

EMILE GROUARD, ARTIST BISHOP OF THE NORTH: The Altar Paintings and Decoration of the Sanctuary in St. Charles Church, Dunvegan

St. Charles Catholic Church at Dunvegan, Alberta, built between 1885 and 1886, is one of the earliest Oblate mission churches still standing in the Canadian North West. The historical significance of St. Charles Church lies in the painted interior decoration undertaken by Emile Grouard (figure 1), including a powerful painting of the crucifixion over the altar and walls decorated with geometric designs. St. Charles Church illustrates the central role of artistic decoration as part of the missionary strategy of the Oblates in the North West, and its relationship to architectural design.

St. Charles Mission was founded in 1867 on the flats of the north bank of the Peace River, just east of the Hudson's Bay Company fort. The Oblates sought to bring Christianity to the Beaver and other Indians of the Upper Peace River, to serve the Roman Catholic employees of the Hudson's Bay Company, and, by the 1890s, to minister to the growing Métis population in the area. The mission finally closed in 1903. Today, two buildings, the church and the chapel house built in 1889 (which replaced the original chapel house of 1869), remain at St. Charles. These mission buildings, as well as the remaining building at the HBC post, comprise a Provincial Historic Site.

The Oblates relied heavily on visual depictions to bring the message of Christianity to Native people. As early as the 17th century, the Jesuits had realized the significance of images in their endeavours among the Indians of New France, and there is record of Jesuits ordering customized paintings on leather or canvas from Paris.¹ The difficulty of learning native languages, and in conveying the alien concepts of Christianity, reinforced this understanding among the Oblates two centuries later. Improvements in printing methods, and the introduction of the lithograph, made religious pictures available in large numbers at relatively low cost. Whenever it became possible to build a church at a mission, every effort was made to adorn the church as lavishly as possible. As one missionary put it: "Only after having seen the 'Holy House of Prayer,' with its decorations, its tableaux, its altar, its cross, and its images, did they begin to understand and to have a taste for the things of God."²

By Judy Larmour



Figure 1. Bishop Emile Grouard (1840-1931), n.d. (Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism, Historic Sites and Archives Service [ACM], research files, St. Charles Mission)

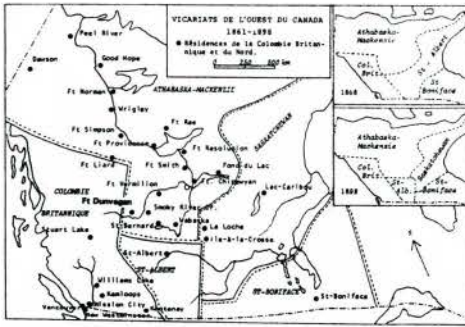


Figure 2. Vicariates in the Canadian North West, 1861-1898. (Donat Levasseur, *Histoire des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, [Montréal: Maison Provinciale, 1983], 1:224)

There is no mention in the historical sources for St. Charles of reaction from Native people to the paintings at Dunvegan. The discussion below, therefore, is bound by a Eurocentric historical perspective. In this context, the paintings at St. Charles represent an example of cultural transference, and an artistic expression of missionary fervour.

Emile Grouard was born at Brûlon in Brittany, France, in 1840. He began his religious vocation at the seminary at Le Mans. In 1862 he accompanied Bishop Grandin to Canada, and completed his studies at the Grand Seminary of Quebec.³ The first record of Grouard's artistic ability appeared in a letter he wrote to Bishop Taché in June 1870; from Fort Simpson, Grouard informed his Bishop that he had painted the small chapel, which was now very pretty. The people there, Grouard claimed, had never seen anything so lovely. Grouard added that he had also done an oil painting on parchment which represented Christ on the cross with the Blessed Virgin and St. John on either side.⁴ Grouard modestly dismissed his work as *une croûte*, or the mere daubing of a novice in the connoisseurs' world of art. Nevertheless, he was delighted with the reception his work received, claiming that elderly Indians clacked their tongues as a sign of approval. Even the Hudson's Bay Company personnel claimed that it was remarkably well done. This, Grouard wrote, encouraged him to attempt more paintings, as nothing, in his view, could contribute so much to the instruction of the Indians. He expressed the hope to do another with natural looking figures.⁵ Later in the year he completed two more paintings, one of the Blessed Virgin holding the infant Jesus in her arms, and another of St. Joseph. Grouard noted that he had not had time to finish St. Joseph before the Indians burst in, causing him to put aside his paint brush and turn to preaching and leading prayers.⁶

