

*There is no cruelty comparable to that which they practice on their enemies....In short, they make them suffer all that cruelty the Devil can suggest. At last, as a final horror, they eat and devour them almost raw. If we were captured by the Hiroquois, perhaps we would be obliged to suffer this ordeal, inasmuch as we live with the Montagnards, their enemies. So enraged are they against every one who does them an injury, that they eat the lice and other vermin that they find upon themselves, - not because they like them, but only, they say, to avenge themselves and to eat those that eat them.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Jesuit Relations*, pg. 19

Jean de Brebeuf forewarned his fellow peoples, if they were to come to New France without the inexorable will of God, their mistake would forever ride. For their God alone the Blackrobes set out to convert the Indians, for any other being would have produced supreme disappointment. To penetrate the natives, the Jesuits had to become the natives, and in that, surrender much of what they had known in the Old World: the delectable cuisine of France, the warm root of family that reminds bold men who they are, in one word, bread. The most superior amiable and adaptable qualities to the bling of religious ornaments would be necessities for the missions to bear fruit. The Jesuit missions were going to be nothing short of suicide vocations, a relentless battle of fear and dangers, just what adventure seekers live for.

Jean de Brebeuf was born of a “habereau,” a country squire, at Conde on March 1593. As a child, he probably tended stock and was gradually given heavier family responsibilities as he grew into manhood.<sup>2</sup> He grew up among the 16th century Normans, known for their boisterous loyalty. They were sharp tongued in their influence, and fiercely driven in their pursuits, yet held tenderness for their homes and family, and were often noted as charitable to their guests and community. Within the political mechanism, they advocated local law, human rights, and liberty and justice. Economically, the population was composed of soldiers, sailors, lawyers, merchants, and priests. Finally, let it be noted that religiously, many Normans cultivated towards fanaticism.

At age seventeen Brebeuf began his academic career lasting six years, taking two years of rhetoric, two years of philosophy, and two years of moral theology. This was considerably less education than the typical Jesuits uncommitted toward the native missions. They generally appeared in Canada at the average age of thirty-four, and were

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<sup>2</sup> Literally no information is known of his youth until he was 24.

trained for seven years in philosophy and theology beyond the B.A.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Brebeuf's relentless allegiance to his missions, and his gifted ability to adopt native tongue, earned him sainthood and a comfortable seat in historical recollection.

In October 1625, Jean de Brebeuf met with Frere Gabriel Sagard-Theodat, a man who spent the winter with the Hurons. The Recollect Peres of Quebec were desperate to convert the natives. It would please God and augment their trading company among the mercenary competition. The powerful Society of Jesus was being invited to join the mission.

The Hurons modeled as a feasible race to pursue for conversion. Of the tribes that passed through Quebec, the Algonquins and Montagnais were too nomadic, sometimes away from their soil for months on fishing and hunting expeditions. The Hurons were "sedentary, cultivated corn, and lived in permanent houses in palisaded towns."<sup>4</sup> The French recognized a sharper wit in Huronia and a more advanced culture. These neophytes held an eagerness to acquire French goods and yearned for military backing against their ancient rivals, the Iroquois. Let the influence of Le Caron and Champlain not be undervalued. They envisioned a French outpost in Huronia, an influence that would eventually spread out over all the country to the west, a bona fide French empire. Who of French company should introduce their presence in Indian country but their Jesus impersonates?

After setting sail from Dieppe, on the fifty-second day of voyage, the fervent Jean de Brebeuf arrived on Quebec territory. He was initially denied pass, his fame would be

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<sup>3</sup> James Axtell, *The Invasion Within*, pg. 279 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986)

