

## HISTORY OF THE PRECIOUS BLOOD CATHEDRAL

### Part I

#### The Jesuit Role in the Founding of Christianity at Sault Ste. Marie



The history of Precious Blood Cathedral is undoubtedly tied to the establishment of Christianity and the Roman Catholic faith here at Sault Ste. Marie and in the Great Lakes region. It is hoped that the following will both inform and give value to what was done for the faith so many years ago.

The great age of European expansion in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries brought the first wave of French explorers to the shores of North America. The ultimate goal was the discovery of an overland route to the Pacific Ocean and beyond, to the riches of the Orient. Notable among these early adventurers are such names as **Jacques Cartier** and **Samuel de Champlain** who repeatedly risked crossing the Atlantic Ocean in an effort to establish a foothold in the 'New World' for France and for the greater glory of God.

The strong religious fervor of the previous century led to the establishment of a number of Catholic missionary orders devoted to proclaiming the Gospel so that all non-Christian souls might be brought into the light and the love of Jesus Christ. State and Church aligned to achieve their objectives of discovery and evangelization.

**The 'Recollets'**, a French religious order following the rule of St. Francis, arrived at the close of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and although they evidently reached the Great Lakes region, were unable to establish themselves in numbers necessary to be successful. It is recorded that they, the Recollets, actually requested the assistance of the recently established '**Society of Jesus**' to take on this daunting task.

The monumental work was quickly and zealously taken up by the '**Jesuits**'. The Society of Jesus was founded in 1540 by **St. Ignatius de Loyola** as an all-male scholastic order, devoted to the evangelization and propagation of the faith through disciplined obedience to the Pope and the Church of Rome. They referred to themselves as 'Soldiers of Christ' and in a short period of time, they had dedicated themselves to the establishment of Missions throughout the known world. The unclaimed souls of North America soon became a prize to be secured. They were, for the most part men of culture and learning, who believed that conversion to Christianity would best be achieved through education, perseverance and the genuine love of Christ for the peoples they had chosen to claim for Him.

From our place in time, it is almost impossible to fully understand the tremendous hardships these men encountered in their efforts to live among and be accepted by the native peoples. They endured constant hunger, cold, loneliness, the lack of any familiar comforts in the vast wilderness around them,

much disappointment and above all, the knowledge that they were always at risk of torture and death. All of this, they willingly and gladly endured 'for the Greater Glory of God'.

About the time of the arrival of the first Jesuits at **Port Royal, Acadia** (Nova Scotia), in 1611, we know that **Etienne Brule**, a young adventurer/explorer had been sent by Champlain to venture west beyond Lake Huron (**le Mer Douce**), in search of a great body of water, the shores of which native legend said, were rich with copper ore. Upon his return, Brule provided confirmation of the existence of '**le Grand Lac**' (Superior) and of the river and rapids connecting it with Huron.

All of this is noted on Champlain's famous 1632 map of the region, where the rapids or 'sault' are named '**Sault du Gaston**' in honor of the brother of the French **King Louis XIII**. The settlement Brule found there was given the native inhabitants name '**Bawating**' (also **Pauwateeg**) – meaning 'the place of the fast flowing water'. Brule called the Ojibway people he found living there '**les Saulteurs**' - people of the rapids.

Meanwhile, by 1625, as their numbers increased, the Jesuits chose to advance their efforts, first to the banks of the St. Lawrence River, near Quebec City where one of their first Missions in North America was established, and where they developed survival skills and some understanding of the indigenous Algonquin peoples; learning their language and customs. By 1632 they had moved westward into the lands of the Huron (Wendat) people, where by 1639, near Georgian Bay, they had built the mission/fort of '**Sainte Marie**' (**Huronie**). Sainte Marie was considered the jewel of the missions in North America, and from here, they established a number of satellite missions which were basically nearby native villages or places where the people gathered in numbers for safety from their traditional enemy, the Iroquois. The day to day existence and experiences of the Jesuits were faithfully chronicled and sent in letters from the Father Superior of the Missions, to the Superior General in Rome and on to the 'Provincial' in Paris, where they were compiled and recorded as '**The Jesuit Relations**'. They are treasured today for their thorough detail.



**Fig. 1: The Jesuits travel and live among the Indigenous People.**

The Relations record that in September of 1641, while witnessing the mystical rite known as the Feast of the Dead near Huronia, a number of the Ojibwa Saulteur who were also present, requested that the '**Blackrobes**' or 'wamitigoshe' come back with them to their village so that they might learn of their powerful magic and strange ways. The opportunity was gladly seized, and after 17 days travel by bark canoe, Fathers (SAINT) **ISSAC JOGUES** and **CHARLES RAYMBEAULT** reached the little village of Bawating, situated at the site of the present **Sault Ste. Marie**.

