

The Communion of the Districts of Francophone Canada and Eastern North America: One More Chapter in a Long Tradition of Innovation for the Lasallian Presence in Québec

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"The spirit of this Institute consists, secondly, in an ardent zeal for the instruction of children."

-Rule 2.9

Saint John Baptist de La Salle has given clear indication through his example that the ministry of the society should embrace everything that concerns the education of young people. The saint's approach had great flexibility to it. Were he to be amongst us right now, this precursor and innovator, who had to endure great challenges because of these qualities, would not hesitate to adapt his Institute to the most pressing current needs. The world is changing quickly. Young people today do not think, and they should not think like we were thinking and behaving when we were their age, embedded in a world that is not theirs anymore. In the face of the rapid collapse of a thousand things that we believed essential, they feel the noble spiritual anxiety that was the privilege of the great minds of the past.

-Brother Marie-Victorin, in the introduction of *L'oeuvre d'un siècle*, written for the one hundredth anniversary of the presence of the Brothers in Canada, 1937.

Introduction

On January 6, 2025, on the Feast of the Epiphany, the District of Eastern North America (DENA) officially began to assume canonical responsibility for the Brothers and the Lasallian mission in the new Sector of Québec, previously known as the District of Francophone Canada. The demographic decline of the Brothers in Québec has been steady over the last decades, resulting in this inevitable conclusion. Yet, as the chapter of the Brothers as they were known in Québec comes to a close, the Lasallian mission remains vibrant. The integration marks only a new chapter for the remarkably rich history of the Lasallian presence in the province of Québec, a history that has been characterized by the constant adaptation of the educational mission to the needs of society. The ardent zeal of the Brothers and Partners who bore the mission on their shoulders has always allowed it to evolve in new and unforeseen ways. As we enter this new period, it is apropos to reflect on some of the important moments and contributions of the Lasallian presence in the province and beyond over the last 188 years and counting. The creativity and zeal of those who came before us helps us to imagine where the mission could go next. This article offers a certain take on this long history by highlighting some of the most creative features and contributions of the mission in Québec through a series of vignettes. It also offers perspectives on the paths that still lie ahead.

Part 1: The Heritage

An Auspicious Arrival

The story of the Brothers' arrival in Montréal could not be more representative of the resiliency that would characterize their endeavors for the coming centuries. After years of incessant requests from the Sulpicians, Brother Superior General Anaclet agreed in May 1936 to send four French Brothers to Canada. After a month of travel, including twenty-four days on board ship crossing the Atlantic, Brothers Aidant, Rombaudo, Euverte, and Adalbertus, arrived in Montréal on November 7, 1837.² On the previous day, November 6, 1837, members of the Sons of Liberty and the Doric Club had clashed in armed conflict just a few blocks away from where the Brothers would put down their luggage. This fight is remembered today as the first violent episode of the Patriot Rebellions in Lower Canada, which lasted until December 1838, almost a full year. This unsettled political context did not stop the Brothers from opening the doors of their first school to its new students on December 23, 1837.³

Necessity is the Mother of Invention: The Brothers' Expertise in the Production of School Manuals

When the four French Brothers arrived in Montréal, there were basically no normal schools tasked with training teachers in the province of Québec.⁴ Consequently, the Brothers had to take charge of the formation of new Brothers themselves. While the *Conduct of Schools* gave most of the details of how the school should be run and how certain topics had to be taught, there was a need for manuals that would go deeper into content areas, and also for workbooks with exercises that teachers could assign to their students. The government of Lower Canada had done very little to organize public education at the time, and manuals and workbooks of that kind were rare. As a result, the Brothers needed to import from France the pedagogical materials they needed to run the schools, adapt them to their needs, or write and publish new ones entirely. The first manual the Brothers edited in Canada was an arithmetic text in 1838, less than six months after their arrival. The book contains hundreds of exercises. They had taken a similar manual published in France and reviewed the entire content, converting it from the metric measurement system to the imperial system.⁵

Over the next century and beyond, the Brothers in the Christian Schools, being one of the first teaching orders established in Canada, played an important role in publishing school manuals on a wide array of topics. Their work had a significant influence on the instruction of the French-speaking population. Brother Paul Aubin, FSC, a scholar on the topic, has built a database, housed within Laval University, of school manuals published in Québec since 1765. It is estimated that the Brothers published over 2,000 titles out of a total of a little less than 50,000.⁶

