Chapter Two
1858 to 1906
The New Arrival

His appearance in a home never failed to bring comfort, consolation and new hope. … He liked clean fun, … Wherever he went he left a ray of sunshine.

FATHER JOSEPH A. ROY

All his life, with few exceptions, he will sign his name “J.A. Roy,” which would create some confusion in my research since in some documents referring to him I would find written in long form “Jérémie Alphonse Roy” and in others “Joseph Alphonse Roy.” All the historical sources I consulted indicate that this is one and the same man. According to his baptismal certificate, he was born “Désiré Jérémie Roy.” Désiré was his godfather’s name. Later, I would be surprised to discover that he had made other creative alterations to his name and that the cloth of ambiguity surrounding his identity was only a reflection of the deeper ambiguity governing his beliefs, his actions and his emotions.

Upon his arrival in Hanmer in August 1906, Father Roy is 48 years old. At first sight, his cassock doesn’t give anyone to suspect the pioneer life that he had led before coming to Hanmer. Born in 1858 on a farm in Berthierville, Quebec, he chose to leave farming and the family homestead behind to undertake classical studies at the Seminary in Joliette. He then entered the Grand Séminaire in Montreal, where he studied theology. He was ordained as a priest by Bishop Monsignor Fabre on 26 February 1888. Afterwards, he would have become the vicar of Saint Eustache or of Saint-Valentin Parish near Montreal, a position he would have occupied for approximately two years (1888–1889).

THE FRANCOPHONE CATHOLIC CLERGY IN THE CANADIAN WEST

Father Jérémie becomes a priest during a bustling period in the history of the Catholic Church. Indeed, since 1870 the Catholic Church has given itself the mission to establish a French-Catholic presence on the entire Canadian territory. In the West, Monsignor Alexandre Taché, Bishop of Saint Boniface since 1854, works assiduously to ensure the rights of French Canadians and of the
Métis. In 1869, the Canadian government acquires Rupert’s Land from the Hudson’s Bay Company, setting off, as a domino effect, the Red River Rebellion (1869–1870). Feeling threatened by this acquisition, the Métis create a provisional government under the leadership of Louis Riel. The francophone Catholic clergy, sympathetic to the Métis cause, helps the provisional government to draft a list of Métis rights. Monsignor Taché, who lived for more than twenty years among the Métis, understands their concerns and tries to sensitize the Canadian government representatives but to no avail. Nevertheless, negotiations between Riel’s provisional government and Canada come to a conclusion and, on 12 May 1870, Manitoba becomes the Canadian Confederation’s fifth province. However, the Canadian government having refused to grant him amnesty, Riel is forced into exile in the United States.

Monsignor Taché, still convinced of the importance of increasing the French-speaking population in the West, launches a campaign to entice francophone settlers to the Northwest Territories. Missionary-colonizers travel throughout the province of Quebec extolling to would-be settlers the richness of the lands in the Prairies. Afterwards, they go to New England to convince French Canadians who had emigrated there to also come settle in the Northwest Territories.

Meanwhile, many settlers arrive in Saskatchewan. Some Métis who had moved there following the Red River Rebellion find themselves once more threatened with losing their lands. In 1884, they call Riel back from exile and once again form a provisional government. A new rebellion, the North West Rebellion (or Saskatchewan Rebellion) erupts in 1885. However, this time the Catholic Church steers clear of the Métis. After many bloody battles, the latter are defeated. Monsignor Taché pleads with the Canadian government to pardon Riel but in vain. On 16 November 1885, Riel is hanged in Regina.

The western francophone clergy’s campaign to recruit French-
speaking settlers keeps on spreading. Between 1885 and 1893, representatives from the Canadian government, including Father Antoine Labelle, go on a formal mission to French-speaking countries in Europe to promote the coming of francophone settlers to Canada. Pierre Foursin, Secretary to the Canadian High Commission in France, travels to Canada repeatedly to study the feasibility of such a project. Subsequently, he creates in Paris the Real Property Society of Canada, which finances sending francophone Catholic settlers to western Canada.

As early as 1887, the Church begins recruiting young francophone priests willing to open new missions in the West for the anticipated settlers. The adventure seems to have tempted young Father Jérémie since he accepts to become a missionary in the West in 1890.

