

# The Holy West and the Land of Perpetual Snow Jesuit Missionaries in the Rocky Mountains and Alaska (1840-1912)

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**Abstract** The paper examines the origins and development of Jesuit missionary efforts in the Rocky Mountains' territories (1841) and in Alaska (1886) highlighting the coordinating role of the Turin Province and some aspects of the contribution of female congregations. Situated within the nineteenth-century Jesuit missionary revival, it explores institutional frameworks, native language study as a tool for evangelisation and instruction. Moreover, it shows how the Rocky Mountains experience served as a precedent for Jesuit missions in Alaska, illustrating the circulation of missionary models despite geographic and cultural differences.

**Keywords** Rocky Mountains. Alaska. Adaptation. Evangelisation. Acculturation.

**Summary** 1 The Roots of Jesuit Missionary Expansion in the Northwest of the United States and Alaska in the Nineteenth Century. – 2 Language and Cultural Translation: Speaking the Language of the Natives. – 3 Synesthesias. Religious Instruction Between Listening, Vision and Daily Practice. – 4 People to Tame. Some Aspects of Indian Schools in the Rocky Mountains and Alaska. – 5 Final Remarks.



#### Peer review

Submitted 2026-01-29  
Accepted 2026-04-07  
Published 2026-04-30

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DOI 10.30687/JoMaCC/2785-6046/2026/01/003

## 1 The Roots of Jesuit Missionary Expansion in the Northwest of the United States and Alaska in the Nineteenth Century

In October 1833, the Concilium Provincialis Baltimorensi II confirmed the disposition of the Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide to entrust the spiritual care of the natives settled in the northwestern territories of the United States, yet to be established as dioceses, to the Society of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> In December of the same year, General Roothaan's epistle *De missionum externarum desiderio excitando et fovendo* helped to give new impetus to the Congregation's missionary vocation, following the difficult years after its reconstitution.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the foundations were laid for a renewed season of apostolate, which found its first concrete expression in the missionary zeal of the period 1840-41, when the Pacific Northwest emerged as one of the most sought-after destinations for foreign missions.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the historian Gerald McKevitt has situated the competition of Catholic and Protestant missionaries to the American frontier territories within a broader "global migration", that also involved the religious world during the nineteenth century and was intertwined with the impulse towards *divisio apostolorum*, that had characterized the Society of Jesus since its origins.<sup>4</sup> In this context, at the urging of the bishop of St. Louis, Giuseppe Rosati (1789-1843) and thanks to the commitment of the provincial of Missouri, Peter Jan Verhaegen (1800-1868), on 27 March 1840, the Belgian Jesuit Pierre-Jean De Smet set out from St. Louis for Westport (Missouri), an important departure point for the West, with the task of verifying the willingness of the indigenous

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1 *Concilia Provincialia*, 91-116; Poponessi, *Mission*, 15.

2 De Jonge, Pirri, *Opera Spirituality*, 1, 347-56; cf. "Lettera del P. Giovanni Roothaan"; Lenoble-Bart, Spindler, *Spiritualités missionnaires contemporaines*, 141-51. See also Rochini, "Vocazione missionaria nel generalato", 208-17; Colombo, Rochini, "Ritorno alle missioni". Jesuits' biography in O'Neill, Dominguez, *Diccionario Histórico*; Mendizàbal, *Catalogus Defunctorum*; Archivio Storico della Provincia Euro-mediterranea della Compagnia di Gesù (AEMSI), fondo Provincia Torinese, Fascicoli Personali. For a general overview of missionary contexts: Županov, *The Oxford Handbook*; O'Malley, *The First Jesuits*; Markus, *The Jesuits*; O'Donnell, *Jesuits in the North American*; Ferlan, *Storia delle missioni cristiane*; Carrez, *Atlas Geographicus*.

3 Rochini, "La frontiera cinese", 278-9; Maryks, Wright, *Jesuit Survival*, 8.

4 *Costituzioni della Compagnia di Gesù*, 211-29; McKevitt, "Northwest Indian Evangelization", 689; United States Department of the Interior, *National Register of Historic*. <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/index.htm>.

peoples of the Rocky Mountains to welcome Catholic missionaries.<sup>5</sup> On 30 June 1840, the Jesuit reached the Green River following an expedition of the American Fur Company, and met the first delegation of the native Flatheads. Between spring and autumn 1841, De Smet established St. Mary in the Bitter Root Valley, the first Catholic residence in present-day Montana, with Gregorio Mengarini, Nicolas Point and three temporal coadjutor brothers.<sup>6</sup> Crucial were also the repeated requests of Flatheads delegations, who between 1831 and 1839 travelled to St. Louis to seek Jesuit missionaries, aided by Ignace Hatchiorauquacha, a Canadian Iroquois previously evangelized by the Jesuits.<sup>7</sup> Although Catholic missions in the Northwest began in 1838 at Fort Vancouver under Bishop François Norbert Blanchet and Canadian priest Modeste Demers, it was the Jesuits who established a systematic and enduring ministry to Indigenous nations.<sup>8</sup>

The founding of St. Mary's was soon followed by the Jesuit missions of Sacred Heart (Nez Percés and Coeur d'Alene), St. Ignatius (Pend'Oreilles) in 1846, and pastoral visits to the Blackfeet around Fort Lewis.<sup>9</sup> The consolidation of the Rocky Mountains missions was shaped by European political developments, especially the Italian Risorgimento. The expulsion of the Congregation from the Savoy territories (25 August 1848), followed by similar measures across the Peninsula, forced many Italian Jesuits into exile; many settled in the American provinces of Maryland and Missouri, strengthening the

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**5** De Smet, *Letters*, 135, 155-89; Mengarini, "The Rocky Mountains", 288-9; Ferlan, "From Ship to Shore", 448, 453-5.

**6** Ferlan, "From Ship to Shore", 456-60; Menelao, *Nella Terra delle nevi*, 19-21. On the Nation of the Flatheads: Johnson, *Encyclopedia of Native Tribes*, 163-4, 174.

**7** Ignace Hatchiorauquacha was also known as Old Ignace, Ignace La Mousse or Lamoose: Paterson, Peers, *Sacred Encounters*; Point, Donnelly, *Wilderness Kingdom*, 7; Palladino, *Indian and White*, 9-20; Garraghan, *The Jesuits*, 236-8; Buckley, "Overland with Optimism", 8.

**8** *Letter from Michele Accolti to the Father General*, 18 October 1852, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Americana USA, Prov. Missouri, Mont. Sax., b. 1002, fasc. I, doc. 1; "Diocese of Oregon City".

**9** For geographical guidance within the mission territories in the Rocky Mountains, please see the online map (1890): <https://tinyurl.com/39hvba2j>. Néz-Percés or Pierced Noses, Blackfeet or Blackfoot, Coeur d'Alene or Heart of Aul and Pend'Oreilles or Earrings, cf. Johnson, *Encyclopedia of Native Tribes*, 93-105, 163-5, 174; Point, Donnelly, *Wilderness Kingdom*, 7. *Letter from Fr. Van Gorp to the Superior of the Rocky Mountains*, 23 January 1888, in AEMSI, Prov. Torin., serie Residenze e Collegi, b. Alaska-California-Montagne Rocciose, fasc. I, St. Ignatius Residence, doc. 3; *Catalogus Provinciae Missourianae*, 1845-7.