Expansion into the United States

Archbishop Ecclestone of Baltimore attempted to persuade the Brothers of the Christian Schools in Ireland come to his city to open a school, but without success. He turned instead to the Brothers in Montréal. The Visitor, Brother Aidant, did not have any English-speaking Brothers

to send, so he suggested an innovative way to proceed: if the Archbishop could find young men willing to do their novitiate Montréal, they could go there for formation. Five recruits subsequently made the trip to Montréal, only one of whom completed his novitiate: John McMullin, also known as Brother Francis. Brother Francis eventually returned to Baltimore and in 1845 opened the first classroom in the school now known as Calvert Hall.⁷ In the following years, a combination of Canadian, French, and Irish Brothers made the journey to the United States as the number of American vocations was not yet able to supply the growing demand for Brothers to open schools across the country. After the first establishment in Baltimore, a second was opened in New York and a third in Saint Louis. Thereafter, communities quickly opened across the diocese of New York and in cities as diverse as New Orleans, Washington, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Chicago, and San Francisco.⁸ By 1864 the District of Montréal stretched across the entire continent; it became clear that a new District had to be created in the United States. The then-new Visitor, Brother Liguori, presided over the division of the District and the creation of the District of New York. This marked the end of the involvement of Canadian Brothers in the foundation of communities south of the border. The American Brothers would fly with their own wings from then on. All Canadian Brothers working in the United States were offered the opportunity to return, but 225 of them decided to stay and eventually passed into eternal life in their country of adoption.⁹

The Priority Given to Commercial Education in Forming Whole Citizens

Faithful to De La Salle and the first Brothers' methods, the Brothers in Canada during the nineteenth century designed educational programs that were practical, aimed at giving young men the tools they needed to succeed in the job market or open their own businesses. Programs still did not include the study of Latin and Greek. In one case, Brothers chose to leave the school altogether rather than change the curriculum when their students' parents asked them to introduce classics.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the programs that the Brothers introduced were not solely technical or vocational, but aimed at developing well-rounded individuals. For example, the Academy of Commerce of Québec, founded in 1862, called for a commercial program that included French humanities, philosophy, and natural sciences, in addition to mathematics and accounting.¹¹ Even the Brothers' most prestigious school, the Mont Saint Louis, opened in Montréal in 1888, started with only a commercial program. They added a scientific program a few years later, but did not introduce Latin until the 1920s.¹²

At first the Brothers opened schools primarily in urban environments. As they spread to more distant towns, the practical education that they offered was adapted to the needs of the localities they served. They introduced elements of agriculture, industrial production, navigation, and land surveying as needed.¹³ The teaching of the English language was also important, as most of the economic resources in the province of Québec were controlled by English-speaking Canadian or American companies until the 1960s. Perhaps the most striking example of the creativity of the Brothers to adapt to local needs was the school in L'Islet, on the Saint Lawrence river an hour northeast of Québec City. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, L'Islet became the province's first naval navigation school and produced scores of marine captains, pilots, and officers.¹⁴

An Exceptional Brother: Marie Victorin

Perhaps no Brother better embodies the creative zeal and innovation of the community within his life and legacy than the one whose quote appears at the beginning of this paper: Brother Marie Victorin. Born Conrad Kirouac in 1885, Brother Marie Victorin developed an interest for botany and scientific observation during his recovery from a severe illness. While he taught secondary education in Longueuil, he also deepened his scientific research on the plants of the province of Québec and published dozens of articles in academic journals, even though he did not have a college degree.¹⁵ In 1920 he was appointed professor of botany at the University of Montreal and thus began his second career dedicated to the advancement of natural sciences.¹⁶ He participated in the creation of a number of important associations: the Montreal Society of Biology, the Canadian Society of Natural History, and most notably the French Canadian Association for the Promotion of Sciences. In 1935 he published a compendium of the entire flora of the province, *La Flore Laurentienne*, and presided over the inauguration of the Montreal Botanical Garden in 1939. He was one of the greatest scientific minds of the province and a strong advocate for French Canadian nationalism before the movement really took off. He died tragically after a car accident in 1944. Over forty towns and cities have a street or a road named after him, and many other parks, schools, and locations also bear his memory.¹⁷