WOLSELEY, SASKATCHEWAN

When Father Roy arrives as a vicar in Regina in 1890, the memory of Louis Riel’s hanging in this city only five years before is still fresh in people’s minds. The population in this territory, which will become Saskatchewan in 1905, is in full expansion. Between 1880 and 1911, it grows from 20,000 to 492,000 inhabitants. As for the number of farms, they increase from 1,500 in 1886 to 56,000 in 1906.²

Since Saint-Boniface in Manitoba is the only Episcopal seat in western Canada, few priests have yet taken up a ministry in the region. Therefore, each priest is entrusted with the responsibility for several missions. Soon after his arrival, Father Roy becomes the first resident pastor in Wolseley, situated 65 miles (105 km) east of Regina. During this ministry, his duties require him to travel constantly. The registers for Saint Anne’s Parish reveal that Father Jérémie has under his purview, in addition to Wolseley, the missions situated in a 30- to 40-mile (48- to 64-km) radius around Wolseley: Qu’Appelle and Balgonie in the west, and in the east Grenfell, Broadview, and even Whitewood 46 miles (74 km) from
Wolseley. In addition, when the Montmartre mission is created in 1893, 47 miles (76 km) south of Wolseley, it also becomes his responsibility. Since these parishes are connected by dirt roads and the means of transportation in this era generally come down to a one-horse buggy, one can begin to grasp the breadth of Father Roy’s responsibilities as he must regularly visit each parish, summer and winter alike, while making sure to be back in Wolseley every Sunday to say Mass.

On 20 March 1890, we find the first inscription under his name in the parish registers: the christening of a girl from Qu’Appelle. He signs, “J.A. Roy, priest.” According to the 1928 version of the *Dictionnaire biographique du clergé canadien-français* (the Dictionary of Biographies of French-Canadian Clergy), the initials J.A. would stand for Jérémie Alphonse. But where does “Alphonse” come from, since
it is not on his baptismal certificate? Is it a name adopted at the time of his ordination? That is a possibility. One should remember that since most people in this era were illiterate, excepting the clergy, names were adopted, used and spelled without following strict rules. They only become important when it came to signing official papers such as a baptismal certificate, a marriage license or a notarized document. Thus, it is quite possible that Jérémie had adopted Alphonse as a second name to use only from time to time, for example when signing official documents. In fact, the stories covering this period of his life seem to confirm this hypothesis since they indicate that people called him simply “Abbot Jérémie” or “Father Jérémie” or “Father Roy.”

Research in the archives of the Saskatchewan Archives Board and of the Regina Archdiocese enable us to follow his trail and give us an idea of the tasks he accomplishes and the difficult conditions in which he works. The Wolseley presbytery where Father Roy lives intermittently between 1890 and 1900 consists only of two rooms: a bedroom and one other unadorned room serving as kitchen and dining room. A stove, a box for firewood, chairs, a table, and a storage chest for provisions constitute all the furniture in this room. As is the custom, the village curate gets room and board from the parishioners. They are responsible each in turn to keep his larder full. However, try as they may, it sometimes happens that the priest finds his chest empty if he comes home earlier than expected.