The work of the artist was not without problems. Grouard bemoaned the fact that several of his paintings were drying out, and that making use of them was difficult without proper frames to hold them.⁷ He sorely wished to be able to receive instruction, regretting the opportunities he had passed up in his youth. In a letter to Sister Marie Colombe of the Visitation du Mans, he requested a painting manual or an elementary treatise on painting to be sent from France.⁸ Grouard's desire to develop his innate talent was to be realized through unforeseen circumstances. In 1872 Grouard developed an unspecified medical problem which caused him to lose his voice. His condition did not improve, and he was unable to say mass and fulfil all his duties as priest.⁹

In June 1874 he returned to his homeland of France for treatment, and there the artistic opportunities he thought he had lost once again came his way. Bishop Faraud had given Grouard the job of overseeing the printing of a Bible in Chipewyan while in Paris.¹⁰ Grouard was pleased to discover that fellow Oblate from the North West, Father Emile Petitot, was also in Paris. Petitot, well known as an ethnographer, geographer, explorer, and linguist, was also an artist.¹¹

The two men shared interests, and together they explored the French capital, visiting monuments and churches. Visiting museums was another favourite pastime. Grouard later recalled how they loved to stop and admire the paintings of the Great Masters at the Louvre.¹² Grouard was inspired by the wealth of art around him, and by the company of Petitot, who, he noted, could already wield a brush to paint flowers to perfection.¹³ Grouard was eager to profit from his stay by improving his own artistic skills,¹⁴ and took lessons in drawing and painting at the college of the Christian Brothers at Passy, in Paris. In his memoirs, Grouard acknowledged the debt he owed the Christian Brothers for having given him the first principles and basic practice in painting.¹⁵

This time spent studying in Paris and the influence of Petitot were to bear fruit when Grouard returned to the missions of the Canadian North West in 1876. En route to Lac la Biche he spent some time at St. Albert, where he decorated a side chapel in the church with a statue of the Blessed Virgin above the altar, and a saint on either side in painted niches.¹⁶ Two years later, Grouard got the first major opportunity to put his improved artistic skills to work in the new Church of Notre Dame des Victoires at Lac la Biche. There he was given the task of painting the interior and creating an altar painting (figure 3). Bishop Faraud was so impressed with Grouard's work that he expressed the wish that this picture should be reproduced in all the mission churches of the Vicariate.¹⁷

It was this recognition on the part of Faraud that resulted in Grouard producing several sets of similar crucifixion altar paintings. The next recorded one was done in St. Charles Church, while Grouard was superior at Dunvegan. Grouard was consecrated as Bishop of the Vicariate of Athabaska-Mackenzie in 1891. In 1901, on the separation of the Vicariate of Athabaska from Mackenzie, he became Bishop of Athabaska. He made his residence from 1902 at St. Bernard's Mission on Lesser Slave Lake. Grouard immediately instigated the building of a cathedral there, in which he painted a huge crucifixion scene

1 Gérard Morisset, "Les Missions Indiennes et la Peinture," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* (1934): 313.

2 Gaston Carrière, *Histoire documentaire de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie-Immaculée dans l'est du Canada* (Ottawa: Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa), 3:328, cited in John Webster Grant, *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter since 1534* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 171.

3 Gaston Carrière, *Dictionnaire biographique des Oblats de Marie-Immaculée au Canada* (Ottawa: Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1977), 2:116-17.

4 Archives Deschâtelets, G-LPP 1779, Premier Pères, Mgr. Emile Grouard, Grouard à Taché, Fort Simpson, le 4 juin 1870.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Archives Deschâtelets, HPF 4191.C75R 132, Grouard à Soeur Marie Colombe Cox, Mission St Raphael, Fort de Liard, s.d.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

9 Emile Grouard, *Souvenirs de mes Soixante Ans d'Apostolat dans l'Athabasca-Mackenzie* (Lyons: Oeuvre Apostolique de M.I., s.d.), 144-45.

10 *Ibid.*, 157.

11 Petitot during the 1870s envisaged and instigated the overall plan for the lavish decoration of the Church of Our Lady of Good Hope at Fort Good Hope. Grouard was influenced by Petitot, and a similarity can be traced in aspects of their style and in the details of decorative elements. Grouard did not, however, visit Fort Good Hope until 1889, after he had completed his work at Dunvegan.

