

The Missionary The People Have Not Forgotten

Who was this man that the Ojibways named "Needamishkang" — The One We Love To See Come?

Who was this tireless apostle who travelled 2,000 miles by canoe each summer, and 1,500 miles by snowshoe and dog team each winter, to visit his parishioners?

Who was this saintly zealot who, when illness confined him to home base, required five priests to replace him?

Who was this revered model of Christian charity who managed, 15 years after his death, to fill the Church of the Infant Jesus to overflowing with old friends, come to witness the unveiling of his tomb?

He was Father Couture.

For 25 years, 1924 to 1949, Father Joseph-Marie Couture, SJ, was missionary priest at Longlac, Ontario, and pastor of one of the largest and most far-flung parishes in the country.

It is one of the ironies of life to note that he was attracted to the Jesuit Order partly by the fact that he loved company and felt that he would have more companionship in an Order than as a secular, then spent the greater part of his life in as lonely a situation as it is possible to imagine.

Yet Father Couture was not really a lonely man, for he loved God and all his fellow men. As he travelled amongst them, there was no evidence of a single nationality. To the French he was French, to the English he was English and to the Ojibway, he was an Ojibway.

The local people who knew him well, without exception testify to the fine character of this man. He was patient, dedicated, lovable and strong, both physically and spiritually. His life of virtue inspired a fellow Jesuit, Father Lorenzo Cadieux to write a book entitled "De L'Avion à L'Avion" — From Paddle to Plane — which won the Prix Champlain—1958.

Apprentice Missionary

It was in 1906, at the age of 20, that Joseph Couture entered the Novitiate of Sault-du-Recollet. In 1913, he left Montreal for Spanish, Ontario, and became an apprentice missionary. At the Indian Industrial School in Spanish, he completed his mastership, four years, and counted on returning to Montreal to begin his theological studies. He was prevailed upon to remain another year, however, as the need for good teachers was great.

It was not until 1922, at the age of 36, that Joseph-Marie Couture was, at last, ordained.

By this time, he had already received his baptism as a travelling missionary of the North, when he visited Albany with Father Desautels in 1920.

Life As a Paddling Priest

The next 13 years of his life as a missionary, Father Couture



Father Couture

spent in visiting the people spread out across the miles of Northland. The hardships he endured on these trips can only be appreciated by those who have spent months at a time paddling through the North and living out of a pack-sack in summer, or driving a dog team and heavily laden toboggan through difficult country, in winter.

They can imagine, without difficulty, the nights of sleeping on the ground, reading his breviary by the flickering light of a candle, tied with a bit of birch bark to a slender stick in the ground.

At the mission in Longlac, Father Couture's comforts were something less than luxurious. His cabin was crudely constructed with one room, though a lean-to shed was added later, and was cold and drafty. Even when there was a good fire burning, it was necessary to stay downwind of the stove to keep warm. Frozen meat, in winter, would remain frozen when set up against the wall.

By the time he was appointed missionary priest at Longlac, in 1924, Father Couture had mastered the Ojibway speech well enough to conduct his missions in that tongue.

The Flying Priest

In 1932, handicapped by painful

arthritis in one knee, Father Couture wrote to the General of the Jesuit Order, pointing out the difficulties of trying to keep in touch with his widespread flock, and asked for permission to obtain a plane.

He received permission, studied and obtained a flying license, and took to the air. Until 1940, Father Couture continued to fly the rounds of his 36 missions. And then his northern trips ended. The Oblate Fathers had taken over the far northern missions.

The Resident Priest

"Resident" is a poor title to describe a man who still had nine mission centres to visit along the railway, but it is used to indicate that the long canoe voyages, dog team trips and flying visits were ended.

In 1940, the new rectory was completed by Father Hamel and the old cabin built for Father Couture in 1928 was transformed into a wood-working shop.

When illness confined Father Couture to the Longlac area the following year, it took five priests to replace him — two on the River Albany, two on Lake Nipigon and a secular priest who helped out along the railway line.

It was March 4, 1949, that Father Couture died — a great man who had given his life for his faith and friends. The 15 years since his death have not erased his memory. Catholics, Protestants — English, Indian and French crowded into the Church of the Infant Jesus on the fifteenth anniversary of his death, this year, for the unveiling of his tomb in the crypt.

Father Alexandre Rolland, SJ, now resident at Longlac, spoke to the gathering — a fitting tribute to a great man:

"For over 30 years not a word has been said against the late father. This is a most extraordinary fact. Everybody loved him and they gave him the name of 'NEEDAMISHKANG' which means 'The one we love to see come.'

"I remember several years ago we arrived at Gull Bay at midnight and had Mass next morning. Indians could be seen coming with their dog teams across the lake. Some had come 22 miles from Jackfish Island after other Indians had travelled all night to tell them. This expressed the love the Indians had for him. He loved them first and most, he loved everyone. Charity and the love of people, all great things he had. This is why we remember him, and we can emulate him in our love for God."

NIC Executive Meets in Toronto

TORONTO — At the executive meeting of National Indian Council, September 18, W. Pelletier summarized grants obtained by N.I.C. thus: March — \$9,000 from Centennial Commission for travel and exchange program; \$7,000 for the Claims Bill C-130; \$5,000 for the Wikwemikong cultural event; in September — \$7,000 for a seminar of key Indian leaders.

Present were: W. I. C. Wutunee, chief; J. B. Tootoosis, vice-president; Phil Thompson, vice-president; Jean Cuthand, Wilfred Pelletier, I. Beaulieu, Gene Lahache, Omer Peters, Mrs. Elizabeth Samson, Jeannette Corbier and Duke Redbird.

The N.I.C. should endeavour to raise funds on their own to operate so as not to be under any governmental control. N.I.C. should have a membership campaign to get support from the Indians; a public relations man will speak to the people and a newsletter will be published, said Mr. Pelletier.

It was voted that a grant should be asked from the Federal Government to keep open an office and pay a staff of a director and secretary and to ask for a basic annual grant from the National Centennial Administration. A finance committee will set up a basic budget.

The Council forwarded a request to the Finance Dept. for tax exemption on the fund raising campaign, hoping that the Council will not have to obtain a charter.

World's Fair

Mr. Bill Thompson reported that a committee on the World's Fair had been set up with Wilfred Pelletier, co-chairman, with Andrew Deslisle, Isaac Beaulieu, Gene Lahache, and William Wutunee as members. Three projects were listed: Arts and Handicraft, Indian Culture and the Indian Pavilion.

Centennial

Wilfred Pelletier said that about \$12,500 more should be forthcoming from the Centennial Commission for the initiation of programs outlined in a brief submitted by N.I.C. to the Commission.

Newsletter

Mrs. Elizabeth Samson reported that no money was available from N.I.C. funds for a newsletter; N.I.C. should have some medium of communication with the Indian people. Cost of this endeavour will be taken into consideration by the Finance Committee.

Individual membership in the N.I.C. will be encouraged through the liaison officer. An education committee will be set up to make Canadians and young Indians aware of the Indian national heritage.