

Editorial

Fr Dan O'Donovan continues his series on Meditation in which he is endeavouring to wed together the rich mystical traditions of East and West with the spirituality generated over the ages by the wise people of the Aboriginal world. These days Dan is establishing once more a hermitage north of Broome, somewhere near Beagle Bay. Back in the late 1970s, early 1980s, he spent seven years in a hermitage at Lombadina.

Fr John Leary msc has been stationed in Northern Territory for the best part of 50 years. In 1959 he recorded some of his reminiscences about his earlier days in the Territory when circumstances of life and work were very different from what they are now. He has recently revised his memoirs, with the help of Sr Therese-Marie (Daly River) and Keren (Nelen Yubu). There is a lot of implicit missiology embedded in his tales and reflections.

Rev. Dr Wayne A Holst is a lecturer and research associate at the Arctic Institute of North America at the University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada. He has served as a Lutheran pastor and missionary for twenty-five years: as a student, missionary, new church development officer, parish minister and administrator and now educator with a special interest in the comparative spiritualities of indigenous peoples. Wayne wrote his doctoral dissertation on the future of the church in the Western Arctic. This study was entitled: 'Planning Christian Witness in Canada's North' (1989). His connection with Indian peoples is mainly through the Catholic, Anglican and United Churches. He has been a subscriber to *Nelen Yubu* for a number of years. The present paper was published in substantially identical form — only a few stylistic differences — in a recent issue of *Missiology* (January 1998, Vol. XXVI #1). The editor, Dr Darrell Whiteman, has kindly allowed us to use the paper.

— Martin Wilson msc
Editor

MEDITATION, ABORIGINAL STYLE?

Dan O'Donovan

*Happy whoever trusts in the Lord,
whose trust is in the Lord.
He is like a tree growing beside the river,
that puts out its roots near the water,
and has no fear when the dry season comes
for its leaves stay green.
It doesn't worry even in time of drought
because it still goes on giving fruit.*

Jeremiah 17, 7-8

THIS is a good word to start off with. The bible is like a flowing river. When by God's grace we plant ourselves near it, it will continually feed us. In this way, we will grow to be healthy and strong.

If you are going to follow along the way of meditation we are talking about, you will need therefore to have your own bible. You can pick the sort of one you like at any christian bookshop. For those who live near Darwin, the Bible Society has a shop in Winnellie. The Salvation Army also have a good bookshop in Mitchell Street. In Broome, there is the Kimberley Bookshop on Kennedy's Hill.

In the bible you will find two great stories about the way of prayer, or meditation.

The first is about when God's people left Egypt because it was getting too hard for them to live there. Already God was starting to speak to them through one of their own, Moses. He was saying they should go. After the people left Egypt, their

desert walkabout lasted forty years. During all that time God looked after them, providing them with enough food and water in a wonderful way. The first story, then, concerns the people, their journey and the onward movement of liberation they were beginning to find.

Leaving a situation of abuse and slavery, they were travelling together toward a good homeland God had promised to give them. So this stage of their life as a people was full of meaning. This story is sometimes called: the *horizontal* understanding. It is about Moses climbing Mount Sinai and spending a long time listening to God, and talking to God, in a cloud. He was by himself.

These two stories together give you a full description of christian contemplation. Really, they are not two stories, but one. However, as we are dealing now with meditation, we will be looking especially at the second, and at those places in the bible that tell us about what happened. The main texts are in the Book of Exodus: chapters 3; 19; 20; 24; 33. They all speak about Mount Sinai. We need to come to love this holy mountain where God has revealed himself to us, and still reveals himself. Read these chapters and re-read them until they become part of you. As you practise meditation, you will find yourself *becoming* Mount Sinai, on fire with divine presence.

There are many things that could be said about Mount Sinai. But for the present we are interested only in what it has to tell us about meditation-communion with God. Notice first, therefore, that when God was going to show himself to the people and speak with them, he wanted to do it through Moses. Moses was made by God what we call a *mediator* between him and the people, an in-betweenener. So, 'the Lord called to him out of the mountain.' (Exodus 19,3)

He told him that when he came up the mountain again in three days time, all people and animals had to stand well back from the mountain, and not go near it. Only Moses should go

up. Around the foot of the mountain, there was to be **nothing**. ' . . . You shall set bounds for the people round about saying. "Take care that you do not go up into the mountain or touch the border of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall die".'

This teaching will be a big help in our meditation.

In the last article we saw that when you have brought your mind down into the place of your heart, you then become to it like a mother with her baby, keeping the flies away from its face while it sleeps. By the flies we meant the thoughts and pictures of the imagination which keep trying to stop our mind from resting.

Now we have a second example, this one from the bible itself. As you sit there quietly with your legs crossed and your back straight, you are as steady as Mount Sinai. You *are* that mountain: secure, immovable. But you must make sure that around the mountain's base there is **nothing**. People and animals must stand a long way back. If they come near, they will die. Here again, the people and animals mean the pictures and thoughts that disturb your mind. Drive them back. Say, 'Go away, go away; back, further back. Around this mountain, there must be **nothing**.'

In the christian mystical tradition called Hesychasm, which I spoke about in the first article, this part of meditation is known as *vigilance*, or watchfulness. It is a most important teaching: 'Be sober, be watchful. Your enemy the devil goes around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to eat. Resist him, firm in your faith. . .' (1 Peter 5, 8-9). Or again, in Jesus' own words: ' . . . Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like someone going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his/her work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Watch, therefore — for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning — lest he come suddenly and

NELEN YUBU

find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch!' (Mark, 13, 33-37).

Vigilance, watchfulness, awareness, mindfulness, attention: all these words are saying the same thing. If, in spite of your watching, troubling thoughts keep coming, even after you have driven them away from the base of your mountain, there is another method you can use. It is very good. When you look at a mountain, often you see clouds drifting past it, through it. They do no harm to the mountain, the watchful mountain. You are aware of the clouds, (thoughts, images), but you don't allow them to bother you. Let them come, and then go. You stay concentrated in the place of your heart. It is good to fall back on the Jesus name, which you can repeat many times, slowly. You will find that those clouds need not interfere with your deeper quiet. It is hard to be altogether without them, until you have mastered the technique. Even then, they sometimes stay around, but harmlessly. Crows may come and land on the cow's back. The cow goes on grazing.

At this point also Yoga and Zen methods can be most helpful. While in christian Hesychasm, one's attention is on 'the place of the heart', in Yoga and Zen it is often rather on the abdomen. Let me explain, in a simple way, how our inside is made up. What we call the chest part is held in by the ribs on either side. Inside that rib-cage are the two lungs for breathing; and sitting in between the lungs is the fleshy heart, which pumps blood through our body. The lowest piece of the heart reaches slightly over to the left. Below all this is a thick sheet of muscle which separates the chest part from the part underneath. Below that sheet of muscle is the **abdomen**. That is why, if you breathe really deeply, you are said to be doing abdominal breathing.

'The place of the heart' of Hesychast tradition is a little below the left breast, where the bodily heart reaches over a bit. It is quite distinct from the abdomen. They are two different places, and different things. So, when thoughts or pictures you

can't get rid of are disturbing you, try this other way. Check first to make sure your back is straight, your head well up and your eyes settled restfully on a point on the ground about one metre in front of you. Then once more become aware of your breathing. Try counting your breaths this time, from one to ten. One for in, two for out, three for in, and so on till you come to ten. After that, stop the counting and concentrate your attention, no longer on the place of the heart, but on your **abdomen**, or lower inside. Instead of **Je-sus**, you could use the word 'na-da', which means 'no-thing' in the Spanish language of that great Christian mystic, John of the Cross. He was planted by the same wide River of Life as you are. Like Moses, he also stood on the mountaintop at God's invitation, and knew the pleasure, and the pain, of communion with the Living Flame of Love which rises into the sky out of the mountain's burning summit. He called it Mount Carmel. But whether it be Mount Sinai or Mount Carmel or Mount Meru — the mythical cosmic mountain, home of the gods — what difference does it make, once you are aware of the symbol, or sacramental sign, in everything? *Understanding* the symbol or sign, that is what matters.

Aware of the meaning of the word 'na-da', (no-thing), remain attentive, therefore, to your breathing. You will find your mind emptied of thoughts, at rest in **nothing**. I have found this to be a vigorous, clean technique which brings quick results. You can then return to the place of the heart, which is our normal way. Both these techniques are very simple. With practice, you will be able to use either as you need.

