

Different approaches to the 17th-century Jesuit mission: Jerome Lalemant
and Jean de Brébeuf

By Michael Pomedli

Seventeenth-century Jesuits were part of a European cultural ethos that considered itself with few exceptions to be at the apogee of religious, commercial, cultural and political attainment. For them, civilization was in the singular, not in the plural.

According to their rule and religious vows, the Jesuits were forbidden to engage in political activity or bear arms. Their writings, especially *The Relations*, and their blog, *Journal des Jesuites*, bear this out. And in European culture this separation of church and state could support this stance. But for the Hurons or Wyandots (dwellers on a peninsula) this was not possible. When the Jesuits worked among the Hurons, albeit mostly along religious lines, they were regarded by their enemies, the Six Nation Confederacy, but mostly by the Seneca, as enemies. This close relationship of religion and politics was unworkable and incomprehensible for the Jesuits.

Instead of dealing in generalities, let me examine two missionaries in Huronia, a 1,000 square kilometre region between present-day Georgian Bay and Lake Simcoe. I chose two 17-century missionaries, Jerome Lalemant and Jean de Brebeuf, because they demonstrate different abilities, temperaments and accomplishments all within the Eurocentric framework and the pursuit of the glory of God.

Lalemant was 48 when he arrived in the Huron mission; prior to this, he had been an administrator, principal and rector of colleges in France. Immediately on his arrival in Huronia, he was named superior of the mission, undertook a census of Huron country, helped build Ste. Marie-among-the-Hurons, established the institution of *données* among fellow Jesuits, aided the revision of the Constitutions and rules of the Ursulines of Quebec, and wrote two continuing works, the *Relations* and *Journal des Jesuites*.

Lalemant was an administrator, organizer, planner, systematizer, knowledgeable about ecclesiastical matters, a writer, a centralizer, many directions quite foreign to the Hurons.

Let me focus on one of his many accomplishments, his involvement in planning and completing Fort Sainte Marie-among-the-Hurons, an agriculturally self-sufficient community with an easy access canoe route to Quebec. Lalemant recalls that the missionaries took their plans to their Huron hosts, for they were guests in this land and could proceed only if their hosts who initially invited them freely agreed to their proposal. As befitting amicable relations, presents were offered and the Hurons granted the missionaries the right to build on an area well-located both agriculturally and strategically. This central residence for the Jesuits was begun in 1639 and burned to the ground in 1649. It comprised a chapel, priests' residence, another for lay personnel, shops for carpentry and iron working, a barracks, a hospital, a retreat house for the newly baptized, a longhouse for non-Christians, a cemetery, a farm with poultry and other animals, and occupations such as a tailor, infirmarian, foreman, mason worker, and shoemaker. A stronghold of the mission, this centralized and stable headquarters, Lalemant felt, was necessary because Hurons changed village sites when the land was no longer productive.

In this permanent mother house the Jesuit missionaries could share their common experiences, and find spiritual and physical rejuvenation. Also, new Christians could come to Ste. Marie to bury their dead, receive instruction and celebrate Mass and other sacraments.

In 1648 there were 67 persons living at Ste. Marie, among them 20 priests, four lay brothers, 24 *données*, 11 lay persons, and eight soldiers. A small cannon had been imported.

I invite you to visit this Jesuit residence, Ste Marie, reconstructed on its original location and foundations, north of Toronto, near Midland, Ontario.

Lalemant thought he was doing the right things in Huronia. And the Hurons seemed to think the same, for they gave him a Huron name which reflected the positive meaning this missionary had in their lives; it was *Achiendassé*, which, according to the missionaries, meant governor or superior. A curious meaning for the Hurons, and one not in their vocabulary. But in the Huron language, the meaning of the name refers to something hurtful, malicious, wretched, contemptible, and not worth very much!¹

The second missionary under consideration is Jean de Brébeuf who spent three terms in Huron country. Since the Jesuits found no apparent external forms of institutionalized religion among the Hurons, they concluded that they were pagans or atheists. The Huron focus on the tangible and material in his daily life led the Jesuits initially to believe that these people were nothing more than materialists. But the missionaries gradually began to perceive that this was not the last word as far as their religion was concerned. There were hints in Native lifestyles of a subtle and pervading spiritual presence in all that they did.

Brébeuf became fascinated by a Huron creation myth, in which a woman named *Aetaentsic* makes the earth and humans. She is something like the Algonquian *Nanabush* who is both the ideal of humans and also harbors many of their foibles. Brébeuf wrote: "And still, though they make them human and corporeal, they seem nevertheless to attribute to them a certain immensity in all places." (*Jesuit Relations*, 8:115-121) With some fellow missionaries, Brébeuf thought there was a way of working with rather than against some Huron religious perspectives.

