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Editorial

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The North American continent, between the 1820s and the early twentieth century, presents itself as a particularly complex and dynamic missionary landscape, one that cannot be reduced to a single confessional trajectory. Rather, it emerges as a plural and competitive field in which Catholic, Protestant (across multiple denominational articulations), and Orthodox Christian actors interacted and at times openly competed. This competition was especially visible in frontier regions, where geographic expansion, demographic mobility, and fragile institutional structures created a fluid religious environment and a constant negotiation of presence and authority. This complexity is particularly evident in Alaska, where interactions extended beyond interconfessional competition to include relationships with local populations, generating new reconfigurations of power and social status, as well as forms of syncretism and even usurpation.

In this special issue, the contributors approach this multifaceted context through a rich and diversified corpus of sources – archival as well as printed, including materials from ecclesiastical and civil archives, missionary correspondence, and periodical literature – thus offering a layered and nuanced reconstruction of Christian missionary practices, representations, and experiences.

Within this context, missionary activity was shaped by a wide range of material and cultural constraints. The environmental conditions of vast areas such as Alaska or the Rocky Mountains imposed forms of isolation that deeply affected the daily life of missionaries, affecting mobility, communication, and exposing missionaries to cultural dislocation, and limiting the very possibility of establishing stable pastoral structures. Chronic shortages of personnel, persistent economic fragility, and the need to organize educational and catechetical systems in dispersed and often transient communities further complicated missionary endeavors. The educational sphere, in particular, became a crucial site of interaction, where male and female religious – often belonging to different congregations – were called to collaborate in the establishment of schools, the transmission of doctrine, and the broader project of social and cultural formation. These conditions required continuous adaptation and contributed to redefining the very models of missionary commitment.

Indeed, the period under consideration reveals the coexistence of different missionary paradigms. On the one hand, a more traditional model, often imbued with a pioneering and, in some respects, romantic ethos, remained oriented toward the evangelization of Indigenous populations, frequently framed within categories of 'spiritual conquest' and civilizational transformation. In this framework, cultural mediation was of central importance, as missionaries were compelled to engage with unfamiliar languages, belief systems, and social structures, developing strategies of adaptation that were as necessary as they were complex. On the other hand, a more modern model increasingly focused on migrant populations and on societies perceived as threatened by secularization and religious indifferentism. This shift entailed new pastoral priorities, different forms of engagement, and a reconfiguration of missionary discourse itself – one that increasingly took shape through letters, reports, and journals intended for circulation within European religious milieus, where the 'mission field' was narrated, interpreted, and, in part, (de)constructed.

The subjects of this missionary landscape were correspondingly diverse. Alongside the central role of religious orders – foremost among them the Society of Jesus – a multiplicity of actors contributed to shaping missionary practice, including female congregations and lay collaborators, whose presence raises crucial questions regarding gender, authority, and the division of labor within mission contexts. The necessity of learning new languages and mediating between different cultural frameworks further underscored the importance of translation – both linguistic and symbolic – often leading to processes of hybridization that challenge rigid distinctions between 'missionary' and 'local' religious forms.

In this perspective, the contributions gathered in this issue place particular emphasis on the analysis of sources and representations,

highlighting how missionary experiences were not only lived but also narrated, interpreted, and re-elaborated.

Francesca Menelao's study reconstructs the development of Jesuit missions in the Rocky Mountains and Alaska by drawing on a wide range of archival materials, bringing to light both the institutional frameworks of missionary expansion and the concrete practices of linguistic and cultural adaptation that underpinned evangelization. More specifically, her contribution shows how the experience of the Rocky Mountains operated as a formative precedent for the Alaskan missions, revealing the transregional circulation of Jesuit missionary models and their capacity to be reconfigured in response to different environmental and cultural settings. Her analysis further highlights the transregional dimension of these missionary models, as well as the crucial – though often less visible – role played by female congregations within educational and medical contexts.

Aglaia Gulakova's article also covers Alaska, examining the relationship between the Alaskan Creole community – people of mixed Russian and Indigenous descent – and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) after Alaska was sold to the United States in 1867. Her study shows how complex and in transition identities can be perceived within the missionary field. In fact, Creole identity underwent a major transformation in that period: from a privileged intermediary group within the Russian Empire to a marginalized community adapting to American rule. Specifically, under Russian rule, Creoles held a distinct and relatively privileged position as negotiators between Russians and Indigenous populations, benefiting from education and integration into Russian culture and Orthodox Christianity. After the transfer to the United States, their situation deteriorated significantly: they lost their socioeconomic status and faced legal and racial ambiguity in a system that did not recognize mixed identities. If ROC missionaries initially strengthened their ties with the Creoles, portraying them as 'Russians' and allies against Indigenous groups and American influence, as time passed, the Russian Orthodox Church shifted its focus toward Indigenous populations, who became more important for maintaining its presence in the country. As a result, Creoles tried to preserve a distinct identity by distancing themselves from Indigenous communities and increasingly aligning with American society.

Luca Sandoni's contribution focuses on a specific case study, the mission of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (Dehonians) in Alberta, Canada, between 1910 and 1940, concentrating on its development and ultimate failure and pointing up the above-mentioned material and cultural constraints, but also the difficulties in understanding non-European viewpoints and different world conceptions. From the start, the missionaries faced serious challenges: lack of resources, harsh living conditions, language

barriers, and the need to travel long distances to reach small groups of believers. Although the mission initially expanded, it struggled to establish stable structures or attract new vocations. Over time, internal problems worsened the situation. Many missionaries were poorly prepared or lacked strong commitment, leading to conflicts, financial mismanagement, and departures from the congregation. A deeper issue was the mismatch between the missionaries' European religious mindset and the practical, individualistic culture of frontier society in Alberta, where material success often mattered more than spiritual life. In the end, the mission failed to take root: by the 1930s the Dehonians were gradually replaced, and their presence in Alberta ended in 1940.

Daiana Menti, by contrast, shifts the focus from practice to representation, examining the image of North America conveyed to Italian readers through the Jesuit periodical *Le Missioni della Compagnia di Gesù*. Her contribution highlights how the North American context was constructed as a *sui generis* missionary field, marked by heterogeneity and requiring differentiated interpretative frameworks. Rather than simply reflecting missionary realities, the magazine contributed to shaping them discursively, selecting and organizing experiences into recognizable narrative patterns for a European audience. In this sense, the coexistence of different forms of missionary engagement – already evident in practice – was re-elaborated within the missionary press into a structured and communicable representation, capable of mediating between the complexity of the field and the expectations of its readership.

By foregrounding all of these dimensions within the missionary world, the present special issue aims not only to revisit established narratives but also to open new avenues for research, encouraging a more nuanced historiographical approach to North American missions in the modern and contemporary age.

Finally, this issue ends with Beáta Katrebová Blehová's article, which explores the role of anti-Communist broadcasting in the early Cold War, focusing on the Slovak Catholic diaspora and the activities of Vatican Radio and Radio Free Europe during the pontificate of Pope Pius XII and highlighting the importance of radio as a key instrument in supporting faith and resisting communism during the Cold War. It shows not only how Vatican Radio became a crucial tool for communicating with believers behind the Iron Curtain, offering spiritual support, guidance, and information while carefully avoiding direct political confrontation, but also how it helped maintain a link between the Vatican and the persecuted Church in Czechoslovakia. This article also examines Radio Free Europe, which played a role in anti-Communist broadcasting, although it was often criticized by Slovak émigrés for lacking proper Slovak representation and for its political orientation.