

“Venerable” Bishop Charlebois

***Pope Francis advances the cause of sainthood of Ovide Charlebois,
oblate missionary and first apostolic vicar of Keewatin, Manitoba.***

Born in Quebec, Ovide Charlebois lived a life of heroic Christian virtue, serving in Saskatchewan, establishing schools and churches in Manitoba, all the while ministering to Indigenous peoples.



Ovide Charlebois, on a visit to an Indigenous community in Northern. (photo: Société historique de Saint-Boniface)

Pope Francis declared Bishop Ovide Charlebois, the first apostolic vicar of Keewatin, “venerable” on November 28. For father Robert Laroche, omi, former vicar general of Keewatin, the papal announcement is “a real source of pride”.

“It’s a very significant moment for the Church in Manitoba. Like many missionaries, Bishop Charlebois may have been born in Quebec, but he’s one of us, a westerner, a Manitoban. Most of all, Bishop Charlebois was an extraordinary man, who gave his entire life to serving indigenous communities.”

Ovide Charlebois was born in Oka, Quebec, in 1862. The seventh of fourteen children, he was ordained in 1887 and immediately began working in Saskatchewan, establishing a school, teaching and traveling thousands of miles by snowshoe, dogsled, and canoe to minister to the Métis and aboriginal communities.

“It’s particularly fitting that the pope took this decision in 2019, the United Nations year of Aboriginal Languages, notes father Robert Laroche. (1) Ovide Charlebois spoke Ojibway and Cree, and a little bit of Dene. For him, reaching out to First Nations peoples in their own languages was vitally important. It wasn’t simply a matter of communicating clearly to them; it was a sign of deep respect. In fact, Ovide Charlebois insisted that each new missionary took a whole year to learn aboriginal languages before they began their service in the various indigenous communities and missions.”



Bishop Charlebois, the skilled backwoodsman, in 1927 at Cross Lake.

(photo: Société historique de Saint-Boniface)

Ovide Charlebois was 48 years old when he was named the first apostolic vicar of Keewatin, in 1910. Father Laroche notes that “he built the cathedral of The Pas with his own hands”. “He also founded many, many missions. I served at St. Theresa Point, where he celebrated the first mass there. I also followed in his footsteps at Brochet. It’s

truly amazing the distances he travelled. He was quite the backwoodsman. He must have covered thousands of miles. And he continued to do so up until his death in 1933, at the age of 71. He was a man of deep faith and action.”

Before bishop Charlebois can be beatified, the Vatican must recognize that a miracle has occurred through his intercession.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if that happens, notes father Laroche. In 1997, an elder from St. Theresa Point had a tumour. On his way to St. Boniface for an operation, he and other faithful spent some time praying at the Cathedral in The Pas, where bishop Charlebois’ remains are buried. Later, in St. Boniface, x-rays confirmed that the tumour was gone. Of course, this event needs to be looked at carefully. But it is a testimony to how much bishop Charlebois was loved and admired.”

(1) The Importance of our Indigenous Languages

Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle released a statement on the importance of Indigenous languages ([click here](#)). A Canadian Catholic coalition of Indigenous people, Bishops, clergy, members of lay movements and of men and women belonging to institutes of consecrated life, Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle seeks to renew and foster relations between the Catholic Church and Indigenous Peoples in Canada. This open Letter to all Canadians affirms the major significance of language in the revitalization of Indigenous cultures and expresses a commitment to finding ways to support this essential aspect of reconciliation. To view a promotional video, [click here](#). Or visit Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle's website at <https://ourladyofguadalupecircle.ca/>.

