

Coming Down

by Denis Ledoux

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Many years earlier, when he was still in the Keewatin, *le père* Mongeau was fond of telling the seminarians over and over again, the Indians had often stood, in the summer, at the door to his rectory. Those days in the Keewatin had been long ago—in the 1860s or perhaps the 1850s—long before any of the seminarians were born. The aborigines would stand without making a noise. The odor of the bear grease they rubbed on themselves reached into the little house, into the room where he was writing his sermon. (In these stories, Mongeau was always writing a sermon.) He would look up to see an Assiniboine, as often as not dressed in a mixture of native and Canadian clothes, staring at him from the doorway, and he would wonder how long the man had been there, standing like a tree, and what he wanted. *Le père* Mongeau would raise his hand and say, “*Bonjour*” and the man would nod his head—but by so little that *le père* was never sure whether he had actually seen it move.

Le père Mongeau himself now stood at the hallway door looking into the classroom, his eyes moving almost imperceptibly from one boy to another. His gaze went from the young teacher, *le père* Vachon, standing near the wood stove, whose hands held the Amorist cross hanging from his neck, down the rows of seminarians, past the ones closest to the door who had noticed him and were waiting to see what he would do, past the boys beyond who had not yet noticed him, until his eyes fell on Paul-Aimé.

Suddenly, the windows rattled. The wind, blowing across the field in which the lay brothers grew corn, sent snow rolling in the air and the darkening landscape was obliterated in the swirl.

“The consequences of the Conquest?” *le père* Vachon repeated, more loudly, unaware of Mongeau, unconcerned with the mounting storm as his voice demanded more hands be raised. But, no one else raised his hand to answer.

Paul-Aimé looked out the window. In the fall, the lay brothers had harvested the corn and now the field was cold and white. He sat thinking, “What did it mean to say that the English had stolen our land?” Whenever he had asked Papa about it, Papa said, “We have to live with them. They’ve been here a long time now.” And hadn’t they themselves stolen from the Indians this very Canada they said should be theirs alone?

Le père Vachon would not call on him; he would only call on those boys who had not yet spoken and who did not want to speak. It had not changed in the five years he had been a student there. Was it the same at Laval? But what difference would it make—how could the son of an *habitant* ever afford to study at a secular university?

Soon *le père* Mongeau, Paul-Aimé continued to ruminate, will be coming around to light the gas lamps in the hallway. At home, they used oil lamps. Maman and Papa put off lighting the lamps as long as they could still see to do their work. The oil for the lamps was expensive. Papa said he loved his land, but it was not good to him. He said it held back its best no matter how much he coaxed it.

With a gust of energy, *le père* Vachon slammed his words, like the wind against the windows, “Jean-Philippe, what were the consequences of the Conquest?”

Jean-Philippe, a heavy-set boy who had not raised his hand, turned from the door to the teacher.

“*Moi?*”

“Yes, you! Wake up! The English conquest of our country in 1760! What are some of the consequences of that?”

“Good consequences or bad?” Jean-Philippe asked absently. Perhaps his thoughts had been at home, with the cows which would be agitated by such a wind as now blew around the seminary, a wind that made a barn moan and rattle. Perhaps Jean-Philippe was thinking how, at milking time when the wind tore around the building, the cows would stomp in their stalls and, if he were there, he would say, “It’s all right, it’s all right,” as he patted their flanks.

“Good ones?” the teacher’s voice rose incredulously and his eyebrows arched so that they were well above his round glasses. Having said this, *le père* Vachon turned to the door and, although his gaze lingered there, he conceded, as usual, no sign, produced no movement, no acknowledgment of Mongeau’s presence. But, Vachon’s hesitation had drawn Paul-Aimé’s attention to *le père* Mongeau, and he saw that the old missionary was looking straight at him.

Paul-Aimé smiled. Perhaps they were in for a good joust between the two priests. After all, when a person lived with foreign people, as Mongeau had, Paul-Aimé said to himself, providing inwardly the conversation he sought from his classmates, he became like one of them and did not remain like one of his own. Was that what *le père* Vachon objected to in *le père* Mongeau—that he no longer thought like a *Canadien*? *Mon oncle* Hector and *ma tante* Léah had gone to live with a foreign people. Had they become

strangers, too, living with *les Américains*? Papa said that it was not a good thing for Maman's sister and her husband to be in the States where their children would become strangers to them. But, his uncle and his aunt said they lived with other *Canadiens* and spoke French all the time. Perhaps it was all right to go to *les Etats*—how could anyone know?—but *le père* Mongeau had not been with his own people. He had been the only *Canadien* living with people who were different. Perhaps that was why *le père* Mongeau was strange, no longer like the son of a Saint-Lawrence-Valley farmer that he was, like all the Amorists were.

