

**Jean-Edouard Darveau 1816-1844.**  
**First Martyr Priest among the Missionaries**  
**to the Indians in Western Canada**

by

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Jean-Edouard Darveau was born in the city of Quebec on March 17th, 1816. We may suppose that he was born into and brought up in a thoroughly Catholic home and that he himself was endowed with the sprightliness and vivacity of the ordinary French-Canadian youth. His boyhood did not differ in any noticeable way from that of other boys of his time. He went to school, where he was known as a serious, energetic student. It was in a Catholic school, in the very heart of the city of Quebec, that young Darveau received his first instruction in his Catholic faith. At the same time, more perhaps by example than by word, in his deeply Catholic home, he acquired a deep knowledge of the ways of God and how he should walk in order to please his Divine Master. At an early age he made his First Holy Communion and in the Divine Host of the Tabernacle he found the saving balm which was to bring him consolation in sorrow, as well as strength to withstand the many temptations of youth. Later he was confirmed by the Archbishop of Quebec and, as the sequel will show, was truly made a Soldier of Christ, ready, as one in the ranks, to give his life to prove his faith in, and his love for, his Divine Redeemer. He went to college and it was there he manifested unmistakable signs of a vocation to the holy priesthood. Apart from his devotion to, and affection for, his pious mother, he evinced a deep piety, showing at an early age a clear desire to conform his life and his conduct to the will of God. As an aspirant to the holy priesthood, he entered the Grand Seminary of Quebec. There, after the usual course of studies, he was ordained priest by Archbishop Signay on February 21st, 1841. Henceforth he was numbered among these who would spend their lives in the service of Christ, by preaching Christ Crucified to God's elect.

At an early age he was moved by an ardent desire to devote his life to the service of those who still remained in the depth and degradation of a pagan world. He wished to give himself to the evangelization of the poor Indians and his vision turned to those who wandered over the western portion of the North American continent. What a glory, he thought, to bring them to a knowledge and acceptance of the vital truths which Christ had brought to earth from the bosom of His Eternal Father. To his Archbishop, he laid bare

his heart, and the good Archbishop, recognizing the call of God, could not deny him his request. His departure was saddened by the imminent death of his mother, and the reflection that he would probably not see her again. But he could not resist the call, no matter what sacrifice it might entail. He would go to the distant missions of Oregon, then the *Ultimate Thule* of Christian missionary endeavor. He would cross the boundless prairies, he would traverse the rough passes through the Rocky Mountains, until, on the fair slopes of the Pacific, he would find those who were the objects of his search.

Accordingly, Father Darveau left Quebec with the good wishes and, let it be added to their honor, with the generous contributions of many friends. He went to Montreal, and it was at Lachine, with a brigade of three canoes, that he set his face towards the West.

It was at the end of April, 1841, that Father Darveau set out. The brigade was under the direction of Mr Donald Manson, a Hudson's Bay Company chief trader who had just been entrusted with the government of New Caledonia, now British Columbia, and whose chief duties would be the establishment of fur-trading posts in that immense country west of the Rockies. As was the custom in those days, the canoes ascended the Ottawa River, then crossed over by the Mattawa and other streams to Lake Nipissing, descended by the Nipissing River to Lake Huron, then around the shores of that lake and Lake Superior, until they came to what is now the thriving city of Fort William. The voyage of Father Darveau then continued over rugged trails, along rivers and over portages, until he reached the Winnipeg River. Then he descended the Winnipeg River to the lake of the same name, then westerly along the southern shores of the lake to the mouth of the Red River, where it flowed into Lake Winnipeg. Then he ascended the Red River until he reached its junction with the Assiniboine River at a point known as Fort Garry. It was here that he saw for the first time the "turrets twain" that surmounted the Cathedral of St. Boniface. He arrived in St. Boniface on the 22nd of July, 1841. At the junction of the two rivers the Hudson's Bay Company had a fort, well protected by thick stone walls, with embrasures for the emplacement of cannon and the firing of musketry. Around the fort were the wigwams of Indians, who had come to barter their furs for some gaudy things of little value that appealed to their fancy. Apart from this little settlement at the junction of the two rivers, no other settlement existed in what is now the province of Manitoba. Nomadic bands of Indians wandered over the prairies, living almost entirely on the hunt of the buffalo.

