

HISTORIC SITES AND MONUMENTS BOARD OF CANADA

SCREENING PAPER

TITLE: Mission Church, Fort Good Hope, N.W.T.

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Historical Report

The Roman Catholic church at Fort Good Hope was begun in 1864 and was still being decorated in 1882. The church is located in a small trading and missionary settlement in the Mackenzie District of the Northwest Territories at the junction of the Hare and Mackenzie rivers, a region inhabited by Indians of the Athabaskan language group.

The post of Fort Good Hope had originally been founded 100 miles downstream by the Northwest Company in 1804.<sup>1</sup> It was moved in 1821 and again in 1836 to its present location where it was operated by the Hudson's Bay Company.<sup>2</sup> A Roman Catholic mission was established here in 1859, Mission Notre Dame de Bonne Esperance, by Father Grollier, an Oblate missionary, with the object of converting the Indians to Christianity. A mission building was probably erected at this time. This would likely have been a two-room log cabin which provided living accommodation for the priests as well as housing a small chapel.<sup>4</sup> Assisted by Father Jean Séguin and Brother Patrick Kearney, Father Grollier found few converts in these early days. In September 1863, with Father Grollier ill, Father Séguin planned to build a separate chapel.<sup>5</sup>

Rev. Grollier died in June 1864 and in August Father Emile Petitot arrived to replace him.<sup>6</sup> Shortly afterward construction of the new chapel commenced. Although Séguin had conceived the idea for the chapel the previous year, sources indicate that the plans were drawn by Petitot.

The three of them started to build the Good Hope Chapel whose plan had been drawn up by Petitot. Suffering from an abdominal rupture, Petitot had to restrict his co-operation to the less strenuous forms of activity, but he did build the altar and a gothic balustrade and also worked at the pictorial decoration of the arch and walls.<sup>7</sup>

It is not known what the artistic or architectural background of the missionaries was, but, under the direction of Petitot, they did lavish an unusual amount of energy on finishing the church. As the priests were often away, furthering the spiritual mission of the church, they could only spare about one or two months of each year to building the chapel.<sup>8</sup> Consequently progress was slow. By 1865 the dimensions had been established as being 45 feet by 20 feet.<sup>9</sup> The interior took the most time. The altar was still being embellished in 1872.<sup>10</sup> Father Petitot continued to work part-time decorating the interior until 1878. He was responsible for much of the painting including the altar, and for carving the communion rail.<sup>11</sup> Father Xavier Ducost, who replaced Petitot, also worked at painting the interior.<sup>12</sup> In the summer of 1882, Brother Julien Ancel was sent to Fort Good Hope especially to finish the building, although it was in use at this time.<sup>13</sup>

The man principally involved with the construction of the church, Rev. Emile Petitot, who was based at the mission from 1864 until 1878, is himself worthy of separate attention as an historic figure.<sup>14</sup> A missionary, he was also an early anthropologist, geographer and explorer. He was born in France in 1832 and in 1860 he entered the Congregation of the Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate. In 1862 he was ordained a priest and that year left for Fort Garry. During the next two years he travelled in the area around Great Slave Lake and engaged in missionary activities. He also began to compile a French-Déné (Athabaskan) dictionary and undertook to learn the language. He relieved Father Grollier as the priest in charge of the Fort Good Hope Mission and while stationed there undertook some of his most strenuous journeys. In 1865 he travelled down the Anderson River and neared the Arctic Ocean where he met Eskimos. In June 1870 he left Fort Good Hope for Alaska to explore that territory and to determine the opportunity for establishing missions in that area.

The period of 1873-1876 was a time of recuperation from his arduous activities. In 1873-1874 he took up residence at a more southerly mission and later left for France. While in France, Petitot became involved with many learned societies including the Société d'Anthropologie et de Philologie de Paris and the Société de Géographie de Paris. To the latter institution he donated a map he had drawn of part of the Canadian Arctic for which he was rewarded with a silver medal. In Paris also, he arranged for the publication of his dictionaries and other works. His reputation was further enhanced by his address to the International Congress of Americanists, held at Nancy, France, in July 1875. Here Petitot emerged as a principal defender of the theory of the Asiatic origin of the Indians and Eskimos of North America.<sup>15</sup>

Father Petitot returned to Fort Good Hope in the spring of 1876. He had never fully recovered from his previous debilitation however, and the return journey further weakened him. Two years later, therefore, he was forced to give up his missionary work. He was attached to a mission at Cold Lake, Saskatchewan until 1881, and in 1882 he travelled in what is now Alberta, collecting stories of the Blackfoot Indians. The following year he retired to France. That year the Royal Geographical Society of Great Britain awarded him the Back Prize in recognition of his scientific contribution. In 1886 Petitot became a parish priest at Mareuilles-Meaux where he remained until his death in 1916. Many of his accounts of his travels in the Canadian northwest were written during this period.

