

NOTES OF FATHER MERCREDI by RAY PRICE_

EDMONTON, ALTA - DECEMBER 1, 1977_

Ray: I have just returned from a visit with Father Mercredi, he explicitly stated that he's not one to seek for publicity, so I hesitated with producing the tape recorder. Hence, I have to rely on my memory.

He told me something about his family background. Apparently, the name Mercredi as far as he's concerned comes from his father's father's side of the family who was a McCarthy. A Priest who was a French speaking Priest in Chip couldn't handle the th in that and altered the word to Mercredi. His mother was a McDonald and his father a Mercredi and there are Tourangeau in his family tree as well as McDonald and McCarthy. He states that he is a mixture of French and Cree and Irish and Scot. One of the things that came out constantly is that he has been discriminated against all his life, discriminated against by fellow priest, discriminated against by the Brothers in the service of the priesthood, discriminated against in College and Insemenary. And it was explicitly at one time that he was sent to France for 4 years in order to Frenchify him, to make him a cultured man and to turn him into a Frenchman. They haven't been able to succeed and the older he gets the more he goes back to his roots, and he feels it is in Fort Chipewyan and in the North American Indian culture, a culture that was dependent directly upon the land for survival.

He attended Convent School in Chip for 10 yrs from 1910-1920 and during that time he had 10 meals in his own home. His father put him in the Convent and once a week his parents would come and visit him particularly his mother but he had 2 sisters who were also in the Convent and he discovered when Mother

came to visit the girls would do all the talking and he would be left in some corner to eat peanuts or chocolate bar or candy or whatever it was mom had brought. This sticks in his mind and obviously in some way it rankled and he was left out. He complained of the regiment in the Convent the fact that they were held at such a tight rein and weren't able to speak to the girls. And fish everyday to eat, taken for a walk like a collection of soldiers and not allowed to speak their own native languages but at the same time he recognizes that thru the Convent and the Administration of the RC Church, he was able to obtain an education that met something to him. And he learned many hobbies in the Convent, learned how to paint. Even today he's painting in oils and he's translating hymns into Cree he has a hymn book of over 320 hymns that he has carefully translated in Cree. Unfortunately, he can find no one to publish the Bishop is not terribly interested in Cree and nobody speaks Cree up there and he cannot get the Bishop's signature to get someone else to publish it. Father Mercedi does not like seminars and he doesn't like to go to them because all they do is to confirm each person their own beliefs. If I go there with my own belief I don't get changed by the seminar and I don't get any or make any converts. Others think differently and that's the end of it. One of the strong criticisms is that the Church went into the north not to evangelize but to civilize. You see it's a real difference in civilizing and evangelizing. He feels that the Church lost its ministry. He demonstrates this by an incident that took place in Fort Smith when 3 young people were killed in an automobile crash. They were of different faiths and the Father of the RC boy nearly went out of his mind because this boy of 15 was his favourite son and he didn't know nearly where to put himself or what to do with himself. In contrast to that there was the son of a Pentecostal home and Father went to this home too to tender his solace and sympathy and the answer he got was a humble "The Lord gave and the Lord

has taken away, Blessed be the name of the Lord" He says, now there is a spiritual Ministry. There they really had a hold of something. He says, there is so little in the Roman Church that does that. His concern of the Priests that were slain in Dismal Lake, Father Lareaux and Father Ruvier should not be saints or canonized. He doesn't think they married it, he mentions the story of the French in Aklavik who were shot by a young fellow some years ago. Jack Sperry, the present Bishop of Anglican religion in the arctic was in Aklavik at the time and actually was the one that prepared Father French for death. There was no other RC Priest that was available. Father French had been conducting communion classes for a group of young people. This boy who shot him was a RC out of a split home and the father in that home brought the boy some drink. The boy was drunk and he went to see Father French early in the morning. Father French heard some noise downstairs so he went downstairs. And he said, Go on home you drunken Indian, I don't want to talk to you until you're sober. And he shut the door. And the young man shot Father French thru the door. Now I don't know that Father French did say that but Father Mercredi has it as a guess that he did say that. Many of the priests have regarded the Indians and the metis that are rather less than themselves and for all their Ministry and administration that the greatest people in the world you are something rather less than they are. He said this came out very strong and clear during his 4 years in France. He also says that he believes that people of British hold less prejudice against the Indian and the Metis than do the French. An interesting comment coming with a person who lived with and talked with French men thru a fair part of their life.

