

FRANZ VAN DE VELDE, O.M.I. (1909–2002)

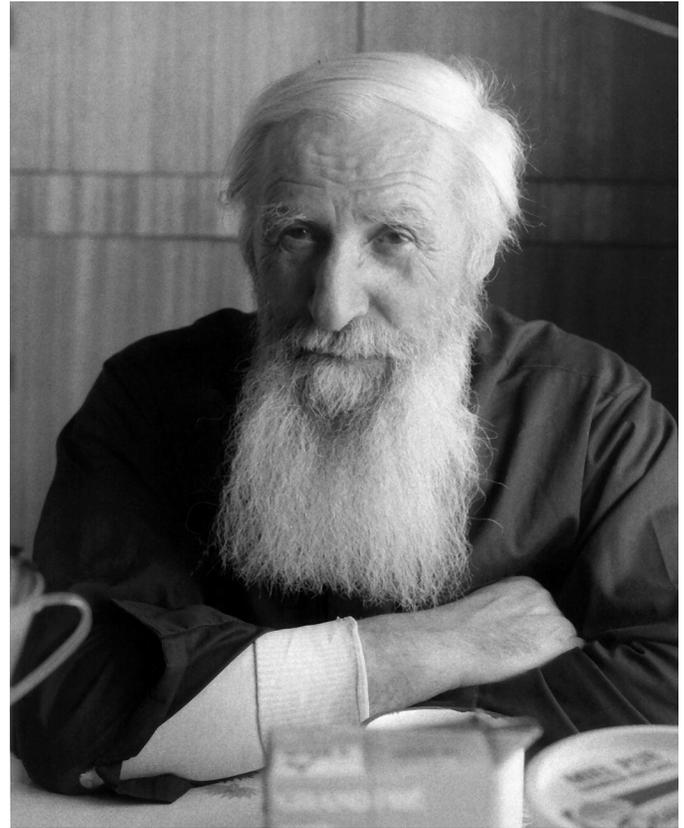
Franz Van de Velde, O.M.I., a Roman Catholic missionary well known in the Kitikmeot and northern Hudson Bay regions, died in Marelbeke, Belgium, on 22 February 2002 at age 92. Member of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate religious order, cultural historian, author, and genealogist, Father Franz (Frans) was born in Belgium on 28 November 1909 to Arthur Van de Velde and Gabriella Lanens de Lier. He graduated from a Jesuit secondary school in 1929, but chose to join the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, a worldwide missionary order founded in France. He took his first vows as an Oblate on 8 September 1930, in Niewenhove, and was ordained a priest by Bishop Rassneur on 8 September 1933 in Velaines, Belgium.

Father Van de Velde received his obedience to minister in the Hudson Bay Apostolic Vicariate in March 1937, and on 26 May 1937, with Bishop Arsène Turquetil, he boarded the *Normandie* in Le Havre en route to New York, Montreal, and Churchill. After overwintering in Repulse Bay, Northwest Territories, he arrived in Pelly Bay (Kugaaruk) on 23 April 1938. Father Pierre Henry, who had established the Pelly Bay mission on Simpson Peninsula in 1935, introduced him to ministry in the Kitikmeot region. Father Franz spent the next 50 years of his life in the Canadian Arctic, mainly in the Pelly Bay and Kitikmeot region until 1965, when he moved to Igloolik. On 12 April 1958, he became a Canadian citizen in a ceremony at Pelly Bay, with Justice Jack Sissons presiding. His last missionary mandate in the Churchill Hudson Bay Diocese (1969–86) was to Sanerajak (Hall Beach), where he established the Coeur Douloureux et Immaculé de Marie parish in 1969.

A Canadian Arctic Producers publication, *Candian Inuit Artifacts*, described Ataata Vinivi (his Inuktitut name) as a missionary, ethnologist, author, and explorer. An avid chronicler of many things, he contributed some 35 articles to *ESKIMO*, the Churchill Hudson Bay diocesan magazine, on a wide range of topics, such as Inuit legends, acts of revenge and retribution, hunting stories, snow and its uses, and Arctic wildlife encounters. His article on Inuit rules for sharing seal meat after a hunt has been reprinted in several other journals. A project dear to his heart was the transliteration and translation of the autobiography and memoirs of his faithful guide, Bernard Irgugaqtuq. He held Bernard and his wife Agnes Nullut of Kugaaruk in highest esteem.

The celebrated *Netsilik Eskimo Film Series*, shot in Kugaaruk in the early 1960s, and directed by Dr. Asen Balikci, could not have been made without the help of Father Guy Mary-Rousselière and Father Van de Velde. Currently distributed in video format by the National Film Board of Canada, the film series remains a valuable educational asset to this day.