<sup>4</sup> Francis Talbot, *Saint Among the Hurons*, pg. 29-30

set on a most crooked ride in the New World. During his wait in Quebec, Brebeuf spent his time collecting supplies and knowledge for his quest. It was there where he came face to face with his future brethren of Huronia. Brebeuf examined their physical. They well built for the wilderness, and had sharp features of high cheekbones, and hook-noses, glossy white chops between full lips, and peered from “beady, furtive eyes.”<sup>5</sup> Their bodies were hairless except for on their crown, which there was black and plentiful. The skin of their children was reddish-brown, and that of the adults was blackish-copper. Men were clad in beaver and bear pelts and “carried nothing but snowshoes, bows and arrows, javelins, knives and clubs,” while “the squaws were loaded like beasts of burden. A broad, leather band on their foreheads supported the packs on their shoulders, the blankets, winter clothing, rolls of barks for the tents, and bundles of dried eels. From another band about their waists dangled their kettles, knives and sundries.”<sup>6</sup> They gazed at Brebeuf “as if he were some grotesque oddity.”<sup>7</sup> The beard, the attire, the height of him was nothing short of alien.<sup>8</sup> They asked him to repeat his name in multitude. Linguistically they did not use their lips to communicate, they emitted their words from the gut, and so the Hurons named him Echon.<sup>9</sup>

After two weeks in Quebec, Echon set up the St. Lawrence in canoe for Huronia, a trip that was to last around thirty days. He attached himself to a family of Montagnais

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<sup>5</sup> Talbot, pg. 54

<sup>6</sup> Talbot, pg. 37

<sup>7</sup> Talbot, pg. 33

<sup>8</sup> About a head taller than the average Norman, Brebeuf’s childhood friends tagged him “vrai bobœuf,” a real ox.

<sup>9</sup> Talbot, pg.33

so to better absorb the language. They were given gifts so to appease his dead weight in body and belongings. The journey was extreme and the land was wild. The priest scholar learned to paddle, well. Sails were futile on the St. Lawrence. Flies persistently feasted and hunger was a familiar occurrence on these voyages. “More than any other evil the Montagnais feared hunger,” and weeks often went by when all they dined was immediate found provisions such as roots, acorns, and shreds of tree skin. Yet, Echon admitted “they endure hunger better than we do,” “so much so that after fasting two or three whole days you will see them still paddling, portaging, singing, laughing, teasing, as if they had dined well...”<sup>10</sup> A beaver find was not balked at however. A catch along the way brightened the flotilla’s day because “the skins were prized and the flesh succulent.” Echon noted that when they had foodstuff, they feasted till all was exhausted, and when they hungered they managed patience and hope. From Brebeuf’s point of view “they were wanderers on the face of the earth, living between the hazardous extremes of starvation and plenty, with little forethought of the future...” All their motives seemed to be possessed by degenerate libido. After weeks of harsh assimilation, Jean de Brebeuf arrived in Huronia country on Friday, March 27, 1626, two days after his thirty-third birthday.<sup>11</sup> The French were known by the Hurons through Champlain’s meeting and were locally branded them the Agnanha, meaning “the men clothed in iron.” The natives knew the gray-robed Recollects, but cast suspicions on the (unearthly colored) black-robed Frenchmen.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Talbot, pg.64

<sup>11</sup> Talbot, pg. 44

<sup>12</sup> Talbot, pg. 47

The Hurons were internally known as the “Wendat,” “the People of the Island.” The name was probably resulted from the land being almost completely surrounded by the Georgian Bay, Lake Simcoe, and the Nottawasaga River. It was a land known to be aesthetic in beauty, but under constant hostilities, mainly with their Iroquois neighbors. The Huron title was conceived by amused French sailors, when upon laying eyes on their erect hair on head, exclaimed “Quelles Hures!” meaning, “What boar heads!” Four major tribes comprised the Huron nation: Bear, Rock, Cord, and Dear. Social law was held joint by ancient customs and mutual respect. The older chiefs held the greatest influence, who, retired in active duties, were the sole “executives of the resolutions passed by the councils, though they were also the promoters of the decisions, since they were the councilors.”<sup>13</sup> Local councils represented each village and produced a national assembly. In the national council, local councils were seated collectively. After the issue to be discussed was clearly defined by the presiding chief, each local council privately discussed their reply. Each spokesman was heard in sequence and concluded his speech with the expression, “Such is my mind,” to which the presiding chief answered, “It is well.” When Brebeuf was proficient enough in speaking Huron tongue, he utilized these respectful and speech hospitable councils to teach his Christian beliefs and denounce all their polluted habits and superstitions thereby opposed. On occasion during these councils, he was rightfully shut down during a rapture of Christian doctrine.