**\*THIS EVENT OPENS THE HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THIS REGION AND AT THE SAULT.**



Fig. 2: 1850's sketch of native 'Bawating' (Armstrong)

The visit of these first missionaries was short, although they promised to return. The intervening years, especially 1648/49 were devastating for both the Huron people as well as the Jesuits at Sainte Marie and throughout all the French settlements. The Iroquois, who had obtained muskets from the Dutch and British,

now waged a total war of annihilation against the Hurons and of course, the French and the Jesuits. Sainte Marie was destroyed, and the Hurons scattered and hunted relentlessly to starvation and death. In addition, they had no natural defense for those common diseases brought by the Europeans. Eventually, the Huron nation, for the most part, ceased to exist. Sadly, a number of these early Jesuits and their followers were killed and martyred between, 1642 and 1649.

Today, the **Martyrs Shrine** at **Midland**, and the recreated Mission of '**Sainte Marie Among the Hurons**', stands as a lasting tribute to the eight Holy Martyrs, including **Saint Issac Jogues**, who chose to die in the service of God and for the love of Jesus Christ. [www.martyrs-shrine.com](http://www.martyrs-shrine.com)



Fig. 3: Martyr's Shrine, Midland Ont.

During these difficult years, Jesuit visits to Bawating were brief, and occurred en route to other areas around Superior. **Father Rene Menard** passed through, but disappeared mysteriously in the wilderness of Wisconsin. **Father Claude Allouez**, known as the '**Founder of Catholicity in the West**' preached here in 1667, and is said to have given the name '**Sainte Marie**' to the river and its rapids.\* Legend has it that there was much discouragement in establishing a mission here, and the Jesuits, near the point of despair, considered giving up, until one of them had a vision in which the **Virgin Mary** appeared before him and assured them of her protection, asking them to carry on the mission in Her name. The place from that time on became known as '**Sainte Marie du Sault**'.

Superior/Father **Claude D'Ablon** together with **Claude Allouez** and Father **Jacques Marquette** become known as the '**Great Triumvirate**' through their unswerving dedication to bringing Christianity to the

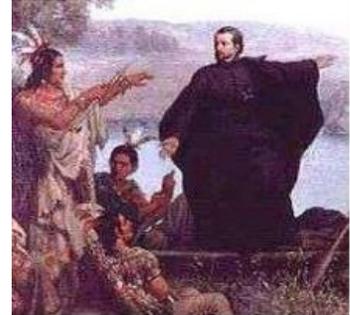


Great Lakes region. The great distance covered in their arduous travel is truly astounding. It was in 1668 that Father Marquette was sent to establish the long anticipated mission on the south shore of the St. Mary's River.

Sainte Marie du Sault was chosen as the headquarters for a western mission territory reaching as far as **Chequamegon Point** (near present day Ashland Wisconsin), on the southern shore of Lake Superior.

Fig. 4: Vast trading routes used by both Indigenous peoples and the early explorers.

It was known that a group of the Huron refugees from Sainte Marie had fled to this region following the destruction of their homeland. Father Menard had been trying to reach them when he disappeared. In 1669, Father Marquette was sent there and established the **Mission of St. Esprit**, and it was here that he learned of the great (Mississippi) river to the southwest, and the 'Illinois' people along its way. His desire to move on and establish a mission in this territory led eventually to his well-documented three month adventure with **Louis Jolliet** which led to the discovery of the **Ohio, Arkansas and Missouri Rivers** and on to the great Mississippi; but the elusive route to California and the Pacific was not found.



Prior to this great expedition, Father Marquette, in an effort to safeguard the refugee Hurons who were now in conflict with the Sioux tribes near Chequamegon, travelled back with them by way the Sault, to establish a safer haven, first on **Mackinac Island** and eventually on the mainland at **St. Ignace**. For a time, this mission would become more strategic and the Sault's importance would wane.

Because the Sault was also an important location on the vital fur trade route, it became the centre of extensive activity, both missionary and expansionary. These years brought many notable historic individuals to the Sault, including the courier/explorers **Louis and Adrian Jolliet**, entrepreneurs **Radisson and Grosselliers**, and the great fur barons **Daniel Greysolon (Sieur du Lhut) and Antoine de Lamothe Cadillac**. All of these influenced the development of the Sault du Sainte Marie, the lives of its native people and hence the work of the Jesuit missionaries here. Father Claude D'Ablon was sent to the Sault as Superior of all the Great Lakes Missions, and in 1670, Fathers **Gabriel Druilletes and Louis Andre** joined D'Ablon to, as stated in the Relations "implement all potentialities of the Sault Mission".

The ongoing struggle for supremacy in the fur trade led to the founding by the English of the **Hudson's Bay Company** in 1670, and the developing settlement at the Sault became once again, a strategic and important focal point on the vital fur trade route. The following event proves just how important.

