

**BISHOP OMER ROBIDOUX, O.M.I.  
1913-1986**

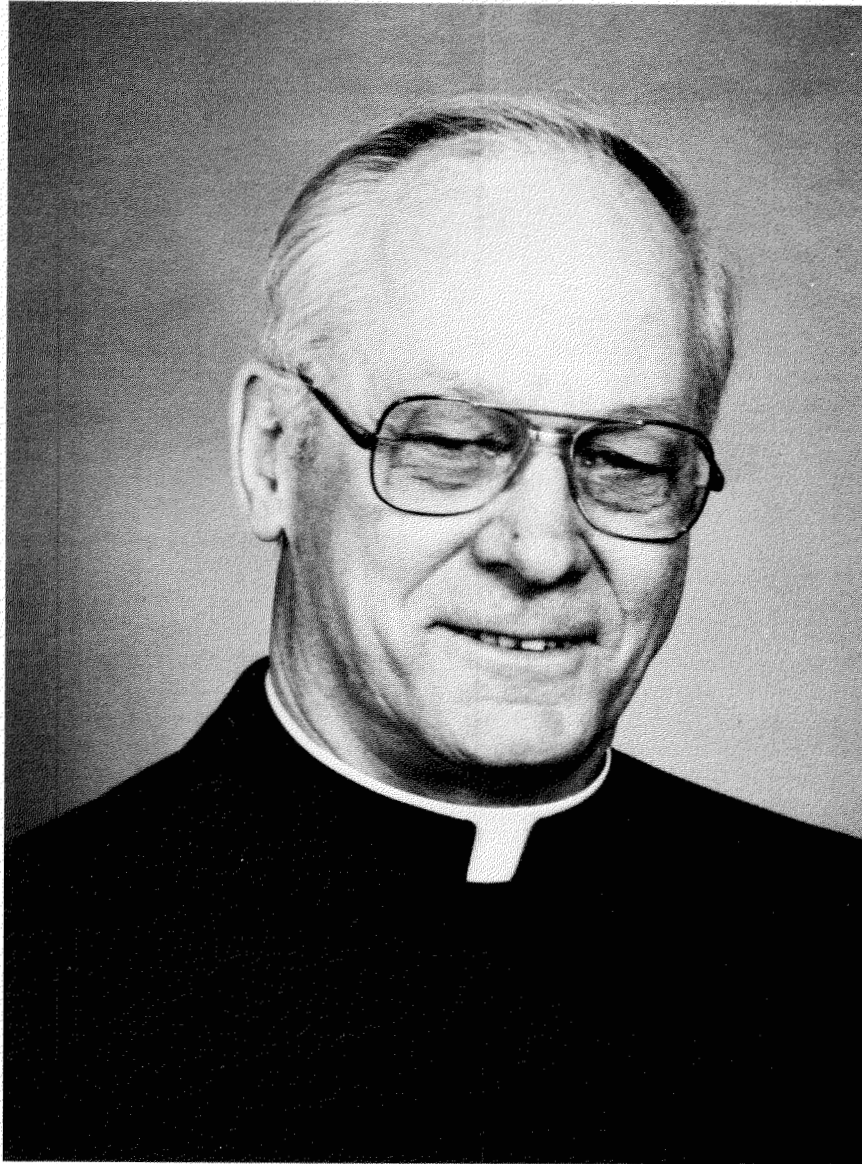


Photo courtesy of R.C. Diocese of Churchill Hudson Bay.

On the evening of 12 November 1986 Omer Robidoux, o.m.i., the Roman Catholic Bishop of the Central and Eastern Canadian Arctic, boarded his final northern flight and the Canadian North lost one of its strongest supporters. The twin-engined Navaho he was aboard tragically crashed after take-off at Rankin Inlet, N.W.T., killing all passengers, including a fellow Oblate, Fa. Theophile Didier, a Grey Nun missionary, Sr. Lise Turcotte, s.g.m., and two Churchill entrepreneurs, Keith Rawlings and Dave MacVey.

Bishop Robidoux, aged 72, was born in St. Pierre-Jolys, a small French farming community 20 miles south of Winnipeg, Manitoba. Omer entered the novitiate of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate at St. Laurent, Manitoba, in 1933. His perpetual vows were made on 8 September 1937, and he was ordained a priest in his home town on 29 June 1939.

Toward the end of his novitiate as a matter of routine he was asked where he might like to undertake missionary work. His first choice was "Eskimo missions," but this was not to be until many years later. His first missionary work was with native Saulteaux Indians in Fort Alexander, Manitoba; following this, he was sent to Lestock, Saskatchewan. Beginning in 1947, the next 22 years of his life were devoted to ministry in Indian residential schools as a teacher, principal, superior and pastor in Lestock and Lebret, Saskatchewan, and in Winnipeg, Manitoba. His vision of ministry to the whole needs of the individual was evident in the many activities he avidly pursued with his students. In particular, sports and outdoor activities played an important part in the education they received at the hands of Father Robidoux, himself a former Montreal Canadian draft choice. In the summers Father Robidoux visited the various

communities and homes of his students. Back in those days the study of one's native ancestry and traditions was not encouraged or sanctioned by the Department of Indian Affairs, but Father Robidoux always found a way to fit into the curriculum "unofficial projects" designed to instill a pride and understanding of the student's background.