The old priest made the slightest of nods, but Paul-Aimé did not understand what Mongeau might mean by this gesture. In fact, he wondered if Mongeau had nodded at all—had he only imagined it? Behind the man's round weathered face, the gas lamps had not yet been lit and the hallway was full of darkness.

“*Les gars*, pay attention!” Father Vachon commanded, his voice edged with irritation. He was only a few years out of the major seminary himself—these minor seminarians would not run his classroom! “Jean-Philippe, come up with at least one consequence of the Conquest or see yourself enjoying some extra homework!”

“We have a queen,” Jean-Philippe answered uncomfortably, in the accent of the farm villages where he and the other boys had been born. It was the only accent they knew, the accent that had been left them by the departing French.

Jean-Philippe's classmates laughed. He smiled but his cheeks quivered as if they might drop the smile at any moment. He did not know why they laughed. Perhaps, he hoped, he had said something clever.

By the time the laughter subsided, without Paul-Aimé being aware of it, *le père* Mongeau had let himself into the room. As he shuffled up to *le père* Vachon, Mongeau, whose teeth had gone the way of his strength, muttered dismissively, “*La Conquête, la Conquête!*” Those in the front rows heard his weary feet scrape against the hardwood floor. His *pauvres pieds*, he used to tell the boys when he sat with them during recreation, had been exhausted walking the length and breadth of the Keewatin. Once, he too had been full of strength and resilience just as the boys were now, but his health had broken in the northern Manitoba winters during his ministry to the Assiniboine. Did they understand that? Did they understand how life would do that to them someday and how their strength must come from God, rather than from a corruptible body?

Paul-Aimé understood that his *pépère* and his *mémère* no longer had the health and the strength to farm the land where they had lived all their lives, but his father was still strong and his mother, too—even if the baby had exhausted her. They had always been strong. That was what it meant to be a *Canadien*.

Mongeau walked behind *le père* Vachon, between the desk and the blackboard to the darkening windows. He looked out on the rising storm.

“So you think the English are just going to leave!” he said, snorting.

Paul-Aimé did not himself know any English people. He only knew that they had confined the *Canadiens* to a small area of Québec and had taken all the rest of the province as well as the rest of Canada for themselves and now that area of Québec where they had been allowed to live was too small. The younger priest did not answer, but his jaw tightened.

Le père Mongeau turned around suddenly, his cassock swirling, the black of it having already taken on the green aspect of a worn *soutane*. “Let me tell you about *les anglais*. They were good to us in the missions. Do you teach your boys that? Do you teach them how *les anglais* at the Hudson’s Bay Company gave us blankets for our Indians? Did you tell them how they took us on their trips so we could reach the Assiniboine? How could we have preached God’s word if the Bay hadn’t done that for us? A Canada without *les anglais*, what would that be? Why do you fill their heads with these ideas?”

Father Vachon gave in to his anger. “The English! I will tell the boys how the blankets the English gave to your Indians were infected with European diseases. I’ll teach the boys how they stole your Manitoba from us, how they exiled Riel and refused to let him sit in Parliament in Ottawa!” The veins at his throat were bulging. “I will tell them how their democracy, with the numbers on their side, is destroying us as a people.”

“Don’t forget to tell them,” Mongeau said with a mocking smile, “how Riel conspired to overthrow lawful authority!” He had been to the Keewatin, and *le père* Vachon was, after all, only a few years out of the scholasticate.

“We had lawful authority—but the English overthrew it in 1760. Why was it legal for them to impose their ‘lawful authority’ on us—wasn’t ours all right! Have you become so much of an *anglais* that you can’t see that?”

Mongeau looked away from *le père* Vachon as a cat allows itself to turn from a cornered mouse that he has injured, but *le père* Vachon did not take his eyes off the older priest. “Well?” the younger man demanded. “If you have not sold out, you will understand that we should have our own government.”

Father Mongeau did not answer.

