared their position to be “public defiance of the Provincial Government”; his own position now seemed to be that Regulation 17 was an act of the duly constituted civil power, and anything but complete obedience to it was intolerable.⁸⁶

The Citizen described the English-speaking Catholics as being divided into two groups, one led by Whelan which favoured “an optional school system, to be reached through a government commission, which would effectively divide the English and French sections,” and the other led by Cornell, “who would mend the trouble via mutual agreement and a separate school board with two committees, one for the French and one for the English.”⁸⁷ The two positions were not that far apart, but Whelan could not be moved.

He was, however, on the losing side, one of the few who seemed determined to carry on the interminable battle. Others were more willing to seek a mutually acceptable solution. The French agreed to once more set up two different committees, allowing each language group to be in charge of its own schools, a reversion to the agreement of 1886. Father Cornell chaired the English committee. That was how matters stood at Whelan’s death in 1922. Finally in 1927 Regulation 17 was amended to allay the major francophone concerns; it was abolished entirely in 1944.⁸⁸

Whelan’s intransigence left him on the losing side in the schools debate, isolated from his former clerical allies, who had finally seen merit in the French cause. His stubborn refusal to compromise in any way, coupled with the extreme language he employed, made him a polarizing figure; despised by the French, he was hailed as one of the leading Irish priests in Ontario, if not all of Canada, by those who shared his views. By 1919, however, that number had dwindled, as people tired of the incessant conflict. It is interesting to note that, in the favourable obituaries printed in the Ottawa papers following his death in 1922, his role in the schools issue was not even mentioned.⁸⁹ He was, in the end, on the wrong side of history.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 13 June 1919.

⁸⁶ AAO, Whelan File (2882), Whelan to Gauthier, 19 June 1919.

⁸⁷ CRCCF, Fonds ACFO, File C2/95/3, undated clipping, *The Citizen* (Ottawa).

⁸⁸ Choquette, *Language and Religion*, 233-4, 245-7.

⁸⁹ *Ottawa Evening Journal* and *The Citizen* (Ottawa), 6 November 1922.