
THE PEOPLE OF THE BEAUTIFUL RIVER



Wishing to learn more about Maliseet history, and aware that the Maliseet people had had close ties with the St. Basile Parish, before carrying my episcopal visitation I read over again the interesting pages on the Maliseet of the St. Basile Reserve in the book *Saint-Basile, Berceau du Madawaska 1792-1992*.

ORIGIN OF THE NAME

We are the Wabanaki of the Saint John River. We call ourselves Wulust'agooga'wiks, [Or: the Wolustokehwiyyik. L.G.] the people of the beautiful river, the Wulustook. [Or: Wolastook, from: wolastoq, meaning "beautiful river". L.G.], We belong to the great Algonquian Nation, different in language from the Algonquins. Among the Algonquian tribes settled in eastern Canada and Maine are the Maliseet, the Micmacs, the Passamaquoddies, and the Penobscots. European explorers called us "Etchemins," without really knowing what the word meant; for us, this word is meaningless, unless the Whites meant to write "Skeejin," which means native person or Indian. Early on, the French called us "Malectites," "Marissizis," and "Marécites," the latter name having been transformed into "Maliseet." We believe that they picked up this word from the Micmacs who to this day call us "Malaisits," [Or: Malisit] which means "Broken Speakers," as they do not know our language too well and believe that we don't speak theirs correctly. [Other Maliseets believe that the name "Maliseet" means "lazy" or "easy-going", or "slow-talker".]

ARRIVAL IN AMERICA

It is generally recognised that we are the first inhabitants of Canada since we came to North America some 20,000 to 30,000 years ago, according to archaeological evidence. Our ancestors came from Asia across the Bering Strait that joins the Pacific Ocean to the Arctic. What is it that brought them all the way to the Saint John River in a journey covering over 100,000 miles and lasted for centuries? We can imagine them making a mental note of [the contour of] every mountain and valley, forest and river, as they crossed the vast glacial plains of the Yukon and the Rocky Mountains, on their way to the Atlantic seaboard. Always on the lookout for the ideal hunting ground, our ancestors travelled north to a river whose many tributaries teemed with fish, where the vast forests abounded with wildlife, and where the birch tree gives up its bark for the construction of canoe and tipi.

PASTORAL VISITATION TO MALISEET

With this background information and a few other documents pertinent to the Southern Victoria Deanery, I started my 1997 pastoral visitation at the deanery's mother parish, St. Ann's of Maliseet. This was my fifth meeting with the local community: I had had the pleasure of celebrating Confirmation and of ordaining Curtis Sappier deacon (in 195) and priest (in 1996). At first a mission of Van Buren, Maine (1838-1850), the mission was attached in turn to St. Basile (1853-1887) and Drummond (1887-1903). The mission welcomed its first resident priests, the Eudist Fathers, in 1903 (to 1906); they were followed in turn by Father Frederick Ryan (1906-1921), and the Franciscan Fathers (1921-1989). A first chapel, built in 1853, was destroyed by fire in 1923. The new church, blessed on November 11, 1925, was dedicated to St. Ann. Religious Sisters also lived and worked at Maliseet: the Little Franciscans of Mary (1924-1927) and the Sisters of Charity of Saint John

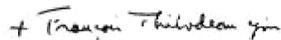
(1927-1985). The Franciscans left the parish in 1989; Fr. Norman Thibodeau was the last Franciscan pastor and was parish priest there for seventeen years. A promoter of the Maliseet language and culture, in collaboration with people from the Reserve he translated the Mass into Maliseet. When he left the parish, he was replaced by Father Pierre Thibodeau (1989-1995). Father Leo Grégoire is the actual pastor of this parish which numbers over 1000 people.

A LIVELY PLACE!

In a church filled to capacity, February 16 marked the Sunday gathering with Mass and Confirmation of twelve young people who had been seriously preparing for the event. Songs and the beat of the ceremonial drum paced the ceremony. Brunch was served to all, following the liturgy. At the meeting with the parish pastoral council we discussed the forthcoming Diocesan Eucharistic Congress: It is going to be a marvellous event. A parish retreat by Deacon Ron Boyer of Kanawake Reserve (May 25 to 29) will serve as immediate preparation to the Congress. The opening Mass of the Eucharistic Congress will take place on the evening of May 30, with the homily - probably in the three languages spoken in our diocese: French, English, and Maliseet! - given by Bishop Gérard Dionne. After some entertainment following the opening Mass, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament will continue non-stop throughout the forty hours of the Congress. Early in the morning, May 31 and June 1, there will be a native Sunrise Service, and the days will also be given over to conferences on the Eucharist and talking circles on native spirituality. It looks as if the closing Mass and the pot-luck supper that follows will be memorable happenings.

A HOPE-FILLED PEOPLE

To the question, *How do you see the Church at Maliseet, five years from now?* the answers given me were truly hope-filled ones, as the parish is witnessing a greater participation by young people, as well as a renewal of the native culture. The importance of the role of the elders was stressed, as well as the need to begin as early as next fall the training of pastoral agents for the parish. I was also able to undertake a short but unforgettable pilgrimage to a few shut-in and sick people and their families. It is so very important for friends to visit them, and for holy communion to be brought to them. I shall long remember the community supper we shared together, and the kindness, pride, and enthusiasm of this *People of the Beautiful River*. A thank you to Father Leo Grégoire, I.V.D., the pastor, as well as to the parish pastoral council, to all the volunteers and the Maliseet Nation as a whole, for this visit to the Mother-Church of the Southern Victoria Deanery. Have a good week!



+ François Thibodeau
Bishop of Edmundston

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