During the long voyage from Quebec Father Darveau showed himself as a true apostle. Every evening he gathered the men of the brigade together for night prayer and a short familiar exhortation. He tells us that the men of the crew were not "among the saintliest of Quebeckers," but this did not dampen his zeal. At every fort at which they arrived Father Darveau heard the

confessions of the men who wished to receive the Sacraments. Moreover, as a crowning glory, he had the consolation of baptizing an Indian child, the first fruit of his Indian apostolate.

On his arrival in St. Boniface his first visit was to the Bishop, at that time Monseigneur Provencher. The Bishop longed for missionaries to look after his scattered flock and no doubt he hoped that Father Darveau might abide with him. In any case he welcomed him most cordially. It must here be noted that Father Darveau came to Western Canada to evangelize the Indians a full year before the intrepid and zealous Oblate Fathers came for the same purpose. It was in 1842 that the Oblates came, a band of three, of whom one was a young ecclesiastic. That young man, Antonin Taché, was destined to leave his mark on the history of the Church in Western Canada. He afterwards became Archbishop of St. Boniface and exercised a profound influence on the advancement of our country. It is sufficient to recall that he was at the Vatican Council in Rome, when Louis Riel was stirring up trouble among the Indians and halfbreeds in the Red River Colony. The Canadian Government sent a hurried call to Rome, that Archbishop Taché should return at once and quell the disturbance. Archbishop Taché did not loiter by the wayside, he came at once and poured oil on the troubled waters. It is not to be wondered at that his name is still cherished in affectionate remembrance by Catholics and Protestants alike.

Father Darveau never went beyond the Vicariate Apostolic of St. Boniface. His face was turned towards distant Oregon, but because of the impossibility of obtaining proper transportation, and, perhaps for other reasons, he did not go farther afield. At once he set himself to learn the Indian Saulteux language and his teacher was the Rev. A. Belcourt who had come from the archdiocese of Quebec to help Monseigneur Provencher in his arduous task. Father Belcourt had an excellent grasp of the language and was noted far and wide for his missionary exploits. Under Father Belcourt as his preceptor Father Darveau spent six months in the closest study of the Indian tongue.

When the six months were up, Father Belcourt bore this testimony to the worth of Father Darveau: "Although I have seen but twice, and merely in passing, our new co-worker, I see in him many of the characteristics of the good missionary. His zeal seems so great that it will place him, from the start, above all the privations inherent in the ministry he is going to exercise, and he appears to me dauntless enough to be able to present himself with coolness and sang-froid in a Saulteux encampment, as soon as he knows the language." Father Belcourt was not a man given to words of adulation and his testimony, therefore, must be regarded as of the highest value.

When Father Darveau finished his six months course in the Indian language, he was sent by Bishop Provencher to the Indian mission of Duck Bay on the western shores of Lake Winnipegosis. Duck Bay was the cradle

of his missionary career, as it was destined in a very few years to be his grave and his last resting place. His next post was at White Horse Plains (now St-François Xavier), where the population was composed almost exclusively of French halfbreeds. These poor misguided souls had one great vice, they were inordinately given to intemperance. Father Darveau labored zealously amongst them and there is reason to believe that his work was not without effect.

He was already experiencing some of the suffering and hardship which are the lot of the missionary. While crossing Lake Winnipegosis in March, 1843, he was lost in a blizzard for two days and nights and barely escaped with his life.

After ministering to his Indians at Duck Bay, Father Darveau repaired to Le Pas, a trading-post in northern Manitoba where the Indians were accustomed to assemble. Here he encountered a non-Catholic catechist, by the name of Henry Budd, a full-blooded Indian who had a singular conception of Christian charity. Not only did he do what he could to thwart the missionary activities of Father Darveau, but he constantly launched out against him, with the fury of one possessed, as an interloper. Thus, Sunday after Sunday, he expressed himself to those who would listen to him and the Redmen believed him and, consequently, regarded Father Darveau as a messenger of Satan. He represented Father Darveau as a "windigo," that is, one possessed of an evil spirit, who, through his influence with Satan brought upon their unlucky heads all kinds of epidemics which carried off thousands of poor victims. The Indians believed that it was their duty to kill such a creature, in order to ward off the disasters which would inevitably follow if he were left at liberty to pursue his nefarious work. Father Darveau, on the other hand, preached nothing but Christ and Christ's love for men, never making an unkind remark about those who did not share his religious beliefs. He was, in truth "all things to all men" after the example of Christ Himself. He would gladly have suffered martyrdom rather than offend Him who gave His life for the redemption of fallen man.