Emile Petitot's contribution to the study of anthropology, linguistics, geography and geology in Canada can be best summarized by a description of just some of his many writings. In the study of anthropology, Petitot wrote three principal works: on the Tchiglit Eskimos,<sup>16</sup> the Déné-dindjié (Athabaskan),<sup>17</sup> and the Algonquin Indians. One anthropologist has observed of Petitot that "[i]t must also be pointed out that he made several observations concerning the Métis. Today ethnology owes him all that is known about the Tchiglit Eskimos, decimated by disease towards the end of the nineteenth century".<sup>18</sup> Of importance to linguistics are his dictionaries of the Eskimo,<sup>19</sup> Athabaskan,<sup>20</sup> and Blackfoot,<sup>21</sup> languages. In the field of geography there is the contribution of his map,<sup>22</sup> as well as published descriptions of the Mackenzie District of the Northwest Territories.<sup>23</sup> In the field of geology there exists his "Communication from Rev. Father Petitot" in the published report of the Select Committees of the Senate, 1887, 1880, The Great Mackenzie Basin.<sup>24</sup> He also wrote "La Géologie des Vallées de l'Athabaskaw - Mackenzie et de l'Anderson", in Mission des Oblats, 1875, vol. 13.

Emile Petitot was commemorated in France by the Canadian government in 1975 when the Minister for Indian and Northern Affairs unveiled a plaque in Mareuilles-Meaux.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 "Fort Good Hope", Encyclopedia Canadiana, vol. 4 (n.p.; Grolier, 1968), p. 219.
- 2 loc. cit.
- 3 Joseph-Etienne Champagne, Les Missions Catholiques dans L'ouest Canadienne, 1818-1875 (Ottawa: Editions des Etudes Oblates, 1949) p. 120.

- 4 Ibid., p. 173.
- 5 Letter from Father Jean Séguin, at Fort Good Hope to Father Henri Faraud, 13 Sept. 1863. Quoted by Father Gaston Carrière in unpublished notes prepared ca. 1969.
- 6 Donat Savoie (ed.), The Amerindians of the Canadian Northwest in the 19th century, as seen by Emile Petitot (Ottawa: Northern Science Research Group, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1970), [hereafter cited as 'Savoie'], p. 42.
- 7 'Savoie', p. 46.
- 8 Letter from Father Jean Séguin to Bishop Faraud, 30 June 1874. Quoted by Father Gaston Carrière in his unpublished notes on Fort Good Hope, ca. 1969.
- 9 Letter from Séguin to Faraud, June 1865. Quoted by Gaston Carrière in his unpublished notes on Fort Good Hope, ca. 1869.
- 10 Letter from Brother Kearney to Brother Alexis Reynard of Fort Chipewgan, "F. Petitot has already begun the altar. He will continue it during the summer. It will be a little cathedral in itself". Quoted by Gaston Carrière, unpublished notes on Fort Good Hope, ca. 1969.
- 11 Gaston Carrière, O.M.I., unpublished notes on Fort Good Hope, ca. 1969.
- 12 loc. cit.
- 13 loc. cit.
- 14 The following brief biography is taken from 'Savoie', pp. 37-57.
- 15 'Savoie', p. 55.
- 16 Emile Petitot, Monographie des Esquimaux Tchiglit du Mackenzie et de l'Anderson (Paris: E. Leroux, 1876).
- 17 Emile Petitot, Monographie des Déné - Dindjié (Paris: E. Leroux, 1876).
- 18 'Savoie', p. 60.
- 19 Emile Petitot, Vocabulaire francais-esquimaux. Dialecte des Tchiglit des bouches du Mackenzie et de l'Anderson. Précedé d'une monographie de cette Hibu et des notes grammaticales, par le r.p.E. Petitot . . . (Paris: E. Leroux; San Francisco, A.L. Bancroft, 1976).

- 20 Emile Petitot, Dictionnaire de la langue déné-dindjie, dialects montagnais au chippewayan, peaux de lièvre et loucheaux, renfermant, en outre un grand nombre de termes propres à sept autres dialectes de la même langue; précédé d'une monographie des Déné-Dindjié d'une grammaire et de tableaux synoptiques des conjugaisons, par le r.p. E. Petitot... (Paris, E. Leroux; San Francisco, A.L. Bancroft, 1876).
- 21 Emile Petitot, "Vocabulaire Piéganiw. Deuxième dialecte des Dinnax au Pieds-Noirs". Exc. Actes Soc. Phil. vol. 14 (1885), pp. 170-198.
- 22 Emile Petitot, "Carte du bassin du Mackenzie dressé de 1862 à 1873" [Paris], 1875.
- 23 Emile Petitot, Autour de Grand Lac des Eclaves, par Emile Petitot... Ouvrage accompagné de gravures et d'une carte par l'auteur ... (Paris: A Savine, 1891).
- Emile Petitot, Exploration de la région du Grand Lac des Ours... par Emile Petitot... Ouvrage accompagné de gravures et de deux cartes dessinées par l'auteur... (Paris: Téqui, 1893).
- Emile Petitot, "Géographie de l'Athabaskaw - Mackenzie et des Grands Lacs du bassin Arctique". Extrait de Bulletin de la Société de Géographie (Juillet 1875) ... (Paris: E. Martinet, 1875).
- Emile Petitot, "On the Athabasca district of the Canadian north-west territory... "[London, 1883], p.[633] - 655  
Caption Title. Extract from the Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society ... vol. 5.
- 24 Ernest J. Chambers (ed.) The Great Mackenzie Basin, Reports of the Select Committees of the Senate, sessions 1887 and 1888 (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1908), pp. 76-78.