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<sup>13</sup> Talbot, pg. 71

In their leisure, the Hurons enjoyed gaming and gambling such as Straw, Dish, and lacrosse (the field sometimes as long as a mile with one hundred players on each team).

They had a dance for almost any ceremonial event: to prepare for battle and celebrate victories, welcome guests, prevent and cure disease, summon the spirits. In the fire dance, masters of ceremony gripped burning coals and clasped heated stones in their mouths.<sup>14</sup> Ononharoia, the feast of the madman, feigned all participants to insanity, whereby they destroyed their village. (Vomit festival anyone?) The most esteemed quality of the dance was endurance, and dancers would gyrate to an exhausted end after several hours.<sup>15</sup>

“Children were the most prized possession of the nation since, potentially, they were the support of the elderly in their declining years and the defenders of the country in the time of war. More rejoicing met the birth of a girl than a boy because on the women depended the ‘...multiplication of the country’s inhabitants.’”<sup>16</sup> These treasures were often the result of unclean, promiscuous relations outside of marriage. Parents of these communally raised children were often assimilated with the dogs and other beasts.

The Hurons sheltered themselves in longhouses, which were constructed to accommodate six to twenty families of blood or comradeship, each family using six to eight feet of space. Visitors found them too public, odor infested, and wrought with smoke. In 1634, Father Paul le Jeune accounted that the smoke was “martyrdom”, and

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<sup>14</sup> Talbot, pg. 200

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Donnelly, *Jean de Brebeuf*, pg. 26

<sup>16</sup> Donnelly, pg. 35

“caused us to place our mouths against the earth in order to breathe; as it were to eat the earth, so as not to eat the smoke.” The Huron calendar, similar with many neophytes, was based on observation of the moon, where they could measure time in years, months, and days. During spring and summer seasons, the Huron women busied themselves in horticulture. They provided corn in many forms, but both genders preferring it in biscuit fashion or boiled as sagamite. Mashed unripe corn greased and with fish was a delicacy, but the most appetizing kind were decomposed ears buried in swamp. When in season, men hunted fish, beaver, bear, and moose, although large animals were scarce in Huron country. The males of the nation were composed of councilors, fishermen, hunters, warriors, traders, cabin builders, and shamans, which were the chief trials of the missionaries. The women performed horticulture, gathered and chopped firewood, dutied the cabins, cured furs and skins, and moved gear during travel. Possibly due from strong backbones in native society, the women character was “quicker to anger, more snarling in insulting, more savage in vengeance, more frenzied in times of trial.”<sup>17</sup> Echon observed the Hurons as jovial and chatty amongst themselves, and sought “companionship so much, they were in their neighbors’ cabins more than in their own.” They always welcomed a stranger for as long a stay as he wished, and generously gave the best they could muster to comfort.

Jean de Brebeuf sent instructions to the Jesuits who were to be sent to the Huron mission via his “Relation” manuscript early in 1637. It consisted of two parts geared towards the conversion of the Hurons, beginning with “matters that affected the

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<sup>17</sup> Talbot, pg. 58

implanting of Christianity among the Hurons,” and the second the concerned itself “with the Hurons themselves, their beliefs, their customs, and modes of life.” He began: “The Fathers and Brethren whom God shall call to the holy mission of the Hurons ought to exercise careful foresight in regard to all the hardships, annoyances, and perils that must be encountered in making this journey, in order to be prepared betimes for all emergencies that may arise.” He stressed they must have sincere affection for the Savages, the people whom they were to spend the rest of their days. Personal conciliating of the natives was a delicate and necessary process for a successful mission. Never should the missionary make his native transportation wait in embarking and disembarking, and when in canoe be wary not to annoy others with the hat or carry sand and water by Blackrobe. Such a time, weeks for the trip to and fro from Quebec and Huronia, calls for silence in both protection. When dining, without curling a lip, the Frenchmen were to eat all the filthy, raw, and bland sagamite and other Huron foodstuffs offered. In order to feast the natives, every Jesuit was to equip with fishhooks, awls, and pocketknives intended for benefiting their tribe in trade with other tribes. These supplies have the power to astonish those unfamiliar and have a high trade value among the natives. In service, equipping oneself with a tinder box or burning mirror, “or with both,” to light their pipes and wood wins sensitivity. All this and whatever hardships arise amid the fatigues of the voyage, the missionaries should bear with smile.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps Brebeuf’s most fruitful contribution in the missions was that of learning their speech. Samuel de Champlain testified, “...he had such a striking gift for learning