North American missions.<sup>10</sup> From 1849 onwards, the assignment of Italian Jesuits to the missions of the Rocky Mountains and California increased, until in 1851 their coordination passed under the direct control of the Jesuit superior general.<sup>11</sup> For over forty years (1849-93), the Rocky Mountains mission was led by Italian local superiors, mainly from the Province of Turin, which formally assumed patronage in 1854.<sup>12</sup> The leadership fostered a strong link, later recalled by Michele Accolti and Carlo Torti as an almost identity-defining bond between Italian Jesuits and the American Northwest.<sup>13</sup>

The creation of economically self-sufficient residences among the native peoples of the American Northwest drew on the Jesuit experience in Paraguay, reflecting the tendency of nineteenth-century Jesuit missions to look, at least initially, to an idealized past.<sup>14</sup> In *Il Cristianesimo felice* (1743-49), Ludovico Antonio Muratori had already portrayed the Paraguayan model as a realized Christian society; De Smet carried a copy to the Rocky Mountains as his personal guide.<sup>15</sup> As late as 1854, Michele Accolti recalled the hope “renewing the marvels of Paraguay”, that had inspired the pioneer fathers after

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**10** Dante, “I gesuiti e i nazionalismi”; Poponessi, *Mission*, 25; McKevitt, *Brokers of Culture*, 17-44; Morales, “Conflict and Reconciliation”; *Storia della Provincia di Torino*, in AEMSI, serie Tematica, b. 110; ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Italiae, Registra, Prov. Taur., b. 1005 (1846-1868); Monti, *La Compagnia di Gesù*, 5: 53-61, 228-69; Melai, “Ancora il Paraguay”.

**11** Cf. *Catalogus Provinciae Missourianae*, 1849, 18-20; *Catalogus Provinciae Missourianae*, 1852; *Copy of the letter of Fr. Roothaan to Fr. William Murphy, vice provincial of Missouri*, in ARSI, Fondo Personale Jan Philip Roothaan, b. 13, fasc. LXI, doc.1023; AEMSI, Prov. Torin., Fascicoli Personali, fasc. XIV Congiato Nicolò, doc. 1.

**12** Poponessi, *Mission*, 16; *Catalogus Provinciae Taurinensis*, 1854, 23-4.

**13** *Letter from Father Carlo Torti to the Father General*, 2 June 1889, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Italiae, Prov. Taur., b. 1011, fasc. II, doc. 37; *Letter from Michele Accolti to the General Beckx*, 5 May 1854, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Amer. USA, Prov. Missouri, Mont. Sax., b. 1002, fasc. I, doc. 6.

**14** Fabre, “Rafael Pérez”, 100; Melai, “Elementi”; Romanato, *Gesuiti, Guarani*, 19-43. See also Garavaglia, “I gesuiti del Paraguay”. After the restoration of the Society of Jesus, a rich nineteenth-century bibliography, from Crétineau-Joly to Gothein and Graham, reworked earlier sources, shaping a historiographical tradition that framed the Paraguayan reductions within the enduring ‘myth of Paraguay’ as a Christian, even utopian, experiment.

**15** De Smet, *Letters*, 252.

the foundation of St. Mary.<sup>16</sup> Yet his assessment marked a break: the missionary, the character of the natives, their limited resistance to the influences and pressures of American colonists, and the difficulties in relations with the American government appeared to preclude the fulfilment of those early hopes.<sup>17</sup>

Although the high expectations were disappointed, the missions expanded again in the early 1880s. In 1886, when the Rocky Mountains mission comprised nine residences, Pasquale Tosi and Louis Robaut, urged by Giuseppe Maria Cataldo, joined the third Alaskan journey of Charles John Seghers, archbishop of Vancouver Island. Arriving on 7 September 1886 at Harper Post on the Stewart River, they inaugurated a long Jesuit presence in the region.<sup>18</sup> Just as the mission in the Rocky Mountains arose in the wake of the death of the Iroquois Old Ignace in 1837, so the mission in Alaska was inspired by the sacrifice of Seghers, later remembered as the ‘Apostle of Alaska’, who was killed by his companion Francis Fuller while on his way to Nulato to precede the arrival of a Protestant minister.<sup>19</sup> Thereafter, the mission attracted Jesuits from the United States and Europe, with Tosi serving as local superior until his death

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**16** Original excerpt in Italian: “Rinovellare le maraviglie del Paraguai”, *Letter from Michele Accolti to the General Beckx*, 5 May 1854, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Amer. USA, Mont. Sax., b. 1002, fasc. I, doc. 6. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.

**17** *Letter from Michele Accolti to the General Beckx*, 5 May 1854, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Amer. USA, Mont. Sax., b. 1002, fasc. I, doc. 6.

**18** *Relazione di P. Canestrelli*, 27 August 1887, in AEMSI, Prov. Torinese, b. Alaska-Idaho, fasc. XXIV, doc. 1; “Lettera di padre Robaut a padre Ionkau (Vic. Apost.)”, Anvik sul fiume Yukon, 31 luglio 1887, in *Lettere Edificanti*, 1: 15; Barnum “Life on the Alaska Mission”, 39; Menelao, *Nella Terra delle nevi*, 31-4, 39; Vanstone, *Ingalik Contact Ecology*, 149; Renner, *Alaskana Catholica*, 4; Ferlan, “Frozen Frontiers”, 173-4, 179; Seghers, “Alaskan Missionaries”, 55-68.

**19** It can also be observed that elements of *parrhesia* can be identified in the edifying death of Seghers, cf. Barnum, “Life on the Alaska Mission”, 420-56; “Lettera di padre Robaut a padre Ionkau (Vic. Apost.)”, Anvik sul fiume Yukon, 31 luglio 1887, in *Lettere Edificanti*, 1: 19; Menelao, *Nella Terra delle nevi*, 39; Santos Hernandez, *Jesuitas*, 226-33; De Baets, *The Apostle of Alaska*, 234; “Castigo dell’assassino di mons. Seghers”, 104; “Mons. Arciv. Seghers trucidato nel deserto”, 1468-9; “Uccisione di Mons. Seghers”, 547.

in 1897;<sup>20</sup> a letter from Congiato (10 September 1887) records its formal acceptance.<sup>21</sup>

The initial foundations of St. Peter Claver (Nulato) and Holy Cross (Koserefski) along the Yukon River were soon followed by new stations between 1891 and 1896: St. Alphonse Rodriguez at Cape Vancouver, and St. Joseph, St. Ignatius Loyola and the Fort Miles miners' foundation.<sup>22</sup> By 1897 the mission had extended to Sitka and Juneau among the Canadian and American settlers, while the northern coastal stations among Eskimo natives weakened by the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, in 1902 the missionary Crispino Rossi reported that the mission extended as far as Cape Nome on the Bering Sea.<sup>23</sup>

Even before the archbishop of Vancouver Island's reconnaissance, in 1867 Nicola Congiato had viewed Alaska, newly purchased by the United States, as a vast field for Indian missions, "guided by the fathers of the Rocky Mountains for the great benefit of their minds".<sup>24</sup> Upon closer examination, the Jesuits had long considered the Far North as a promising area, untouched by the proximity of the American colonists, whose westward advance weakened Rocky Mountains mission stability.<sup>25</sup> Unlike in the Rockies, where they coexisted with Anglican and Protestant missionaries, in Alaska they also confronted Russian Orthodox ministers.

