

# French Missions in Canada

*Adapted from Sister of Notre Dame, Leading Events in Church History, Vol. IV*

The French first landed in Canada. They started towards the end of the reign of Henry IV, and that sovereign realizing that, if the Indians were to be converted, they ought not to have before their eyes the spectacle of white men quarrelling over their religious tenets, forbade his Calvinist subjects to land in Canada. The settlers won ascendancy over the natives by gentle and prudent measures. Later on the Indians were subjected to cruel treatment, but even then it was not the French that were the aggressors. It was when Dutch and English Protestants obtained the mastery that evil days fell on the hapless Indians.

Jesuits were the first missionaries, and among them the heroic **Jean de Brebeuf** holds a very prominent place. No sketch can do justice to the lives or the men who conquered the savage Hurons and Iroquois to the faith of Christ. These two tribes were perpetually at war, but this was not the only difficulty the Jesuits had to encounter. The nomadic habits of the people made the lives of the Fathers one long journey. Wherever the Indians went they followed, and by long patience and gentleness they won them to the practice of Christian virtues. Like the Jesuits of Paraguay, they sought to convert by civilizing, not by preaching, and the long-enduring fruits of their toil showed the superiority of their plan.

The Canadian Jesuits, too, were the first to recognize the benefit that would be derived if women were involved in their labors. They found it hard where the training of the women was neglected to get the idea of a Christian home realized. As a result of their call, the Hospitalieres of Dieppe and the Ursulines of Paris each sent three sisters (1639) under the care of **Madame de la Peltrie** who organized an Ursuline Convent. A very eminent member of the same Order was **Mother Mary of the Incarnation**, whose letters to Europe served to win many volunteers for the Canadian mission. She was a woman of courage and enterprise and her influence over the Indians was very strong. They had an intense respect for the nuns, whose example and teaching brought happiness and virtue into their own homes.

Canada was the center from which the neighboring districts were converted. The Indians of Maine had been visited by Spanish missionaries in 1609. These zealous men had fallen victims to their devotedness, and the faith was forgotten. Thirty years later, instigated by a converted Indian from Quebec, the Abnaki tribe of Maine petitioned for missionaries. It is thought that these Indians are of an earlier race than the great body of the people. They are more steadfast in character, and make very faithful Catholics. Father **Druilhettes**, S.J., paid them several visits, and succeeded in converting the people. Other Orders followed up the work of the Jesuits, and established a flourishing mission.

New York State was the land of the Iroquois, the fiercest of all Indian tribes. They seized on a boat full of missionaries going down the St. Lawrence, among whom was the young Jesuit, **Isaac Jogues**. They tortured the Father in the most fearful manner. His hands were left without fingers, and were pierced the whole length of the arm, from the thumb to the elbow, by stakes roughly driven in. He was kept prisoner for fifteen months, when the Dutch helped him to escape to Holland. The heroic missionary could not rest without attempting to convert his torturers, and at his own request he was sent back to Canada. The Pope allowed him to say Mass in spite of the condition of his mutilated hands: no one had a better right to offer the Holy Sacrifice, he explained, than one who had suffered like his Divine Master. Father Jogues had not the joy of seeing many of the Iroquois converted, but he gave his life for them (1646), and in

the end a large number submitted to the religion of the Cross. In order to secure for the Indians the necessary conditions for leading a Christian life, a purely Catholic settlement was made at St. Louis Rapids. Indians of all tribes were admitted, and they became very thorough Christians. Among others, **Daniel Garacontie** and **Kateri Tekakwitha** are wonderful examples of almost heroic virtue.

The most adventurous of the Jesuits was Father **Jacques Marquette**, one of the Sulpician missionaries of Quebec. He had heard from the Indians of a mighty river which he longed to explore. His wish was granted for he was named to accompany a small band of explorers headed by Jolliet (1673). Guided by Indians, they crossed the prairies until they came to the great river, down which they rowed for many days and nights, seeing no living being to right nor to left. The Illinois Indians were the only ones visited, and on them Father Marquette made so deep an impression that they implored him to come back to them, which he promised. The explorers dared not push into Spanish territory, as France was then at war with Spain; but they learned enough to make them conclude that the Mississippi flowed into the Gulf of Mexico, and not through California into the Pacific, as had been supposed.