12 Grouard, *Souvenirs*, 156.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Archives Deschâtelets, HPF 4191.C75R 136, Grouard à Ma Très Révérende Soeur, Paris, le 14 mai 1875.

15 Grouard, *Souvenirs*, 156.

16 *Ibid.*, 178.

17 *Ibid.*, 191.

flanked by two smaller paintings. Only one more instance of Grouard's work has been verified: the altar paintings and decoration in the Church of the Nativité at Fort Chipewyan, which show a consistency in design, were painted by Grouard about 1910. Nothing is known of additional work from this time until his death in 1931.

It is useful to return to the sanctuary at the Church of Notre Dame des Victoires at Lac la Biche, the first example of Grouard's style, to establish those elements which were consistent in his work, and to seek their origins. The church was demolished by a tornado in 1921, but an archival photograph shows clearly the decorative work in the sanctuary (figure 3). Brother Patrick Bowes, an Ontario-born lay brother, was in charge of the construction of the church, which was built in Carpenter's Gothic style. Bowes was influenced by the ideas and work of A. Welby Pugin, the great exponent of Gothic Revival architecture in England and Ireland. In 1869 Bowes had mentioned that he found Pugin's *Ecclesiastical Architecture* (1843) very useful for giving plans for churches.¹⁸ Pugin advocated a return to the principles of what he defined as Catholic architecture, centred in the traditions of the medieval world. True Catholic architecture, in Pugin's view, could be accommodated to "any materials, any dimensions, and any locality."¹⁹ Pugin suggested that churches should be regulated in scale and decoration according to circumstance. Bowes, and no doubt Grouard (as the two men must have discussed their work closely), would have found comfort in these ideas. One can postulate that they attempted to take his advice as they sought for the church at Lac la Biche the sense of grandeur and attention to detail that permeated Pugin's work, but on a scale that was fitting to the place, means, and materials available to them.

Grouard's altar painting at Lac la Biche set the style and components for all his crucifixion scenes. Christ was set large on the cross against a dark, swirling, thunderous sky that must have resonated in the minds of Native people. Below, the figures of the Virgin Mary and St. John had long dark hair and facial features with a generic likeness to those of the North American Indian. In the background, behind the rocky outcrop where the cross stood, was a large classical building that in its placing and appearance indicated Grouard's familiarity with the genre of European Renaissance religious painting. Grouard used trompe l'oeil columns and niches to give a depth of perspective.²⁰ The floral contents of the classical urns he painted into the niches were, perhaps, an attempt to emulate the skill of painting flowers that he envied in Petitot. They were, however, relatively unsophisticated, and Grouard did not repeat the design at Dunvegan. Instead, he turned to more naturalistic leaf motifs.²¹ Grouard used many other stylistic elements of his work at Lac la Biche at Dunvegan.

Grouard arrived at Dunvegan in 1883, and supervised the construction of St. Charles Church in 1885 (figure 4), working alongside the carpenter, Father Husson, and then Father Le Serrec. It seems that Grouard worked on the painted decoration of the church on his own throughout 1886, using the image requested by Bishop Faraud. Father Le Treste, reporting news from Dunvegan in the Oblate *Missions* in 1886, noted that Grouard was producing all kinds of fine pictures that would make the church, if not one of the biggest, at least one of the most beautiful in the Vicariate.²² This suggests that Grouard was responsible for the central crucifixion scene over the altar, the two paintings either side, as well as the two framed paintings hung on the northeast and west walls of the nave. The style of all of these paintings was similar. A photograph taken some time after the closing of the mission in 1903 reveals the splendour of Grouard's work (figure 5).

There was no cloth available when he set out to paint, so he decided to use moose hide for a canvas. He enlisted the help of a Métis hunter, Jean-Baptiste Castawich, whom he asked to get a moose hide with no tear in the skin and to bring it to him when his wife had made a parchment of it. His request was duly answered, and Grouard was presented with an appropriate parchment. He recorded how he prepared it for painting by soaking it in hot water and then stretching it out. When it was well stretched and completely dry, he nailed it to the boards.²³ It would have been necessary to use a ladder or some form of scaffold to reach the wall. Whatever he used, Grouard next sketched the crucifixion scene and painted it.