Many Jesuit missionaries regarded the principal Huron religious image, that of *oki*, as exclusively evil. Brébeuf did not deny this possibility but was more positive. For him *oki* could be immense, wise, good and benign, beautiful, and caring.

¹ For the meaning of the root, *achen/aken*, see John Steckley, *A Huron-English/English-Huron Dictionary*. Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen, 2007, 21, and Alexander Fraser, *Fifth Report of the Bureau of Archives for the Province of Ontario, 1908*. Toronto: L. K. Cameron, 1909, 46.

He was quite positive about the openness that Hurons had toward the Christian religion. "They are a people who have a settled habitation, judicious, capable of reason, and sufficiently numerous." (JR, 10:313)

Brébeuf captured the hearts of most of the Huron people. He had a facility for learning languages, a great patience and gentleness, a remarkable and sensitive understanding of the Hurons, making him very lovable. He was tall, pragmatic, and mystical. He revealed his care and prudence in his 1637 "Instructions for the Fathers of our Society who shall be sent to the Hurons." We could interpret these instructions as opportunistic ploys in the missionizing endeavor; I cannot deny his overall plan, but I think there is more to his instructions than this.

"You must have sincere affection for the savages, looking upon them as ransomed by the blood of the Son of God, and as our brothers, with whom we are to pass the rest of our lives.

"To be accepted by the savages, you must be careful never to make them wait for you in embarking.

"You must provide yourself with a tinder box or with a burning mirror, or with both, to furnish them fire in the daytime to light their pipes, and in the evening when they have to encamp; these little services win their hearts.

"You should try to eat their sagamité or salmagundi in the way they prepare it, although it may be dirty, half-cooked, and very tasteless. . . . [The blackrobes mention eating the dreaded sagamité as a great hardship. This dish consisted of crushed corn boiled in water with the option of dried fish, meat, squash, pumpkin, or berries as available, and no condiments.]

"It is well at first to take everything they offer, although you may not be able to eat it all; for...one becomes somewhat accustomed to it. . . .

"You must be prompt in embarking and disembarking; and tuck up your gowns so that they will not get wet, and so that you will not carry either water or sand into the canoe. To be properly dressed, you must have your feet and legs bare. . . .

"You must so conduct yourself as not to be at all troublesome to even one of these barbarians. . . .

"You must bear with their imperfections without saying a word, yes, even without seeming to notice them. Even if it be necessary to criticize anything, it must be done modestly, and with words and signs which evince love and not aversion. In short, you must try to be, and to appear, always cheerful. . . .

"You must not be ceremonious with the savages, but accept the comforts they offer you, such as a good place in the cabin. . . .

"Be careful not to annoy anyone in the canoe with your hat; it would be better to take your nightcap. There is no impropriety among the savages.

"Do not undertake anything unless you desire to continue it; for example, do not begin to paddle unless you are inclined to continue paddling. . . .

"Finally, understand that the savages will retain the same opinion of you in their own country that they will have formed on the way; and one who has passed for an irritable and troublesome person will have considerable difficulty afterwards in removing this opinion. You have to do not only with those of your own canoe, but also . . . with all those of the country; you meet some today and others tomorrow, who do not fail to inquire, from those who brought you, what sort of man you are. It is almost incredible

how they observe and remember even to the slightest fault. When you meet savages on the way, as you cannot yet greet them with kind words, at least show them a cheerful face, and thus prove that you endure gaily the fatigues of the voyage. You will thus have put to good use the hardships of the way, and have already advanced considerably in gaining the affection of the savages.

"This is a lesson which is easy enough to learn, but very difficult to put into practice; for, leaving a highly civilized community, you fall into the hands of barbarous people who care but little for your philosophy or your theology. All the fine qualities which might make you loved and respected in France are like pearls trampled under the feet of swine, or rather of mules, which utterly despise you when they see that you are not as good pack animals as they are. If you could go naked, and carry the load of a horse upon your back, as they do, then you would be recognized as a great man, otherwise not." (12:117-121)

To indicate their endearment to Brébeuf, the Hurons gave him the dignified title of echon, indicating the name of a tree esteemed for its medicinal purposes, or indicating perhaps the Huron's intimate sobriquet for the equivalent of Jean, like our Johnnie!

Two missionaries, two different personalities, two ways of approaching the mission and two different names the Hurons gave them.