In order to halt the growing incursion of the English into the valuable regions both north and south-west of the Great Lakes, in 1671, the **Quebec Intendant Jean Talon**, sent **Simon Francois Daumont (Sieur du**



**St. Lusson)** to Sault du Sainte Marie as the personal Ambassador of **King Louis XIV**, to take possession of Lake Superior and all of the surrounding lands, as well as all territory lying between Montreal and the South Sea (Pacific Ocean), in the name of the King. St. Lusson was accompanied by **Nicolas Perrot**, who was to become the first French 'Governor of all the Western Lands' and who had gathered a large assembly of ambassadors of at least fourteen tribes.

Fig.6: Depiction of the Pageant of St. Lusson.

It is recorded that “close to one thousand souls were present” at this very ambitious event. The Jesuit Relations records the ceremony in great detail, including the names of all those present for the raising of the Cross and Banner of France. Superior D’Ablon blessed the assembly and Father Claude Allouez eulogized the King. Several days later, it is said that both the Cross and the Banner had disappeared.

As previously mentioned, it was during this event, that Father Marquette arrived here with the large company of Huron, Chippewa and Ottawa refugees – men, women and children who were fleeing the Mission at Chequamegon in fear of an imminent attack from the Sioux. They were directed on to the Straits by Superior D’Ablon and some of these Chippewa chose to go east to Manitoulin Island, where many of their descendants reside today.

As a result of the increasing hostilities between the Saulteur and the Sioux, who had been enemies for many years, the native population at the Sault decreased, and the mission became less prominent and less prosperous. In addition, the first chapel built in 1668 was destroyed by fire in 1671, as was the second chapel built in 1673. Another disastrous incident also occurred that same year, when the house of the missionaries was the scene of a massacre of ten Sioux ambassadors and twenty other tribesmen who had come there to negotiate peace with the Ojibway. In the battle, the mission house was burned to the ground. The ‘Relations’ suggest that this event severely retarded the growth of the Church in this area, and influenced the decision to move the mission headquarters to the better defended site at St. Ignace in 1673.

The real tragedy for the Saulteur lay in the renewal of conflict with the western tribes who continued to seek revenge for the massacre, causing the majority of the remaining Ojibway to disperse and abandon the old mission site at the Rapids. References to the Mission at Sault du Sainte Marie became very scant after this date, and it is generally believed to have been abandoned by 1689; although the Sault’s position on the fur trade route and its proximity to the missions at St. Ignace and Michilimackinac, ensured occasional visits by travelling priests to the small but growing population.

The Jesuit presence in North America, although steadfast in resolve, was fraught with many hardships, impediments and political issues, both in North America and especially in Western Europe, where in 1773 the Jesuits were subjected to **Suppression by Papal Edict**. The complex and primarily political issues at work, both inside and outside the Church leading to the Suppression, also depleted the resources of the Jesuit Ministry, which in turn impeded their ability to maintain their missions abroad.

But by the time of their severe diminishment, the Jesuits had left their footprint and legacy everywhere from the St. Lawrence to the lands around the Mississippi and north to Hudson Bay. The founding of our nation would have been a far more formidable task without their accurate record keeping and skillful cartography. Apart from the severe personal hardships they endured, they were beset with years of political intrigue and bloodshed due to the ongoing struggle with the English and warring Iroquois nation, the **Seven Years War** for supremacy leading to the fall of Quebec, **Pontiac’s Rebellion**, the **American Revolution** and eventually the **War of 1812**, all of which would shape the Canada to which the Jesuits would return in the mid 1800’s.

As a result of the tremendous respect and admiration for the valiant work of these great and saintly missionaries in the early days of the history of the Sault, **Monsignor T. J. Crowley** (then Father Crowley), along with the Roman Catholic people of the city saw to the erection of a fitting marble and granite monument of **Christ with the Cross**, on the front lawn of the Church.

The celebration took place during **Discovery Week** in August of 1923 on the Grounds of **Sacred Heart Church**, and was attended by a number of church dignitaries including the Canadian Jesuit Provincial, the Very Rev. J. M. Fillion; the Bishop of Sault Ste. Marie, the Rt. Rev. D. J. Scollard; the Bishop of Peterborough, the Rt. Rev. M. J. O'Brien and many other local clergy, religious and faithful.



**The Monument reads:**

**1641**

**TO COMMEMORATE THE HEROIC DEEDS**

**OF THE EARLY MISSIONARIES**

**1923**

On reporting the occasion, the Sault Star provided the following unattributed commentary:

**“In the view of the Savior we mean to express the burning love and apostolic zeal of our missionaries, the white marble speaks to their immaculate lives, whilst the solid granite base characterizes the solidity and enduring nature of the doctrine they preached. They have lived amidst suffering and privation untold. We bless their names and try to imitate their charity”.**

\*Credit for much of this history must be given to the diligent work done in preparation for the Centennial celebration of Precious Blood Cathedral in 1974/75 by Don Burgess, Kay Punch and Hildegard Lewis. They did much to pave the way to have Precious Blood recognized as an Ontario Heritage Site. We hope to build upon their efforts as we endeavor to present the complete story of the establishment of Precious Blood Cathedral and the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie.