

Bishop Paul Piché

Bishop Paul Piché was a pioneer missionary far ahead of his time who witnessed the results of his labour to educate native people. He acted on his firm belief that education was for the children and founded educational institutions and programs for the native students in Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories. His love, strong conviction and confidence in his students influenced two generations of outstanding native leaders.

Paul Piché was born to Joseph and Eleonore Piché in Gravelbourg, Saskatchewan, on 14 September 1909. He was the youngest of four brothers and three sisters and was raised on a farm. His mother's dream was that her youngest boy be a priest. Paul attended school and Matthieu College in Gravelbourg. He studied to be a lawyer and before he was finished he decided to be a priest.

In 1930, he entered the Oblate Novitiate at St. Laurent, Manitoba, and completed his theological studies in 1931 at Sacred Heart Scholasticate, Lebret, Saskatchewan. When he found that the students in Lebret had been without a music master since their school burned down, he volunteered to be their music teacher. He called his little band "Christ the King Band." He graduated from the University of Ottawa, Philosophy Department, with a major in anthropology.

On 23 December 1934, he was ordained as a priest. In 1935 he became professor of holy scripture and liturgy at the seminary in Lebret, Saskatchewan. In 1941, he was professor of social economy and education as well as the Superior of Oblate Juniorate in St. Boniface, Manitoba. In 1943, he opened the first high school for native students, the Qu'Appelle Indian School, in Lebret, Saskatchewan. He was superior and principal until 1951. His motto was "The school for the children." In June 1946, Father Piché stated in the editor's comment of the *The Indian Missionary Record* that

Any system of Indian Education which would provide only for intellectual advancement, without similar provision for spiritual and bodily improvement, would fail to achieve the purpose so much desired. The will, the character and the physical qualities of the Indians must be developed as well as the intelligence if they are to take their place as worthy citizens of this country.

When the band master position became available in 1948, Father Piché took the position and again expressed his love for music through the students and brought the band to a higher standard than before. Coronets, clarinets, pianos, trombones and saxophones could be heard throughout the corners of the building. He and his students participated in the annual festival held by the Qu'Appelle Valley Musical Association. In 1950, they joined the International Band Festival, competing with other Canadian and American bands. They tied the Regina Lions Band in 1951. In drama, the students won many trophies and medals. They won the top honour, the Drama Cup, for the "Lost Princess" in the local drama festival. They came first in the Regina festival. Father Piché's guidance, optimistic hopes and unflinching enthusiasm were recognized by the government and other authorities as the talents of the native students surfaced.

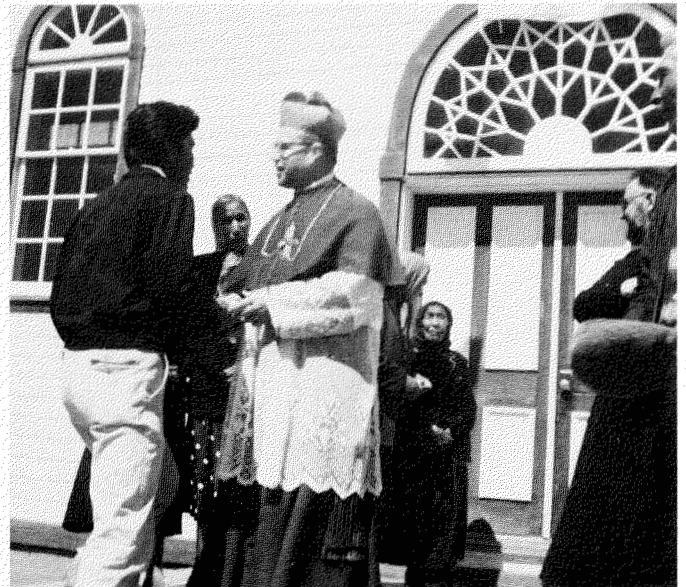
When the first girl graduated in 1951 from Qu'Appelle Indian School, the seed had been planted to produce other

native graduates. The school is now run by his ex-pupils. There are also three bishops among the students.