## Saints and Notable Persons of French Canada

- **North American Martyrs** (died 1641-49) — Seven Jesuit missionaries to the Huron tribe in Canada who were killed by Mohawk or Iroquois enemies of the Hurons. Notables include:
  - **Rene Goupil** (1608-42) — Associate of Isaac Jogues who was captured by the Mohawks at nearly the same time, but killed immediately instead of
  - **Isaac Jogues** (1607-1646) — Tortured by having his fingers burned off, and enslaved by Mohawks. Escaped and returned to Europe, but then returned to the mission field to suffer martyrdom.
  - **Jean de Brebeuf** (1593-1649) — Missionary to the Hurons with a great aptitude for languages. Translated a catechism and wrote a famous "Huron Carol" telling the Christmas story in Huron native language.
- **Mary of the Incarnation** (1599-1672) — Missionary nun sent to New France in order to establish an order of Ursuline nuns. Founded the first school for girls in Canada.
- **Kateri Tekakwitha** (1656-1680) — Indian maiden who converted to Christianity and fled to a community of Christian Indians in Canada where she dedicated herself to prayer and service.
- **Daniel Garacontie** (d. 1676) — Tribal chief of the Onondaga nation who converted to Christianity and served as a peace keeper and diplomat to the Iroquois.
- **Francois de Laval** (1623-1708) — First Archbishop of Quebec who tried to protect the natives from the bad influences of Western traders and adventurers.
- **Jacques Marquette** (1637-1675) — Jesuit missionary to Canada who explored the upper regions of the Mississippi river with Jolliet.

## Maryland, an English Catholic Colony

Only one Catholic colony has ever been founded by England, that of Maryland, a beautifully fertile country lying around Chesapeake Bay. Lord Baltimore, a convert to the Catholic faith, conceived the idea of founding a colony where his persecuted co-religionists might take refuge, and he obtained a charter from Charles I. for the purpose. This document, drawn up by Baltimore and signed by Charles, is the first instance of legislation in which toleration for all religions is granted.

Lord Baltimore died and his son, Leonard Calvert undertook to carry out his father's idea. He took with him two Jesuits, Fathers White and Altham, and about two hundred English and Irish emigrants of good birth. The first Mass was said in the new colony on the Annunciation, 1634, and the State was named Maryland, in honor of Queen Henrietta Maria. The most happy relations were established with the native tribes, and Maryland soon became a really Catholic land. Refugees of all denominations were given a generous hospitality with the result that a body of Puritans who had been expelled from Maine plotted to overthrow Governor Calvert and take his place. The governor and the missionaries had to flee during the English Civil Wars (1644), but two years later they were able to return. The interval had shown Maryland Catholics what Puritan toleration was like.

Every political event in England found an echo in North America. With the triumph of Puritanism under Cromwell, religious animosities were let loose. English and Dutch, enemies as they were, joined in a fierce persecution and warfare against Catholics, and the Catholic missionaries were captured and sent back to Europe. Cromwell sent out thousands of Irish men, boys, and girls as slaves as well as Christianized indians to the West Indies where workers were needed on sugar plantations.

The Restoration brought an end to Cromwell's worst abuses and gave a few more years of peaceful progress to Catholics in America, but the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 brought an end to almost all the flourishing Catholic missions in North America. On the east coast English, Dutch, and Swedish Protestants waged continual war against the Catholic neophytes, and many of the missions were extinguished. And as long as the Dutch supremacy of the seas lasted no Catholic missions were safe; the missionaries were waylaid on the high seas, and ports were shut against their entrance. Their converts were corrupted by drink and false doctrines, or else slaughtered when staunch to their faith.