On 7 September 1890, we find him baptizing two children in Balgonie. On 14 November 1893, he makes a special trip to Montmartre to baptize the Simonins’ daughter. In December of that same year, a Montmartre resident comes and fetches him in a hurry to administer the last rites to a Montmartre man suffering from pneumonia. Unfortunately, after having travelled 47 miles (76 kilometres) in the cold from Wolseley to Montmartre, the two men arrive too late: the patient has uttered his last breath. Father Roy sings a requiem mass for the deceased.
Father Roy maintains excellent relations with the Montmartre parishioners. They trust him and his presence comforts them in times of need. His sense of humour livens up every visit to Montmartre homes. It is not surprising therefore that the parishioners invite him to participate in important community events. For instance, on 1 April 1894, residents of Montmartre celebrate the first day of their first spring in Montmartre. They invite Father Roy to partake in their celebrations. He hears confession and sings a High Mass. This day will be remembered as a milestone in the history of Montmartre and the parishioners will be forever grateful to Father Roy, who accepted to come and share with them this historic moment. In 1926, they erect in Montmartre the Roy Cross to commemorate this important day.
Father Roy’s tasks are not limited to administering the blessed sacraments or to saying mass for his flock. A letter dated July 1895 by a certain Martelle from Wolseley and addressed to Archbishop Langevin indicates that Father Roy also gave advice to some couples experiencing marital problems and that some of them separated after receiving his advice. The letter also refers to his taking care of many civil matters without describing their nature. Mr. Martelle complains that Father Roy spends more time on these civil matters than on his religious tasks. His activities are not unanimously accepted by Wolseley parishioners, even though Father Roy is merely doing the duties expected of a parish priest of his day. “The priest was the driving force in a parish. Much respected, he could play the role of pedagogical, economic, legal and cultural advisor. The vitality of a parish was directly linked to the personality and energy of its curate.” However, Father Roy does not always share his superior’s views on questions of morality. He understands and shares the settlers’ life and the harsh conditions in which they live, with the result that he indulges them and lets them enjoy the small pleasures their rustic life affords them. But his Archbishop in Saint-Boniface does not see things that way. Thus Father Roy finds himself sometimes between a rock and a hard place, as evidenced by the visit he reluctantly makes to Montmartre at the beginning of the year in 1896:

In fact at the beginning of the year 1896, in one of his rare visits to Montmartre, the pastor of Wolseley had come to announce to Mr. and Mrs. De Tremaudan that he had received orders to have these evenings of dancing stopped. The good priest admitted that, personally, he understood that the dances at Montmartre were well conducted, but he still was obliged to carry out the instructions received. The clergy of Canada would not tolerate dancing, especially dances
such as the waltz, the polka, the mazurka, and it even went so far as to refuse the sacraments to persons who participated or organized dances. The pastor also advised that the young folks of Wolseley be no longer invited to any reunion whatsoever; the French Canadian parents complained that the young folks were not able to work the next day after passing the night dancing at Montmartre.  

The correspondence that Father Roy entertained with his Archbishop, Monsignor Langevin, between 1896 and 1900, reveals a man tired of the physical and moral sacrifices inherent in his life as a priest/missionary. At the instigation of Monsignor Langevin, he undertakes the construction of the Wolseley church but does it reluctantly, as evidenced in his 24 March 1896 letter to the Archbishop:

“Truthfully, my parishioners do not deserve the sacrifices and risks that we impose on ourselves. I find myself getting disgusted and I am tempted to abandon them and to take off elsewhere. I will start this construction but I do not promise to complete it. Pray for me, Monsignor …”

This construction causes him unrelenting financial worries and multiple arguments with the parishioners’ committee involved in the project. How he would like to escape from this burden! On numerous occasions, he asks Monsignor Langevin to assign him to a ministry elsewhere. He suggests the Klondike or the West. Finally, in early 1900, the ecclesiastic authorities send him to Vernon, British Columbia. The last inscription under his name in the Wolseley parish registry is dated 12 April 1900. It is for the baptism of a boy, son of a farmer named Gérald Seymour from Sintaluta. The child inherits the first names Gérald Roy.
The citizens of Montmartre feel a great deal of sadness to see him go. The portrait they write of him in the *History of Montmartre* attests to the warm human relationships he maintained with them:

Gifted with a lively deeply-rooted faith, he devoted himself wholeheartedly to the temporal as well as the spiritual welfare of his flock, and shared their trials, tribulations and privations, which he himself had experienced. They placed all their confidence in him. His appearance in a home never failed to bring comfort, consolation and new hope. He settled quarrels and renewed their courage. He was indulgent towards sinners, but was a staunch enemy to sin himself under any of its forms. He roused the sluggish and encouraged the timid. He liked clean fun, and this was very necessary to the men of the prairies. Wherever he went, he left a ray of sunshine. Such was the Missionary-Pastor who was to exert a profound and lasting influence on the colonists of Montmartre, either by visits to their dwellings or by his ministry in the poor church at Wolseley.
VERNON, BRITISH COLUMBIA

Father Roy is therefore assigned to St. James Parish in Vernon. His first inscription in the parish baptismal registry is dated 27 May 1900. I could not find any details regarding this period of his life in Vernon. I only know that in 1901 two of the “best families” from Wolseley moved there to join him because the climate is more pleasant.  