The wind rattled the windows that looked out on the fields. At home, down many miles of pot-holed roads, and over many hills, Paul-Aimé's father and his brother, Louis-Joseph, were perhaps setting out to milk the cows. At this time of day, Papa and Louis-Joseph spent an hour together in the barn. Knowing this, Paul-Aimé felt very lucky. At the seminary, for all its problems, he had an opportunity to think of all sorts of things, to be occupied with ideas of ever increasing importance, while at home, Louis-Joseph was spending his time with cows that switched their tails as you were milking them and shat where they stood so that you had to shovel away their dung.

His father and Louis-Joseph loved to farm, he knew, as he loved to be in school learning about things that he had had no idea existed when he was in St-Ephrème. His choice was the better of the two, but he reminded himself that "an Amorist seminarian," as he had read many times in the *coutumier*, that book where every facet of their lives was regulated, "has been chosen by God to further His work and not the ambitions of the individual. Any opportunities that have been made available to the seminarian will be seen as a gift for which not he but God working through the congregation has made available. The seminarian will ever conduct himself with a humility sprung from an enhanced sense of responsibility in face of the great gifts God has bestowed on him."

"Humph!" Father Mongeau said at last. He looked around the room, slowly. *Le père* Mongeau had a circle of white hair. Paul-Aimé's *pépère* too had a circle of white hair around his ^[L]_[SEP]head. Would he, himself look like that some day?

"I presume you came here not to teach my history class. Do you have a message?" said the younger priest, his voice rising in frustration.

Mongeau did not reply. Instead he said peremptorily, “Paul-Aimé Soucy!”

Paul-Aimé looked at the old priest.

“Father Superior wants to see you in his office!”

It was almost never good when Father Superior sent for a student. It meant that something had been left undone; it meant that something had to be corrected. Paul-Aimé stood up and looked toward *le père* Vachon.

“Yes, yes, of course! Go!” the teacher said curtly.

Paul-Aimé closed his book and pushed it to the corner of his desk. Was he being called in for something he had done—or was it for something that he had not done? His mother and his father had said it imposed a sacrifice on the whole family to send him to the seminary, to make do without his work, but they would accept that sacrifice. They had only asked that he make them proud of him. He had promised to try his best and he had always tried to do his best, but perhaps he had done something so thoughtless that he did not even remember doing it and now for this mindless act he would be sent home and not allowed to finish his education. His parents would not be proud of him. He would be back to milking cows and everyone in the village would laugh. “Who did he take himself for?” they would say. “A Papineau?”

“Paul-Aimé, *le père supérieur* must not be kept waiting,” insisted Father Vachon, attempting to reassert his authority over the class.

Outside, the fields and the hills, over which the north wind had blown all afternoon, pushing the cold in around the window frames, were disappearing into the darkness. Paul-Aimé walked down the row of wooden desks, his cassock flapping against their iron sides, and then he walked past the wood stove. The heat that warmed his right

arm and thigh was like the heat at home at this time of day in the kitchen that ran the whole east side of the house. When it was getting dark like it was now, Maman would be working at the cook stove, the baby asleep nearby in the *berceau*, sheltered from the drafts pushing in under the door. Perhaps right now she was thinking about how he would be the *curé* of a parish not unlike the one at Saint-Ephrème.

He shivered.

“*Dépêche-toi!*” insisted Mongeau, no longer eager to play with the younger priest. “I don’t have all day. I’ve got the hall lamps to do.”

Vachon, perhaps realizing from the smiles of the boys that he had been bested, said, “I’d appreciate it if you knocked next time.”

The old Amorist did not answer. He shuffled out of the classroom, Paul-Aimé close behind him. The hallway was cold, and the young man remembered how it smelled of wax to him every time he first came back in the fall or after Christmas break. When the whole family had visited once, Maman had asked, “How can you keep the place so clean with only boys and no girls to help?” Louis-Joseph had laughed then and had said, “That’s all they’ve got here—girls.” Paul-Aimé had paid his older brother no more attention than he paid now to the wax which he could no longer smell. But, as they passed a lower-form classroom where boys turned their heads toward the glass in the door as if they could see in the dark, he remembered being hurt by Louis-Joseph’s words. He had wished that day that the hallway had been dark. He had wanted to evade his brother, but it had not been as easy as slipping by the younger seminarians straining their necks during composition class to see who made the oak floor squeak.

“*Dépêche-toi!* You have a visitor,” said *le père* Mongeau. With one hand, he held a French door open; with the other, he waved impatiently to Paul-Aimé to pass through.

Paul-Aimé walked up to the priest. There was not enough room for both of them to go through the door together.