In 1984, the Government of Canada officially adopted the Inuktitut names of 313 Arctic geographic features, a decision based on Father Van de Velde's efforts to record



Father Franz Van de Velde, O.M.I., at the age of 70, photographed at Sanerajak, (Hall Beach), N.W.T., April 1979. (Photo: Ron Dervoir, Co-op Manager.)

some 600 names he had collected from 1938 to 1958 in the Kugaaruk–Taloyoak–Gjoa Haven area. Because these names are descriptive, Father Van de Velde wrote, “With all the Eskimo names in their proper places, the country is an open book for living and travel.” He certainly recognized the value of traditional ecological knowledge. His painstakingly recorded genealogical records of the Pelly Bay people back to the time of Roald Amundsen (1903–06) occupy 4250 handwritten and typed pages. Photographs of elders, now kept in the local government offices of Kugaaruk, came from his vast, carefully annotated photograph collection, now located in the Oblate Archives in Ottawa. Any archivist knows how rare it is for a donor to send identified photographs! His collection remains a splendid legacy for the Kitikmiut and for all the people of Nunavut.

As the only permanent white resident at Pelly Bay until 1960 (when a federal school opened there), Ataata Vinivi stayed close to his parishioners, and he became their strongest advocate when he felt new developments from the South would adversely affect them. When he was convinced the cause was just, be it a protest about fuel barrels dumped in a lake by the DEW Line station (Site 26) or perceptions of inadequate health care delivery, he was tenacious, and at times abrasive. Yet he deeply appreciated

people of good will, like RCMP Captain Henry Larsen, who were dedicated to advancing the interests of northern residents.

Father Van de Velde was befriended and aided by many individuals associated with the DEW Line stations in Sanerajak (Fox Main) and Pelly Bay (Site 26), as well as the Borealis Mine near Hall Beach. His many contacts with people outside the North brought wonderful gifts, such as the bell mounted in the old stone church in Pelly Bay and some rare northern books donated by the American botanist Margaret E. Oldenburg. Those volumes have since found their way to the Eskimo Museum library in Churchill.

Ataata Vinivi promoted the production of Inuit art in the Kugaaruk–Repulse Bay area, and especially that of miniature stone pieces and exquisitely carved ivory scenes set on walrus tusk boards. He knew this region well from his many trips with the *Arviligjuaarmiut* to the H.B.C. trading post at Repulse Bay. Father Van de Velde's family in Belgium and collectors such as the late Dr. Jean Paul Drolet were beneficiaries of his keen eye and interest in promoting Inuit art. Some of the finest items he purchased are on display at the Eskimo Museum in Churchill.

Father Van de Velde had a good, strong stature and large hands that showed the consequences of many years of working in the extreme cold. Seeing his striking white beard and twinkling eyes, you could easily imagine him as your grandfather. He and his Oblate confreres, especially Father Rogatien Papion, have faithfully encouraged and kindled my own interest and understanding of the North. Their collaboration has been a consistent support for my work. Father Van de Velde knew the value of the data that he had collected, and he carefully deposited originals or copies of his reports in the Archives Deschâtelets, Ottawa, the University of Leuven archives in Belgium, and the Diocese of Churchill Hudson Bay headquarters at Churchill.

Several university professors and graduate students based their own theses on fieldwork done in conjunction with Father Van de Velde and the people of Kugaaruk. He himself had a special confidence in Dr. Cornelius Remie, a scholar who has made major contributions to our understanding of the religion and culture of the Pelly Bay region. Father Van de Velde's latest and last project was a joint paper with Dr. Ian Stirling, the chief polar bear biologist with the Canadian Wildlife Service, who has completed their article on the bears of Simpson Peninsula and their denning habits for a future issue of *Arctic*. Father Van de Velde also worked tirelessly with film crews in his home country to promote the cause of the northern missions.

Father Van de Velde was honoured by Belgium as "Knight in the Order of the Crown" (Décoration de Chevalier de l'Ordre de la Couronne) in Ottawa on 25 February 1986. He received the Order of Canada award from His Excellency Edward Schreyer on 11 April 1984. In 1981, Princess Margriet unveiled a granite sculpture dedicated to him in his Flemish hometown of Landskouter. Carved by Belgian artist Frans Heirbaut, it depicts Ataata Vinivi, an Inuk woman, and the famous Pelly Bay stone church.

Father Van de Velde retired from northern parish ministry in 1986 and spent the rest of his life in Belgium. Sidonie and Barthelemy Nirlungayuk have been faithful leaders in his beloved St. Peter's Parish at Kugaaruk since the late 1960s. On learning of Father Van de Velde's death, Sidonie wrote:

Ataata Vinivi always helped people, most of all those who were very poor. He gave them food and clothing, and helped them in so many different ways. I believe we all saw him not only as our priest, but also as someone who had many unusual skills. He did everything. He was for us a builder, hunter, teacher, doctor, manager, administrator, social worker, and sometimes even a police officer. I remember many things, but most of all his words: *Help people, and pray for them!*

Last year, Mr. Ovide Alakannuark, MLA for the Akulliq riding in Nunavut, spoke to the Legislative Assembly about Ataata Vinivi's kindness and generosity. Indeed, this legendary figure, described by Bishop Reynald Rouleau as "an example of immense determination," has left an indelible mark on the spiritual and cultural landscape of Nunavut.

Note: A more comprehensive article about Father Van de Velde's life, written by Father Charles Choque, O.M.I., will be published in issue no. 64 of *ESKIMO* magazine.

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