The call to go North came a few years later, in March 1970, when he was appointed Bishop of the Diocese of Churchill-Hudson Bay, which included the Central Arctic and Eastern and High Arctic of the Northwest Territories west from Gjoa Haven and south to Churchill, Manitoba, the Bishop's cathedral. The following May he was consecrated a Bishop by Cardinal G.B. Flahiff, the Archbishop of Winnipeg, and as his official crest and motto Bishop Robidoux chose the theme *Ut sint unum* (That they may be one). This theme of conciliation he brought gently and courageously in his work to facilitate and encourage people to work together.

His early actions in the Diocese were to confirm and fully support the beginning steps taken by the Diocese a few years earlier to involve and train the local laity in the communities to more fully participate in the ministry of the church. A lay catechist family program, which involved both husband and wife, remains today as a basic thrust and orientation of the Diocese.

The one-million-square-mile Diocese kept the "Flying Bishop" on the move constantly. His army surplus bag, with a sleeping bag, wind pants and Ministry of Transport issue flying boots, was always ready, and it was with a joyous step that he headed North to visit his missionaries and flock entrusted to his care. In the small communities he would make long walks daily, trying to visit as many homes as possible and also to lend a friendly ear and words of encouragement to staff at the nursing station and other government offices.

Bishop Robidoux lived a life and spirituality very close to people of all walks and faiths and also very close to nature. In the 1970s as Chairman of the Churchill Community Development Corporation, he and other local residents and government development officers were able to set up a northern studies centre in Churchill to accommodate the research and teaching activities of universities in the Churchill area and to inform and involve the community on the unique aspects of the region. He served as Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Churchill Northern Studies Centre from its inception in 1976 through 1984. In 1985 in recognition of the special friendship and dedication Bishop Robidoux brought to this task and other initiatives to promote the natural history of the North, the Manitoba Naturalists Society made him an honorary member. The Bishop's great love for nature was evident in his frequent forays to the mission cabin 12 miles from Churchill.

Bishop Robidoux was very supportive of the activities of the different missionaries relating to the preservation and promotion of northern history and heritage. The Eskimo Museum in Churchill, started in 1944 and curated by Br. Jacques Volant until August 1986, was an institution in which he took special pride. This modest museum, with its unique collection of carvings portraying Eskimo life and traditions, was the beneficiary of some significant acquisitions made by an unpretentious Bishop who always claimed not to know anything about Inuit art but who had an astute eye for a good carving nevertheless. Fa. Charles Choque's biographies on the missionaries, Fa. Franz Van de Velde's geneology studies and other projects, and Fa.

Guy Mary-Rousselière's archaeological work and editorial work on the *ESKIMO* magazine always received the blessings of their Bishop. The Inuktitut translation work undertaken by various missionaries, including Fa. Theophile Didier and Fa. Hubert Mascaret, and the adaptation of the Canadian Catechism to a northern milieu by Sr. Lise Turcotte, s.g.m., were tasks that received his ongoing encouragement and support. The Bishop would defend his missionaries and those who had gone before them from the attacks of "northern experts" unwilling to reside in the North but quick to criticize actions without a thorough understanding of the context and milieu.

The plight of the northern hunters and trappers as they faced the problems of increasing costs of equipment and the results of extensive anti-trapping propaganda in the South was a strong concern of Bishop Robidoux's. A public statement of support and information was issued from the Diocesan office in April 1986 to benefactors of the missions and interested parishes in western Canada and Great Britain. In his opening statement, the Bishop wrote, "Hunting and trapping activities are valuable activities not only to be measured in strict dollars and cents but in cultural integrity, as a gainful activity in an already fragile economy, for nutritional purposes, and Christian stewardship of northern lands."

The role of transportation in developing the North was a subject any passer-by could readily strike up as a topic of conversation with Bishop Robidoux. Whether it was the role of the Port of Churchill, on whose Development Board he actively served since 1973, or the scheduling and deregulation of the airline industry, there was certain to be a lively discussion.

To many individuals and northern interest groups in the South, Bishop Omer Robidoux was an enigma, a man they couldn't conveniently label as pro- or anti-development. Perhaps some northerners can give us a clearer picture. The Arctic Co-operatives Limited wrote in their bulletin:

The nostalgic traditional heritage of the Arctic and the vigorous new North found a common friend and supporter in Bishop Omer Robidoux. With a subtly skillful blend of administration and political acumen, the Bishop led his vast diocese in its recognition of the rights of self-determination of native people. His concurrent support of two generations of Arctic missionaries required administrative and diplomatic skills to link the work of the modern Church with both the secular community and the traditional religious community in the development of northern native people.

A fellow northern Bishop, Hubert O'Connor, o.m.i., described the Diocese of Churchill-Hudson Bay "as a young man's country," stating, "Bishop Robidoux was not young, but he was actually about 50 in spirit." John Hickes, an Inuk from Churchill and a former president of Nunasi Corporation, said,

the Bishop's genius was the quality of his friendship. You could talk to him anywhere, anytime about anything. He always had time. I valued his sharp, strong yet constructive criticisms. They were always given to you face to face and never mentioned behind your back. He was our sounding board for testing out new ideas. He would always say exactly what he thought, but never press his point. We would always leave him encouraged to go ahead with our aim of economic development by our people and for our people.

Lorraine Brandson  
Curator, Eskimo Museum  
Diocese of Churchill-Hudson Bay