“A visitor?” asked Paul-Aimé with relief. The local village boys sometimes had visitors during the year, but he had never had one. Who could have come for him? Perhaps it was his aunt or uncle from the village?

“*Dépêche-toi!*” said the missionary, pushing the door back some more to let Paul-Aimé through. Paul-Aimé went past the old man. Suddenly, he said, “I can go by myself, if you have work to do.”

At his father’s farm, he worked for hours without being told to do things. Not like that lazy, unruly boy, Donat Lefebvre, Papa said, whose father had the bad luck of always having to keep after his big lout of a son.

From a niche in the hallway, a plaster statue of the boy Jesus looked down on Paul-Aimé. Morning and night as the young men filed to and from classes, the boy Jesus was there to remind them of their duty. Now Jesus seemed to be asking Paul-Aimé, “How have you presumed to speak so impatiently to an old missionary!”

“An Amorist seminarian” the *coutumier* admonished, “always remembers that respect for one’s elders is pleasing to God whose only begotten Son ever modeled filial piety.” Tomorrow morning, he resolved, he would confess his impudence.

The priest said in a low voice, “I was told to bring you back and that’s what I’m going to do.” They entered a different passageway connecting the classroom building to

the priests' house. In this hallway stood a gauntlet of statues. The hills, barely silhouetted in the windows between the figures of holy men and women, were gray and cold.

The old priest went to a window. "It will snow hard once it really starts," he said, breaking the rule against conversations in the hallways—but Mongeau was a priest already and perhaps it was all right for him to speak. "The wind will find its way through cracks of a lot of houses tonight. It doesn't pay to rush the construction of a house."

Paul-Aimé shivered, feeling the cold of the unheated passageway chilling him, seeping deep into his *soutane*.

"In the Keewatin, it could snow all day and all night," the priest continued, as if he had forgotten his task. "We would stay in the rectory and conduct a prayer retreat for ourselves. It was a good time to pray." Then he was silent.

Paul-Aimé said, forgetting his resolve not to be impudent, "Shouldn't we be going to the Father Superior's office?"

"Oh, yes," said Mongeau. "You mustn't tarry in the *couloir*. *Le père supérieur* would not be pleased." They passed through the double doors that now opened into the priests' house. That hallway was warmer; the gas lamps were already lit. He could see a large crucifix, blood flowing from the side of the corpus. Paul-Aimé's mother had a great devotion to the suffering Jesus. At home, in the parish church, there was a crucifix depicting Jesus with this flow of blood and his mother always said she brought her special prayers there. At that moment, because the bloody Jesus had reminded him of the crucifix in his parish church, it occurred to Paul-Aimé that maybe the *curé* was traveling through Notre Dame to, or perhaps from, the bishop in Québec City. Since the parish was paying for Paul-Aimé's seminary studies, *Monsieur le curé* Létourneau would, of course,

stop at the seminary, while *en route*, to verify Paul-Aimé's progress—though he had never stopped before.

Le père Mongeau knocked twice on Father Superior's smoked glass door and from inside came Father Superior's insistent voice, his loud "*Entrez!*"

Mongeau opened the door. The gas lights inside caught Paul-Aimé's attention, blotting out details in the room. He stood immobilized, in the hallway, trying to assess the situation, like a deer stopped at the edge of the pasture at home, nostrils flaring to scent the new terrain. Suddenly, *le père* Mongeau shoved him into the room and closed the door behind Paul-Aimé.

The room was warm. Paul-Aimé stood guardedly, looking from Father Superior to one of the two high-back stuffed chairs that faced his desk. He saw the pant legs of a man, rough brown trousers, not the black cassock of the parish priest, *Monsieur le curé* Létourneau. Father Superior pointed for Paul-Aimé to sit in the other stuffed chair. Paul-Aimé started forward but as he did so his cassock pulled at him from behind and he realized that it was caught in the door. Mongeau needn't have shoved him into the room so that he would make a fool of himself in front of this unknown visitor. Opening the door again, his cassock free, Paul-Aimé approached Father Superior's desk. As he came closer, the man in the chair leaned forward, and Paul-Aimé was astonished to see that the man was his father.

How could his father be there when his mother was not feeling well and would need his help with the family! There were seven left now at home, and the baby was only three months old.

“*Bonjour, Papa,*” he said. Neither he nor his father made any gesture to touch each other; it was not their custom.

