

Marie de l'Incarnation and the Aboriginal Peoples

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Marie de l'Incarnation, who came to this country in 1639 to devote her life to the Aboriginal peoples because of the love she felt for them, was a true witness to their life during her 33 years of missionary work in seventeenth-century Quebec.

Language

As soon as the Ursulines arrived, a two-room house was placed at their disposal by Mr. Noël Juchereau of the Company of One Hundred Associates. The tight living space facilitated the learning of the language. The first six boarders taught their mistress. Marie de l'Incarnation exclaimed: "This language is difficult!" The words "roll around like stones in my head." Regardless, at forty years of age, this Virgin of Prayer, as the Algonquins called the nuns, could converse with these young people after three months of apprenticeship; the Jesuits provided additional training.

Marie de l'Incarnation worked on leaving as much written material as possible for teaching purposes. She noted: "A large Algonquin book of sacred history and holy things, with an Iroquois dictionary and catechism, which is a treasure. Last year, I wrote a large Algonquin Dictionary with the French alphabet; I have another one in the native alphabet."¹

Opening

The Ursulines began welcoming young Algonquin girls to their convent within the first fortnight of their arrival in the country. One of them, an orphan, Marie Négabamat, did not want to have anything to do with the boarding school. She jumped over the fence whenever she felt like it. Her father had to work very hard to convince her; we know that Indigenous peoples could not stand to see their children sad! He was so persuasive that he managed to get her to return to the boarding school. The girl changed her behaviour and became a model for the other residents.

Children and outside women also regularly attended Saint Joseph Seminary, the first school for girls built in 1641. Nothing could stop Marie de l'Incarnation's zeal for "her heart's delights," as she liked to call the girls. This included her fasting so that they would have the food they needed.

Men had a different privilege. Welcomed in the parlour, a good dish of sagamité [a Native American stew made from hominy and other ingredients] whetted their appetite to receive the Word of life that Marie de l'Incarnation and her companions gladly spread.

Soon, and at any time of the day or night, the great First Nations Chiefs and their leading women came to seek advice in the parlour. While respecting their values, the Ursulines presented Jesus Christ to them.

When difficulties arose among the tribes, the Ursulines were there to help them reconcile. Aboriginal peoples are very sensitive, as intelligent as they are resourceful. Having no written material at this time, they transmitted their way of life by example. Sorcerers

¹ Letter CCXXXV1, *Correspondance*, p. 801.

sometimes influenced them. Their stories were enhanced by trickery that they had difficulty letting go of.

To Frenchify?

For the foundress, there was no question of Frenchifying the Aboriginal Peoples. The reply to the King of France, Louis XIV, is clear in the 1660s. For all the many years that we have been in Canada, she writes, “we have barely managed to Frenchify” a few individuals, and they are orphans. It was necessary to respect the customs and values of these people.

At the end of her life, Marie de l’Incarnation, having totally given herself to the cause of the Aboriginal peoples, testified to the prosperity of the country. The Intendant Talon organized the colony for its well-being, in the hope that these Peoples would be respected and would be but one people with the emigrants from France.