### Architectural Report

The Roman Catholic Mission Church at Fort Good Hope (Fig. 1, 2) is not only one of the earliest surviving mission churches in Western Canada but its design, particularly its interior detailing, offers a fine and unique example of church decoration in Canada. Father Emile Petitot, who served at the Mission from 1864 to 1878, conceived of and partially executed this grand interior design. This scheme was largely completed between 1882 and 1885 by Brother Julien Ancel who proved himself to be not only a highly skilled craftsman but a talented artist as well. This church would

be noteworthy had it been located anywhere in Canada; however, remotely situated a few miles south of the arctic circle on the Mackenzie River, its execution seems that much more remarkable.

### Exterior Design

The plans for the church, which are said to have been drawn up by Father Petitot, had been prepared by 1864.<sup>1</sup> The wood was cut and squared by servants at Fort Good Hope and transported to the nearby church site by dog sled.<sup>2</sup> Because of the difficulty of obtaining lumber and the little time that could be spared by the priests for the church construction, the actual building did not begin until 1865.<sup>3</sup> In 1870 the church was opened,<sup>4</sup> however, work on the interior was still being carried out fifteen years later. The structural walls employ a Red River frame which consists of a series of widely-spaced, vertical uprights which are joined by horizontal planks slotted into these posts. This same type of construction can be seen in the now demolished church at Fort Chipewyan, Alberta (fig. 3) which was constructed in the 1850s. The west façade of the Good Hope Church had always been sheathed by vertical planking up to the eave level with horizontal boards under the gable; however, early photographs show that the sides were not sheathed until early in the twentieth century.

The basic design and planning of this church is typical of Roman Catholic Mission Churches of the gothic style in the Canadian Northwest. The building is of a simple rectangular plan and surmounted by a straight pitched roof which is gabled at the front and hipped at the rear. The central steeple has been set flush with the main façade. Originally the church measured 45 feet by 20 feet; however, in 1877 it was decided to build a twenty foot addition at the rear in order to accommodate their growing congregation.<sup>5</sup> The façade is articulated by a central pointed arched doorway, with a rose window above and two gothic windows on either side. Five similar windows punctuate the sides of the building. This same design, characterized by the simple plan, central steeple, and gothic detailing can also be found at the Mission Church at Fort Chipewyan or the Roman Catholic Church near Normandeau in Alberta (fig. 4).

While the plan and exterior articulation of Fort Good Hope conform to a well-known format, its intricate detailing surpasses anything known to this remote area. The simple horizontal and vertical pattern of the window mullions at Fort Chipewyan or the more elaborate, but still stylized, windows at Normandeau contrast to the richly carved tracery of Petitot's design for the lancet and rose windows and reveal his wide vocabulary of gothic detail. In Petitot's description of the church he goes as far as to suggest

that the spire was copied from Chartes Cathedral in France.<sup>6</sup> While this statement should not be taken too seriously, it is clear that Petitot has tried to imitate features known to him in the great cathedrals of the Middle Ages. The highly decorative gables on the spire and the rows of crochets along the eaves and spire resemble the stone detailing of large churches in the gothic style. Unfortunately this steeple was removed in the 1920s and replaced by a much simpler version (fig. 5).

### Interior Design

Despite this careful attention to detail, the exterior of the church is relatively plain and does not prepare one for the splendid transformation that takes place on the interior. The entire church has been lavishly decorated in the gothic style with elaborately carved woodwork, painted in vivid colours of red, green, white and various shades of brown (fig. 6). The walls are covered with painted ornamentation which surrounds large panels depicting biblical scenes and figures. Just inside the main door stands an intricately carved screen with a central gothic arch, flanked by two smaller ogee arches (fig. 7). This screen is supported by piers painted in a multi-coloured geometric pattern which simulates inlaid marble. This feature also serves to divide visually the interior space into a nave with two side aisles. This effect is reinforced at the alter-end by a repetition of this three-arched motif which in this case is not supported by piers. The straight gable roof of the exterior has been transformed into a curved, pointed-arched vault which springs from the cornice which is decorated by fretwork. All the side windows are also defined by these carved surrounds.