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'Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.' (Exodus 24, 18). What kept him there so long? What went on between himself and God? A big question, which we will have to look at now.

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OUT BUSH IN THE NT

Reminiscences in the life of an Outback Priest: Biking in the Bush

John Leary msc

Very early in my career at Port Keats, I had decided to make a one day trip to Daly River where I had been stationed the year before. Two Aboriginal men had agreed to accompany me. We would do the trip in a novel way, certainly for the Aboriginal men, on push bikes. I had worked out the distance between the two stations to be a mere ninety miles, that is, as the crow flies. Perhaps my unfortunate mistake was getting bikes mixed up with crows! As things worked out, my mistake proved fortunate. Aborigines often appear to attribute more common sense to the white man than is merited. They objected neither to the push bikes nor to the idea of the trip in one day. They certainly knew both were impossible. The plan was to ride the bikes along the ancient 'blackfellow road'. I wonder how many outsiders have seen such a road! It resembles a narrow cattle track winding its way through the bush. There are many of them crisscrossing the countryside. This one led to Daly River. It has been there for who knows how many centuries, hardened and defined by the timeless tread of human feet on the way to ceremony or trade.

The first night, we camped on the beach at the bottom end of the Moyle Plain. As the sun went down, mosquitoes in their thousands arrived from nowhere. The air was alive with them and filled with their sound. The men informed me that we were in the area of the Mosquito Dreaming. Arriving at the beach at nightfall, the mosquitoes allowed us no time to boil the billy. Evasive action had to be taken instantly. The men broke off

branches from nearby trees, then proceeded to dig long holes in the sand in which to bury themselves. Their protruding heads they covered with the branches. I did likewise. By the time I had arranged my branches, the men were soundly asleep. It was such a relief to be free of bombarding mosquitoes and their bites. However, after some fifteen minutes, I developed cramp and had to do something about changing my position. So, off came the branches and the sand. I rearranged myself in the grave and got myself comfortable. Hearing the snoring of the men nearby, I was half convinced I might go off to sleep before cramp set in. This was not to be. After several rearrangements I decided to take my branches and sit up to my neck among the rocks in the sea water. It was the longest night I have ever experienced.

As soon as there was light in the sky next morning, we were off along the beach. I was not a little alarmed at seeing several large sharks cruising not far out from my mosquito refuge; also, a little further on there were crocodile tracks in the sand!

Our bikes had proved to be far more of a hindrance than a help. The 'blackfellow road' was often covered by fallen trees and all sorts of obstacles. It was a case of off-again, carry the bike, on-again, to the point of exhaustion. So we unanimously decided to abandon the bikes and pick them up at some later, very indefinite date.

From the beach, we headed deeper into the Moyle Plain. It became unbearably hot. Heat poured out of sky and ground. To aggravate matters, I had lost my hat back at the beach during the burial operations and I was now improvising with a handkerchief. We must have reached three-quarter way across the Moyle Plain. I was having visions of ice-cold cans of beer ahead of me. My walking had become a mere mechanical process. Suddenly, away on my left, perhaps two miles away, I thought I imagined I could see a rather large aeroplane on the ground. Aware of what the heat can do, I could not bring myself to ask the men whether that distant object was, in fact,

NELEN YUBU

an aeroplane. So I subtly got on to the subject of the war and the radar station at Port Keats and finally on to aeroplanes and whether any had come down in the Port Keats area. 'Yes,' was the reply. 'That's one over there. It ran out of fuel before it could get to Darwin and had to land there. From my position, it seemed to be in good shape, but I wasn't going the extra two miles to inspect it. That could wait till later when the heat was less and I had a hat.

After leaving the Moyle Plain, we trudged on for another three hours through very rugged country. I still maintain that I walked twice as far and as fast as the men because of the difference in the length of our legs. I believe I was taking two steps to their one. Quite a few times I questioned the direction we were walking, only to be told there was no water in other directions. So we were sort of zig-zagging between water holes. I had been proven wrong on two counts: the novel idea of push bikes was a failure. The idea of a ninety mile journey was beginning to look more like one hundred and fifty. The men did not appear in the least worried — so neither would I. We would take it all in our uneven stride! They were completely at home, confident, enormously skilled at finding food. On several occasions, I excitedly pointed out many scratches on the bark of a tree and suggested there might be a possum. A casual glance from one of the men and some such remark: 'Nothing! He's out hunting.' They could see, not only the most recent scratches among so many, but that the latest were downwards. It was the same with tracks around a goanna hole: 'Yes. He's home!' And goanna was on that evening's menu. It certainly saves a lot of time and work if you know whether or not your animal is at home.

I have never ceased to be amazed at the powers of observation and tracking ability of these people. They have their ears and eyes and touch closely attuned to nature. I recall an Army Major General remarking, after watching their tracking skills, how, with his own specialised commando

groups, there came a time when you eventually had to drop survival kits for them. But this was never necessary with the Aboriginal people. They could survive indefinitely. You would never have to drop them anything. 'That's right,' I innocently remarked. 'No one, over the centuries, ever dropped them anything!' The Major General realised then something which so many others fail to realise, that these people were, over the centuries, so completely self-sufficient and independent.

I think it was the second night out. I had fallen asleep by the fire listening to the stories of the land we had traversed. I woke up suddenly in the early hours of the morning out of a nightmare. I had the fearful conviction the two men had left me. I was much relieved to see them sleeping peacefully. It then dawned on me that I had been, and was, completely dependent on them. Without them, I was lost, without them, I would have died of thirst, without them, I would have starved to death. It was the first time ever that I have had such an experience. The more I reflected on the experience, the more convinced I was that it was a good thing both for me and for them. Some months later I was travelling to Darwin by jeep. These two men asked if they could accompany me. Darwin was an entirely new experience for them and for the two weeks we were there, they were completely dependent on me. Circumstances and roles were reversed. The incident in itself is a little parable about what has happened to these people over so short a space of time. There has been too much too quickly. The things that gave them pride and healthy independence have been almost suddenly removed from them and replaced by things that cannot be absorbed in so short a space of time, and so these things have proved to be destructive.

Harry Palada once called a big meeting of his people at Port Keats. In one hand, he was waving a wage packet called 'Training Allowance'. He said, 'This is not my way of living. In the bush, hunting, teaching my children to hunt — that is me. But this new way is not me. What if I leave my old way

and take up this new way, I will end up *makadu*, a non-person, a nobody.' Three cheers for Harry!

Claude Narjic, an eighteen year old in the early sixties, expressed his anxiety by stressing the Murinpatha word *Thawait*. 'That word,' he said, 'has a double meaning. It means 'carefully — slowly'. Things are not happening carefully and they are not happening slowly. Because of that we are becoming lost. We are going backwards. We are being badly hurt.'

Let me return to our zigzagging between water holes. One water hole seemed so far off I began to have doubts as to whether I would make it or not, despite the encouragement from the men who kept repeating *Munda* (close up). Finally they pointed out a cluster of long reeds. I instantly found more energy. '*Thawait* - slowly, carefully,' said one of them. 'There may be a buffalo in there.' Apart from the cluster of reeds, the country was open, flat and bereft of trees. I wondered where the escape route might be from a charging buffalo. I stood back while one of the men gingerly approached the rushes. He hesitated a moment and then announced that there was indeed a buffalo among the reeds. Eventually, after some advancing and retreating on the part of the hunter, the buffalo got the message, bounded out on the opposite side of the clump and headed for the distant tree line. The water hole turned out to be just large enough to contain one only buffalo. It was a typical buffalo soak. Despite mud and buffalo, we sucked out the water with not a thought of what the consequences might be. Never was a drink so acceptable.

We walked on until it was too dark to go any further and came to a place called *Mugart*, a long serpentine billabong. It seemed to be in an area of many billabongs, quite a contrast to the land of the 'buffalo soak'. Imagine my surprise when the men suggested we take a shortcut across one of the billabongs. I had become quite suspicious of the word 'shortcut'; so often it involved twice the difficulties of the long way round and often twice the time to travel it. Often in taking shortcuts there were

ulterior motives: a jungle with edible yams or good goanna country etc. etc. However, taking all this into consideration, you can imagine that what took me most by surprise was the suggestion we might walk across a stretch of apparently deep water, a sort of attempt to outdo Peter. Of course they were joking. A little later, further along the billabong, there was a thin strip of matted grass stretching to the other side. Here it was that we would make the crossing. It was all somewhat unbelievable. I wondered if it was part of the joke. It was like the Israelites crossing the Red Sea on dry land with water and the nasties in it on either side. I expressed my lack of faith. Even if the matted grass held firm, what if a leg went through at a weak spot? What might happen to the leg? I was told, but in other words: 'man of little faith'. The fifty yard walk was a strange sensation, a little squelchy, spongy, soft, and giving way under foot — a situation enough to make every step an act of faith!

