

WHY THE ANGLICANS OF ODANAK COMMEMORATE A CONGREGATIONAL MINISTER

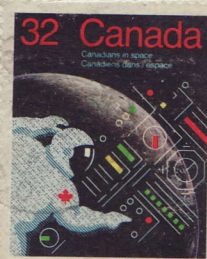
In 1754, five years before Roger's Rangers, sacked and put the the torch the Abenaki village of St. Francis, Quebec, the Rev. Eleazar Wheelock founded Moor's Charity School in Lebanon, Connecticut, for the "civilization and education of Indian youth". Enlarging this purpose, the school evolved into Dartmouth College and moved to Hanover, New Hampshire in 1770. It was not long before students were recruited from St. Francis, the first of many. Visiting there in 1810, the Rev. Thaddeus Osgood wrote Wheelock's successor (and son) about enrolling Capt. Annance's youngest and another lad providing the son already at Hanover return home. Osgood also expressed his firm hope that a Protestant minister might soon be settled at St. Francis (today known as Odanak).

Twenty years later that dream began to take shape when a St. Francis Indian experienced conversion while attending Moor's Charity School (1822-23 and 1826-29). His name was Peter Paul Wzokhilain (often spelled Osunkhirhine). This young man soon prepared in his native tongue a primer and religious tract, both printed in 1830 at Boston by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (now the United Church Board for World Ministries). His education and ability won Wzokhilain an appointment as government schoolmaster at Odanak. As a Protestant, he also witnessed to his adopted faith and initiated meetings. When some hearers defected from Roman Catholicism, the Government was pressured to warn him: continuing this disruptive activity would jeopardize his position.

Not one to be easily intimidated, Peter Paul did not stop evangelizing and soon found himself without a job. He then petitioned the American Board for support and was appointed a missionary on November 17, 1835. The "Mission to the Abenakis" had become a reality. In January 1836, he was licensed to preach by the Champlain Presbytery of New York and Vermont. Within two years, a meeting-house had been built from Canadian gifts and a Congregational church with six members was gathered with the fraternal blessing of the Revs. David Dunkerley and Ammi Parker of ~~Dunham~~ and Danville, respectively, in nearby County Richmond. Six months later, Wzokhilain was formally installed as pastor. There were now twelve members, eight Indians and four whites.

Peter Paul was able to report in 1838 a congregation of sixty (75% Indian) despite injunctions by the priest that no one attend evangelical meetings or even visit Protestant families. He was now so preoccupied with preaching, writing and printing tracts, farming with no hired help, composing and printing psalms and tunes in Abenaki, and serving as a French and English translator that he could no longer keep school. Money was found and Miss Caroline Rankin of Melbourne was commissioned from the ranks of County Richmond Congregationalists. Her gifts soon won the confidence of her twenty pupils, the women with whom she worked, her Indian pastor, and the Board in Boston which elevated her to female assistant missionary by 1843 (as much as a woman could hope for in those days). However, poor attendance apparently undercut her work that year and she left. Meanwhile, Peter Paul had pursued the cause of temperance and boasted in May of 1839 that forty-seven parishioners had made - and kept - pledges of total abstinence. It was an achievement that could not, and did not, last.

Given the theological climate of the times, churches were quick to assert claims of their own superiority and accuse others of heresy. A spirit of contention simmered and sometime boiled over at St. Francis. Defections from the other camp were no doubt heralded with glee. Peter Paul's insistence on total abstinence inevitably set the stage for painful applications of church discipline as adherents fell from grace and were confronted. The old adversaries of Wzokhilain's brand of Protestantism were stubborn and, much too often, seemed



triumphant. The grand occasion in February 1841 when the Rev. Henry Wilkes, D.D., LL.D. of Montreal, the "Congregational Bishop of Canada", had visited Odanak and baptized the pastor's son "Solomon" became only a memory. By 1843, Peter Paul was downcast with poor health and the death of three children in rapid succession. Still, in 1846, it was estimated that fully one third of the three hundred Indians at Odanak were Protestants, thanks to the labors of the "judicious and devoted" native missionary who provided three services on Sunday and three during the week.

By the early 1850's, the Congregationalists at St. Francis were doing well to hold their own. Reports in The Missionary Herald, organ of the American Board, became scarcer and more terse in content. By 1857, the once intrepid missionary was talking of insuperable obstacles and expressing interest in relocating in Upper Canada. Despite an offer for reassignment to the Stockbridge Indian Mission in Wisconsin, Peter Paul was released by the Board in 1858. The Mission to the Abenakis had come to an end. Wzokhilain did, in fact, remove to the Tuscarora Indian Reservation where, in 1860, he was living in the American Board mission house and conducting services. Little more is known of this outstanding Indian and man of God though legend has it that he lived to the age of ninety and died at Port Huron, Michigan.

The Protestants of St. Francis were still without a shepherd in November 1858 when an Anglican missionary, the Rev. Joseph de Moulpied, was asked to officiate at a Sorel, Quebec, wedding for an Abenaki woman. She did not speak French and an interpreter was necessary. Fifty members of the tribe were present one of whose leaders asked de Moulpied to visit Odanak the next Sunday and preach in the French language. This he did, leading the customary three services with gratifying results. At the evening service, almost as many Roman Catholic Indians as Protestant were in attendance. According to de Moulpied, the Congregationalists, surely unaccustomed to ritual, "evinced much delight as the solemn words of our Liturgy fell upon their ears"! His host was none other Peter Paul's half brother. No wonder he urged the Colonial Church and School Society to occupy the field. Within three years, in 1862, St. Francis Anglican Mission was duly constituted. The honor of building the present church fell to the first resident missionary, the Rev. Octave Fortin.

Thus it came about that the congregation gathered and nurtured for a quarter century by a Congregational minister and missionary native to Odanak adapted Anglican ways. It is this community of faith which celebrates three related anniversaries: the 144th of Protestant beginnings, the 152nd of church organization by its father in Christ, the Rev. Peter Paul Wzokhilain, and 120 years of Anglican corporate presence as St. Francis Mission.

Robert L. Howard

On September 5th, 1982, a memorial tablet was dedicated at St. Francis Mission, Odanak, commemorating the **Reverend Peter Paul Wzokhilain** (Osunkhirhine), an Abenakis Indian who became a Christian and studied at Moor's Charity School (now Dartmouth College). He returned to Odanak and put his native tongue into writing. He founded a Congregational Church in 1838, and upon his departure 20 years later the remnant formed the Anglican congregation which continues to this day. The project to erect the memorial tablet was spearheaded by Mrs. Alice Wawanolet of Odanak, with the enthusiastic help of the Reverend Robert Howard, Minister of the Federated Church in Thomaston, Maine, who was present at the dedication ceremony.