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**20** Faherty, Hennesey, McKevitt, O'Neill, "Estados Unidos de America", 1329; Menelao, *Nella Terra delle nevi*, 105.

**21** *De accipienda missionem Alaskanam*, (excerpt of Father Congiato's Letter), in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Italiae, Registra, Prov. Taur., b. 1002 (1873-1906), 158-9.

**22** Menelao, *Nella Terra delle nevi*, 107-9; *Catalogus Provinciae Taurinensis*, 1896, 44-6; Tosi, *La Missione dell'Alaska*, 77.

**23** *Catalogus Provinciae Taurinensis*, 1903, 40-54. For geographical guidance within the mission territories in the Rocky Mountains and Alaska (1900): Carrez, *Atlas Geographicus*, 58. [https://archive.org/details/atlas\\_sj/page/n57/mode/2up?q=taurinensis](https://archive.org/details/atlas_sj/page/n57/mode/2up?q=taurinensis).

**24** "Qui a patribus Montium Saxosorum magno animarum emolimento excoli possit", in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Amer. USA, Prov. Oregon., Missio Alaska, b. 1001, fasc. I, doc. 1; Lucchesi, *Gesuiti genovesi*.

**25** *Letter of Fr. Congiato to Beckx*, 20 May 1859, in ARSI, Ass. Amer. USA, Prov. Missouri, Mont. Sax., b. 1002, fasc. III, doc. 2.

## 2 Language and Cultural Translation: Speaking the Language of the Natives

Since the early modern period, mastering local languages was central to the Jesuits' missionary method. In multi-ethnic contexts, Jesuits sought linguistic uniformity to evangelize native groups. Both linguistic practice and ritual adaptation can be seen within the broader historiographical debate on Jesuit *accommodatio*, here understood not as a uniform method but as a flexible strategy shaped by local conditions, resources, and the need to communicate with indigenous populations.<sup>26</sup> Precedents, including Paraguay, had already shown the importance of linguistic competence in overcoming fragmentation among coexisting ethnic communities.<sup>27</sup> In the northwestern United States and Alaska, a striking contradiction emerged: local languages were employed for catechesis, but banned from everyday missions' life, while English was enforced in schools, also reflecting Jesuit adaptation to American norms.<sup>28</sup>

Jesuit humanistic formation and linguistic aptitude therefore became key criteria for missionary selection and deployment, as with Gregorio Mengarini, chosen by Roothaan to join De Smet's second expedition precisely because of his prior linguistic studies, and others, as Filippo Canestrelli, Giuseppe Giorda, Antonio Ravalli, Giuseppe Bandini, Antonio Morvillo, Urbano Grassi, Paul Muset and Julius Jetté, who produced grammars of various native American and

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**26** Romanato, "Le riduzioni del Paraguay", 58; El Alaoui, *Jésuites, morisques et indiens*; Maldavsky, "The Andes", 58-9; McKevitt, "Northwest Indian Evangelisation", 695. See also: Broggio, *Evangelizzare il mondo*; McManus, "Jesuit Humanism"; Zwartjes, Zimmermann, Schrader-Kniffki, *Missionary Linguistics V*; Poli, "Politiche linguistiche"; Zupanov, Fabre, *The Rites Controversies*.

**27** Wilde, "Le missioni del Paraguay", 82-3. See also: Piras, *Martin de Funes*; Maldavsky, *Vocaciones inciertas*.

**28** *Letter from Michele Accolti to the General Beckx*, 5 May 1854, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Amer. USA, b. Mont. Sax. 2, fasc. I, doc. 6. On the linguistic distribution in the Rocky Mountains: Jacquin, *Storia degli indiani d'America*, 30-5; in Alaska, Krauss, Hoppel, *Native Peoples and Languages*. Although not exhaustive, this source provides a summary of selected diachronic trends in U.S. federal educational policy: <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL34205?>

Alaskan languages and catechisms.<sup>29</sup> However, it was not always possible to rely on missionaries who were willing to study Indigenous languages or had sufficient proficiency in English. As emigrants, many European Jesuits frequently found themselves required to learn or refine their English while simultaneously studying local languages or to prioritise indigenous idioms, hoping to be assigned solely to missions serving native communities.<sup>30</sup> In 1884, General Beckx encouraged the provincial of Turin to send Jesuits with English skills or previous experience in California to the Rocky Mountains.<sup>31</sup> Language, logistical, and financial challenges led the provincial in 1889 to consider transferring mission coordination to the Maryland province.<sup>32</sup> Missionaries of the Turin province debated the issue extensively, sending observations to the general of the Society of Jesus, to protect their mission camps.<sup>33</sup>

Language barriers were particularly acute in Alaska, due to its distance from European and American cultural horizons. By 1893, many of the elderly Jesuits were discouraged by the need to learn multiple indigenous languages, and Tosi requested that General

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**29** *Letter from Fr. Caruana to Fr. Casagrandi*, S. Cuore, 1882, in AEMSI, b. Fascicoli Personali, fasc. LXII Giorda Giuseppe, doc. 3; *Letter from Fr. Tosi to the General*, Holy Cross, 4 September 1894, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Amer. USA, Prov. Oregon., Missio Alaska, b. 1001, fasc. II, doc. 1; McKeivitt, "Northwest Indian Evangelisation", 697; De Smet, *Letters*, 193. Ferlan, "From Ship to Shore", 447; Menelao, *Nella Terra delle nevi*, 106-7; Casassa, *Gesuiti Liguri*, 96; Jetté, "On the Superstitions"; Jetté, "On Ten'a Folklore"; see also: Jetté, "On the Medicine-Men"; Walter, "Father Joseph Jules Jetté", 2-7. An overview of the translations and works that the Jesuits produced in "Indian Language Collection" (Gonzaga University), cf. Schoenberg, *Jesuit Mission Presses*.

**30** *Letter of Fr. Tosi to Fr. General*, Holy Cross, 4 September 1894, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Amer. USA, Prov. Oregon., Missio Alaska, b. 1001, fasc. II, doc. 1; *Letter from Fr. General Louis Martin to Fr. Sasia*, Provincial of Turin, 25 May 1895, in AEMSI, serie Tematica, b. Prov. Taur. 1 (Miscellanea); McKeivitt, "Northwest Indian Evangelisation", 696.

**31** *Letter from Fr. General to Fr. Provincial of Turin*, Fiesole, 1 January 1884, in AEMSI, serie Tematica, b. Prov. Taur. 1 (Miscellanea).

**32** *Letter from Fr. Bandini to Fr. General*, 2 June 1889, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Italiae, Registra, Prov. Taur., b. 1002 (1873-1906), fasc. V, doc. 37 a.