There is no information on the artistic supplies Grouard had at his disposal, though they may have been similar to those used by Father Ducot at Fort Norman. An illustration in Grouard's memoirs shows Ducot holding at shoulder height a long paint brush in one hand against a mahlstick held in the other hand. The width of a single brush stroke, which is clearly visible in the motif on the ceiling of the sanctuary at St. Charles, is three-quarters of an inch, indicating that at least one of his brushes had a three-quarter-inch bristle.²⁴ No indication of the type of paint used by Grouard is given in documentary sources. Petitot apparently used a special fish oil-based formula of his own in the church at Fort Good Hope, which he began decorating after 1876.

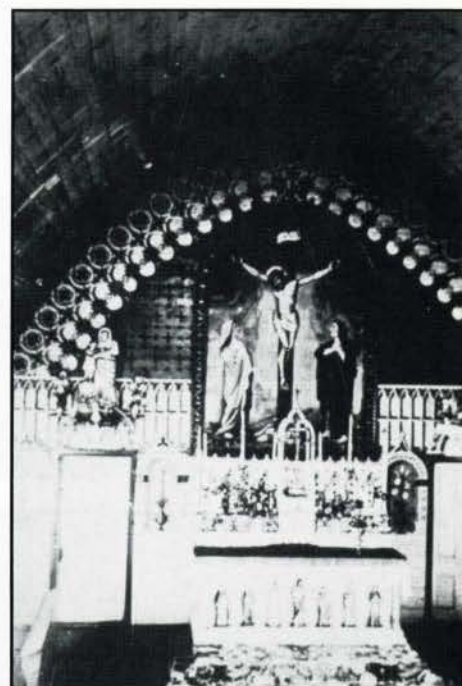


Figure 3. Grouard's altar painting in the Church of Notre Dame des Victoires at Lac la Biche, n.d. (Provincial Archives of Alberta, OB 1043)

18 Provincial Archives of Alberta, 71.220/7828, Bowes to Vegreville, Carleton, 11 July 1869. I am grateful to Gerhard Ens for this reference.

19 A. Welby Pugin, *The Present State of Ecclesiastical Architecture in England* (London: Charles Dolman, 1843; Oxford: St. Barnabas Press, 1969), 6.

20 Petitot's achievement at Fort Good Hope was a more sophisticated execution of the same effect, enhanced by intricate wood carving. It is worth noting that the round-lobed quatrefoil carved into Petitot's tribune arch also appears as a motif along the border of the vaulted ceiling and wall of Grouard's sanctuary at Lac la Biche.

21 It is interesting that these leaf motifs bear a similarity to those on the ceiling of the sanctuary of the Church of Our Lady of Good Hope.

22 *Missions de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée* (Paris: A. Henuyer, 1886).

23 Grouard, *Souvenirs*, 210.

24 I am grateful to James Englebert, Conservator, Historic Sites and Archives Service, Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism, for this measurement.

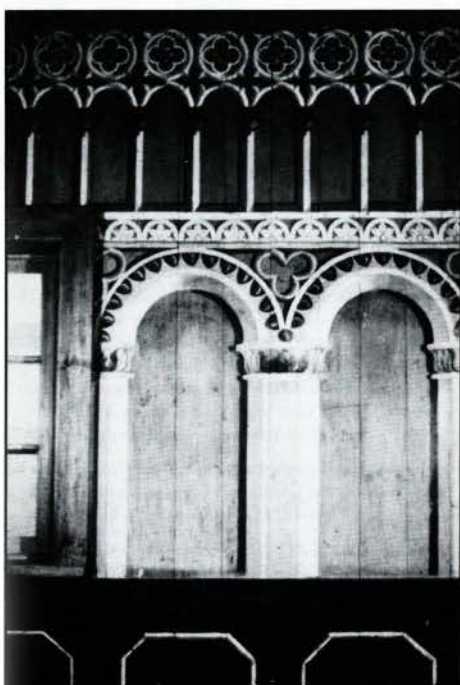
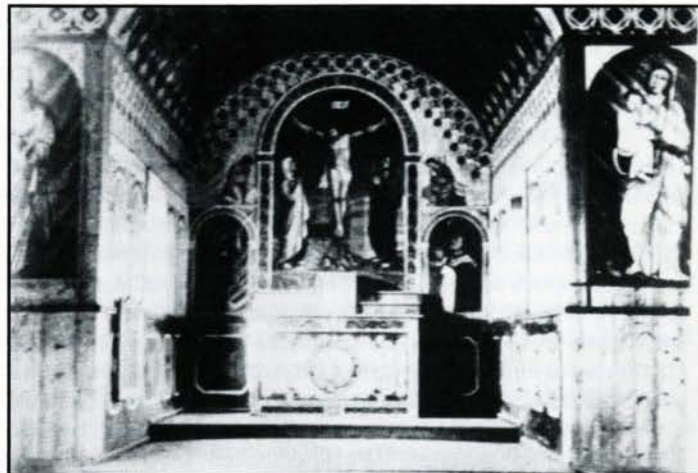


Figure 4 (top left). The Roman Catholic mission at Dunvegan, 1899. (RCMP Museum, Regina/Glenbow Alberta Institute, NA-949-31)

Figure 5 (top right). The interior of St. Charles Catholic Church, Dunvegan, n.d. (Paquin Photographs Ltd.)