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<sup>18</sup> Jean de Brebeuf, *The Jesuit Relations*, pgs. 48-50

languages that” “he grasped in two or three years what others would not learn in twenty.”<sup>19</sup> Metaphors, Echon learned, were used to the greatest extent in their councils. He recorded further: most of their words were vowel composed and all lacked labial letters. A remarkable thing, he noted, “is that all their words are universally conjugated.”

The written word and idea of the Christian God was digested as “He-who-made-all” or “He-who-knows-all.” In translation of the doxology and trinity of Christian faith: ‘In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,’ Echon inquired to his superior if “In the name of our Father, and his Son, and their Holy Spirit” was harmonious with Christian faith and could be substituted. Brebeuf explained: “A relative noun with them always includes the meaning of one of the three persons of the possessive pronoun, so that they cannot say simply ‘father, son, master, servant’ but are obliged to say ‘my father, your father, his father.’”<sup>20</sup>

Testing was the translation of abstract spiritual concepts to the material vocabulary of the Hurons. They had no words to describe a mystical world isolated from the physical world. In their animistic beliefs, all objects inhabited spiritual beings intrinsically. The spirits and the physicals were at one with each other, and thus the immortality concept of the Christian soul, which is transcendental to the temporal, was a baffling topic. Divinity could not be separated by corporeality, which was instilled deep within their psyche. “Your God has not come to our country,” a native remarked. “That is why we do not believe in him. Make me see the One-who-made-all and I will believe

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<sup>19</sup> Donnelly, pg. 57

<sup>20</sup> Talbot, pg. 65

in him.”<sup>21</sup> However, the brave and dying were among those slow but substantial numbers surrendering to the Blackrobes.<sup>22</sup> Other hovering doubts kept them further from conversion. The elderly denied they could walk such a great length to salvation, others were afraid of falling from such a great spiritual height, had objections of the monogamy of marriage, diet restrictions (such as cannibalism rituals), and the restriction of tobacco use. Still, others saw a fateful connection with Baptism and sickness.<sup>23/24</sup>

The Hurons, to satisfy their question of how did man originate, adopted a myth that was widely accepted throughout the tribes of eastern North America. Ataentsic, an expecting woman, unintentionally fell through a gap in the sky and settled softly on the back of a turtle. A beaver brought soil on the turtle’s back to create an island and hospitable living space for Ataentsic. She gave birth to Iouskeha and Tawiscaron, two brothers who quarreled in their adulthood. Iouskeha, employing no mercy to his wounded brother, slew him with stag horn and thereafter became father of every living man. Among this idea implanted in the Huron mind, the missionaries had to detract their countless superstitions. Brebeuf recorded: “The dream is the oracle that all these people consult and obey...” “A dream prescribes the feasts, the dances, the songs, the games; in a word, the dream does everything here, and in truth, is to be regarded as the chief god of the Hurons.”<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Oqui, personal charms, were given absolute weight upon a

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<sup>21</sup> Talbot, pg.107

<sup>22</sup> The relevance of the French missions is divided among historians. By the year of 1647, the Blackrobes were converting natives in large numbers. In that year, they baptized 1,300 Hurons, Petuns, Algonquins, Eies, and Neutrals.

<sup>23</sup> Talbot, pg. 198

<sup>24</sup> This area of discussion will be discussed further in the discourse.