The focus of the interior is the lavishly carved altar in the gothic style (fig. 8). The altar, which is separated from the nave by a communion rail of an open fretwork design, is approached by a series of steps richly painted in various geometric patterns to imitate red, green and white inlaid marble. There is conflicting documentation as to who is responsible for the design and execution of the altar, as some sources have attributed the work to Father Petitot while others name Brother Ancel; however, a shift in the style of the woodwork from the "tombeau d'autel" (altar tomb) to the "retable" would indicate a joint effort. This hypothesis is supported by a letter written by Father Petitot on August 30, 1872:

J'ai entrepris la construction de l'autel de notre nouvelle église. Il est moitié fini. Il sera gothique quant au style, flamboyant quant au genre, en faux marbre blanc, tout découpé ajouré et tout sculpté. Le tombeau qui est déjà fait est soutenu par cinq anges sculptés et peints.<sup>7</sup>

This account accurately describes the existing altar tomb and would indicate Petitot's work. Behind the sculptured angels, the body of Christ has been painted. This feature reveals Petitot's very unconventional and imaginative mind; for, while the depiction of the bodies of saints is common in small side chapels, it is very unusual to apply this convention to the body of Christ. The woodwork of the "retable" is continued in the gothic style; however, its forms are more intricate and sculptural and would indicate the work of the more experienced craftsman, Brother Ancel. The two sacristy doors (fig. 9) and the niche for the statue of the Virgin also show the accomplished style of Ancel.<sup>8</sup>

The extensive painted decoration was again largely carried out by Father Petitot and Brother Ancel. Petitot's work seems to be restricted to the borderwork around the panel scenes and the decoration of the wainscotting. According to Petitot his designs were based upon models brought from France.<sup>9</sup> The various styles of his decorations indicate that he had studied a wide range of sources and felt free to combine them as he wished. The wainscotting has been adorned by the interlocking forms of stylized serpents which are strongly reminiscent of the borderwork of medieval illuminated manuscripts. The elaborate framing of the panels is carried out in what Petitot refers to as "le goût italien". In contrast to the abstracted shapes of the wainscotting, these designs depict naturalistic birds, fruit and heads of putti united into a symmetrical composition by the graceful curving lines of his vine-like forms (fig. 10).

According to a letter of 1885<sup>10</sup> Brother Ancel was responsible for the two adoring angels on either side of the statue of the Virgin, the panels of St. Peter and Paul on the east wall, the Christ on the Cross, Mary, Joseph and two painted scenes of the Nativity (fig. 11) and the Fall of the First Parents (fig. 12). This same letter also states that Brother Ancel had never touched a brush before; however, this statement is hard to accept as Ancel's work reflects a confident and mature style. The panel of the Fall of the First Parents is the finest example of his work and demonstrates Ancel's skillful handling of a difficult composition which is executed in vivid colours and clean flowing lines. The painting of the Nativity however, does not show the same confident style. The regular composition and stiff handling of the drapery forms indicate a less mature artist. Either this painting is not by Ancel or it was retouched at a later date. This would not be surprising as it is known that Ancel's Christ on the Cross and his Joseph and Mary were extensively repainted in 1953 by the scouts of Aklavik. There are several other painted panels in the church by later members of the mission and while they show a certain naive talent none could match Ancel's work.



### Conclusion

The decoration of this church set a precedent for interior design for the missions of the Northwest. When Bishop Grouard saw the church in 1889 he was very much impressed. He referred to it as "une petit bijou" and wrote:

Il faut avouer que l'on ne s'attend guère à trouver, sous le cercle arctique, une décoration si riche, si élégante et si variée. Le P. Petitot y avait consacré tout son talent d'artiste qui n'est pas mince et le F. Ancel venu ensuite a complété la chapelle.<sup>11</sup>

Following his visit Bishop Grouard undertook the decoration of a number of chapels including the church at Dunvegan (fig. 13) and the church at Fort Chipewyan (fig. 14) which are both in Alberta. While Bishop Faraud was a man of considerable talent his work was much more conventional and in a more classical style. None of his examined schemes match the Church at Fort Good Hope for the lavish execution of detail and the skill demonstrated in its woodwork and painted decoration.

The church at Fort Good Hope, despite its humble dimensions, reflects the aspirations of the mission, and particularly of Father Petitot who was the driving force behind the project, to build the most beautiful church in the Mackenzie.<sup>12</sup> It is remarkable that such a grand scheme could have been executed under the harsh conditions of the Northwest Territories. The fact that two talented craftsmen and artists, such as Father Petitot and Brother Ancel, were available to carry out this design greatly adds to its value.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 See Historical Report.
- 2 Petitot, Father Emile, Quinze Ans Sous le Cercle Polaire. Quoted by Father Gaston Carrière in unpublished manuscript on the church at Fort Good Hope, Ottawa, 1970, p. 31
- 3 See Historical Report.
- 4 Letter from Father Petitot to Mgr. Faraud, May 10, 1870. Quoted by Father Gaston Carrière in unpublished manuscript on the Church at Fort Good Hope, p. 38.
- 5 Letter from Father Jean Séguin at Fort Good Hope to Father Augustin Maissoneuve, January 25, 1878. Quoted by Father Gaston Carrière in unpublished manuscript on the church at

Fort Good Hope, p. 50.