I asked him how come he became a priest? And he said, he felt he was called. He said it was difficult to put his finger on it, he says there was a Father who is still alive Bequoc who is apparently ;90 yrs old in France. This man

suggested to young fellows that they should go to seminary. Father Mercredi remembers that he was a good friend of him but he thought going to seminary was abhorrent to him. So from then on he avoided that Father and was glad to see that he was posted away to Fon du Lac, and when he returned from Fondu Lac and worshipped in the Church in which Father Mercredi was attending Mass, Father Mercredi hid behind a pillar so this Priest wouldn't see him. He was obviously considering going into the seminary but didn't want to be confronted with the issue. After he left the Convent he left and worked for awhile and managed to get a very good dog team. All of them part wolf, fine up standing dogs with pointed ears and bushy tails. These dogs many people wanted to buy and they kept bugging him to sell these dogs. But Father Mercredi's father said Look, if people keep wanting to buy these dogs you better put a price on them. However, a man called Letendre came thru with the money and put cash on the barrel and there went Father Mercredi's dogs and he was so upset that he didn't want to stay in Chip anymore. And he said that's really how I came to go into the Seminary and the Ministry. He said, my father and my mother died and I shed tears for them but he said, I shed more tears for my dogs. And he said, I still have a photograph of the team with 2 of the dogs but not one of the whole team. By then they belonged with someone else and by that time they were hitched up with some one elses scruffy mongrels.

Anyway, I asked Father Mercredi about the land claims settlement. He said, I know so little about it he said, I have no stance on it. He said, I think they're making a mistake. I asked who and he said, perhaps the Indian people are. He said, the Alberta Railway went thru it didn't hurt anything it didn't hurt the game, wild animals are still there and a person can still live off the land if they choose.

Father has attended seminars and when asked to speak he says that he believes that they discriminate against the native people and this has not gone over terribly well. He is a great friend with Jack Sperry and speaks well of

him. I asked him why so few natives become (not) priests. And he said, that it's quite clear why they don't and he says that he heard some priest actually say, that the Priest hood is now for half-breeds and natives. Somehow it was beyond the reach of these 'savages'. Whether he uses the term 'savages' French-wise or not is not known.

I am impressed with Father Mercredi, he is a man of some spiritual value and a man who has stuck it out. He hated seminary and he hated college but he stuck it out, I hated it out there but stuck it.

Most of his priesthood in McMurray and Lac La Biche and a few years in Fort Smith. And another reason why natives don't become involved in priesthood is because one of the metis said to the Bishop., Look why don't you get priests it 's obvious you don't now. What did you do when you did get them, What did you do with Father Lafferty? You stuck him in Fort Fitzgerald for 25 yrs and what did you do with Father Mercredi? You put him a little in between house somewhere between Lac La Biche and Ft McMurray there's no possibility of advancement for native priests.

Father shared with me that during his ministry never once did he have a Brother to share it with and this made it a very lonely path for him. And he used as his confidence the older ones in the community. And he was glad that he did because they were great and interesting persons. And he recalls how religious they were, he recalls travelling by dog team and camping in the bitter cold. And the old man whom he was travelling would meditate, prior to going to sleep and first thing in the morning. Before crossing a river he would ask the Great Spirit to keep him safe and when he did cross the river h e would give thanks to the Great Spirit for the safe passage and offer something to the Great Spirit by the river, walking around it 3 times. He also told me something about medicine men and he believes that they do have the ability to cure some sicknesses with the use of herbs and

other means. But he says one thing that he did run into more than one occasion was the use of love potions. He had girls come to him and say that a certain boy came to them and say that they wanted to marry them but they didn't want to marry them. But they were frightened that he would use a love potion and the young fellows would go to the Sherman, the Medicine Man, and obtain the potion and get the young lady to drink. And apparently the potion would encourage the woman to fall in love. And some of the priests don't believe in the love potions but he says that he does. He says, that men and women have been brought together by using these things from his experience. Of course their marriage was not recognized by the Church because they never had them ratified by the Church.

Father Mercredi is in average health and he has suffered several heart attacks and suffers from angina and he carries ^{nytro} glycerine to relieve the pain and he says he thinks he must get himself ready for the big trip. One of the things that he did say, I forgot to mention earlier on in the tape. The Priests have failed to really live with the native people, they have lived among them but have not lived with them. He says, this is the basic failure of the Church. He says, he hears constantly from the Church that what are we going to do we're losing the native people, they're leaving us. We would never have lost them if we went there to evangelize and not civilize. We'd never lose them if we lived with them not just among them.

END