In 1951, he was appointed provincial superior of the Oblate Fathers of Manitoba and Southern Saskatchewan and remained in that position for five years. From 1955 to 1959 he was general director of the Oblate Indian and Eskimo Commission in Ottawa.

In March 1959, Pope John XXIII appointed him Bishop of the Mackenzie. Later that year he was consecrated as bishop and installed as Vicar Apostolic of Mackenzie in St. Isidore Cathedral in Fort Smith, N.W.T. "Vicar Apostolic" means that the church was being financially supported by Rome. The Northwest Territories was not recognized at the time as a diocese. His area covered more than 600 000 square miles, stretching from northern Alberta and Saskatchewan to the North Pole.

During his first year of appointment as bishop, Piché worked to open Grandin College in Fort Smith. Native children were not attending high school and the government did not want to help. In an attempt to rectify this, he produced a list of 100 graduates from the high school he started for natives in Lebret, Saskatchewan, and all the professions they were in. The result was that the government officials decided to give it a start with a minor seminary.



Piché at Fort Chipewyan, 1968. Photo courtesy of Sr. Agnes Sutherland.

In 1962, he was elected president of the Oblate Fathers' Indian and Eskimo Welfare Commission for a two-year term. Educational and welfare problems affecting the Catholic Indians and Eskimos who were in their care in the eight provinces and the Northwest and Yukon territories were discussed. He also served as a member of the Vatican II Council in Rome from 1962 to 1965.

In the summer of 1964, Bishop Piché travelled all over the N.W.T. interviewing and recruiting native students to enroll in Grandin College, in Fort Smith, N.W.T. That summer, I was approached by him in Fort Rae, N.W.T., while I was



Piché with students at Lapointe Hall, Fort Simpson, N.W.T., 1968. Photo courtesy of Sr. Agnes Sutherland.

working in the hospital. He asked me if I would attend Grandin College. I had been living at Breynat Hall, in Fort Smith, for six years, and I was not prepared to leave my friends and told him so. He told me I could still visit my friends there anytime I wanted. When I saw the list of girls who would be attending the college and did not recognize the names, I refused to go. He asked me to think it over and we could discuss this the next day. The next day I agreed to try living at Grandin College for a month and if I did not like it I could return to Breynat Hall. He agreed. I stayed at Grandin College for six years and graduated.

Grandin College was opened in the fall of 1964 with 60 boys and 14 girls. There were native students from across the N.W.T. I was the youngest in the girls' residence. Academic expectations were high, and this was physically evident within the building. Every student had a desk in his/her room, a library was available in both the girls' and boys' residences, and supervisors were available day and evening as tutors or counsellors. Study hours and chores became the norm for all of us. Gradually music and band lessons, sport activities and camping trips were included in our schedule. These enabled the students to participate in activities together and develop lasting bonds of friendship.

The Grandin students began to surface as those who were academically and physically talented from the outset. The Glee Club performed for the local holiday events and they competed against Yellowknife, N.W.T., and tied them in 1967. That same year, the girls' basketball team, the Oopiks, and the boys' team, the Huskies, won the Territorial Basketball Championship trophies for Fort Smith. They also won trophies in volleyball and badminton. During tournaments in Fort Smith, the town was there to support the Grandin teams. The brass band, directed by Bishop Piché, played at every special local event. The boys' musical band, called "Ronnie and the Saints," was popular. They played for most of the high school and college dances.

The ideals of the students were inscribed in their crest, which was printed on their yearbook covers and worn on

their jackets. The college crest had three colours: white, green and gold, and the three Olympian torches: Leadership - Knowledge - Integrity. The students' motto was "Per Veritatem ad Lucem." The bishop stated in the 1966 yearbook, "It is in fact by living up to the Truth, that you will be led to the Light, to leadership, knowledge and integrity." The college song expressed these ideals very clearly.

Bishop Piché's love for and guidance of the Grandin College students was expressed in the 1966 yearbook, where he stated,

You must learn to pray, think, love, work, fight, serve, and build the future. It is the basic objective of Grandin College to equip you for this responsible living, and I am most appreciative of the work of the College staff and of the Joseph Burr Tyrrell School teachers, who encourage, inspire, challenge, even defy you at every turn, to think for yourselves, make your decisions and assume your own responsibilities.