Father Darveau spent only five weeks at Le Pas. Before he left, he planted a cross where the future church would be built. During this short ministry he had received forty-five persons into the Church by holy baptism, and had united one couple in the bonds of matrimony. He departed, promising his faithful followers that he would return the following year.

During the same summer of 1843, Father Darveau had, on Lake Winnipegosis, another adventure that well illustrates the extraordinary faith and piety of the man. He had landed on an island where there were a few families of aborigines. These aborigines had previously refused to listen to him, but now he found them surprisingly well disposed. He gave them some instruction and promised to return to them later in the summer. On the latter occasion, Father Darveau almost lost his life. He was doubling a cape when

his frail canoe barely escaped some hidden rocks. So grateful was he for his deliverance that he turned around, climbed the cliff which threatened his life, and there, falling upon his knees, recited the *Te Deum*, followed by a very fervent *Salve Regina*.

Father Darveau returned to his mission stations on the lake in March, 1844. He first went to Duck Bay to minister to his people there. This being accomplished, he set out in June for his ultimate destination. The following evening, he and his two companions – a halfbreed by the name of Jean Baptiste Boyer and a Muskegon Indian boy – camped for the night on the beautiful shores of Lake Winnipegosis. They lighted their camp fire, which was seen at once by some Indians in the neighborhood. With their usual curiosity the Indians came over at once to see who the visitors were. These Indians were the faithful followers and devoted adherents of Henry Budd and they must surely have been surprised when they noted among the visitors the “windigo,” Father Darveau. Father Darveau received them very kindly and talked to them for a time on religious topics, explaining to them in particular Christ’s law of love. But the Indians did not forget their duty as explained to them by Henry Budd, and, levelling their guns, they first shot the halfbreed, Jean Baptiste Boyer. They then turned their guns on Father Darveau and shot him through the heart. For the moment the Muskegon Indian boy was spared, but later, he was decoyed to a remote spot by one of the murderers, who feared that he might tell the truth of what had taken place, and was never heard of afterwards. The report first went forth that Father Darveau and his companions were drowned and that their dead bodies had been washed ashore. Bishop Provencher reported to the Archbishop of Quebec as follows: “People have come from the end of Lake Winnipegosis to tell me that Father Darveau has been drowned, as well as the two men he had with him. He had left this place during the Month of March, so that he might have some time to consecrate to the instruction of the Duck Bay Indians and proceed, on, the breaking up of the ice, to Le Pas, a mission he opened up laid yew. I have learned that he had left Duck Bay in the evening, and had camped a short distance therefrom. It is likely that he perished in setting out on the morrow, as his body, that of one of his men, Jean-Baptiste Boyer, halfbreed from White Horse Plains, his canoe and other belongings, have been found near his camp. It is the Indians who have found on the beach the body of our unfortunate missionary and that of his companion. They immediately went to tell the bad news to some Metis who were making salt at Duck Bay. Two of the latter left at once to render the honors of sepulture to the deceased ones, either on the spot or at the chapel of Duck Bay. The body of the young Indian who was also with Father Darveau has not been found. A great distance intervenes between this place and that where the accident took place – it is a journey of a score of days. Two men left on the 24th of the present month with a coffin to bring back the missionary’s

remains, so that we may give them ecclesiastical burial.” Such was the first report that circulated among the halfbreeds and whites of the country. In the same letter to the Archbishop of Quebec, Bishop Provencher deploras his loss and describes Father Darveau as “zealous and very active, who used to put up with everything and little feared those privations to which a missionary is often exposed.”