- 6 Petitot, Father Emile, op. cit., quoted by Father Gaston Carrière in unpublished manuscript on the Church at Fort Good Hope.
- 7 Letter written by Father Petitot to Bishop Faraud, August 30, 1872. Quoted by Father Gaston Carrière in unpublished notes prepared ca. 1969.
- 8 The two sacristy doors and niche can be documented as Ancel's work by a letter written by Père Séguin of Fort Good Hope to his sister dated February 4, 1885. Referred to by Father Gaston Carrière in his unpublished manuscript on the church of Fort Good Hope, 1970, p. 84.
- 9 Letter by Father Petitot to his Superior-General, June 1878. Quoted by Father Gaston Carrière in unpublished manuscript on church at Fort Good Hope, p. 79.
- 10 Letter by Père Séguin to his sister, November 4, 1885. Referred to by Father Gaston Carrière in unpublished manuscript on the church of Fort Good Hope, p. 84.
- 11 Letter from Monseigneur Grouard to Father Marc Sardou, August 25, 1890. Quoted by Father Gaston Carrière in unpublished manuscript on the church at Fort Good Hope, p. 85.
- 12 Emile Petitot, op. cit., quoted by Father Gaston Carrière in unpublished manuscript on church at Fort Good Hope.

## MISSION CHURCH, FORT GOOD HOPE, N.W.T.

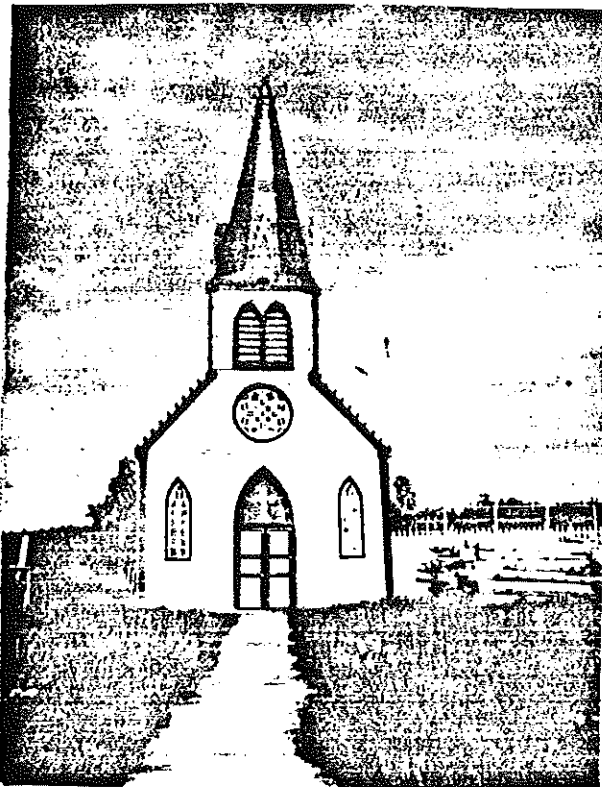


Fig. 1 Church at Fort Good Hope, early view of main façade. (PAC)

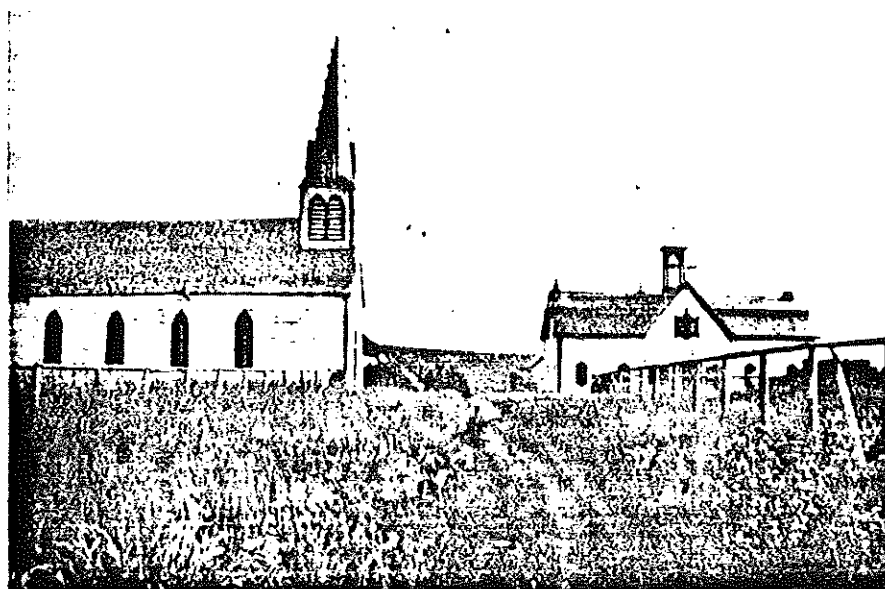


Fig. 2 Church at Fort Good Hope, early view of side elevation. (PAC)