In 1967, when the Mackenzie-Fort Smith area was recognized as a diocese by Rome, he was installed as the first bishop of the new Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese in the St. Joseph Cathedral, Fort Smith, N.W.T. The church was mostly financially self-supporting then.

I often visited Bishop Piché in his office at the old mission as a student and later as a parent. We always discussed Grandin College students: where they were and what they were doing. We would laugh about the tricks that some of the students pulled. There were times he laughed so hard I was afraid he'd fall off his chair. When he talked about his Grandin College students there was love and affection in his voice. Politics, communities, leaders, economy, land prizes, religion and taxes were some other topics that were discussed in his office.



Girls' residence at Grandin College.

Nick Sibbeston was the government leader, Steve Kakfwi is the minister of education, John T'seli was a member of the Legislative Assembly, James Wah-shee founded the regional councils and the Indian Brotherhood, which is now the Dene Nation, Ethel Blondin is the first native woman representative from the Western Arctic in the Parliament of Canada in Ottawa, Michael Miltenburger was mayor of Fort Smith, N.W.T. Others have chosen to work with the government as principals, teachers, linguists and administrators and more have become active in local politics or gone on to post-secondary education.

Bishop Piché learned in 1984 that he was diabetic. His vision would blur at times and this made it difficult for him to read documents and the Bible. Despite his medical problems, he maintained his sense of humour through it all. He would visit me at times just to see how I was doing. It was a pleasure and honour to have him in my home.

On 16 June 1984, the community of Fort Smith honoured Bishop Piché in celebration of his 50th anniversary as a priest, of which for 25 years he was the bishop of the Mackenzie - Fort Smith Diocese. His 75th birthday was also celebrated.

After his anniversary, Grandin College had a reunion. Past students from all parts of the Northwest Territories and Alberta came to attend. They toured the old residences and their old rooms and reminisced about the good old days. Bishop Piché was the honoured guest, and he visited with his ex-students and their families for a week. This was an occasion when we, the students of Grandin College, thanked Bishop Piché for his dedication, love, guidance and allowing us to find our path in life through education. It was evident there was a strong family bond among the students during the reunion.

In February 1986, Bishop Paul Piché resigned from his position. He was 76 years old. According to the Church Canon Law #401, a diocesan bishop who is 75 is requested to offer his resignation from office to the Supreme Pontiff. He is officially bishop emeritus of the diocese and is now working with archives and serving as chaplain for the senior citizens in Fort Smith, N.W.T. He approved Father Croteau as the next bishop.

It is often true that it is much easier to criticize from the sideline than it is to help improve matters. The Roman Catholic Church has been criticized for stripping the native people of their language and culture. Such criticisms are unfounded, because there are native leaders who benefited from the educational system established by the church. Furthermore, Slavey, Chip and Dogrib were spoken at Grandin College. We were never punished for it, unlike the practice in some of the residences in the past. Though living away from home was not easy, I think we were quite aware of our responsibilities and the fact that the future of our people would depend on our survival. Some criticisms overlook the enormous contribution the Roman Catholic Church has made in terms of health and education for the native people. The positive course the government has set in favour of native people today is properly credited to the church, to Bishop Paul Piché and to many of his native graduates.

Grandin College reminded us of the raw realities of life waiting for us and the fact that the odds may always be against us but we had to persevere in order to succeed in life. We were taught that we must be aware of the native and non-native perspective and this may be unacceptable to both groups. Our responsibility was to survive the system by using the best of the native and non-native perspective in life. The



Bishop Paul Piché, 1986. Photo courtesy of Sr. Agnes Sutherland.

tool for our future was education. All this has been true. They had warned us and prepared us.

Bishop Paul Piché's knowledge of the need for love for, and attention to, children while educating them has yielded rewards that few achieve in their lifetime. He devoted his energy to create an environment that reflected his motto that education is for the children. He was a pioneer missionary far ahead of his time who was able to witness the fruits of his labour. He is respected and loved by his students and all those who know him.

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