Come eight o'clock by our only watch (mine) and, being pitch dark, we boiled our billy on the banks of the last billabong. No sooner had we got the fire going and settled down to ease weary legs than we could hear warning sounds of crocodiles present — groaning calls and splashes as reptiles leapt and slithered from lower parts of the banks, no doubt alarmed by the presence of humans and the glow of our campfire. As soon as we consumed our tea, we decided by common consent that this was not a good place to camp. I am sure that my vote was more determined than the others. I knew that once I put my head to ground I would be off to sleep and all the crocs in creation could come and take bites out of me and I would know nothing about it. So we walked for another hour before making camp.

I was about to perform my usual slump to the ground when there was a cry from the men and both instantly disappeared up trees calling out, 'Buffalo!' I, with unsuspected agility, leapt up the nearest tree. It turned out to be the flimsiest of saplings

— a later cause for much laughter from my friends. They must have had their trees chosen before the event. They seemed to have had good prewarning of the buffalo's approach. I imagine they sleep with one ear clamped to the ground, tuned in to the movements of the earth around them. They had often told me their stories of buffaloes charging their camps and even horning and tossing their fires plus anyone who happened to be between the buffalo and the fire. I had on occasions expressed my disbelief, suggesting that buffaloes were more afraid of us than we of them. From my disadvantage point on my sapling, I clearly saw my theory disproved. Soon there were loud thuds of galloping hooves and through the camp shot an outraged bull buffalo with head and wide embracing horns low to the ground. He scooped the fire into the air and continued his charge through the surrounding bush. When distant hooves told us we were safe — and only then — did we relinquish our trees and gather round our remade fire. There was no 'I told you so' or 'man of little faith', just instant sleep amid a symphony of crickets and night owls and other quiet, peaceful sounds of the bush. I had learned not to remove my sandshoes for fear I would not be able to get them on again. My last thoughts were to remember to keep a sharp eye and ear out for charging buffaloes! That is the last I could recall. Again, all the buffaloes in creation plus as many mosquitoes could have done their vicious best to disturb my slumbers without the least effect.

Reflecting on the habit of buffaloes charging camp fires, I have developed my own theory as to why buffaloes charge aboriginal camp fires. Most of the buffaloes then on the Port Keats, western side of the Stuart Highway were rejected bulls. So already they were nursing a grievance. Then to be attacked by black men throwing long shovel spears propelled by woomeras, must have deepened the grievance and intensified the hostility. It must have taken many shovel spears to dispose of a hardy bull buffalo. I can imagine such a beast looking like a super pincushion and, in the process of becoming so, wanting to

tear the world apart, along with blackfellows and their campfires.

Next morning, shortly after setting off, we met up with the first storm of the Wet Season with vivid lightning and deafening thunder. We were on a high ridge at the time. The tall trees bent low under the driving wind. The men made for a twenty foot ant hill in a cleared patch and crouched in its protected side. I crouched with them. I don't think I have ever felt so cold or so cramped. We were there for nearly an hour before the rain eased off. Cold and shivering, I persuaded them to move on so that we could get warm and also have the unusual experience of walking in the rain and out of the sun. They seemed reluctant to move on but eventually agreed. At the time, I wondered why they were so reluctant. The explanation came later. After walking for two hours through the rain and low cloud cover, the sun came out. The men then informed me that we had to go back to our ant hill. Not being able to see landmarks, they had become lost. I then realised why they had been slow to move off despite the cold and cramped joints. I had presumed that Aborigines did not need landmarks, but had some sort of in-built compass like migratory birds. We had long since abandoned the blackfellow road on the pretext of taking a short cut.

Towards the close of the day, one of the men discovered quite a large hive of wild sugarbag honey. It took the place of a few lost meals. Prior to this we had been eating on the run, or rather on the walk: a goanna, a duck caught with an improvised boomerang, many wild berries; these berries seemed to form our staple diet. I used to fill my pockets between stops just in case there might be famine ahead. I have discovered that Aborigines on the hunt do have their good days and their bad days and take both philosophically.

Because I had done the initial organising with the intent of doing the trip on bikes in one long day — in retrospect, how amazed am I at my own ambition — as you by now have surely

NELEN YUBU

realised, I took neither blanket nor mosquito net, so my bed and theirs was the bare ground and our warmth was the fire. A black billycan and 'tea leaf' were our sole provisions. As things turned out, it was this complete lack of experience on my part that made me so totally dependent on their experience. I had two forgiving and expert backstops. It gave me time to hear so many stories about different parts of the land we were walking over, about various 'countries', about the movements and activities of peoples, about relationships, about inter-tribal fighting, about totems, about 'dream tracks' and so much more. I wonder how many thousands of volumes of oral history have already been lost!

I am convinced that the best way to learn from these people is to get yourself into a position where you simply have to listen, where you have to watch and so often admire; if possible, where you can have the experience of being so totally dependent. It is a position of humility, perhaps forced humility, but isn't it precisely there that the best of good things begin? Isn't this where all growth and all education begin?

I admit that occasions for such experiences are becoming less and less because, sadly, these people are tending to become, to their detriment, more dependent on us. How can we reverse the tendency? How can we convince these people of their need to have a 'basic trust in their own resources?' (Paulo Freire) Previously, I described the experience of taking these two men to Darwin, in which situation they were completely dependent on me. I think it all goes to show what a tremendous leap these people have been asked, forced, to make in so short a time in respect to their culture and history. Surely this demands from outsiders a deep spirit of understanding and solidarity.

The fourth day we were off again at daybreak. By midday we were in country I had been in when I was stationed at Daly River. It was Hermit Hill country, Malak Malak country, where the Jesuits had been at the turn of the century. Near Hermit Hill we met up with a camp of Aborigines and shared some

geese with them. I was determined, having got so far, to keep going until we reached the Daly. This meant an all night-walk. We made a late start due to the fact that so many stories had to be told about the journey, about what was happening both at the Daly and at Port Keats, about the serious and the humorous, about the young men who were coming up for ceremony etc. The conversation would have continued most of the night and should have, but for my anxiety to reach the Daly, have a long needed wash with soap, a shave, and give the aching body a good rest. The men kindly agreed to oblige.

We arrived at Daly River next morning at seven o'clock. It was the fifth day. The total walking time was sixty hours. If my studies at Croydon, Victoria, had provided me with little anthropology, my stay there had taught me how to walk, which gift, like wisdom, had brought with it many good things.

The trip was done at the end of the Dry Season. I did another walk with Rex from Port Keats to the Daly along the old road in the following Wet Season, a trip far more incident-filled than the first. I did several walks to Marjilindi Valley and the Fitzmaurice River with groups of people from that area. On invitation, I visited every neighbouring tribal area — 'country' — and experienced, I think, as much as an outsider could of the significance of 'country' for these people. I especially remember Nym Bunduk, a senior man of the Murinpatha Tribe, taking me to his 'country'. Having arrived, there was a long period of silence. He then called out to his ancestral spirits in a strength of voice that surprised me, among other things announcing that he was bringing a friend. Next he stamped firmly on the ground with a pause between each stamp. 'My country! My country!' he kept repeating with a faraway, proud, mystical smile on his face. I could almost see his 'country' seeping in and out of him.

In those days we had little money. Administration was at a minimum. There was more time to work and to walk beside these people, to walk, not only in the physical sense, but in the

sense of sharing and trying to understand something of their lives, their culture, their deep spirituality. Can we make it happen again? Aboriginal people tell me they need such a partnership.