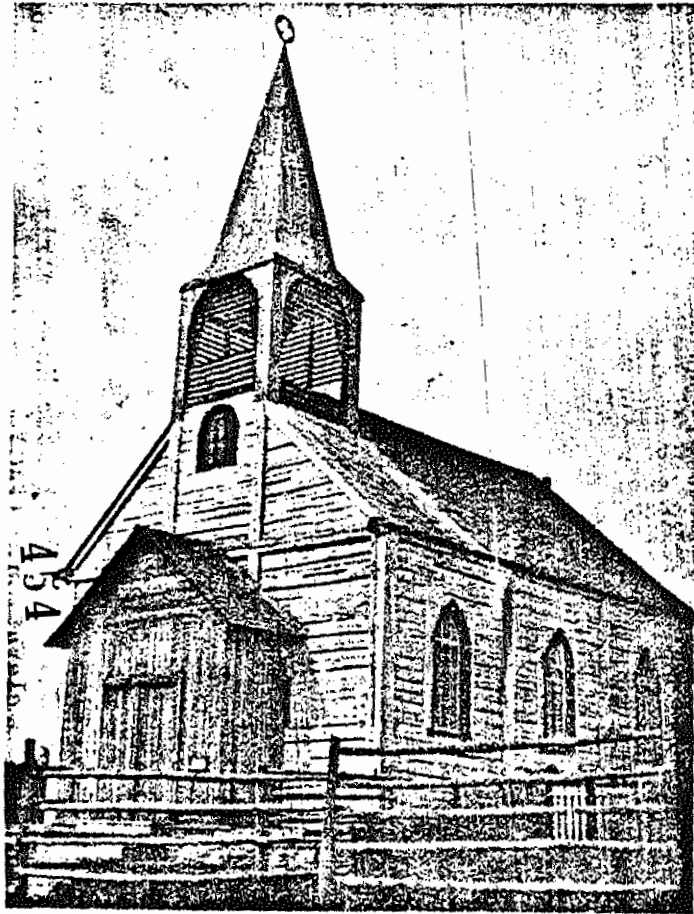


Fig. 3 Roman Catholic Mission Church,  
Fort Chipewyan, Alberta in 1916.  
const. 1850s (PAC)

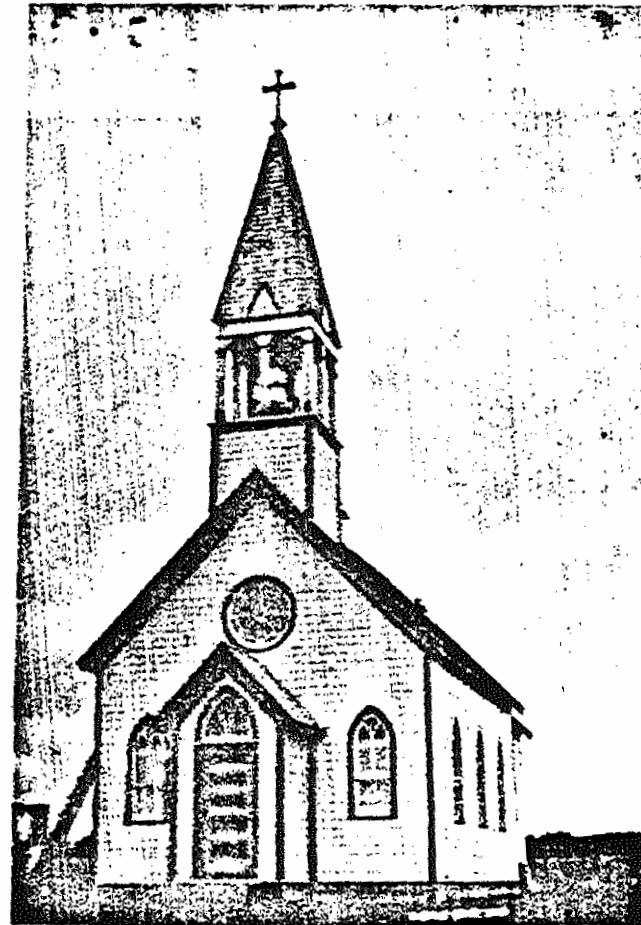


Fig. 4 Catholic Church in Tp. 64-13-W4,  
near Normandeau, Alberta in 1912.  
(PAC)



Fig. 5 Church at Fort Good Hope in 1933, showing new steeple and clapboarding.