**33** The Jesuits Fortunato Giudice, Franco Secondo and Giacomo Razzini agreed, cf. *Letters from Fr. Giudice, Fr. Secondo and Fr. Razzini to the Father General*, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Italiae, Prov. Taur., b. 1011, fasc. II, docs. 37 b, c, d, e. An emblematic passage of Torti reads: "Per gli Indiani non si richiede lingua perfetta; è gente che si deve dirozzare, non perfezionare", cf. *Letter from Fr. Carlo Torti to the General*, 2 June 1889, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Italiae, Prov. Taur., b. 1011, fasc. II, doc. 37.

Martin send two young Jesuits, Raphael Crimont and Louis Ragaru, to focus on language study and support the missions.<sup>34</sup> Conversely, Francis Barnum was recalled to Europe in 1894 after failing to master local languages and establish relations with the Yukon Valley natives.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, as late as 1895, William Judge noted to General Anderledy from St. Peter Claver that without a proper knowledge of the local languages, he could introduce only a few religious foundations and barely perceive the needs of Nulato natives.<sup>36</sup>

At least in the early phase of evangelisation in the Rocky Mountains and Alaska, missionaries relied on Indigenous intermediaries familiar with English to assist in religious instruction. An example was the 1883 *Corpus Christi* feast among the Néz-Percés, conducted in English with simultaneous translation into the native language, and later published in the *Edifying Letters*. While the account underscores behaviours perceived as extravagant and inappropriate by missionaries, it also highlights the central role of language and the extent to which Indigenous participants understood the basic of Catholic doctrine.<sup>37</sup>

The ability to understand and master local languages allowed the Jesuits not only to succeed in instruction more than Protestant and Orthodox ministers, but also to ensure missions' survival, particularly in challenging and unstable regions.<sup>38</sup> A striking case appears in an 1863 manuscript by Giuseppe Giorda, superior of the Rocky Mountains mission, who recounts being kidnapped by a group of unconverted Gros Ventres while crossing the Missouri River with other missionaries. Thanks to his communication skills, the Jesuits were not only released but also able to advocate for peace with the neighbouring Blackfeet community and "con Dio", by offering to

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**34** *Letter from Fr. Tosi to the Fr. General*, San Francisco, 17 May 1893, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Amer., Prov. Oregon, Missio Alaska, b. 1001, fasc. I, docs. 15, 18.

**35** *Letter from Fr. Tosi to the General*, 4 September 1894, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Amer. USA, Prov. Oregon., Missio Alaska, b. 1001, fasc. II, doc. 1.

**36** Judge, *An American Missionary*, 105-8, cf. Judge's letter to the Father General, 1895, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Amer. USA, Prov. Oregon., Missio Alaska, b. 1001, fasc. VIII, doc. 5: 1; Menelao, *Nella Terra delle nevi*, 108-9.

**37** Cf. "La Festa del Corpus Domini fra gli Indiani. Da una lettera del P. Morvillo al P. Cataldo", Néz-Percés, 3 settembre 1883, in *Lettere Edificanti*, 1: 19-20.

**38** O'Donnel "Jesuit in the North", 7; McKevitt, *Brokers of Culture*, 123.

baptise their children.<sup>39</sup> The manuscript also reports that, in the following days, some Gros Ventres allegedly came to the mission seeking Catholic instruction, despite widespread beliefs that baptism endangered their children. This gave Giorda an opportunity to demonstrate the strength of his missionary vision. The episode and the natives' response reflect rhetorical patterns typical of edifying narratives, as shown in the following extract between the missionary (M) and the native (N):<sup>40</sup>

M: "Credete forse che sia così empio da volere la morte dei vostri figli? Qual utile me ne verrebbe? [...] Vi ha mai la Veste Nera domandato o un cavallo o una pelle per darvi il battesimo? E i Piedi Neri le hanno forse dato danaro perché uccida i bambini dei Grossi Ventri?"

A queste parole tutti i cuori furono cambiati.

N: "Noi siamo stati ingannati; non siamo rozzi e ignoranti, perdonaci, Veste Nera, domani ti condurremo i nostri bambini perché tu ne faccia tanti amici di Dio".<sup>41</sup>

On the one hand, the account demonstrates how the Jesuits sought to distance themselves from the practice of administering sacraments in exchange for gifts, a tendency they commonly attributed to Protestant and Orthodox ministers and considered one of the causes of the invalidity of such sacraments.<sup>42</sup> It also highlights their role as 'mediators' in local conflicts, crucial both for successful evangelization and for the survival of missions in a region strained by ethnic tensions and federal Removal Acts.<sup>43</sup>

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**39** *Estratto da una lettera di padre Giuseppe Giorda*, 4-5, in AEMSI, serie Manoscritti, nr. 519, Letters of Missionaries (1863-1866).

**40** The initials are a convention adopted by the Author.

**41** *Estratto da una lettera di padre Giuseppe Giorda*, 4-5, in AEMSI, serie Manoscritti, nr. 519, Letters of Missionaries (1863-1866). On the term 'Veste Nera' o 'Black Robe', cf. Jesset, "Origin of the Term Black Robe", 1-15.

**42** Cf. *Lettere Edificanti*, 1: 28; "Lettera del P. Robaut al P. Carlo Torti", S. Pietro Claver (Nulato), 27 agosto 1890, in *Lettere Edificanti*, 1: 78.

**43** *Letter from Fr. Filippo Canestrelli to Fr. Cataldo*, 13 July 1885, in AEMSI, Fascicoli Personali, fasc. Filippo Canestrelli, doc. 4. See also Boltanski, "A Jesuit Missio Castrensis".

### 3 **Synesthesias. Religious Instruction Between Listening, Vision and Daily Practice**

Knowledge of both local languages and English enabled the Jesuits to lay the foundations of the Catholic faith among native populations, structuring catechetical instruction around key elements of Ignatian pedagogy and the *Spiritual Exercises*, including daily collective exercises.<sup>44</sup> In the American Northwest, the first Jesuit residence in Montana provided a model of practices, later implemented in other Rocky Mountains missions. Soon after St. Mary's was founded, De Smet began translating Catholic prayers into the Flatheads language, assisted by Indigenous people familiar with French.<sup>45</sup> Daily group recitations in a circle reinforced learning and memorization of texts, and gradually fostered natives' autonomy. Mengarini himself was astonished that, among the Flatheads, the prayers taught by De Smet in 1840 were still remembered, demonstrating the model's success.<sup>46</sup> When adapted to different local conditions, religious instruction soon assumed a comprehensive educational role.<sup>47</sup>

In each Rocky Mountains residence, the missionary in charge of spiritual affairs celebrated Mass every morning, while instructing the gathered natives, who returned in the evening for prayers and a brief additional lesson.<sup>48</sup> Once the prayers were learned, the missionaries introduced natives to Catholic devotional and liturgical practices, effecting a translation that went beyond language. By drawing on forms, elements, and archetypes familiar to the Flatheads, they employed a mediatory strategy that made the sacred space of the celebrations and the dynamics of Catholic rites intelligible, fostering cultural and ritual hybridisation.<sup>49</sup> A notable example is Gregorio Mengarini, who attempted to recreate elements of the scenography and visual apparatus of the Forty Hours devotion, as he had seen it in the Roman College, carving wood covered with gold leaf and crafting candles from bison fat.<sup>50</sup>

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**44** For a contextual framework: Ferrer, *Indigeni e cristiani?*; Burkhart, "The Little Doctrine"; *Ratio atque Institutio Studiorum SJ*.