The report that Father Darveau was drowned accounts for the fact that no criminal action was ever taken against his murderers. But what the courts of criminal law did not do to avenge the terrible crime, God reserved to Himself. We cannot do better than quote here *verbatim* the admirable History of Father Morice, which gives a detailed account of the shooting of Father Darveau and the sad lot that, by the hand of God, befell the murderers. Father Morice tells how Father Darveau was setting forth Christ’s doctrine of love and then goes on to say:

“One of the Indians, called Shetakon, drew apart an old man. Chimekatis, and representeed to him that the priest was the cause of the epidemic which had lately ravaged the tribe. Therefore, he added, we must do away with him before he has brought the Indians of Le Pas to his way of praying and thereby ultimately cause their destruction. The missionary’s exhortation to embrace the true faith still accentuated the ill-will of the old man against him, and must have sealed his doom. And lest their crime should be known to the whites, they found it necessary to kill Boyer first, after which one of the old men shot the priest. But so nervous was he at the thought of the possible consequences of his deed, that he fired wide of the mark. The guns of both men were then emptied and, lest their intended victim should attempt to escape while they were reloading, they urged the third man, called Vizena, the son-in-law of Chimekatis, to kill the priest. “Shoot him... Dispatch him quick” cried out Chimekatis. “Shoot him, I say, or he will kill us himself.” Reluctantly, Vizena fired the fatal shot, and Father Darveau fell by the side of his canoe.”

The body of Father Darveau and that of his companion remained long undiscovered on the beach. When found, they were in too advanced a state of decomposition to allow of close examination.

But the murderers suffered for their crime. Shetakon had a miserable and a worthy chastisement for his nefarious deed. Chimekatis had even a worse ending. Blind and deaf for a long time, he was burnt alive in his miserable hut. Vizena admitted publicly, at the hour of his death, that he was going to hell for two reasons: he had assassinated his two wives and he had shot Father Darveau. Thus perished under the hand of God those vile assassins who had foully done a fellow-creature to death.

It has often been said: “The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians.” And so it has been in this case. The faith has flourished around Duck Bay. The Indians there have come into the Church in such numbers that there is

not a single individual in the vicinity who is not a faithful and devoted member of the fold. And I personally can bear witness to the fervor of their faith. I was on one occasion in Camperville, the parish church of Duck Bay, some seventeen miles distant. It was the month of February, the coldest time of the year, and the ground was covered with snow. All the Indians came in the evening to go to Confession. The next morning I said Mass at six o'clock. Not only was the large stone church filled to capacity, but every single individual in the church went to Holy Communion. The Indians of Duck Bay must have left their warm homes shortly after three o'clock in the morning to drive seventeen miles and be present at the commencement of Mass. Has such piety ever been duplicated amongst the whites?

Ordained in February, 1841, and done to death in June, 1844, three short years marks the whole span of Father Darveau's apostolate among the Indians. God's work is not measured by space or time, and three short years may have the same value as an eternity of time. The body of Father Darveau was interred at Duck Bay, at the very spot where he met his untimely end. Later the body was exhumed and it now rests in the crypt beneath the high altar in St. Boniface Cathedral, to await the final call when the dead shall come forth from their graves.

Father Darveau was murdered *in odium fidei*, "in hatred of the faith" – the hatred that was inspired by Henry Budd in his provocative sermons against Father Darveau. To die in this manner, to be done to death "in hatred of the faith," has always been regarded by the Church as equivalent to martyrdom. However, only Holy Mother Church can pronounce the final sentence on any individual case. All we can do is to pray that God has dealt kindly with Father Darveau and that, after buffeting the storms of life, he is now at rest forever.

Only a simple wooden cross marks the exact spot of Father Darveau's interment. But some years ago, precisely in 1930, a cairn in stone was erected at the Indian Residential School in Camperville to the memory of Father Darveau. It was considered a fitting place for such a monument, as the exact spot of death is remote and rather inaccessible. On the monument is inscribed, in English and in French, the salient points in the life and work of Father Darveau. In this manner it is hoped that his memory will be preserved unto future generations, an example in faith and courage that others may follow for their own benefit and for the benefit of their fellow men.

#### Bibliographical Note.

For the greater part of the material in this paper we are indebted to the work of the Rev. A. G. Morice, O.M.L., *The History of the Catholic Church in Western Canada*.

Father Morice has made use of the archives of the Oblate Fathers, as well as those of the archdioceses of St. Boniface and Quebec. He was personally acquainted with some persons who had an intimate knowledge of the work of Father Darveau. Among these was Father J. C. Camper, O.M.I., one of the greatest of the Oblate missionaries among the Indians in Manitoba. Father Camper discovered the facts here related concerning the death of Father Darveau and his companions.