

The Papal Visit

Sainte-Marie among the Hurons

Fact Sheet

In observance of the Papal Visit, 1984.

Important Dates:

- 1639 Construction of Sainte-Marie among the Huron begins.
 - 1649 Sainte-Marie among the Hurons is abandoned and burned down by the Jesuit fathers.
 - 1941 Excavations begin near Midland, Ontario.
 - 1967 Official opening of the reconstructed Jesuit Mission headquarters.
- September 15, 1984 Visit of Pope John Paul II to the Martyrs' Shrine, and to Sainte-Marie among the Hurons.

The New World and the Jesuit Mission: In the seventeenth century, the English, the Dutch, and the French were each cultivating areas of the new continent for furs, fish and the rights to future settlement. The French had begun settlements along the St. Lawrence River and considered conversion of the natives to Christianity essential to further settlement in the interior. To begin this task, Fathers Brébeuf and de Nouë made the first Jesuit visit in 1626 to Ouendake, the land of the Huron Indians. By 1648, there were twelve missions and eighteen Jesuit fathers at work in Ouendake.

The Ouendat People: To the Jesuit fathers, the Huron Indians, or Ouendat, seemed most likely to respond to their efforts. They were part of the Iroquoian linguistic family, but formed their own confederacy on the shores of Georgian Bay. The Ouendat were a sedentary people who lived in longhouses and grew corn, beans, and squash, as well as hunting and fishing for food. They used some of their harvest to trade for furs with their northern neighbours, and then traded the furs to the French. This "middleman" position and an Algonquin alliance made friendship with the Ouendat a cornerstone in French settlement plans.

Headquarters of the Huron Mission: Sainte-Marie among the Hurons was a fortified mission village built to centralize the missionary work in Ouendake. Serving many purposes, it provided an independent and stable residence from which the missionaries were assigned to work in the outlying villages; a peaceful place, ideal for prayer, meditation, and the retreats of the Jesuit fathers; a centre of civilization where the natives could see Christianity in practice; and a refuge for converts and prospective converts among the natives.

Life at Sainte-Marie among the Hurons: During its ten-year existence, Sainte-Marie among the Hurons grew and prospered. In the Jesuit Relation of 1643-44, Father Jerome Lalemant wrote:

This House is not only an abode for ourselves but it is also the continual resort of all the neighbouring tribes, and still more of the Christians who came from all parts for various necessities. . . . We have therefore been compelled to establish a hospital there for the sick, a cemetery for the dead, a Church for public devotions, a retreat for the pilgrims, and, finally, a place apart from the others, where the infidels . . . can always hear some good words respecting their salvation.

As well, there were shops for the blacksmith, the carpenter, the shoemaker, and the apothecary. There were gardens and stables, a cookhouse and a granary. There were barracks for the soldiers, residences for the Jesuits, and dwellings for the mission helpers — the donnés, servants, boys and lay brothers who combined with the Jesuit fathers to make up one-fifth of the European population of Canada in 1649.

Contact: The many natives who accepted Christianity often found themselves at odds with their families. The "black robes", as the Ouendat called the Jesuits, were accused of causing death among the tribes as diseases previously unknown among the natives reaches epidemic proportions in 1634, 1636, 1637, and 1639. From an estimated 30,000 Ouendat before 1620, only 12,000 remained. Contact with the French brought change, conflict and the white man's diseases to the Ouendat. They barely survived the impact of the meeting.

The End of the Huron Mission: The traditional enmity between the Ouendat and the Iroquois reached a crisis in the 1640s. The Iroquois were anxious to eliminate their rivals in the fur trade. Attacks on Ouendat trading expeditions had already become frequent, but now the Ouendat were in danger even in their own villages. In 1648, Father Antoine Daniel was killed in an attack on the village of St. Joseph. In 1649, Fathers Jean de Brébeuf and Gabriel Lalemant were tortured and killed in attacks on the villages of St. Louis and St. Ignace^{II}. The remaining Jesuits and Ouendat thought it best to leave Sainte-Marie among the Hurons. They set fire to the mission village and went to Christian Island. The following year they settled in Quebec.

Grave of Brébeuf: The bodies of Brébeuf and Lalemant were first buried beneath the church at Sainte-Marie among the Hurons and then taken to Quebec when the Jesuits left Ouendake. Early searches for the original graves failed, but in 1954, Father Denis Hegarty, S.J., excavated part of the church floor and found a coffin and a lead plaque inscribed, "P. Jean de Brébeuf brûlé par les Iroquois, le 17 de mars l'an 1649". Pope John Paul ^{II} will visit that gravesite in the Church of St. Joseph in September of 1984.

Martyrdom: Fathers Brébeuf, Lalemant and Daniel, along with five other missionaries to the new lands, were canonized in June, 1930, by Pope Pius ^{XI} for their role in bringing Christianity to an unfamiliar and savage land.

Plenary Indulgence: The first Apostolic document in Ontario was from Pope Urban ^{VIII} granting plenary indulgence to pilgrims to the Church of St. Joseph. It was to last for seven years beginning in 1644. In 1926, a rekindling of the indulgence was requested since the original seven years had been cut short. Renewal of the indulgence has occurred every seven years since 1926.

Excavation and Reconstruction: When land containing the remnants of the mission became the property of the Jesuits in 1940, they invited the Royal Ontario Museum to carry out an investigation of the stonework that stood there. Later, the University of Western Ontario conducted excavations from 1947 to 1951, and began reconstruction of the site in 1964. Sainte-Marie among the Hurons had its official opening in 1967 as a centennial project in Ontario.

Sainte-Marie among the Hurons Renewed: The authentic reconstruction of the mission is complemented by guided tours, historical interpreters, and a museum. The many programmes at the site are designed to reflect the historical importance of Sainte-Marie among the Hurons. On the site, the emphasis is on understanding the realities of a mission in the wilderness in the seventeenth century, while the museum helps visitors to piece together the story of Sainte-Marie among the Hurons in view of the period and the varied objectives of its players.

Papal Visit: The extensive details of Sainte-Marie among the Hurons' existence have been revealed through careful archaeological exploration and research. With each new discovery, Sainte-Marie among the Hurons took a more significant role in the history of Canada and Catholicism. The visit of Pope John Paul ^{II} is in recognition of that role.