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FEATURE ARTICLE

JOSEPH CHIHWATENHA, HURON CATHOLIC

The Forgotten Martyr

By Clement Anthony Mulloy **December 2012**

Clement Anthony Mulloy is an assistant professor of history at Arkansas State University at Mountain Home. His articles have appeared in Catholic Social Science Review, Baxter County History, and the Online Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture.

One of the most famous chapters in Church history involves the heroic martyrdom of the French Jesuit missionaries to North America. Saints like Jean de Brebeuf and Isaac Jogues continue to inspire us centuries after their deaths. But a story rarely told is that of an Indian martyr who preceded them in giving his life for the faith. His name was Joseph Chihwatenha and he was a convert of the Huron tribe who became the cornerstone of the emerging Huron Church.

When the Jesuit missionaries first arrived, they were greeted by the Huron with a mixture of emotions: curiosity, fear, awe, and, in some cases, love. But these initial reactions quickly yielded to another: suspicion. The Huron perception of the Jesuits was influenced by the appearance of another strange arrival, that of a highly contagious and deadly disease. This disease, commonly identified as smallpox, swept through the Huron villages in a series of epidemics between 1634 and 1640. The Huron looked on in horror, helpless as friends and family died slow and painful deaths. At the end of those six years, over fifteen thousand people, approximately half the Huron population, had succumbed to the disease.

The natural remedies the Huron concocted could not stop the epidemic. It spread despite the time-honored treatments of their most powerful medicine men. Having found no cure, the Huron concluded that there could be only one cause. It was the cause that the Huron feared most: The disease must be the result of a powerful and malignant witchcraft.

The obvious suspects were the newly arrived Jesuits. The Huron asked one simple question: “Why do these men desire so strongly to live with us?” The Jesuits had endured great hardships to reach the Huron land. What could be the purpose of such a strenuous undertaking? The Huron concluded that the Jesuits could have only one motivation: They intended to wipe out the entire Huron population using their powerful witchcraft. One of the missionaries, Jerome Lalemant, wrote of this perception:

> The climax of it is, that the most intelligent among these poor Barbarians, not being able to comprehend the object and motive that have caused us to leave France and come so far, with so much difficulty and labor, and not seeing us claim any profit or advantage from our residence among them, conclude that we must, therefore, desire their ruin, since we can only aim at some object of great importance in such resolution.

Incriminating evidence quickly accumulated against the Jesuits. Not only did the onset of the disease coincide with their arrival, but wherever they went, the

disease followed. “It has been remarked more than a hundred times,” Lalemant was forced to admit, “that where we were most welcome, where we baptized the most people, there it was where they died the most: and in the cabins to which we were denied entrance, at the end of a few days one saw every person cured.” Even more incriminating, the Jesuits themselves did not contract the disease. While the Huron were dying by the thousands, not one missionary died. Jesuit Francois Le Mercier remarked that the Huron did not fail to notice this and “were astonished at it, and are still astonished every day, saying in reference to us, ‘Those people are not men, they are demons.’”

To defend themselves against the “black magic” of the Jesuits, the Huron carefully watched the missionaries in order to discover the methods they used to spread the deadly disease. They developed several theories. Many believed the Jesuits kept a corpse in the chapel tabernacle and it was this corpse that caused their people to die. Some said the life-size paintings of Christ and the Virgin Mary were real people and by merely looking at them one could catch the disease. Eventually, everything associated with the Jesuits was thought to have a connection with the plague. Even a clock the Jesuits brought with them from France to impress the Huron with their superior knowledge became a source of suspicion. Initially, the clock was looked upon with great wonder and curiosity. Many would come to the Jesuits’ cabin and silently sit staring at the clock for much of the day just to hear it chime on the hour. Soon, however, this “demon of death” was thought to spew forth the disease with every chime.

Ultimately, one theory gained prominence. The Huron concluded that the primary way the Jesuits spread the disease was through the Sacrament of Baptism. The Jesuits’ cautious methods gave rise to this suspicion, for the Jesuits were reluctant to administer this sacrament to healthy adults. The Jesuits feared apostasy and wanted only authentic conversions. Consequently, the missionaries were scrupulous in administering this sacrament, sometimes requiring a trial period of several years before allowing a convert to receive it.