Brothers in Mission: Japan, Cameroon, and Haiti

Since 1864 and the creation of the District of New York, the Brothers of the District of Montréal had largely remained in the provinces of Québec and Ontario. In 1932, the Dominicans from French-speaking Canada were in charge of the diocese of Hakodate in Japan and were looking for a teaching congregation to collaborate with them. They turned to the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Four Brothers from the District of Montréal left for Japan on October 2, 1932.¹⁸ This opened a second period of missionary involvement that would lead the French-speaking Canadian Brothers to open schools in Japan, Manchuria (present-day China), Cameroon, and Haiti well into the second half of the twentieth century. Cameroon (from 1948) and Haiti (from 1974) especially have seen the involvement of great numbers of Canadian Brothers and have become flourishing parts of the Institute. As the cultural and religious context started to change in the province of Québec in the 1960s, becoming a missionary was a way for many Brothers to fulfill their vocation in an environment more friendly towards Catholicism where they could be involved in apostolic work and pastoral ministry in addition to their role as teachers.¹⁹

The Golden Age and the Quiet Revolution

The middle of the twentieth century represented the Golden Age of the Brothers in Québec. There were up to 1,481 Brothers dispersed in 123 communities in the year 1960.²⁰ There were so many Brothers from French-speaking Canada working at the Generalate in Rome that they had their own wing and their own community room nicknamed “Little Canada.” The context in Québec, however, would soon change drastically. In June of 1960, the Liberal Party, under the leadership of Jean Lesage, won the general election in the province of Québec, putting an end to sixteen years of reign of the National Union, a conservative party. Thus began a period of intense political unrest and the numerous and profound policy reforms known as the Quiet Revolution.

One of the objectives of the Quiet Revolution was to secularize society and gain greater government control over the public services that the Church administered, including in education. In 1964, the Ministry of Education was created and reorganized the governance of education and the school board system. Many of the Brothers' schools transitioned and became part of a school board that, although Catholic, now had the power to impose important changes, such as hiring practices, resulting in a transition in co-educational education. These changes coincided with a cultural revolution that saw the number of novices crash and many Brothers leave the Institute. In 1965, there were 1,336 Brothers in 100 communities, and the number of novices had fallen from 109 in 1960 to only 40.²¹ These two educational and cultural realities became serious problems that would continue to evolve throughout the rest of the twentieth century and would lead the Brothers to progressively leave formal schools.

The Great Renewal: The Emergence of Camps and Pastoral Centers

Starting in the 1930s, the different Districts had started to rent or buy pieces of land in beautiful settings and used them for hosting camps for young people. At first those camps were mostly used for the formation of juniorates. As early as 1942, however, the first summer camp for impoverished children was opened at Lac-Beauport, outside of Québec City. More camps followed, including Camp De-La-Salle, which opened in 1952 and is still a Lasallian ministry today.

The General Chapter of 1966-1967 opened a period of renewal for the entire Institute. The *Declaration* that was published to announce the results of this extraordinary Chapter covers, among other topics, the growing desire and necessity for Brothers around the world to work in apostolates that are not formal schools. It gave a set of criteria for superiors to consider when evaluating the merits of starting a ministry other than a school.²² While it reaffirms the primacy of the school, it legitimizes other types of apostolates. Brothers in Canada were especially encouraged by the *Declaration*,²³ and developed at least ten ministries working in alternative settings over the following fifteen years.²⁴ In 1971, Brothers from Québec City transformed a former house for postulants into an innovative retreat center, the Villa des Jeunes. The Villa des Jeunes offers programs for students, retreats for adults, preparation for sacraments, workshops directly in schools, and many other services catering to the spiritual and formation needs of young people and the community.²⁵ In 1983, Brothers from the Ottawa District decided to invest in a stunning piece of land that they were renting from a hydro power corporation and where they used to host juniorate summer camps. The Centre Notre-Dame de la Rouge was officially born, at first offering only summer camp but soon expanding into year-round programming for schools. Those two centers are still open today.

For many decades, a number of these ministries, especially the camps, were add-ons to the school duties of the Brothers. They would teach the entire school year and, as soon as the final bell rang in June, they would pack their bags and head for the camps, work two whole months at the camp, and come back to the city just in time for the school year to start. In other cases, Brothers would teach in a school until 3:00 p.m. and then head to a social center to provide after-school care and work a few more hours with other kids. While not all Brothers worked this pattern, many of them did. Their zeal still influences the way Lasallians envision their apostolic action today.