**45** McKevitt, "The Art", 55-7; Maldavsky, "The Andes", 52-9.

**46** Palladino, *Indian and White*, 25-7.

**47** McKevitt, "The Art", 49.

**48** *Letter from Michele Accolti to the General Beckx*, 5 May 1854, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. America USA, Prov. Missouri, Mont. Sax, b. 1002, fasc. I, doc. 6; *Estratto di una lettera di Giuseppe Caruana*, 3 April 1866, in AEMSI, serie Manoscritti, nr. 519.

**49** McKevitt, "Northwest Indian Evangelisation", 698.

**50** Mengarini, "The Rocky Mountains", 34.

Aware of the central role of music in indigenous ritual practices, the Jesuits attributed a prominent function to sound in religious celebrations. As already experienced among the Guaraní of Paraguay, similarly in the American Northwest the singing of hymns and the use of liturgical music proved effective in inspiring enthusiasm and participation among the natives, as well as attracting the interest of unconverted groups. Gregorio Mengarini translated some traditional liturgical compositions into Salish language, composed funeral laments and in 1845 established a small musical band of twelve young Flatheads.<sup>51</sup> In this context, music functioned as a link between European popular religious imagination and the sensibility of the Flatheads.<sup>52</sup>

To consolidate catechetical teaching among the youngest, the missionaries introduced recreational activities with prizes, in keeping with Jesuit pedagogical principles, structured as team competitions. These mirrored activities employed in earlier missionary context, such as those of New France, featuring a series of quizzes on religious themes accompanied by gifts offered by the missionaries. The combination of competition and reward also served to engage parents and native chiefs, who encouraged their children's participation.<sup>53</sup>

The experience gained in the Rocky Mountains provided both a model and the most immediate precedent for organizing missionary activity in Alaska from 1886 onward, where, at the Holy Cross and St. Peter Claver school, missionaries offered daily morning lessons in religious doctrine alongside the fundamentals of the English language.<sup>54</sup> In the vast, sparsely populated and particularly hostile territory, which strained the Jesuits' adaptive strategies, catechetical activity, when not conducted within permanent residences, coincided with the long apostolic visits undertaken by the fathers.<sup>55</sup> According to an 1893 report by Pasquale Tosi to the general of the Society of Jesus, the Holy Cross school was progressing to such an extent that it was soon able to admit other young indigenous children from the coastal regions of Alaska.<sup>56</sup>

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**51** Palladino, *Indian and White*, 76.

**52** McKeivitt, "The Art", 59-60.

**53** Deslandres, "New France", 133; McKeivitt, "Northwest Indian Evangelisation", 698.

**54** "Lettera del P. Judge al P. Cataldo", Koziorevsky, 19 giugno 1891, in *Lettere Edificanti*, 1: 68; Judge, *An American Missionary*, 105-8.

**55** Tosi, *La Missione dell'Alaska*, 50-9.

**56** *Letter from Fr. Tosi to the Fr. General*, St. Michael, 17 August 1893, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Amer. USA, Prov. Oregon., Missio Alaska, b. 1001, fasc. I, doc. 18.

These efforts, however, encountered the limits of linguistic comprehension, as previously noted.<sup>57</sup> A particularly significant example of catechesis among the indigenous peoples of Alaska was that conducted by Giovanni Parodi at St. Joseph residence, as documented in a series of reports sent to the superior general between 1895 and 1896, which provide an example of successful religious instruction programme.<sup>58</sup> This catechetical lesson plan, beginning with the narration of Creation and extending to the coming of Christ and its moral implications for humanity, aimed to make intelligible to the natives, bearers of different cultural and spiritual horizons, the purpose of Christian life and the meaning of life and death.<sup>59</sup>

Beyond catechetical instruction, Jesuit educational activity extended to the regulation of gender roles and the reform of family structures, forming part of a broader project of moral, social, and cultural transformation aimed at integrating Indigenous populations into a Catholic way of life. Health, belief, and authority played a central role in shaping everyday life. In a letter dated 1896, Parodi informed the General of the Society of Jesus about a challenge facing missionary work: the need to limit the influence of shamans or 'Indian doctors'. Because of the authority they enjoyed as interpreters of reality, predictors of the future, and healers, the Jesuit found it difficult to establish European therapeutic practices among the native communities. In this regard, Parodi stated: "Si infirmi convaliscunt arte medica, non multum curant de magicis artibus; sed si Missionarius non potest eos adjuvare, tabescunt superstitionibus die ac nocte".<sup>60</sup>

As early as 1889, three years after the foundation of the Alaska mission, Joseph Tréca identified the role and the ritual practices of shamans as one of the principal obstacles to the Christian evangelisation of the Yukon natives. However, his assessment was marked by a notably severe tone, as he attributed to the shamans nothing more than venial motives and the skills of a quack and a

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**57** *Letter from Judge to the Father General, 1895*, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Amer. USA, Prov. Oregon, Missio Alaska, b. 1001, f. VIII, doc. 5, p. 1; cf. Judge, *An American Missionary*, 105-8.

**58** Parodi, *Quid Ago inter Indos?*, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Americana USA, Prov. Oregon., Missio Alaska, b. 1001, fasc. X, docs. 4-6.

**59** Parodi, *Quid Ago inter Indos?*, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Americana USA, Prov. Oregon., Missio Alaska, b. 1001, fasc. X doc. 4.

**60** Cf. *Letter from Father Parodi to the Fr. General, St. Joseph, 1896*, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Amer. USA, Prov. Oregon., Missio Alaska, b. 1001, fasc. I, doc. 5.

circus performer.<sup>61</sup> The therapeutic dimension thus assumed a central role in missionary activity, not only as a response to recurrent epidemics but also as a means of countering the traditional healing practices of shamans. Missionary intervention therefore operated simultaneously on the spiritual and material levels, contributing to a redefinition of the very meanings of illness and healing.<sup>62</sup>

Beyond the limited or absent therapeutic efficacy attributed to these practices, the Jesuits identified in the rites of the “medicine men” elements they regarded as superstitious, at times interpreting them as manifestations of diabolical influence, at others as the result of imposture and personal interests, exercised to the detriment of natives, considered naïve and easily impressionable.<sup>63</sup> Because the terminology employed by the missionaries to describe the Alaskan shamans closely resembles that used for indigenous healers in the French colonies of North America, Catherine O’Donnell has drawn parallels between these judgments and the assessments expressed by the most educated French elites towards popular healers in Europe. In this perspective, missionary efforts appear to reflect a broader attempt to reform certain aspects of European culture, through the correction of analogous practices in mission lands.<sup>64</sup>

On the one hand, linguistic practice facilitated the inculturation of missionaries and the evangelisation of the natives, enabling the reception and transmission of Catholic teachings. On the other hand, the abandonment of native languages by Indigenous peoples laid the foundations for the conversion of Indigenous peoples to the Catholic Church, encompassing both the material and spiritual dimensions of native belief systems.

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**61** “Lettera del P. Tréca al Rev. P. Cataldo”, Tunungamute (Capo Vancouver), 2 giugno 1890, in *Lettere Edificanti*, 1: 49.