Let me conclude. Some years ago in Darwin, in the time of Bishop O'Loughlin, we had one of our regular 'Mission Meetings' at the school in Fannie Bay. The building now belongs to the Missionaries of Charity but at the time of our meeting it was presided over by Sister Agnes fdnsc. The meeting went on for the best part of a week. It was attended by mission personnel — Sisters, Brothers, Priests, Lay Missionaries, and Aborigines representing each mission. We discussed everything from mission policy, to finance, to staff, to all the nuts and bolts issues. At the end of it all, Bishop O'Loughlin, after summing up proceedings, singled out Aboriginal Sister Basil (now Beatrice). 'Sister Basil,' he said, 'You have been here all the week and have been very quiet. (Sister had not said one word.) Have you got anything you want to say?' Sister nervously addressed the gathering: 'My Lord, I only want to say this. Back home at Port Keats, I watch Father running here and there trying to do so many things. I watch the Sisters going off to school, off to the hospital, off to their jobs. All of them working so hard. I watch the Lay Missionaries, every one of them so busy trying to help us. But no one has time to sit down and talk to us!' — Sister Basil, I feel sure, made the wisest contribution to the meeting.

Came the time for me to return home from our memorable trek, when I was lucky enough to find a plane going from Daly River to Port Keats with one vacant seat which I promptly accepted.

The two men set out on foot, taking a leisurely three days on the walk back and collecting the bikes on their way.

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A STUDY OF MISSIONARY MARGINALIZATION

The Oblates and the Dene Nation of Western and Northern Canada Since 1847¹

Wayne A Holst

In his insightful contribution to the discussion of marginalization and its implications for missiology Jung Young Lee, Korean American theologian, affirms the claim of Arnold Toynbee, the historian who recognized the creative capacity of the marginalized. Toynbee believed that marginal people tend not only to be self-assertive and spiritually strong but also endowed with the potential for new visions and creative energies since they have had to deal with uncertain conditions and conflicting cultural values.² Here, I am proposing that the missiological gift from those on the margins of church and society, missionary and formerly missionized alike, can be a universal, transformational message of liberation, healing and reconciliation.

My subject for this case study of *dual marginalization* is the Oblate engagement with an indigenous people of Western and Northern Canada from 1847 to the present. I will use Lee and Toynbee as reference points while attempting to revisit this story and then to project it forward, into the future of the church's mission in Canada and beyond.

I will argue that the current self-acknowledged marginalization of *both* the Oblate missionaries *and* the Dene Nation with whom they have shared the gospel for more than

¹This paper has appeared in the recent issue of *Missiology* (January, 1998).

²Lee 1995: 152. Lee's book, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology*, Fortress, 1995 is a groundbreaking study that sheds light upon the thesis of this paper.

a century and a half in Denendeh³ (Dene homeland in Canada's Western Arctic) furnishes us with an evolving three stage model for a *revised second evangelization*. In his study, Lee proposes a shift in the locus of mission impetus. His model helps us trace the stages from *triumphalist missionary operation* through a contemporary period of *chastened mutual accompaniment* to a shared *wider mission engagement* (see illustration based on Lee 1995:153).

In brief measured sketches I hope to describe how the Christian gospel, proclaimed through a particular French Catholic missionary order, engaged a special native culture and is even now becoming integrated to that culture's traditional spirituality. Because of this grafting, a new understanding of the good news is being conceived and an authentic Dene church is being born. This development has the potential to help revive not only the northern church but also (as part of a renewed native church in southern Canada) a revitalisation of Canadian church and society in general.

National spiritual renewal can occur not because of recognized institutions at the current hub of religious, cultural and political activity but from spiritually rejuvenated clusters and minorities on Canada's periphery. In the past, northern native missions were considered a 'marginal activity among marginal people'. Today, waning numbers of Oblate missionaries and a growingly self-conscious Dene Nation are at an ideal juncture to revision and reclaim their mutual marginality and homeland. From this the whole church can proclaim the gospel anew.

'New life ensues from the margins and restores the oikoumene.' This paradoxical truth offers a unique perspective on the revolutionary nature of the gospel and the future of the church's mission. Marginalized people as creative minorities can become catalysts in the transformation of the world and in

³Dene means 'the people'. Denendeh, rather than Mackenzie, is the traditional name for 'the people's land'

shifting the mission axis from centrality to marginality and thence to universality. Using this Canadian case study I seek to amplify what I have devised from Lee's three stage model: the conversion of an old mission story into a new global message.

A. THE FIRST EVANGELIZATION: CENTRALITY AND MARGINALITY (1847-1991) FROM TRIUMPHALISM TO ACCOMPANIMENT

1. Historical Context of the Oblates and the Dene

Little in the background of either the Oblates or the Dene would have foretold their lengthy and close relationship, or the development of the uniquely Dene form of Catholicism which resulted from a century and a half of close association (McCarthy 1995:1), It would be hard to imagine two more vastly differing parties on earth at the time of first contact.

When the Oblates and the Dene initially encountered each other at northern settlements or on trapping routes that had been established a century earlier by European fur traders, each possessed a faith which served their experience even though they had lived radically dissimilar lives on separate continents. Over time and out of this strange engagement of differing worlds, missionary and native started communicating and developing a blended set of beliefs and understandings. A long-term, mutually defining relationship resulted. Joining the pioneering priests were devoted lay Oblate associates and groups of women religious (primarily the Grey Nuns, or Sisters of Charity of Montreal, a Canadian order with origins in Quebec).⁴ The common languages of missionary activity in the north rotated between French, the Dene dialects,⁵ English and subsequently a blending of them all!

⁴300 Grey Nuns have served in Canada's North as teachers, nurses, social workers, musicians, etc.

⁵Six major Dene dialects are still spoken today: Slavey, Hare, Dogrib, Chipewyan, Gwich'in and Sahtu.

The Oblate's Charism

The founder of the Oblates, Eugene de Mazenod, (b. 1782) had a background of French nobility and privilege. His immediate Provencal family had experienced various cycles of honor and disfavour during the tumultuous period leading up to and following the revolution of 1789. From his years living in political exile and through association with other public outcasts, Mazenod developed a keen social conscience and a profound spirituality. These characteristics were unshared by many in post-revolutionary France. At age twelve, and under Jesuit tutelage, he determined to dedicate himself to some form of compassionate service. At twenty-six he undertook theological studies in Paris. After seminary training, he was ordained and assigned to a parish in Aix-en-Provence. There, he quickly and sometimes imprudently determined that the parochial institutions of the church were not responding to the needs of the poor in that city, to say nothing of the rural hinterlands. He felt strongly that many of his aged priestly colleagues were irrelevantly clinging to an outdated pre-revolutionary and aristocratic mindset; that Christianity was a foreign religion to many and that the church had actually abandoned ministry to large sectors of society. French Catholicism was in a holding pattern, he felt, and was doing little more than pandering to an ebbing number of practising believers. It was out of touch with the needs of a changed era. A vision began to open before this priest who, even then, gave indication of being a marginal man. Mazenod was also an opportunist and an improviser. Gradually he realized that his religious vocation was to be invested in the ostracised persons of his city and of Provence (Hubenig 1995:280).

In time, Mazenod decided to establish a religious community of lay and ordained missionaries to help him develop evangelization strategies of word linked with deed. The pope officially endorsed his order on the 17th of February, 1826

giving it the formal title: Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (omi). Mazenod did not distinguish between 'home' and 'foreign' missions and, at first, had no idea that the hand of God would guide him and his confreres well beyond the borders of Provence.

The Oblates were less than twenty years old as a canonically approved religious order numbering less than sixty members, when two of their number, Frs. Alexandre Tache and Pierre Aubert (the former Canadian-born, the latter from France) first arrived in St. Boniface (Winnipeg), Manitoba on the 25th of August, 1845. They had taken 60 days by canoe to reach this destination at the forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers after departure from Montreal (which was itself thousands of miles from Provence). Two years later, Tache and a secular priest, Fr. Louis-Francois LaFleche, journeyed another 600 miles inland via Hudson's Bay Company trade routes, to remote northern Canada to evangelize people in places where no missionaries had gone before. Tache himself arrived at Lake Athabasca and the headwaters of the Mackenzie (the Dene called it Decho — or 'Big River') in the fall of 1847 (Choquette 1995:38ff). From the time of that first contact until the present, many hundreds of ordained and lay ministers, women and men, have followed the path first established by those original religious adventurers in order to work among the Dene. Their carefully marked and caringly tended graves can still be visited, in Denendeh, or at St. Albert, Alberta and St. Boniface, Manitoba.

Mazenod's missionary penchant for the poor represented a conceptual and tactical shift in the practice of evangelization from the centre to the margins of Provence. With other self-declared, marginalized colleagues this ex-aristocrat received a charism that matured to engage marginalized people in many other remote parts of the earth. Mazenod's vocation was and remains the Oblate congregation's guiding charism, and lies at the heart of its missionary thrust (Hubenig 1995: 35ff). Canonised by the pope in December of 1995, he left as legacy a

personal example that for a century and a half has inspired the Canadian Oblate missions. The essential goals of Oblate missionary activity have been to seek out and serve the poor and the marginal in a specific context of time and place; engaging the margins of church and society where no one else would venture; and investing in evangelisation by effectively crossing boundaries to share the good news with an eye to improvisation and a willingness to acknowledge, learn and adjust from past mistakes.

Some Dene and Oblate Values Compared

The Dene also brought a noble and even older narrative to this remarkable encounter. They had developed their culture over thousands of years in a land of spectacular beauty and of great plenty, although there were occasional periods of severe deprivation (McCarthy 1995:12). The people, sparse in numbers, lived in various clans or tribal groupings and inhabited territory stretching from the northern regions of modern Canada's prairie provinces, through the Decho valley and into the delta region to the great seas to the north (Beaufort, Arctic). Survival meant maintaining a symbiotic relationship with nature. Their lives depended on the use of large expanses of land and water which in turn implied considerable understanding of the local flora and fauna. According to the area in which they lived, migrated and hunted, they depended on nature to supply them with their basic needs. They believed that whatever was taken from nature must in some way be returned. The Dene held in honor those who were most competent in ecological stewardship and who possessed special spiritual medicine powers.

On entering Denendeh, the Oblates soon realised they were living in a different world. Much of what they assumed about life in Europe did not apply here. Because of the foraging patterns of the Dene, the Oblates learned early the difficulty in maintaining any prolonged and stable contact with them. While

the missionaries tried to live with the people to the fullest extent possible, they did not easily adjust to life 'on the land'. The Dene lived a cycle of social reciprocity and self sufficiency whereby food, for example, was distributed to all who needed it. Reciprocated sharing was also expected. People who gave freely earned prestige. People who hoarded were ridiculed and rejected. This behaviour ran counter to European notions of self-preservation and economic security. The Dene initially disparaged the missionaries for depending on others but, with time, the Oblates learned subsistence from their hosts (McCarthy 1995:18).

Cultural history and education for living were traditionally conveyed by Dene tribal elders through the use of stories and myths, often based on the experiences of animals. Their oral traditions were as rich as their functional expertise which had developed over millennia. In family and community everyone was valued. A strong emphasis was placed on the forming of individual judgement and on due regard for all other beings (McCarthy 1995:19).

The natives did not command or enforce leadership as practiced in Europe; nor did they forcibly discipline their children. Dene leadership styles were quite alien to the Oblates. It was hard for them to respect the principles behind many native practices.

Religion was an integral part of Dene life. It was taught by observation and example. Dene religion, unlike that of the Oblates, was unregimented and accommodating. The natives had no sense of doctrinal exclusivity. They readily incorporated new religious beliefs and customs without considering it necessary to abandon old practices (McCarthy 1995:21-26). Elder members of the community were the repositories of the spiritual tradition taught through sacred stories and preserved by oral tradition. Truth for the Dene resided in orality which could be lost if it was not passed on before the storyteller died.

Adherence to Dene beliefs was a matter of individual choice and social pressure, not of rules and punishments. The Dene believed that their welfare depended on the maintenance of a balanced relationship between humans, animals, plants and spirits, European distinctions between natural and supernatural, secular and religious, were incomprehensible to the Dene. While the Oblates believed that God spoke to humans through Scripture, the written word as interpreted by the Church, the Dene believed all their people could have a personal spirit guide and that certain members of their community were visited by special spirit-powers. These shamans mediated with the spirit-world. Their authority derived from demonstrated individual experience; not from a position achieved by means of caste or ordination.

The Dene had become somewhat familiar with Christianity through their contacts with Europeans long before the Oblates became part of their lives. Because of their openness to things spiritual, the Dene readily welcomed the missionaries into their communities. Little did they then realize that the French religious would not respect their spirituality and would demand deep-seated changes to their faith.

The Oblates misunderstood and dismissed Dene religious practices; calling them pagan and superstitious. They were convinced that, over time, they could fully convert the Dene to their understanding of Christian faith and the benefits of civilization as they had known it from Europe. Incorporation into the Catholic Church would grant them temporal and eternal salvation through this association. After initial joy at the apparent receptivity of the Dene the missionaries began to realize that while not rejecting the faith outright they were indirectly resisting the strategies being used. What began with a naive yet optimistic attempt to assimilate native people while Christianizing them evolved into an awareness that their goals were not being accomplished. In fact, they were being passively transformed into a 'made in Denendeh' kind of Catholicism.

2. The Cultural Context: Evolving Euro-Indigenous Contacts

Probably the most thorough and balanced historical assessment (from a non-native perspective) of the first hundred years of the Oblate missionary enterprise in Western and Northern Canada is Raymond J A Huel's *Proclaiming the Gospel to the Indians and the Metis: The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Western Canada, 1845-1945*.⁶ This study is based largely on archival material, and does not purport to present the native perspective but to critique with the tools of a modern historian the missionary enterprise during the 'classic' first century period. Huel writes of the Oblate effort in a constructively critical manner that is instructive in terms of this paper's thesis.

According to Huel, in ideological terms the Oblate experience involved the export to the Canadian North West of a west European model of Christianity. It is a story of a deep cultural and religious conflict between individuals reared in a west European cultural and religious tradition that was deemed to be the finest manifestation of human endeavour, and nomadic hunters who by comparison were deemed to lack the fundamental elements of civilization, religion and perhaps even humanity.

The Oblates began to assume that 'serving the poor' meant that the benefits which had accrued from their cultural traditions should be bestowed on less fortunate groups through evangelization. *It was through the process of proclaiming the Gospel [sic] that the contrast between missionary and those being evangelized became most evident.* The distinction between Christianity and European culture was never questioned.

The resistance of the Dene to Oblate Christianity and its missionary institutions was not so much against the spirituality

⁶Huel, 1996. Much of the material presented here is gleaned from a summary of his book prepared by the author.

advocated by the missionaries but the loss of native identity implied in the acceptance of Christianity as it was presented.

The Oblate's understanding of their mission underwent significant change as the order analysed the results of its first century of work. Change came slowly. While some voices within the Oblate missionary community may have begun to express dissatisfaction with classic missionary philosophy and its resulting structures before the ending of the first century of activity, it was hardly possible for the order to change direction at the time. Only following World War II would a generation of missionaries with better training in the social sciences begin to appear. Using the greater tolerance advocated in the reforms of Vatican II, the Oblates started to rediscover the poverty in their own situation. The order began to realise that the gospel needed proclaiming, not from a European perspective, but from the historical context and the cultural traditions of the people being evangelised. In terms of the model based on Lee's thesis, Huel sees this changing Oblate understanding of evangelization as a transformation with the impetus for mission shifting from centrality to the margins. The missionaries began to sense their own need for being missionized.

3. The Spiritual Context: From Missionary Paternalism to Accompaniment

From the outset, the Oblates had difficulty believing that the Dene had a 'civilized' understanding of God. It came easily to the Oblates to assume that the Dene had no religion of consequence. They viewed Dene religious beliefs, customs and society as chaotic (McCarthy 1995:74). Though they did not accept the spirituality of the Dene as valid, they used any spiritual parallels they found to help them explain corresponding Christian patterns.

For their part the Dene did not tend to put much stock in well developed conceptual understandings of the Christian faith or in formalised religious practices and structures. They paid

more immediate attention to the actions of evil spirits in their lives than they did to the Creator. Their solution to the problem of evil was to make from their medicine something which was stronger than the spirits which threatened them.

Building on whatever parallels they could detect, the Oblates concentrated on transferring their knowledge of Christianity to the Dene. Not so subtle forms of racism showed itself periodically. Were the 'poor of Provence' as poor as the Amerindians? Using experience they had gained from their missions in France, the Oblates nevertheless addressed the indigenous people in much the same way as they might have presented the gospel to the poor back home. As in France, the Oblates sought to evangelize by using the languages of the people with whom they were trying to relate. This wise approach was actually a bridge in helping the missionaries to better understand the worldview of the Dene. Fr Emile Petitot, (1838-1917) an amateur anthropologist whose insights were rather ahead of his time, claimed that through his study of the Dene languages he had 'arrived at a world of logic, metaphysics and philosophy' quite distinct from his own (McCarthy 1995:79).