One could expect that this new ministry would free him from criticism by the parishioners’ committee in Wolseley and put an end to his worries. Unfortunately, he continues to receive letters from Monsignor Langevin regarding Wolseley’s financial problems. The tone of his replies indicates how exasperated he is with the petty complaints about him and how hurt he is by Monsignor Langevin’s apparent lack of trust in him. The last three lines of his 2 May 1900 letter are a cry from his heart: “Let me tell you, Monsignor, that if you want to discourage me you only have to keep up this pestering. I can readily give up my ministry. I can live without this.”  

Is it only frustration that makes him threaten to renounce the priesthood, or is he beginning to have doubts about his vocation? We can’t tell. But he certainly harbours ambiguous feelings about his ministry.  

The last inscription under his name in the baptismal registry in St James Parish is on 20 September 1905. Then I find no trace of him until a year later, in August 1906. What does Father Roy do during this period? Does he take a leave of absence to reflect on his future? Does he return to his family in the Province of Quebec to rest for a few months? We can surmise that he spends part of the time negotiating with the Church regarding the destination of his next assignment. But something definitely important occurs during this year because it is a “new” Father Roy who finds himself assigned to the hamlet of Hanmer, a small francophone enclave in northern Ontario where, in the late nineteenth century, economic development is mostly governed by anglophone masters.
Hanmer, Ontario (August 1906)

On 1 August 1906, Father Roy takes up his duties as the first parish priest in Hanmer. He has not just donned new responsibilities: he seems to have also acquired a new identity during the past year. Indeed, during my interviews with Marie-Louise’s family members in Hanmer, the issue of Father Roy’s identity crops up when I refer to him as “Jérémie.” His niece corrects me:

*His name is “Joseph.” We never heard anything else besides Joseph. In all the books it was always “Joseph Roy,” Joseph A. Roy. Joseph Alphonse, I believe.*

She is right! Later I discover documents from this period signed by Father Roy showing in his handwriting “Joseph A. Roy.” I tell myself that he might have simply chosen to use Joseph instead of Jérémie. It is plausible because in this era all boys were christened with the first name of Joseph and all girls with the first name of Mary. This first name would be followed by two or more given names: Joseph François Aimé or Joseph Louis Victor or Joseph Napoléon, etc. But on his baptismal certificate I do not find Joseph. I pursue my research and consult once more the *Dictionnaire biographique du clergé canadien-français*. The 1908 and 1928 editions clearly indicate that Father J.A. Roy, missionary in western Canada, and Father Jérémie Alphonse Roy, first curate of Hanmer, are one and the same person. So why does he introduce himself to his parishioners as Joseph Alphonse instead of Jérémie Alphonse? Is he trying to cover up something in his past? What happened between Vernon and Hanmer? I never found the answers to these questions and they only increase the ambiguity clouding the portrait of this man.

Whatever the case may be, whether he presents himself as Jérémie or Joseph does not change the fact that he is ideally suited to establish a parish in Hanmer. His ministry in the West endowed him with all the experience he needs to take on the task. For him, it is

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only one more French Catholic mission to found in a land of colonization. His duties also cover the nearby township of Capreol. As in the West, he will have to travel around frequently with precarious means of transportation and in sometimes inclement weather. So he understands the challenges ahead of him! But what he cannot foresee upon his arrival is that he will discover during this mission another very agreeable side to life that will turn his beliefs upside down and provoke a tortuous emotional development in his heart of hearts.

**FIRST MEETING WITH MARIE-LOUISE**

As the parish’s new curate, Joseph Roy’s first duty is to make the rounds of the homes and introduce himself to the settlers. He shakes hands with the parents and says a few kind words to the children. At Napoléon Labelle’s house, he meets Marie-Louise for the first time. She is 15 years old. They probably exchange a smile and a few pleasantries at the most.

He leaves a good impression in Hanmer homes and, the following year, he doesn’t take long to fulfill the settlers’ fondest dream, that of building the hamlet’s first chapel. This small chapel strengthens the community’s identity. Hanmer is no longer just an agglomeration of settlers that receives a priest once a month when he comes to say mass. Hanmer is now a parish where a resident priest administers the sacraments and teaches catechism to the children. Christenings, weddings and first communions follow one another and ensure stability in the settlers’ spiritual, emotional and social life.