**62** “Lettera del P. Crispino Rossi al R. P. Provinciale”, Holy Cross, Koserefsky P. O., 16 agosto 1900, in *Lettere Edificanti*, 2: 19-25.

**63** Clark, “Jesuit Missionaries”, 406-7; Ragaru, “Il mio primo viaggio”, 21; Menelao, *Nella Terra delle nevi*, 63-4, 86-7.

**64** O’Donnell, “Jesuits in the North American”, 8. For a reflection on “the outer and inner Indies”, see: Colombo, “Gesuitomania”, 50-1; Proserpi, *Tribunali della coscienza*, 551-99.

#### 4 **People to Tame. Some Aspects of Indian Schools in the Rocky Mountains and Alaska**

In the long history of Jesuit missionary tradition, the native, far from being a mere recipient of evangelisation or a simple vehicle of Catholic teachings, was an otherness capable of stimulating processes of mediation and adaptation between two distinct cultural models. This dual status, both as an object of evangelisation and acculturation and as an active subject in the dissemination of missionary teachings, is further confirmed by the scholastic experience designed for young indigenous people of the Jesuit residences of the Rocky Mountains and Alaska. The instructional and educational activities drew on the formative experience of the Jesuits themselves, for whom education responded to a principle of the integral perfection of the individual.<sup>65</sup>

Fundamental to the development of educational activity were several women's congregations of active life, Belgian, American and Canadian, engaged in the management of schools and hospitals, often at the urging of the Jesuits themselves or the local American clergy.<sup>66</sup> Although often rooted in training where academic preparation outweighed practical experience of care and formation, which later became central to missionary work, the experience of religious women, particularly the Sisters of Providence and the Sisters of St. Anne of Lachine, in medical assistance proved crucial for managing St. Julian's Hospital at St. Ignatius in Montana, St. Patrick Hospital at Missoula and Holy Cross Hospital in Alaska.<sup>67</sup>

On 5 August 1844, a first group of six Belgian sisters of Notre Dame de Namur arrived at Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River, accompanying a group of Jesuits, among whom were Ravalli, Nobili and Vercruysse, and subsequently settled in Oregon, where they devoted themselves primarily to educational and missionary work. Twenty years later, a small community of the sisters of charity of Providence established the earliest organized Catholic educational initiatives at St. Ignatius Mission, followed in 1884 by a group of Ursuline nuns from Toledo, Ohio, who arrived at the invitation of bishop Jean-Baptiste Brondel.<sup>68</sup> In 1873 the same sisters of Providence, founded by Madame Émilie Gamelin in Montreal as

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**65** Haub, "Education Jesuite", 639-42.

**66** For each female congregation, please refer to the *Dictionary of Institutes of Perfection (DIP)*; McKevitt, *Brokers of Culture*, 14; Butler, *Across God's Frontiers*.

**67** Butler, *Across God's Frontiers*, 32.

**68** Flintham, "Leaves from the Annals", 322-39; Mengarini, "The Rocky Mountains", 77. Schrems, *Uncommon Women*, 5-8. See also: Colombier, *Annales de l'Ordre de Ste-Ursule*, 194; Garceau-Hagen, *Portraits of Women*.

the Daughters of Charity Servants of the Poor (1843), founded one of the most important hospitals at Missoula in Montana and the following year, they obtained the contract to provide care for the poor of Missoula County.<sup>69</sup> With the beginning of missionary activity in Alaska in 1886 and at the insistent request of Jonckau, on 13 March 1888, a first group of sisters of St. Anne of Lachine from Quebec was sent, arriving on 26 June of the same year at St. Michael, in the Norton Sound's Bay. These nuns would remain the only active women's congregation in the region until at least 1905.<sup>70</sup>

The nuns' willingness to aid in dangerous places others avoided underscores the substantial, not merely supplementary, role of their contribution in Catholic missionary history. Within the Jesuit missions, their influence in educational initiatives particularly regarded hygiene and the regulation of girls' behaviour. In his writings, Pasquale Tosi gave special emphasis on body care, which missionaries viewed as unfamiliar to local customs.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, Jesuits and nuns sought to differentiate practical and educational activities according to the gender of the children under their care, in accordance with the principle of Catholic complementarity, unknown to native populations, in which women instead held an active and leading role, even in activities considered physically demanding.<sup>72</sup> Thus, in their writings, the missionaries portrayed native women of the Rocky Mountains as "schiave condannate a faticosi mestieri".<sup>73</sup> While operating among different ethnic societies, both in the Rocky Mountains and in Alaska, religious women and Jesuits identified the 'liberation of women' as one of the goals achieved through their missionary work.<sup>74</sup> They interpreted as a positive outcome of their missionary action the transition of indigenous women to the status of morally protected person, respected by their husbands, according to Catholic values and norms and regarded as bearers of a virtue to be preserved. Missionary writings interpreted the regulation of women's presence in public spaces, the adoption of clothing deemed

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**69** Willms, Savitt, *Sisters' Hospital*, 30-1.

**70** Ferlan, "Frozen Frontiers", 181-3; Menelao, *Nella Terra delle nevi*, 49-51; Barnum, "Le Suore di Sant'Anna", in *Lettere Edificanti*, 2: 19-21; Renner, *Alaskana Catholica*, 261-2.

**71** Tosi, *La Missione dell'Alaska*, 23-4, 48-50.

**72** McKevitt, *Brokers of Culture*, 12, 120-4.

**73** "Missione delle Montagne Rocciose. Alcune notizie generali", in *Lettere Edificanti*, 1: 3; McKevitt, *Brokers of Culture*, 125; Menelao, *Nella Terra delle nevi*, 29.

**74** Extract from a letter from Fr. Caruana to Fr. Provincial of Turin, 3 April 1866, in AEMSI, serie Manoscritti, nr. 519, 12.

decorous, and the display of devotional symbols, such as medals of the Immaculate Virgin, as external signs of a renewed morality and as concrete evidence of the effectiveness of the evangelizing project. This representation of female respectability was accompanied by the idea that Catholic education had strengthened women's ability to resist behaviours considered harmful to their virtue, contributing to the limitation of even free unions. From this perspective, missionaries interpreted the reform of the institution of marriage, particularly the elimination of polygamy in favour of Christian monogamous marriage, especially in the Rocky Mountains regions, as a further and decisive step in the process of Catholic education.<sup>75</sup> While missionaries in Alaska did not have to contend with the issue of polygamy, they nonetheless considered certain female customs in that context to fall outside the Catholic horizon, notably what they perceived as a lack of prudence and reserve in interactions with men.<sup>76</sup>

The European conception of gender roles was also reflected in the organization of school instruction at Jesuits' residences. Regarding practical activities, Jesuits introduced the boys to agriculture, from basic principles to the care of plants and the harvesting of fruits, as well as to carpentry. The girls, on the other hand, were trained by the sisters in domestic work, including food preparation and daily cleaning, as well as in sewing, mending, embroidery, and lacemaking, skills introduced in Alaska by some Flemish nuns. The skills acquired in Indian schools were considered by both sisters and fathers to be valuable not only for strengthening and consolidating the mission as a self-sufficient community, but also for preparing students for integration into civil and 'civilised society', in accordance with Catholic values.<sup>77</sup> Generally, the nuns focused their care exclusively on indigenous school-age girls, except in exceptional or emergency circumstances. As evidenced by a report by Accolti in 1854, due to the lack of male staff and the reluctance to employ secular tutors, the missionaries contemplated assigning the sisters to the education of male children "in separate apartments and up to a certain age".<sup>78</sup>

Missionaries and nuns often encountered resistance from pupils' parents; according to Jesuit writings, this obstacle was overcome whenever the parents themselves saw the positive results of a

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**75** Menelao, *Nella Terra delle nevi*, 28-31.

