

# CHIEF JEAN-BAPTISTE SIWEPAKAHAM

## MAN OF FAITH

By Fr. Jacques Johnson o.m.i.



He was not always a saint, he was not always a Christian either. But the people of Fox Lake, Alberta, consider him a holy man, the equal of the great saints that we Catholics venerate at mass.

That is why they sometimes pray to the old Chief Jean-Baptiste Siwepakaham. His father, who was once a famous .....

....medicine man, became a Christian, I believe, toward the end of the last century. He became a very saintly man. He tried to convince all the members of his family to be baptised and saw several of them joining his faith.

One who steadfastly refused was his son Jean-Baptiste. The old man thought greatly of his seventh and younger son. He told him one day he would be Chief. In order to force him to come into contact with God, who reveals himself so often in nature and in solitude, the old Chief ordered him to leave home and go live in the forests for a year with only his gun and a dog for companion.



At the end of the year the young man returned as skeptical as ever. His journey through the Northwest Territories among other Indian tribes did not bring him closer to faith.

So one evening, his father who had an exceptional faith worked a miracle for him. He started praying and sent Jean-Baptiste outside the cabin. He asked his son, "Do you see the moon?" The younger man said that he did. In fact what he was seeing was an incredible sight: the moon was moving in the sky in a fantastic dance. After a while, the father asked, "You believe now, don't you my son?" The son answered, "No, I don't."



When he would recite the rosary people knew by his face, what mysteries - joyful, sorrowful, or glorious - he was meditating on. Tears would role down his cheeks as he would recite and reflect on the sorrowful mysteries. He would sigh and whisper to himself, "No, it's not possible that He suffered so much for me. If the priest had not told me I would not believe it."

Father Habay writes of the great trials that Jean-Baptiste had to overcome. At one point in his life he had three sons. Two died of disease. His third son, Samuel was the pride of his father. One day, when the boy was ten years old, he went to check the snares for rabbits with his father. A young hunter, returning home, saw the boy in the semi-darkness. Sure that it was a bear, he shot him.



Fatally wounded the boy cried to his father. "Where are you wounded, my son," the father asked. "Here", said the son showing his side. He died immediately. Jean-Baptiste's sorrow was as great as his resignation.

When the young hunter, seventeen years old, realised what had happened, he turned the rifle on himself. Before he could fire Jean-Baptiste snatched the weapon away from him and brought him to his home, adopting him as his own son .

What happened, in fact, is that Jean-Baptiste studied all the hymns, which contained the whole story of salvation in Jesus Christ, his life, his death, his resurrection, the foundation of the Church, the Sacraments, and also the Blessed Virgin Mary whom he recognised as the woman who had spoken to him in his vision. It was a discovery that transformed his whole life. He shared this good news with his people who received it with joy.

J.B. Siwepakaham became a most remarkable leader to his people. He always showed a very deep faith.



Father Vandersteene told me how moved he was, when meeting the Chief, (then an old man) who would kneel at his feet right there in the street before everyone, and ask for the priest's blessing. To him, the priest was sent by God.

If Jean-Baptiste Siwepakaham was the people's political leader, he was even more their spiritual leader. The priest could visit their village only once or twice a year. In his absence the people would meet at the Chief's house and he would lead them in hymn singing and prayer. He would pray everyday and seemed to be always walking in the presence of God.



He remained firm in his unbelief until the time he had a special dream that moved him deeply. He saw a woman dressed like a priest in a long black robe, a cross hanging from around her neck, holding a book in her hand. She told him, "Go see the man who is dressed like I am, and ask him to teach you to read the book he holds in his hand."

Jean-Baptiste left for Fort Vermilion as soon as he could, paddling his way upstream in his canoe. When he arrived he saw two churches on the bank of the river. There, in front of one, was a man dressed in a black robe. He went to speak to him. The man was holding a bible in his hand, but he had no cross around his neck. Jean-Baptiste asked, "Is this how you dress?" The man answered, "Yes." "You are not the one I am looking for," the young man told him.

Then he saw Fr. Habay coming out of the other church. He had just finished Sunday mass. Jean-Baptiste approached him and saw that he was dressed exactly as the woman had told him. In his hand was a Cree hymn book. He immediately asked the missionary to teach him to read the book.

The priest brought him to his home and asked him who he was. When he told him, the priest said, "Oh, so you are the one who does not want to become a Catholic." His stubbornness was well known. After they had lunch, Father Habay taught him the syllabic characters and in a few hours our man could read. He took the hymnal and left for home.

A few months later when Father Habay went to the Little Red River mission, he met Jean-Baptiste who asked to be received into the Church along with his people. Father Habay would refuse to take any credit for their conversion. "They did it all by themselves," he would say.

“No doubt”, writes Father Habay, “he could not approve of the foolishness of the hunter who had killed his son, but he never showed any desire for vengeance toward him, and not even the slightest anger. All he did was to tell his sorrow to God who had permitted that accident, and to the missionary in order to receive Christian strength and consolation.”

Years ago I visited Garden River, where Chief Siwepakahan lived for a long time. I met his kindly wife, who lived in the log-house of Andrew his only surviving son. She sat on her bed, blinded with age, and gladly remembered those years long ago when her husband Jean-Baptiste was the Chief.

The old chief died in Fox Lake in 1965. The people buried him in a special plot next to the Church to show the reverence they have for this great and holy man who, once he met God, never looked back.

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