<sup>25</sup> Talbot, pg. 62

man's fate. They came in the form of animals' teeth or bones, or an odd shaped rock, and lodged spirits who must constantly be obeyed no matter how profuse the request seemed. The tribes' shamans orchestrated these superstitions and were chief rivals of the Jesuits. They detested each other in secret and in public. In familiar occasion, "the great Arendiowane<sup>26</sup> having failed to produce showers, finally learned from his special demon that Echon and the Blackrobes were the witches causing the drought" of 1635. In response, Echon and the Blackrobes blamed droughts on the Hurons' debauches and orgies, superstitions, and other cultural aspects, and testified that if they were to pray and conform to the Christian God, then their needs would thereby be met. Brebeuf and the missionaries were not totally against shaman practice. It is interesting enough to note (today) that there were occasions where Brebeuf and the French used shaman fashion to "cure" the sick, such as by bleedings and other illogical remedies.<sup>27</sup>

The Blackrobes were passengers on a roller coaster of speculations thrown by the natives. They were causes of epidemics and peace, peace representing a more welcomed merit. A native orator spoke: "We of my nation are timid. We are easily frightened. But we are courageous when Champlain and the French are our allies." But when smallpox unfolded in Huronia the people were in frantic despair. It was a horrific epidemic in fatalities and personal suffering. Father Lalemant, Brebeuf's comrade and superior sent from France to control the French missions, wrote: "I could not believe that one could look on a human body more covered with miseries."<sup>28</sup> Lalemant also noted: "The Hurons

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<sup>26</sup> Ariendiowane, otherwise known as Tehorehaegnon, were commonly known as the most powerful shamans in Huronia.

<sup>27</sup> Talbot, pg. 190

<sup>28</sup> Talbot, pg.206

observed with some sort of reason that those who had been nearest to us, happened to be the most ruined by the disease.”<sup>29</sup> Champlain in 1615 and de Brebeuf in 1636 both estimated all the Huron villages numbering 30,000 souls. By 1640 the numbers dwindled to a grim 12,000.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the natives became demented at the very sight of the missionaries, and Baptism only promoted dreadful connotations when the Blackrobes anointed the desperate dying. Any misfortune or misery, the French priests became known to cause, and Echon chief of all. A fellow missionary wrote: “In a word, the name of Echon has been, for the space of some years, held in such abhorrence that it was used for terrifying the children.”<sup>31</sup>

Among all these sufferings Echon held his faith and continued his mission for Christ and France. Yet Brebeuf’s physical efforts ceased when, on the morn of the 16<sup>th</sup> day of March 1649 at St. Ignace, he and Lalemant willingly surrendered to the Iroquois who had come to fall the Huron name and absorb the captives. The death he suffered was agonizing beyond compare. He was stripped and fastened to a post of which he was said to kiss, where they tore off his fingernails and showered him with blows across his whole body.<sup>32</sup> While catching the blows Brebeuf continued to speak of his God, encouraging all native Christians to suffer well. While hearing his rapture, a former student and Christian of Brebeuf, taken captive by the Iroquois, baptized Echon with boiling water three times. “Go to Heaven, for thou art baptized,” he spitted. After that Brebeuf suffered a series of

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<sup>29</sup> Talbot, pg. 216

<sup>30</sup> Talbot, pg. 220

<sup>31</sup> Talbot, pg. 238

<sup>32</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia, [www.newadvent.org/cathen/02751b.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02751b.htm)

torments. They first hot-fired several hatchets and pressed them upon his loins and armpits, and made a collar to decorate his neck. “I have seen no torment which moved me to compassion than that,” said the witness. Next his body was roasted with belt of resonated bark. “During all these torments, Father Brebeuf endured like a rock” and continued to preach which astonished and boiled the blood of his murderers. They cut off his tongue and lips, then sliced his fleshiest regions and dined it right before his eyes. Seeing that he was nearing death one scalped him while the other tore his heart from his chest. The warriors drank his blood with both hands so as to receive his courage. What remained of his carcass was thrown into the fire and his fat smothered the flames.<sup>33</sup>

Francis Xavier Talbot S. J. wrote: “Truly the Huron mission died with the death of him who had begun it.”<sup>34</sup> Jean de Brebeuf’s arrived in Quebec in 1625. His missions lasted twenty-four years. A will such as Brebeuf’s would never again walk through Huronia. He served as a proper buffer between French and Native American relations, and his writings are of unprecedented contribution to the preservation of history and native culture in a time so delicate and gone. In Catholicism he is known as the patron saint of Canada.

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<sup>33</sup> *The Jesuit Relations*, pg. 67-71

<sup>34</sup> Talbot, pg. 320