**76** "Lettera del P. Perron ad un Padre del Collegio di Torino", Nulato, 11 giugno 1899, in *Lettere Edificanti*, 2: 50.

**77** Tosi, *La Missione dell'Alaska*, 48-72; Menelao, *Nella Terra delle nevi*, 113-15.

**78** *Letter from Michele Accolti to the General Beckx*, 5 May 1854, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Americana USA, Mont. Sax., b. 1002, fasc. I, doc. 6.

Catholic upbringing in the changed behaviour of their children, which underscored the perceived necessity of converting the natives.<sup>79</sup>

Catholic Indian schools were strengthened especially under Giuseppe Cataldo, local superior of the Rocky Mountains Mission from 1877 to 1893, who actively recruited new Jesuits for the Northwest missions.<sup>80</sup> Despite these initiatives, the missions had to adapt to the changing federal educational policies.<sup>81</sup> Oversight by officials from the Bureau of Indian Affairs was ensured through inspectors and officials tasked with supervising school activities, as documented in the missionaries' correspondence.<sup>82</sup> Although the selection of the *Edifying Letters* presented clear examples of success, the results of government inspections were not uniformly positive: an official visiting the missions at Colville and the Sacred Heart in 1889 issued an unfavourable report.<sup>83</sup> However, a second visit by a different inspector contradicted the earlier assessment, ranking the Sacred Heart School as the finest Catholic educational institution examined.<sup>84</sup> Likewise, an excerpt from William Judge's account, published in the *Edifying Letters* and concerning the subsequent Alaskan mission, shows that federal agents considered Jesuits' schools capable of providing a comprehensive education, by combining practical instruction in trades with intellectual training in languages and sciences, alongside constant supervision of indigenous youth.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, precisely because it was provided by a Protestant, this testimony also served, from a Catholic perspective, to demonstrate the greater success of Jesuit evangelisation compared to that of other churches active in Alaska. The tone in which Judge reported Catholic these educational successes once again reflected the intention to uplift Indigenous populations according to Catholic values and to Western ideas of care, hygiene, and productivity.

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**79** Jung, *Jesuit Missions*, 28.

**80** McKeivitt, "The Jump", 430.

**81** For some questions relating to Federal Government funding, see also: Tosi, *Le nostre Scuole Indiane*, in AEMSI, Prov. Torinese, b. Alaska-Idaho, fasc. XXIV, doc. 3. See also McKeivitt, *Brokers of Culture*, 8-9; McKeivitt, "The Jump", 428-30. See also: Prucha, *The Churches*; Fritz, *The Movement for Indian Assimilation*.

**82** For further guidance, cf. Hill, *Guide to Records*, 24-40.

**83** *Letter from Fr. Carlo Torti to Fr. General*, Genoa, 2 June 1889, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Italiae, Registra, Prov. Taur., b. 1011, fasc. II, doc. 37.

**84** *Letter from Fr. Carlo Torti to Fr. General*, Genoa, 2 June 1889, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Amer. USA, Prov. Oregon., b. Missio Alaska, b. 1001, fasc. II, doc. 37.

**85** Judge, *An American Missionary*, 72-4; "Terza lettera del P. Judge a suo fratello", San Michele, 3 luglio 1895, in *Lettere Edificanti*, 2: 63-6.

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Missionaries and sisters later extended Catholic educational activities, initially aimed at indigenous population, to the children of commercial officials and settlers, in buildings near their communities. They arrived in Alaska following the Klondike gold rush, reportedly impressed by the education imparted by Jesuits and nuns to indigenous children.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, each spring, when the Alaska Commercial Company steamer arrived at St. Michael, the young natives of the residence welcomed the agents with demonstrations of what they had learned at school up to that point.<sup>87</sup> As well as showcasing their academic abilities, such as science, and arithmetic, the program included music, theatrical performances and physical exercises. In this regard, below is an extract from the alleged testimony of one of the officers, once again reported by Judge:<sup>88</sup>

A welcome song by all the children; a little play by the girls [...]; then the boys came in as a company of soldiers with wooden guns and an American flag. After drilling for a few minutes, they sang three songs and six of them spoke pieces. Then they marched out and the girls marched in and performed the calisthenic exercises; after which they all sang the *Star-Spangled Banner*.

Within the missionary narrative, the indigenous peoples of the North-West and Alaska were portrayed as “poverelli famelici”, emerging from paganism and polygamy only with the arrival of the first Jesuits, gradually adopting a sedentary lifestyle, a moderate life guided by Christian values, and the benefits of formal schooling.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, from the earlier excerpt, it is clear that evangelisation served as a bridge for integrating indigenous peoples into American culture.

Within the horizon of edifying models, the figure of Louise Siuwheem (1800-1853), daughter and granddaughter of Coeur d’Alene chiefs, is particularly prominent. Also known as the ‘Apostle of the Coeur d’Alene’, Louise was among the first women in her community to be baptised by Pierre-Jean De Smet in 1842.<sup>90</sup> Not only does her story testify to the early processes of Christianisation among the natives

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**86** Menelao, *Nella terra delle nevi*, 71-9.

**87** Judge, *An American Missionary*, 72-3; Tosi, *La Missione dell’Alaska*, 28.

**88** Judge, *An American Missionary*, 73.

**89** Menelao, *Nella Terra delle nevi*, 27. Cf. Tosi, *La Missione dell’Alaska*, 69-70.

**90** De Smet, *Story of Louise Sighouin* (manuscript), in KADOC-KU, Conglomeraatsarchief met betrekking tot Pieter Jan De Smet S.J. en de Noord-Amerikaanse jezüetenmissies (1811-2007), Archive of the Society of Jesus in Flanders, Prov. Belgica Septentrionalis, b. Desmetiana, fasc. 16123, doc. 1. Cf. also Turner, *Wise Women*.

of Idaho but also highlights the active role of natives in translating and adapting the Christian message within their own community. Indeed, Louise Siuwheem, mother and wife, distinguished herself through her assistance to the needy and orphans of the mission, becoming a point of connection between new religious practices and pre-existing cultural traditions. This connection was reinforced by the oral tradition of the Coeur d'Alene, according to which Chief Circling Raven, Louise's ancestor, allegedly had a vision of "men wearing Black Robes who bid his work and will teach the Coeur d'Alene".<sup>91</sup>

As late as 1860, the French journal *Collection de Précis Historiques littéraires et scientifiques*, directed by the Belgian Jesuit Edward Terwecoren, reported on the death of the woman, "who died in 1852 in the odour of sanctity".<sup>92</sup> The account of her conversion and pious death reflected, on the one hand, a 'desire for holiness' within the missionary context and on the other, it could be interpreted by contemporary readers as an evidence of Jesuit missionary activity in one of the communities considered most resistant to evangelisation in the Rocky Mountains.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, behind the edifying narrative centred on Louise's life, the considerable difficulties faced by missionaries among the Coeur D'Alene in the early years of evangelisation become apparent. Emblematic in this respect are the epithets attributed to her: "Lys entre les épines", "Oasis au milieu de l'aridité stérile", "Lumière au milieu des ténèbres de la mort", which underscore her dual exceptionalism: as an indigenous convert and as an exemplary Christian.<sup>94</sup> Yet, the emphasis on sanctity and exemplary behaviour may equally reflect the author's rhetorical aim of presenting an idealised model of missionary life rather than providing objective proof. In this sense, the source operates both as a historical record and as a tool to shape audience perception and reinforce the legitimacy of Jesuit missions.