The Last Prophetic Call of the Brothers: The Centre Lasallien

In 2004, at the District Chapter, the Brothers understood only too well that their numbers were dwindling, but they still had the human and financial resources, and most importantly the audacity, to try something new, perhaps one last time.²⁶ They assigned a team to look into possible opportunities to open a new ministry that would serve the most vulnerable young people anywhere in the province. After a period of discernment and research, they chose the neighborhood of Saint-Michel in Montréal, a part of the city that had one of the highest percentage of residents born outside of the country and faced significant economic challenges. The Brothers collaborated with lay Partners to open an after-school center in the basement of a church. They also opened a community in a small, rented house a few blocks away on the property of a school run by the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary. Within a few years they bought a piece of land from the same Sisters and began to build what is today a state-of-the-art facility offering a variety of educational programs to young people as well as adults. Inaugurated in 2015, the Centre Lasallian has become an anchor for the neighborhood. It partners with the surrounding public schools and other non-profit organizations to provide services to Saint-Michel and beyond.

Part 2: Looking Ahead

Integration into RELAN

The four Districts that operated in Québec and French-speaking Ontario (Montréal, Québec, Trois-Rivières, and Ottawa) merged in 1992 to become the District of Francophone Canada. This was a true union of both cultures and finances, enabling the new District to engage in a slow but resolute process towards a unified body.

In the 2000s, the Institute started to consolidate its governance structure and merge many of its Regions, creating continental Regions. By the end of the 44th General Chapter of 2007, there were only six Regions left.²⁷ One of these six was Francophone Canada, the last District to be its own Region within the Institute. It was clear at the time that Francophone Canada would join another Region at some point, but which one, and when? Brother Claude Reinhardt, FSC, a General Councilor from France, had been appointed by the General Council in 2007 to accompany Francophone Canada, and some Lasallians in Québec were hoping that Francophone Canada would become part of the District of France. But this was not the direction in which the Holy Spirit moved, and by the start of the 2010s discussions had begun to have Francophone Canada join the United States-Toronto Region. On May 19, 2012, during a ceremony at the Résidence De La Salle in Laval,²⁸ the Lasallian Region of North America officially came into being with Francophone Canada as one of its founding Districts, thus tying the future of the Lasallian Mission in Québec to the United States.

The Mission Today and Consolidation in the Future

After the closure in 2008 of the last school belonging to the Brothers, Mont-Bénilde, there remained only four ministries to advance the Lasallian mission in Québec, all of them operating

in non-formal education settings. They were all mentioned earlier in this paper: Camp De-La-Salle, Villa des Jeunes, Centre Notre-Dame de la Rouge, and Centre Lasallien.

As Brothers grew old and their numbers dwindled, plans had to be made in order to preserve the sustainability of mission and the survival of the charism in the long term. The *Fonds de la Mission*, an endowment fund dedicated to cover infrastructure and operations expenses of the ministries, was set up in 1992 and expanded in the 2010s as financial sustainability became a pressing concern. The fund owns the land and buildings of the ministries, covers important renovations and constructions, and guarantees a certain amount every year to support each of the operations. It also helps the ministries to develop their ability to be financially self-sufficient over the life left to the fund. There is also an entity that gathers the directors of all the ministries and other Lasallians doing important work related to Mission and Association in the Sector of Québec. Its first iteration was created in September 2000 and its name and structure changed several times over the years. It is currently called the Council for the Lasallian Educational Mission.

The communion of the Francophone Canada District with the District of Eastern North America is the logical completion of this phase of building governance structures that will guarantee the sustainability of the mission. The District Council, which was also the board of the legal entity representing the Brothers, has been replaced canonically by a Sector Council, and this transition was the perfect opportunity to also change the legal nature of the board to now allow lay Partners to be full members. Its first president, Denis de Villers, a longtime, dedicated Lasallian Partner, was elected in February 2026.

Signs of Faith

The four ministries of the Sector are resolutely turned towards the future. In just the last few years, they have developed a new program for young people who dropped out of school to reintegrate formal schooling, a day camp in a rural area where there were no local alternatives during the summer, a program to teach school curriculum through camp activities, and a series of monthly gatherings for teenagers, centered around the Gospel. The community of current and former counselors of Centre Notre-Dame de la Rouge also operates a separate non-profit entity, la Bouffée d’Air, which provides weekend camps during the year to children of families with serious challenges.

The communion of the two Districts entails an administrative transformation, but it also offers an opportunity for spiritual transformation. The ministries of the new Sector of Québec, embodying in their creativity and zeal the heritage of the Brothers and Lasallians who came before them, can be signs of faith for Lasallians across the District of Eastern North America and the Lasallian Region of North America. These are signs of faith in our capacity as a charismatic family to respond to the signs of the times and adapt our structures to better serve those in need. Inversely, stepping enthusiastically into the Lasallian family of this continent can be a way for Lasallians in Québec to renew their spirit of faith and zeal, reaffirming their belonging to a mission that is greater than what they are able to do every day. The charism is expressed differently on opposite sides of the 45th parallel, but this diversity is a strength, inviting a deeper understanding of the mission rather than an obstacle to collaboration. The destiny of the Lasallian Mission in North

America has been a shared responsibility between nations before, and this new stage is only one more step in a long and exciting adventure for Lasallians in the province of Québec.