But this cautious attitude was abandoned when it came to those near death. Under these conditions, which were common during the years of the epidemic, there could be no fear of backsliding. Moreover, the Church teaches that baptism not only washes away original sin but all sin, and that the baptized person is freed from the punishment that would otherwise have been his due. Consequently, the Jesuits believed that a person who died shortly after baptism would go immediately to Heaven. The Jesuits, who were reluctant to baptize a vigorous healthy adult, were willing, even eager, to baptize those on the verge of death.

In the beginning, the Huron considered baptism to be similar to one of their rituals to heal the sick. But this positive view quickly changed. As more and more of those baptized soon died, the Indians began to see baptism as the kiss of death. The Jesuits added to these fears by regularly baptizing children without their parents’ permission. The parents, not realizing the Jesuits’ intentions, concluded that the Jesuits must have some sinister motive. Baptism, far from being the gateway to eternal life, came to be viewed as the chief means by which the Jesuits sought to destroy the Huron nation.

Increasingly, the Huron called upon supernatural powers to defend themselves against the disease. These powers were summoned by shamans or by the ceremonies performed by curing societies. All these efforts were condemned by the Jesuits. The shamans were branded as “imps of Satan” and the healing ceremonies were denounced as sinful attempts to invoke demonic spirits. This opposition was seen by the Huron as another element in the Jesuits’ deadly plot.

The condemnation of traditional medicine placed the convert to the new religion in a difficult situation. He was cut off from the customary ways his society had devised to cure the afflicted. He felt defenseless against the disease’s onslaught. He was also attacked by his own community — sometimes by his own family — for failing to take action against the dread disease. Failure to perform the traditional ceremonies was perceived as guaranteeing its spread. A convert was viewed by society as allied with the Jesuits and taking an active part in the “killing” of his tribesmen. He was a traitor who was committing the most heinous of crimes. In

short, the Jesuits were believed to be mass murderers, and any converts to the new religion were their accomplices. To break with his culture, the convert needed a courage and dedication of heroic proportions.

Jean de Brebeuf, who more than anyone understood the Huron, wrote in 1636, "You might say that they are only waiting to see one of their number take the dreaded first step, and venture to run counter to the customs of the country." The breakthrough finally occurred when a man of great courage became willing to sacrifice his life for his newfound beliefs. His name was Joseph Chihwatenha. He was approximately thirty-five years old at the time of his conversion. He was neither a wealthy man nor one of the chiefs of his community, but he would soon become the Jesuits' greatest asset.

Joseph's desire to convert was sparked after hearing Brebeuf's sermon to the Huron during their great "Feast of the Dead." Thereafter, Joseph became increasingly interested in Christianity, and his instruction soon began. Eventually, Joseph contracted the disease. Fearing his death, the Jesuits asked if he wished to be baptized. Joseph joyfully consented and was baptized on August 16, 1637.

For a period of about ten months he and, later, his family were the only converts in his village. Joseph maintained the practice of the faith despite the climate of suspicion and persecution in which he lived and the ostracism and loneliness he endured. He and his family were openly mocked as the "family of believers." Despite such intense opposition, Joseph was the man who dared to take the "dreaded first step."

The Jesuits found Joseph to be more than just a simple convert. He helped them in every way he could, traveling throughout the length of his country promoting Christianity and closely identifying himself with the Jesuits, despite the likelihood that he would be linked to their nefarious activities. Joseph often gave inspiring speeches urging his tribesmen to convert. On one such occasion, Joseph spoke movingly at the Christmas midnight Mass of how fortunate the Huron were to be chosen at this moment in history, for reasons unknown, to receive God's message.

Joseph fulfilled the role of lay preacher, as was common in the Middle Ages. Christians and nonbelievers alike never seemed to tire of his oratory. This was important in an oral culture such as that of the Huron, for while the Jesuits with great effort could reach the point where they could converse in the Huron language, it was difficult for them to achieve the eloquence necessary to persuade them to become Christians. In addition, the native language was limited because it lacked the vocabulary to describe Christianity adequately. As one of the missionaries noted, Joseph's "sole recreation is to converse about the things of God, which enables us to make great progress in the language, for he pronounces distinctly and uses good words."