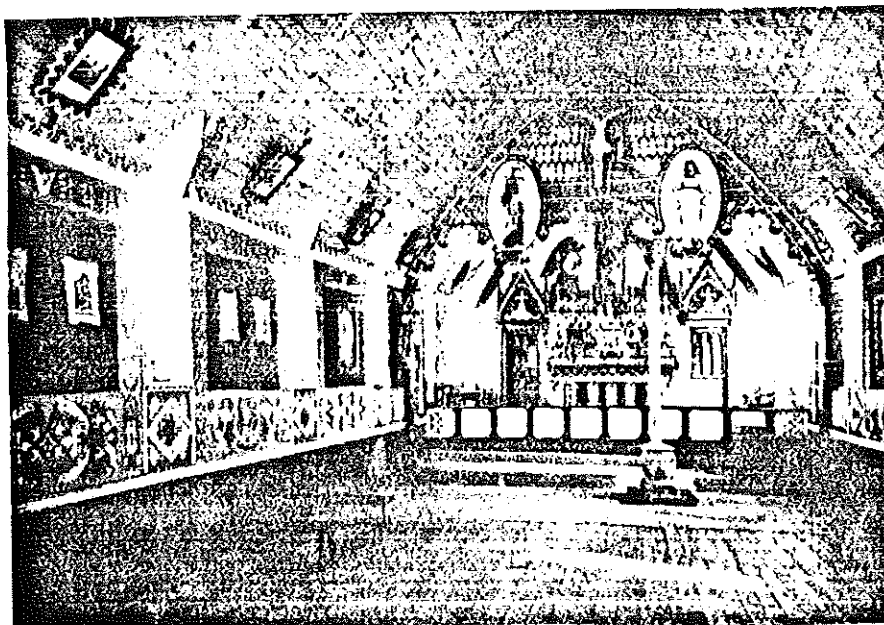


Fig. 6 Church at Fort Good Hope, interior. (PAC)

## MISSION CHURCH, FORT GOOD HOPE, N.W.T.

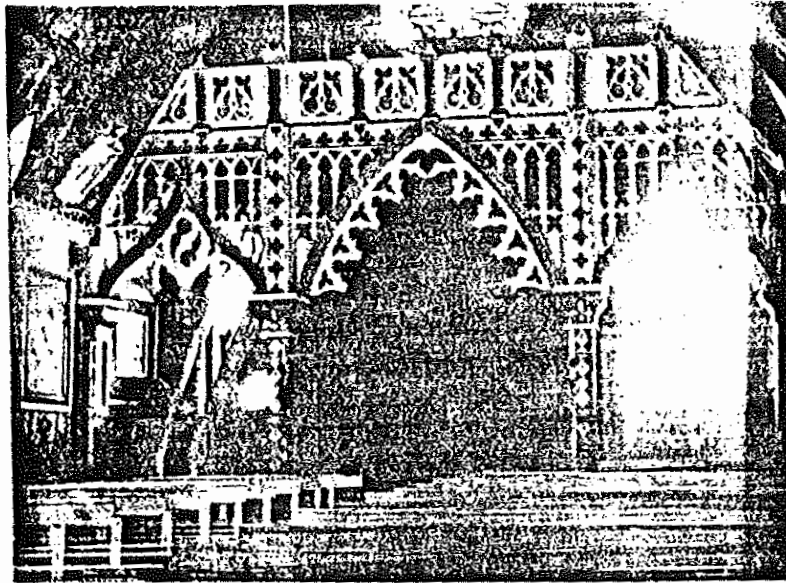


Fig. 7 Church at Fort Good Hope, arched screen at entrance.

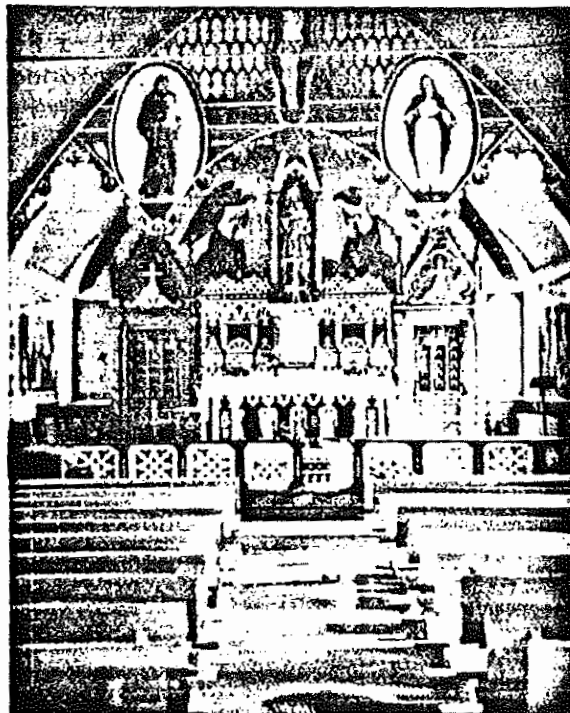


Fig. 8 Church at Fort Good Hope,  
Altar end.

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Fig. 9 Church at Fort Good Hope, Sacristy doors, carved by Brother Ancel.



Fig. 10 Church at Fort Good Hope, painted borders by Father Petitot.

MISSION CHURCH, FORT GOOD HOPE, N.W.T.