Figure 6 (above). The east wall of the sanctuary, St. Charles Church, Dunvegan, 1989. (ACM, conservation files, St. Charles Church)

Grouard's work at Dunvegan was stylistically very close to that which he had done at Lac la Biche. Christ has dark hair; only in St. Bernard's and in the Church of the Nativité did Grouard give Christ and the two other figures lighter-coloured hair. Unlike in the other three churches, Christ at Dunvegan appears to have no halo. The figure of St. John at St. Charles Church is the only one of the four figures of St. John who is bearded. His posture at St. Charles is also more natural. A large square three-storey building is situated behind St. John. This building is similar in architectural style to the composite structures in the paintings in St. Bernard's and in the Church of the Nativité. Although the quality of the archival photograph makes it difficult to be sure, the sky in the painting at Dunvegan seems less dramatic than in the other three churches.

Grouard must have trimmed the edges of the parchment, as the painting fits perfectly inside a border of two columns joined by a round arch painted on the boards. The columns had a light-coloured border edge, enclosing a geometric design of light-coloured twisted strands inset with a motif in a darker colour. A break in the border edge of the column delineated a simple capital, before continuing as the edge of the arch. The arch was inset with a continuous pattern of *fleurs-de-lys* within circles containing lozenges. Shading on the gospel side of the column and arch lends a sense of perspective. On the gospel side of the crucifixion painting Grouard presented a white-haired and bearded figure, probably St. Peter, looking up and pointing to Christ. He was set between columns surmounted by an arch, which mirrored the arch surrounding the crucifixion scene, but with less ornate decoration. On the epistle side, inset in a similar way, Grouard painted St. Charles with outstretched hands gazing up towards the crucifixion scene. He was portrayed wearing a fine dark-coloured robe decorated with a lighter-coloured band with dark flecks.

On close examination of the archival print one can see a set of folds or creases running diagonally from the top right-hand corner of the painting of St. Peter. The painting appears to be attached at the top to a thin strip of wood that must have been nailed to the boards underneath. The bottom of the canvas must have been nailed to the boards or to the chair rail. Above each of these paintings Grouard painted an angel figure on bended knee directly onto the boards of the wall of the sanctuary. The design of these angels is very similar to contemporary statues.²⁵

A geometric border on the boards of the north wall of the sanctuary under the vaulted ceiling formed an arch over the altar. This design was repeated along the side walls of the sanctuary directly under the ceiling. On the side walls, the hanging motif formed the capitals for arches that rose to a border design running perpendicular to them. The border was inset with a variation of a lunette motif. Beneath this border were large arches set on columns, two on either side of the window on both the east and west wall (figure 6). These columns were carefully angled and shaded to give the effect of perspective. The capitals were decorated with a leafy motif in shades of green and blue. Above them, the outward surface of the arch had red oval motifs inset on a yellow background. In the V-shaped space where the arches rose out of a capital, Grouard painted a *grisaille* trefoil that resembled a stone carving as a symbol of the Holy Trinity. The overall background colour of the boards on the wall was a soft blue green. The same colours for both the background and the geometric border design were undoubtedly used on the north wall of the sanctuary. The boards below the chair rail were most likely painted brown. The area on each of the side walls was broken into five panels, and there was also a panel on each side of the altar on the north wall. Each panel had

²⁵ Grouard later painted angels in the same prone position in the church at Fort Chipewyan.

a white edge and was inset with a dark blue flower with four pointed petals and a yellow centre placed against a background of four green composite leaves.