Also noteworthy is the paradigmatic story of little Marie Kolinzuten, likely belonging to the Flatheads community, who was brought to Rome by the Ursulines of the American Western Province to the Mother House and the Holy See, following the Congregation's accession to the Roman Union in 1900.<sup>95</sup> This episode aimed to strengthen the ties between the American missions and the Roman

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**91** New, *Cooperation in the Wilds*, 29.

**92** "Louise Sighouin", 274. Sources differ on Louise's date of death (1852 vs. 1853).

**93** Cummings, *A Saint of Our Own*.

**94** "Louise Sighouin", 274-5.

**95** "A Bright Page of a Sweet Life", 6.

center, ensuring continuity and the recruitment of new personnel for those in the United States. The episode also had a clear apologetic dimension: the figure of the young Marie Kolinzuten, also known as Mary Stuart, not only embodied the effectiveness of Catholic evangelisation but was also presented as a paradigm of religious fidelity in an explicitly anti-Protestant framework. Her story, therefore, confirmed how the educational and religious formation of indigenous children became a vehicle for narratives and symbolic representations of spiritual victory and institutional cohesion. The traditional framework, which sees individual experiences as evidence of missionary progress, also applies to conversions at the point of death of adults and young natives.<sup>96</sup>

After an initial period of difficulty for missionary work in the Rocky Mountains around the 1850s, evidenced by the closure of the St Mary's Mission in 1850 and by the difficulties in administering the St Paul Mission in 1858, Indian missions in the region experienced a slight decline towards the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>97</sup> In 1898, Sasia reported the closure of the St. Peter residence in Montana due to a lack of people to assist and began procedures to sell the land. As early as 1897, he had informed the general of the Society of Jesus that the indigenous population of the Rocky Mountains was steadily decreasing, making it likely that missionary activity would focus almost exclusively on the American population within twenty-five to thirty years.<sup>98</sup> Sasia recognised that, while the advance of American settlers was inevitable, missionary activity would continue to serve both Indigenous populations and the newcomers, thereby maintaining the Jesuit presence in the Rocky Mountains.<sup>99</sup> Meanwhile, the Alaska mission represented a new area of development for Jesuit Catholic efforts. This mission was under the administration of the Province of Turin until 1910, the year in which, the control of the missions in the Rocky Mountains and southern Alaska was definitively transferred to

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**96** Barnum, "Le Suore di Sant'Anna", in *Lettere Edificanti*, 2: 19-27.

**97** *Letter from Michele Accolti to the General Beckx*, 5 May 1854, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Amer. USA, Mont. Sax., b. 1002, fasc. I, doc. 5; Jesuit Archives & Research Center (JARC), Roll 1 St. Mary in Montana, fasc. 2 Property Deeds and Sale; *Lettera di p. Congiato a p. Beckx*, Oregon City, 10 December 1858, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Amer. USA, Prov. Missouri, Mont. Sax., b. 1002, fasc. III, doc. 1.

**98** *Letter from Fr. Sasia to the General*, Turin, 28 September 1897, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Italiae, Prov. Taur., b. 1001, fasc. IV, doc. 115.

**99** "Unum facere et alterum non omittere", cf. *Letter of Fr. Sasia to Fr. General*, 28 September 1897, in ARSI, Nuova Compagnia, Ass. Italiae, Prov. Taur., b.1, doc. 115.

the new-established Province of California.<sup>100</sup> As for northern Alaska, the territory was initially assigned to the Canadian Province (1907); however, from 1912 onwards, its incorporation into the Province of California was confirmed.<sup>101</sup>

## 5 Final Remarks

In analysing certain aspects of Jesuit missionary activity in the Rocky Mountains and Alaska, this study situates these experiences within the renewed missionary impulse of the nineteenth century, shaped both by the revitalising action of General Jan Roothaan and by the expectations of the American bishops of the Oregon district. Focusing on Italian Jesuits, particularly from the Province of Turin, the mission territories of the U.S. Northwest emerge as spaces of survival and reorganisation for the Society of Jesus following the European expulsions (1848), illustrating the composite nature of the initial missionary groups. At the same time, the Province of Turin was active in the Rocky Mountains, California and Alaska. In California, Fr. Congiato founded the College of Santa Clara (1851), and missionaries frequently moved between different fields, transferring models and experiences.

Drawing on earlier missionary models and emerging forms of inculturation, Jesuit *accommodatio* is understood here, also in light of Markus's observations, not as a retrospective classificatory framework, capable of unifying heterogeneous phenomena within a coherent interpretative scheme, but as a dynamic and historically situated practice, shaped by ongoing negotiations between local cultures and the missionary project.<sup>102</sup> However, adaptation did not imply syncretism or tolerance, but remained oriented toward the conversion of Indigenous peoples.<sup>103</sup>

In the Rocky Mountains and Alaska, educational activities led by Jesuits and female congregations show that missions functioned not only as sites of conversion, but also as spaces of mediation, where indigenous agency was negotiated and later reframed in missionary

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**100** *Catalogus Provinciae Californiae*, 1910, 44-5.

**101** *Catalogus Provinciae Canadensis*, 1908, 70; Menelao, *Nella Terra delle nevi*, 50-3; *Lettere Edificanti*, 2: 5. See also ARSI, *Collezione Acquaderni*, 1940, voll. 3 and 10. The collection also includes photos Fr. Tosi (voll. 3, 11) and Fr. Chiavassa in Inuit dress, as well as several photographs of pupils from the missions (voll. 10, 38).

**102** On the distinction between *accommodatio* and inculturation as categories of analysis, cf. Friedrich, "Accommodation", 146-70.

**103** Colombo, "Gesuitomania", 51; Romanato, *Gesuiti, Guarani*, 19.

narratives. Moreover, the prominent role of women, not only in healthcare but also in missionary schooling, invites further research into their substantial, not merely subsidiary, contribution. It also opens the possibility of reflecting on the spaces of negotiation that existed between the sisters and the Jesuit fathers at the administrative level.

Finally, one might explore the relationship between Catholic schools and federal government policies within the spaces and time frame considered in this paper. In territories where control was weak, government authorities may have relied on religious institutions to extend their influence and promote cultural assimilation. As federal education policies gradually took hold, potential tensions could have emerged between the government and the Jesuits' aims to Catholicize education, given that they viewed the advance of American settlers as a serious obstacle to consolidating Catholicism among Indigenous peoples.

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