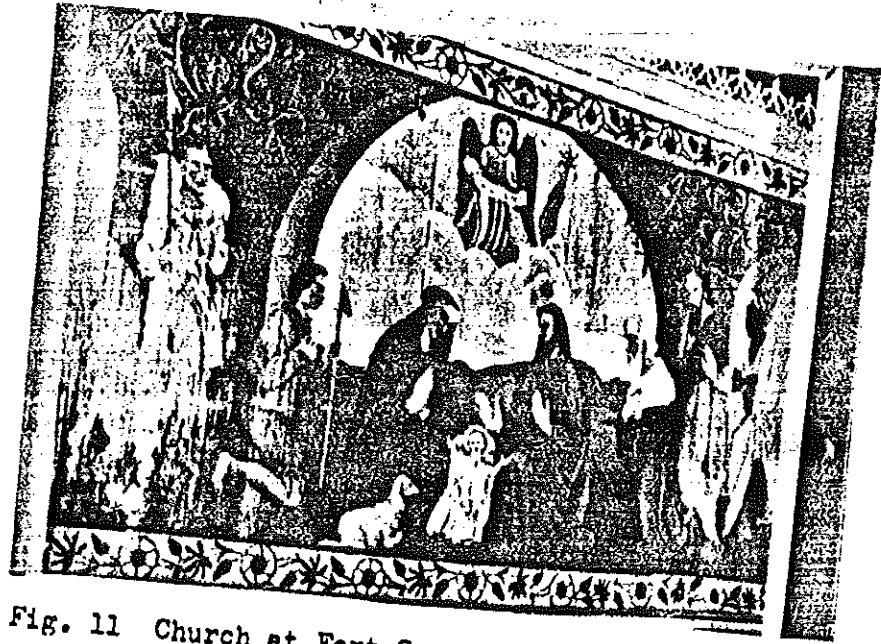


Fig. 11 Church at Fort Good Hope, "The Nativity" by Brother Ancel (?).



Fig. 12 Church at Fort Good Hope, "The Fall of the First Parents" by Brother Ancel 158



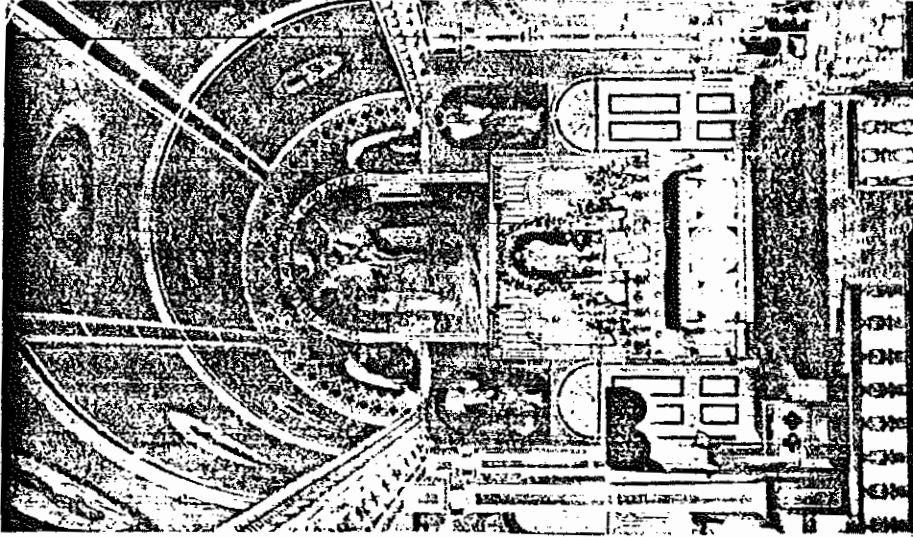


Fig. 14 R.C. Mission Church, Fort Chipewyan, Alberta. Decorations by Bishop Grouard in 1886. (PAC)

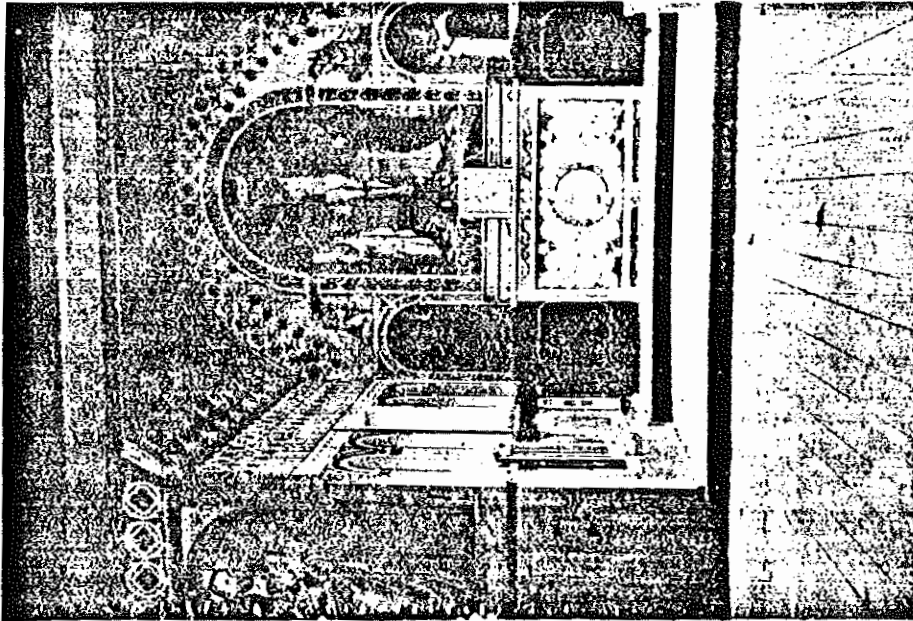


Fig. 13 R.C. Church, Dunvegan, Alberta, interior, Decorations by Bishop Grouard. (PAC)