Joseph was also invaluable at the regular meetings the Jesuits formed to give instruction. These question-and-answer sessions were carried out in dialogue form between Joseph and one of the missionaries. In these dialogues, Joseph played many different roles. One missionary observed that "Joseph acts sometimes as objector, sometimes as ignoramus, and sometimes the Doctor, he gives opportunity to our Catechist to explain by Dialogue, and with more clearness, what otherwise would be only half understood." Another even credited Joseph with the flowering of the Huron Church: "Joseph seems to have been the leaven of the Gospel that has made the whole lump of this new Church of the Huron rise…he having been everywhere present on the most suitable occasions, to make public profession and to render an account of his faith and his conversion."

But Joseph's faith was soon put to the test. A short time after his baptism the dread disease invaded his household. Normally, a shaman would be invited and by chanting incantations and wielding mystical powers, it was believed, a cure would be possible. But Joseph refused to allow his family the benefits of Huron medicine. To those who saw a connection between Joseph's conversion and the disease, this refusal confirmed their suspicions. He was deliberately causing the deaths of his closest relatives. Many from around the village, and even some in his own

family, attempted to force Joseph to abandon his newfound faith and permit the traditional healing ceremonies. Yet, even when death came to his family, especially to his beloved son Thomas, Joseph's faith did not falter.

The pressure brought to bear upon Joseph to abandon his faith extended even into the realm of dreams. For the Huron, dreams were thought to reflect hidden desires, and failure to fulfill these "desires of the soul" meant hardship and even death. The Jesuits described dreams as the "God of the Huron" and as an oracle that predicted future events. Several years after his conversion, Joseph had a vivid dream in which he was attacked by several Iroquois, the hated enemy of the Huron. His dream foretold a grisly death: He was to be scalped and his head split open. For death to be averted, tradition demanded a sacrifice in which a dog was offered as a replacement. By disobeying this warning from the spirit world, Joseph risked certain death. The dream, with its warning, recurred numerous times. On several occasions, upon suddenly awaking, Joseph was heard to say, as if responding to the threat on his life, "Art thou the master of it? No, no it is only God who shall depose of it." The Jesuits believed that Joseph was being tempted to perform a diabolical sacrifice in order to save his life and thereby subvert his faith.

Even without warnings from the spirit world, Joseph was aware that his life was in great danger. He knew how his people dealt with those who were suspected of practicing witchcraft. It was a widespread belief that Joseph was in league with the Jesuits to destroy the tribe. His activities on behalf of the missionaries over the years deepened this conviction. The Jesuits quote him as saying defiantly, "Let them come, let them burn me, and let them see if it is in good earnest that I believe, or if it is only with my lips."

Despite the threats, Joseph still lived openly as a Christian. In a council held in 1640, Joseph boldly declared, "I hear that they speak of me as of a man who is in league with the black gowns. I wish them to know that I am allied with them, not to ruin the country…but to maintain the truths which they have come to announce to us. I shall be happy to die for this reason; I am quite ready to be burned for this cause."

Further evidence that Joseph knew how his tribesmen perceived him came during an unsuccessful effort to convert his brother. Joseph said to him, "the dread of death will never close my lips." He was fully aware of the danger he was in, saying to his brother, "The worst that can happen to me, in your opinion, is that they may split my head, as they do to the sorcerers of the country…. I should account myself too happy to give my life for the One who has loved us so much."

Joseph's dreams eerily predicted his fate. On August 2, 1640, Joseph was murdered while working in the fields. Though the Huron chiefs claimed that Joseph had been killed by the Iroquois, modern scholars agree that the evidence indicates that Joseph was executed by his own people for being a "sorcerer." The Huron took his death as proof of the power of dreams and, henceforth, conversions became more difficult.

Soon after Joseph's martyrdom, Jean de Brebeuf had a reassuring vision concerning the fate of his longtime friend. Brebeuf wrote, "I saw a pavilion or a dome descend from Heaven and rest on the grave of our Christian. Then it seemed to me that someone picked up the two ends of the pavilion, drawing it upwards, as if to take it to Heaven. The vision continued a very long time. I felt, at the time, that God wished me to understand the state of the soul of that good Christian."

Joseph was the first martyr of the Huron Church. Yet after his death, the Jesuits rarely mentioned him. What is most unfortunate is that this model convert, who "preferred losing life to losing the liberty of living openly like a Christian," has never been officially recognized by the Church for which he died.

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"*Christians naturally think more often of what the world has inflicted on the saints; but the saints also inflict much on the world. Mixed with the cry of martyrs, the cry*

of nature wounded by Grace also ascends — and presumably to Heaven." — C.S. Lewis

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