The Oblates created religious books and catechisms using native languages and adapted the syllabics developed by a Wesleyan missionary, the Rev. James Evans, who had worked among the Cree of Northern Manitoba. Here was an example of the use of work done by Protestants to further their own missionary efforts. They also sought to apply catechetical methods devised in Quebec to regulate and more carefully define the nature of their Christian teachings.

While the missionaries rejected outright what they considered inferior native beliefs, the Dene listened to the Christian teachings and usually adapted them in ways which did not compromise their own traditions. A case in point was the traditional native notion of the reincarnation of souls. To counter this, the missionaries taught classic Christian doctrine

pertaining to the last judgement of an individual soul. They stressed the importance of eternal rewards and punishments. After years of missionary indoctrination it became apparent that, even among faithful Dene Catholics, parallel beliefs in reincarnation as well as the typical Christian teaching of individual soul continued to be accepted. It baffled the missionaries that the people could subscribe to two seemingly opposite belief systems simultaneously and without any disconcertion.

The Dene seemed as amenable to adapt new European tools for trapping and hunting without a fundamental alteration to their culture as they accepted new teachings, objects and rituals of worship (McCarthy 1995:84). It is apparent in hindsight that the Dene were very discriminating about what they accepted from the missionaries and how they interpreted and adapted these accretions.

Adapting new rites such as baptism, confirmation, the eucharist and other sacraments did not occur without significant assessment on the part of the Dene. Common wisdom among the natives was that at very least they could do no harm and at best they might help to enhance their own spirituality. Many Dene participated in the Catholic rituals without truly undergoing the 'conversion' experience anticipated by the missionaries. With respect to native mores, old traditions died hard.

Mandated clerical celibacy was, for the Dene, an unnatural and unattractive lifestyle. The celibate priesthood, more than any other Catholic religious practice, created a major impediment to native vocations which has never been overcome. Efforts to create a native priesthood have always floundered. Appeals to Rome by Oblate bishops favouring a married native clergy have consistently been rejected. In place of an indigenous priesthood, the northern church has long encouraged and continues to develop a lay apostolate. This is

one example of how a 'compromise' was reached between the missionary and the people's value-systems.

Significant changes in the missionary approach to traditional Dene spiritual wisdom have occurred since Vatican II opened the church to a more positive attitude to native ways. More recent missionary attitudinal modifications reflect a major adjustment from a former paternalism to the current accompaniment. Movement, often hesitant, has occurred because of the growing ability on the part of the missionaries to come to terms with the profundity of Dene spirituality and the recognition on the part of the native elders that a creative fusion of the traditions was desirable. Blending had actually been occurring from the beginning. On the part of the missionaries, none has been more helpful in discerning and interpreting native spiritual traditions to the church than Fr. Rene Fumoleau.⁷ On the part of the Dene, none has been more faithful to both traditional native and Catholic spirituality and the linkages between them than Elder George Blondin.⁸ Both men will be more extensively referred to later. Suffice is to say here that the gospel has indeed taken deep root among the Dene and spiritually discerning leaders from both Dene and Oblate communities have helped the church struggle to find itself.

Both Oblates and Dene would now agree that the old way of evangelization in word and deed, directed by Oblate clergy, must be replaced. A revised way of seeking out and ministering to their mutual poverty will require a revisiting of the meaning of the term. This implies a period of 'walking together', with the native people changing their role from passive recipients of missionary benevolence to active partnership in the process of leading the church. This way cannot be imposed by the missionaries or by outsiders. Fr Denis Croteau, current Oblate

⁷see Fumoleau bibliography

⁸see Blondin bibliography

bishop in Denendeh, has spoken of this missionary phase as that of an 'accompanying church' (Croteau 1990:195).

In a paper dealing with the process of 'walking together' missionary Marie Zarowny has written: 'I have had many opportunities to observe and experience the results of cultural oppression. It is only recently that I have learned to call it by this name and to explore more deeply what it means.' (Zarowny 195: 193).

Cultural oppression is shame-based, relating to one's own sense of being. It damages people's ability to relate to themselves, their families and other members of the groups to which they belong. It negatively affects their capacity to determine their own gifts and place in the world. Despite the goodwill, love and enormous self-giving of many missionaries, the church contributed to the creating of a shaming environment. Attitudes of superiority/inferiority were prevalent. They were usually conveyed unknowingly and quite subtly. The native spiritual way is more demanding than the Christian way. It shapes one's whole being and the way one walks the day-to-day life. In spite of their anger and suspicion toward the church, many native leaders want the church to 'walk with them', to support their processes of healing, their deep thirst for spirituality and their efforts to reclaim their culture and to shape their destiny. 'We need to more thoroughly explore the meaning of a "ministry of presence".' (Zarowny 1995: 200).

The Oblates have acknowledged their cultural and spiritual arrogance. They have determined to reclaim their original missionary charism reflecting a mutual marginality and to refocus their understanding of evangelization from a centrist to a marginalist position. In addition to these 'course corrections' the constant factor has been the desire of the missionaries to remain with the Dene. This commitment was reaffirmed when, in July of 1991, Fr Douglas Crosby, president of the Oblate Conference of Canada read a statement of apology and preached

a related homily during the annual Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta pilgrimage,⁹ Crosby stated:

As Oblates, it is our intention to continue to be your friends and brothers for as long as God gives us life... We want to denounce imperialism in all its forms...[and] to meet with native peoples and together help forge a template for a renewed covenant of solidarity. Despite past mistakes and present tensions, the Oblates have felt all along as if the native peoples and we belonged to the same family... We recognize that the road beyond the past may be long and steep but we pledge ourselves anew to journey with native peoples on that road. (Crosby 1992: 258).

B. The Second Evangelization: Marginality and Universality (1991-) From Accompaniment to Wider Engagement

1. Current Historical Context: Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples

Several months ago, Ecumenical News International reported that a church-sponsored gathering of 125 American Indians strongly criticised what it described as the 'colonial imposition' of European church structures on indigenous communities and called for a new relationship with the churches and white American society. The gathering, held in April, 1997 in Oklahoma City, and co-sponsored by the National Council of Churches of Christ, USA, The Oklahoma Council of Churches, several Protestant denominations and the Tekawitha Conference, a native organisation linked to the Roman Catholic Church declared: '... we will no longer tolerate the colonial imposition of European church structures and doctrine on indigenous people' (Ecumenical News international- eni news release, 21 April, 1997).

⁹Lac Ste. Anne is the major Indigenous American and Christian sacred site north of Guadalupe. It draws great crowds, sometimes numbering 30,000 Native people to an annual 'blessing of the waters' rite, mid-July.

Sovereignty, or independence from non-native organizations and communities, has become a key issue for many North American Indians including their relationships with the church. One of the gathering's native spokespersons stated:

The churches have a significant responsibility for addressing the Indian issue...because they had often played a role in the destruction of Native American culture and traditions, and even in the taking of Indian lands and their sacred places... Are the apologies just pieces of paper, or will the churches try to heal and reconcile? ...The churches need to let us come and be ourselves... Healing will take a long time.¹⁰ (Ecumenical News International 1997)

For many years, anti-colonial sentiment has been latent in Native American communities across the continent. In this decade, that spirit has been growing more vocal and visible. The Oka crisis which dominated headlines in the late summer and fall of 1990 reminded many North Americans of the Wounded Knee, South Dakota conflict of the 1970s. Now, Amerindians are politically more sensitised and better able to influence the media and public opinion than they were several decades ago.¹¹

Evidence of the enhanced self-conscious intentions of native Canadians is obvious to anyone consulting a recently released five volume study. The report was prepared by a government commission of seven established in 1991, the majority of whom are Aborigines.¹²

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) presented ideas and recommendations (advisory, not legislative

¹⁰Similar statements to the Oklahoma City conference have been made at Canadian native church gatherings. For example, see Joyce Carlson (ed) *Dancing the Dream*, pp. 48-50.

¹¹Oka, Quebec is located just NW of Montreal. It includes a community of Mohawks who rose up in arms after a local golf club announced it was expanding and (without consulting the native people) would expropriate a native burial ground. The army was called in and the protracted incident was a global embarrassment costing Canadian and Quebec taxpayers \$150M. The matter of expropriation remains unresolved.

¹²A summary of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples Report is contained in a 150-page book which highlights the full study. It is entitled: 'People to People, Nation to Nation' (1996; see refs.)

in nature) on significant topics such as the treaties, economic and cultural development, health, housing, Metis (half-breed) perspectives and the North. The final volume of the study proposes a major change in the way the dominant society should address the native peoples of Canada.

It recommends a new relationship between the 'Canadian peoples' seeing the Aboriginals as having a special status as First Nations within the larger culture. This could best be initiated, the RCAP suggests, 'through a new Royal Proclamation, issued by the Queen as Canada's head of state and the historical guardian of the rights of the aboriginal peoples and presented to the people of Canada in a special assembly called for the purpose' (RCAP 1996: 130). The proclamation would set out the principles of the new relationship and outline the laws and institutions necessary to turn those principles into reality. The laws and institutions would come into being through companion legislation passed by the Canadian parliament. 'Structures don't make change; people do,' the report continues. 'Aboriginal people must regain hope that their rights will be recognized and their legacy of disadvantage overturned (RCAP 1996: 133).

To accomplish the goal of self government, early action will be required in four areas: the *healing* of individuals, families, communities and nations; *economic development*; accelerating the *development of human resources* through education; and *institution building*. The report concludes: 'Most of the institutions governing aboriginal life today originate outside Aboriginal communities. For the most part, they operate according to rules that fail to reflect Aboriginal values and preferences' (RCAP 1995:135-36). In every sector of public life, there is a need to make way for the Aboriginal institutions. Development of many of these institutions should proceed before self-governing nations emerge, but they should be designed to complement, not compete with, native structures,

These proposals coming from the larger society suggest ways by which the wider church will need to relate to the native peoples in order to envision the forms of mission that will be required in a new era of native/non-native relationships. Self-government means that aboriginal peoples must be treated with both special status and complementing institutions.

This is indeed a *kairos* moment of transformation — suggesting the advent of a second missionary era of evangelisation that is not so much directed to the native people as coming *from* and facilitated *with* them. This paper's primary model gives focus to the new perspective. Evangelization moves from marginality, through a current period of accompaniment, toward a wider mission and future universality.

2. Current Cultural Context: Indigenous Revitalization

The model for this new form of mission suggests that marginalized communities discover for themselves and then begin to share a life giving understanding of the gospel which is not only for themselves but for all. The rebirth of the good news for the Dene Nation and their Oblate accompaniers begins with a revitalization of traditional native culture. It is here that the impetus for a second evangelization begins. This section will attempt to describe what is meant by cultural revitalization.

Fr Michael Stogre, sj, MD is regional superior of the Jesuits of Manitoulin, located at the Anishinabe Spiritual Centre, Anderson Lake, Espanola, Northern Ontario, Canada. Fr. Stogre has spent many years working with Oji-Cree people, but what he has to say about cultural revitalization in this setting can be readily applied to others. In a paper presented at the University of Saskatchewan in 1996 Stogre attempted 'to explore current knowledge and efforts toward cultural restoration; enabling new methodologies, conceptual designs

leader/movement must be able to communicate the vision within and beyond the culture. Fourth, a group of disciples will form around the leader and enable the message to be carried to all. Fifth, there will be opposition, from within and without. If the vision is strong enough, opposition can force adaptations and adjustments to make it more acceptable and workable in changing circumstances. Finally, if the movement succeeds, the entire culture is transformed. What were once thought to be radical innovations now become the routines of a reintegrated culture. Ultimately, a new and stable state emerges, different from but in continuity with the earlier culture.¹⁴

It is the contention of this paper that the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples describes and envisions what is required to accomplish aboriginal cultural revitalization. Aboriginal peoples in Canada have been involved in a great deal of creative and fermentive work during the past twenty-five years. New spiritual visions and blueprints are being developed. Charismatic leadership is emerging.¹⁵ They have listened to the people and are shaping an outlook based on this attentiveness. For the past decade, a native vanguard has been guiding their own nations and society at large in ways not evidenced previously. Spiritually focused, political, social and economic changes have been proposed as the followers of transformative native leaders and their movements have determined to assume responsibility for their own future. Opposition too has surfaced, as the incident at Oka clearly exemplified. Gradually, these visions and resulting actions are changing the ecologies of native culture in Canada. New methodologies, conceptual designs and healing approaches are crystallising.

¹⁴ Stogre's book *That the World May Believe: The Development of Papal Social Thought on Aboriginal Peoples* (see bibliography) provides background for the ideas developed in his present paper.

¹⁵14 Elijah Harper, Cree Spiritual Elder and Federal Member of Parliament (Churchill, Manitoba) is a prophetic native leader who convened a national spiritual assembly in Ottawa, December, 1995.

The accompanying church and those committed to Christ's future mission stand poised to share in the movement to indigenous sovereignty and cultural revitalization. This paper's final section anticipates such developments by returning to the Dene/Oblate story.

3. Future Spiritual Context: From Accompaniment to a Mutual Ministry of Healing and Reconciliation in Church and Society

George Blondin, Dene elder, storyteller, traditional medicine person and devoted Roman Catholic, born in May of 1922 (exact date unknown) in Horton Lake, NWT; north of Sahtu (Great Bear Lake) and above the Arctic Circle. At age seven, he left home to attend the Roman Catholic mission school in Zhahti Koe (Fort Providence) near Tucho (Great Slave Lake). 'I was forbidden to speak my own language, he writes.

It was hard at first, because I didn't know how to speak English... At the end of five years, I moved into what they called Grade Four then... although I had very low marks in English. I had forgotten everything my grandfather had taught me. During all those years at the mission school, I saw my parents only once. (I returned home again during the summer of 1934). We had come back to our own way of life, but in the eyes of our people my brother and I (who was also a student at the Fort Providence residential school) were like aliens from outer space. No one at home spoke more than a word or two of English. My brother and I could no longer speak Gokede [the local dialect]. Our family had to make signs to us. (Blondin 1990: 203-206).

Gradually, with the help of his father, Blondin relearned how to hunt and to live on the land. Returning to recover his native ways saved Blondin from a disintegrated existence, the fate suffered by many of those caught in the clash of European and Dene cultures. The Blondin family has been on the forefront of helping their people adapt to the turbulent changes that have affected the people of Dehcho during the last 50-75

years.¹⁶ Blondin has always attempted to live the values of his traditional culture even as he has sought to be a change agent for his people as they enter a strange new world (a world that has evolved from prehistoric to post-modern times in less than three generations). Traditional Dene medicine and the Catholic faith have helped Blondin and many of his people to live spiritually integrated lives and to offer a message of hope and healing to the Dene, to the Oblates who have nurtured them and to the world outside Denendeh. The Blondins, as strong a family as they are, were fortunate to live in one of Canada's more isolated regions. Change came, but not with the dramatic and destructive impact that it had on many other native communities. The strength of their culture and the accompaniment of the missionaries over many years helped them learn basic lessons about living in two worlds.

Blondin has written a special mediation about the drum, the most sacred symbol of Dene spiritual tradition. He states that the old people tell us the Creator gave the Dene medicine powers to help them survive the hardships of living. 'It was part of our spiritual beliefs, just as it was part of all the native peoples in Canada. The elders say our people could not have survived without this medicine (Blondin 1990:58).

'A certain man saw visions at various times in his life', says Blondin who has written extensively about the significance of spiritual visions for the Dene. 'These were revelations which would help his people live well in the future. This particular vision was one of four drums'. There was no one else around at the time, just this man and four drums in the air. He could hear someone singing, and knew that the song was a gift for him, a message from the Creator. The words went something like this:

My people, the time on this earth is very short.

Be good people. Help each other. Work hard; that's part of the order of our Creator. Don't complain.

¹⁶15 A relative, Ethel Blondin, serves as the Member of Parliament for the Western Arctic.

Love one another. Listen to the drum song and live by it.
(Blondin 1990:58).

Blondin believes that in a changing world, some things do not change. Many younger Dene no longer live the traditional life but they know it and its values. They try to use their heritage in their work and to maintain control over the changes affecting them. They are creating Dene lives in new ways. 'it may well be that in future the important values of the Dene - respect for the land and respect for one another — will endure, both here in Denendeh and all over the world' (Blondin 1990:246).

Rene Fumoleau is an Oblate who has invested close to half a century among the Dene He, along with Roger Vandersteene, omi who worked among the Cree of Northern Alberta, were two of the first missionaries to recognize the value of traditional native spirituality as integral to the Christian faith. Fumoleau has been a mentor to many non-natives who have sought to understand Dene values. He, along with George Blondin, has for many years served as bridge persons for both cultures. In a poetry collection recently published, Fumoleau provides a frame of reference for the Dene and the Oblates as they journey together into the future. It is a statement of faith reflective of two marginal peoples, mutually missionized and on a new mission:

Truck Lights

Winter time and very cold,
early afternoon but already dark.
I'm driving from Sombak'e (Yellowknife) to Behchoko (Rae)
in my fifteen year old pickup truck, and a Dene elder asked
me for a ride.

The land has taught the Dene
to live in a world of silence. After ten kilometres, Kolchia
reflects:

"Driving the truck is like having faith in God."

I'm trying to figure out what he means,
but after two kilometres I give up:

'Grandpa, you talked about driving and faith in God. I'm not sure what you meant.'

Kolchia turned slightly towards me:

'You started the engine and you put the lights on. We could have said:

"We see only one hundred meters ahead.

Further on, it's one hundred metres of darkness, so we cannot go to Behchoko".

But you got the truck into gear, we started to move, and the lights kept showing ahead of us.

Must be the way with God too

who shows us only a bit into the future,

just enough for our next move. If we are afraid and if we stand still,

we'll never see further ahead. But if we go with the little light we have,

the light keeps showing us the way on and on.

(Fumoleau 1995:57).

Summation

Jung Young Lee has reminded us that marginal people can be self-assertive and spiritually strong, endowed with the potential for new visions and new energies because the realities of marginality have made them that way.

Lee also suggests that, in future, the focus of mission should be on the marginal person Jesus, and not on the church itself. Territorial expansion and the quantity of souls reached are not the essence of a missiology of creative marginality (Lee 1995: 71 ff,78,83,99, 149ff).

The self-acknowledged marginalization of both the Oblate missionaries and the Dene Nation of Canada's North helps place them within a three stage model for a revised evangelization from triumphalist missionary operation through a contemporary period of mutual accompaniment to a shared,

wider missionary engagement. 'New life ensues from the margins and restores the whole oikoumene' is a maxim to be honored as the native people, the missionaries and the wider culture come to recognise what is happening, to take responsibility for their roles during a time of significant change and to move forward purposefully in universal mission with a sense of promise and hope.

The concluding vision belongs to Rev. Dr Stan McKay, Cree Elder, United Church of Canada minister, native seminary principal, ecumenical and societal mentor: 'We are not going to submit to oppression in the name of gospel... We are going to give our church a shape which makes the gospel real to us in the context of our understanding of the Spirit of God... The "gospel and culture" question...has to do with a critical self-evaluation of the very structures of the church. It has to do with who has the power and authority to define the gospel, to determine what is true and good... The challenge is not just to people on the margins, but also to those at the centres of ecclesiastical power (McKay 1995:39-40).

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NELEN YUBU

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From the Secretary's Desk...

At the end of my column in *Nelen Yubu* no. 67 I mentioned that our Editor, Fr Martin Wilson had just had a heart attack. Since then many kind messages and enquiries have been received from anxious readers, the parishioners of Rydalmere, and other friends. We are indeed grateful for your concern. At first we hoped it was a mild attack, but after an angiogram and various stress tests, it became apparent that Martin would need a quadruple bypass. Several months of care followed the operation and we thank God for bringing him through this difficult period and giving him the strength to face his ordeal. He was patient and very game, trying to display his usual cheerfulness.

Unfortunately Martin has had some severe setbacks, returning to hospital several times, often with distressing symptoms. His work has suffered in that he has been forced to rest after attacks of fibrillation, rendering him unable to engage in his usual long hours of preparing content and arranging for *Nelen Yubu*. In that regard I apologize for our slightly late publication of this issue. He is not yet back to full capacity.

Martin's thanks go to you all who followed his progress during these worrying months, and for your prayers for his recovery. Especially to the

children who sent Get Well cards, often composed and illustrated by themselves! Our telephone lines ran hot. We hope by the time issue no. 69 is out, he'll have been restored to health.

Martin's confreres and the staff of *Nelen Yubu* thank you for your support and concern for him.

* * * * *

In January this year my daughter and grandchildren came from Melbourne to spend some of their school holidays with me, and since they were to drive back through the Snowy Mountains of NSW, they invited me to go with them. It was an exciting trip, revisiting towns like Tumut where I'd spent so much of my childhood, and on to Talbingo, Jindabyne and Thredbo. In a weak moment I decided to accompany them up the Crackenback Mountain in the terrifying chairlift; walked the 2km for a view of Mt Kosciuszko and then, armed with enough food for the four of us for a day, we pushed on to Tom Groggin's Creek, an enchanted bush camp beside the rushing Murray River near its source, and only about 20 metres wide at that point. The temp. was 34 degrees so we swam and lay in the cool water till it was time for tea, watched by a dozen kangaroos, and later on a couple of 'possums. Judy decided to move the car, and that's when we found ourselves in trouble. Our brave car would not budge.

Out came the mobile phone to call RACV for help, but situated as we were among deep valleys under towering mountains, we could not even call 000. Up went the little tent; a cold meal by moonlight; no wood fires allowed. Judy and the two children just fitted into the tent, and I slept out under the stars, relishing every moment of it. By morning we were disturbed as this was the beginning of the Australia Day long weekend — who would happen upon us in that remote spot miles off the road? But crawling out of our sleeping bags, we saw a man strolling along with his fishing line! He heard our story, said he was no mechanic but that if we were stuck there for the weekend, he could feed us all as he was camping out for a week. The hospitality of the bush! Then, to cap it all, down the track came a 4WD vehicle driven by a man who looked at our engine and pronounced that it was the alternator. He backed up to our car, put the jumpers on for about 20 minutes, and the engine started! Our gear was flung pellmell into the car and off we shot, without breakfast, but determined to reach Khancoban for help, even though the driver had warned us not to stop or use brakes, wipers, air conditioner or lights on the trip. Judy drove magnificently, and I was so proud of the children, Rob 11 and Anna 7, who didn't murmur despite hunger, but sat

quietly waiting for the next calamity. Suddenly I discovered a packet of biscuits, and when I asked: 'Would anybody like one?', a dual-shout of 'YES' came from the back seat. Those biscuits saved the day for two famished, uncomplaining little passengers.

Khancoban couldn't help us but they rang ahead to Corryong, alerting the RACV that we were coming, then gave us the same instructions about driving without straining the battery. What a trip! At Corryong the RACV man spent a lot of time fixing us a makeshift part to get us to Wodonga, while we explored the town, bought a pair of thongs for weary feet and ate sandwiches on a grassy patch outside the school gate. Luckily there is a pool at Corryong. Then on we went, heart in mouth, till we pulled up in Wodonga on Saturday afternoon in boiling heat. It must have been 40 degrees plus.

The RACV put us up in a motel for the night, sending us off on Sunday morning with our usual warnings. Finally we reached home in the Dandenongs after battling a violent storm when we *had* to use the wipers. On Tuesday Judy's car received a new alternator!

A Happy Easter to all our subscribers, friends, and the good people who came to our rescue on that holiday weekend in the Snowy Mountains.

Secretary Keren

and approaches for implementing healing of indigenous peoples from within their ecologies.¹³

Revitalization is an expression the church has been using for some time but it has also become a term commonly employed by governments and corporations working with Canada's First Nations. Revitalization movements have been described by anthropologist Anthony Wallace (Stogre 1997:20) as 'deliberate, organized, conscious efforts by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture'. Cultures try to maintain an adequate life support system for its members but this balance can disintegrate as a result of external and internal stresses. Cultures can be under stress because of military threat, political and social pressures to assimilate to surrounding cultures, etc. If this stress escalates without redress, then there follows a period of cultural distortion and dysfunction in which are evidenced increasing rates of alcoholism, suicide, crime, family violence, physical and mental illnesses, etc. This situation well describes the condition of many aboriginal communities during much of Canada's past history since native/non-native contact.

Social malaise and a sense of defeat can totally overpower and demoralise a people. There comes a point, however, when a culture must revitalize or die. Cultures under stress can fight back in order to restore their integrity. This is currently happening among indigenous peoples across the Americas and around the world.

If revitalisation is to succeed, Amerindians such as the Dene must work at six major tasks. The first and most crucial responsibility is the formulation of a blueprint or vision for a meaningful culture. Second, a religious visionary or prophetic movement is able to capture the imagination of a people and galvanize their energies for rebirth. Third, this

¹³Stogre 'Old ways can draw new life from the Gospel' until now an unpublished paper, it is summarized in the Canadian Catholic journal, *Mission Canada*, Summer, 1997, pp. 19-23.