The ceiling was painted a deep blue. Grouard had described the ceiling at Lac la Biche as “an azure sky sprinkled with gold stars.”²⁶ Above the picture rail on the east and west walls of the sanctuary Grouard introduced another design, a cone-like motif set on five supports. Decoration continued over the picture rail around the corners to the northwest and northeast walls of the sanctuary. For these, however, Grouard returned to the same geometric border design as the north wall of the sanctuary, but without the hanging motif. The two paintings on the north walls of the nave completed the artistic decoration of St. Charles Church. They were painted on canvas, cloth or possibly moosehide stretched on lath frames with extended corners which were then nailed to the wall. The painting on the northeast wall depicted Mary in a pose of serenity, with the infant Jesus in her arms. Interestingly, in this painting Grouard accentuated the generic Indian facial features and skin tone that was so apparent in the crucifixion painting at Lac la Biche, but which was not so clearly defined in the crucifixion painting at St. Charles. On the northwest wall was a figure of Christ in long robes that had the familiarity of an illustration from the Bible. It certainly stands out as the least original of the paintings in St. Charles Church, and is the only painting that raises doubts about authorship by Grouard.

St. Charles Church was finally completed in the spring of 1887. The altar paintings were still hanging in the church after it was abandoned in 1903, and according to an article in the *Peace River Record*, they were still there in 1916.²⁷ In 1919 Grouard’s crucifixion scene was removed from St. Charles, where it was in danger of deteriorating. It was placed in the Church of the Immaculate Conception in the town of Peace River.²⁸ It must have been quite a job, as not only the crucifixion scene and the other two paintings, but all the boards from the north wall of the sanctuary were removed (figure 7). The boards on the east and west walls of the sanctuary were left behind. The entire ensemble of boards from the north wall was remounted on the wall of the sanctuary of the much larger church in Peace River (figure 8). Grouard’s altar painting, according to Father Le Treste, then-parish priest in Peace River, became the great treasure of the Church of the Immaculate Conception, and a curiosity that attracted numbers of visitors.²⁹ What happened to the two paintings that hung on the north walls of the nave in St. Charles is not known.³⁰ In 1944 the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Peace River burnt down and Grouard’s paintings from St. Charles were lost.

The restoration of the sanctuary of St. Charles Church to its former splendour has recently been completed by Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism and the Fort Dunvegan Historical Society. The archival print of Grouard’s work, as well as the paintings in the churches at present-day Grouard on Lesser Slave Lake and at Fort Chipweyan, were carefully studied by an artist for stylistic comparison. A reproduction of Grouard’s crucifixion scene was then painstakingly worked on moosehide. The other two paintings, and some panelling in the sanctuary which had been replaced during a previous restoration in 1957, have also been replicated. The original decorative wall boards in the sanctuary have undergone conservation treatment. In addition, the altar has been replicated and the church furnished as it would have appeared in 1896.

Grouard’s sanctuary in St. Charles Church was a small gem among the several magnificently-adorned sanctuaries produced by the Oblates in the North West. For Grouard, artistic expression was part of his vocation, part of his desire to bring the beauty of God’s house to Native people. His work illustrates the Oblate aim to transmit the Christian message through a European artistic tradition. The splendour of St. Charles was remarkable, given the constraints of isolation, and the limited amount of time and materials with which Grouard had to work. The church echoes Pugin’s vision of the appropriateness of adapting to circumstance. In paint alone, through the skilled use of perspective and shading, Grouard succeeded in evoking the atmosphere of Catholic churches far from the last frontier of North America.

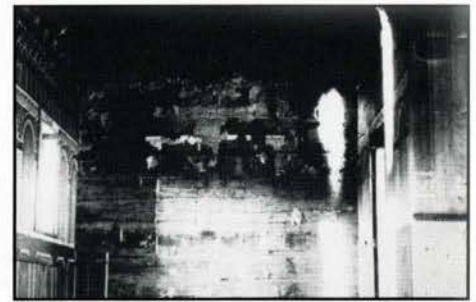


Figure 7 (top). The sanctuary of St. Charles Church, Dunvegan, in 1942, after Grouard’s crucifixion scene had been removed. (McLennan Diocesan Archives, Dunvegan, 21)



Figure 8 (bottom). Grouard’s St. Charles Church crucifixion scene relocated in the sanctuary of the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Peace River, n.d. (before 1944). (McLennan Diocesan Archives, Peace River, 29)

26 Grouard, *Souvenirs*, 191.

27 Douglas R. Babcock, *St. Charles Mission: A Structural History* (Edmonton: Alberta Culture, Historic Sites Service, 1982), 66, n. 51.

28 Provincial Archives of Alberta, 71.220/6890, Joseph-Vincent Le Treste, “Mes Souvenirs,” 174.

29 *Ibid.*, 174-75.

30 Babcock, 45.

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