“Sit down,” said the Superior, pointing again to the empty stuffed chair, but Paul-Aimé remained standing, his hands against the back of the empty chair. His astonishment was a cover for the fear he had harbored ever since he had left the classroom. His fear rang within him like the cry of cows about to be slaughtered.

“*Monsieur Soucy?*” suggested the Superior, who, used to directing men and affairs, now felt it incumbent to cue Paul-Aimé’s father to speak.

Papa pursed his lips. His face was hard. Then he bit his lower lip. He said without looking up, “Your mother died last night.”

Paul-Aimé gasped. His head lifted and he looked out the window to the hills. They were dark. He could make out only their outline, black against the chalky sky. Near the building was a maple. The wind moved its bare branches. Paul-Aimé could not hear the wind. The room was very quiet. Someone walked by in the hallway. He had not been breathing. He took a deep breath. His mother was dead!

“*Le bon Dieu* has called her to Him, Paul-Aimé,” Papa said, picking a thread off his pant leg. His voice broke. He closed his lips tightly to prevent any further breaking. Paul-Aimé passed the nail of his index finger over the fabric of the stuffed chair.

“She is with Him now,” Papa said

Paul-Aimé laid his head against the back of the chair and sobbed. Sorrow heaved his shoulders like the wind gusting over the trees. “*Non, non, c’est pas possible!*” he moaned. He needed to go home to help make things right! If only he were there to give a hand! Perhaps then his mother could rest more and then she would get better.

When Paul-Aimé looked up at last, Father Superior was arranging pieces of paper on his desk; he aligned scraps one next to the other and then he moved them all one way and then another. Papa was holding on tightly to the armrest of his chair. He was staring at the rug, his face contorted as muscle after muscle twitched. For a long while, no one spoke. A clock in some other room chimed, and then the one in Father Superior's room. After a time, Father Superior, perhaps assessing all he still had to do, joined his hands together above his desk and then his fists collapsed against the desktop. "Your father has come to take you home," he said.

"I will go and pack a few things for the trip," said Paul-Aimé flatly. It sounded to him as if some other young man were speaking, some young man who had felt it was perfectly all right to go away from home, and now this young man's mother was dead.

"It's not only that," said his father. "You must pack everything. You're not coming back."

Because the parish was paying his seminary fees, he would, of course, have to return to the seminary. His mother wanted him to be an educated man, to become a priest. It was her dream, wasn't it, that he would be a *curé*, just like *Monsieur le curé* Létourneau? Paul-Aimé whispered hoarsely, trying gently to correct his father, "But, I have to come back after a while!"

"No, it's not for a while. It's ... it's for good."

Paul-Aimé shook his head slowly. "*Non!*"

"There's no other way. Without your mother, I can't keep the farm going."

"There's Annette. She can help," Paul-Aimé said, as if some other boy were speaking, some other boy who wanted to help this farmer, this *habitant* in rough trousers.

“Annette’s a good girl, but your mother and Annette were already hardly enough. There is too much housework, and the women’s farm chores take up a lot of time. Now that your mother is ... “

His father swallowed his words and looked toward the wall, at the unsmiling portrait of the founder of the Amorists, a man who had known poverty and sorrow all his life. His father hit his fist again and again against the armrest of Father Superior’s upholstered chair.

The founder would want him to submit to his father, would ask how could he be an Amorist if he would not bow to the will of God? “Just as Jesus submitted himself unto death,” said the *coutumier*, “unto death on the cross so too will the seminarian submit himself to the will of God.” Suddenly more than anything, Paul-Aimé wanted to be with his brothers and sisters. He said, “Papa, you want me to help at the farm, I will help”.

“You are a good boy,” his father said. “Your mother was proud of you. But it’s not that I want you to help at the farm. It’s not that.”

“Well, what is it?” asked Paul-Aimé, wondering what else his father might have to tell him.

“We are going to the States.”

“*Les Etats?*”

“Only until we get on top of things,” Papa said. “We can all work at getting on top of things! *Mon oncle* Hector has always said he can get us all good jobs in the textile mills. Annette will stay home to keep house. We’ll buy our food and soap and things that Maman used to make. As soon as things get easier, we can come back.”

Father Superior looked up from his paper scraps, suddenly sweeping them into a pile and crumpling them in his hands. "Go to the dormitory to pack your things," he said. "Tonight you will sleep at your aunt and uncle's in town and in the morning you will go home with your father. You have a difficult journey ahead of you. If you have faith and hope, you will find your way back here. You need to go now."