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² Nive Voisine, *Les Frères Des Écoles Chrétiennes Au Canada. Tome 1, La Conquête de l'Amérique 1837-1880* (Anne Sigier, 1987), pages 47-49.

³ François De Lagrave, "Les Frères des Écoles chrétiennes au Canada, 1837-1904," *Sessions d'étude—Société canadienne d'histoire de l'Église catholique (Montréal)* 36 (1969): 29-47, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1007293ar>, page 32.

⁴ Paul Aubin, "La formation à l'enseignement dans une communauté enseignante. Les Frères des écoles chrétiennes du Québec 1837–1980," *Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 28, no. 2 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.32316/hse/rhe.v28i2.4494>, page 30.

⁵ Paul Aubin, "Les Frères des Écoles chrétiennes du Québec: 300 ans de production et de consommation du manuel scolaire," *Revue Numérique de recherche lasallienne* 6 (2013): pages 63-81, page 67.

⁶ Université Laval, "Les Manuels Scolaires Québécois. Catalogue Général," accessed March 5, 2026, <https://www.bibl.ulaval.ca/ress/manscol/catalog.html>.

⁷ Nive Voisine, *Les Frères Des Écoles Chrétiennes Au Canada. Tome 1, La Conquête de l'Amérique 1837-1880*, page 153.

⁸ Ibid., 22-23.

⁹ Ibid., 161.

¹⁰ Nive Voisine, "Les Frères des Écoles chrétiennes dans l'Est du Québec," *Études d'histoire religieuse (Montréal)* 58 (1992): 49-58, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1006881ar>, page 53.

¹¹ Les Frères des Écoles chrétiennes, *L'Œuvre d'un siècle: les frères des écoles chrétiennes au Canada* (Les Frères des Écoles chrétiennes, 1937), <https://numerique.banq.qc.ca/patrimoine/details/52327/1987030>, pages 277-278.

¹² Ibid., page 274.

¹³ Voisine, "Les Frères des Écoles chrétiennes dans l'Est du Québec," page 53.

¹⁴ Ibid., page 56.

¹⁵ *Dictionnaire biographique du Canada*, "Kirouac, Conrad (Baptisé Joseph-Cyrille-Conrad), Dit Frère Marie-Victorin," accessed March 8, 2026, https://www.biographi.ca/fr/bio/kirouac_conrad_17F.html.

¹⁶ Nive Voisine, *Les Frères Des Écoles Chrétiennes Au Canada. Tome 2, Une Ère de Prospérité 1880-1946* (Anne Sigier, 1991), page 220.

¹⁷ Commission de toponymie du Québec, "Recherche Multicritères Sur Marie-Victorin," accessed March 8, 2026, <https://toponymie.gouv.qc.ca/ct/ToposWeb/recherche.aspx?s=Marie-Victorin>.

¹⁸ Les Frères des Écoles chrétiennes, *L'Œuvre d'un siècle*, 484.

¹⁹ Nive Voisine, *Les Frères Des Écoles Chrétiennes Au Canada. Tome 3, Inquiétudes et Renouveau* (Anne Sigier, 1999), page 288.

²⁰ Ibid., page 148.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, “The Brothers of the Christian Schools Today: A Declaration,” Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1967, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1XJBoEXmZdbW_Ji_cpqStmJTa_t9qZiGH/view?usp=sharing&usp=embed_facebook, page 66.

²³ Voisine, *Les Frères Des Écoles Chrétiennes Au Canada. Tome 3, Inquiétudes et Renouveau*, page 236.

²⁴ Ibid., page 340-342.

²⁵ Ibid., page 243.

²⁶ Centre Lasallien, “La Genèse,” accessed March 5, 2026, <https://www.lasallien.org/la-genese>.

²⁷ Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, *Circular 455: The Documents of the 44th General Chapter; “Being Brothers Today: Open Eyes, Burning Hearts”* (Rome, 2007), page 46.

²⁸ Frères des Écoles chrétiennes du Canada francophone, “Échos Lasalliens,” *Frères Des Écoles Chrétiennes Du Canada Francophone*, 2012.