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# Theresa Oionhaton

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*"flower of Huronia"*

*by James J. Mara, S.J.*



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## **THERESA OIONHATON . . .**

The early history of Canada boasts of outstanding heroes and heroines, people whom we can admire and look up to. We have only to recall a Champlain, a de Maisonneuve, the famous Jesuit blackrobes, including our martyrs, Mere Marie de l'Incarnation, Madame de la Peltrie, and Bishop Laval. But there are just so many.

### **Notable Hurons**

Old Huronia was singularly blessed with great men and women, active people, people full of faith and goodness, who deeply edified and consoled the blackrobes working among them.

We have in mind men such as Joseph Chiwatenhwa, that "pearl of the Huron Christians", his brother, Joseph Teondechoren, the noble warrior chief Ahatsis-tori, and women like Aonetta, the wife of Joseph Chiwatenhwa, Catherine, the wife of Joseph Teondechoren, and their niece Theresa Oionhaton.

This young woman, Theresa, displayed a completely disarming faith in her childhood, a faith that deepened during her captivity among the Iroquois, and flourished in her mature years.

### **Theresa's Uncles**

Theresa had several uncles, among them Joseph Chiwatenhwa and his brother Joseph Teondechoren. Chiwatenhwa was the subject of the first pamphlet in our series "Heroic Native Christians." Mere Marie de



l'Incarnation, foundress of the Canadian Ursulines, called Chiwatenhwa "an apostle with apostles." Father Le Mercier, who directed him in the first recorded eight day Ignatian retreat given to a lay person in Ontario, compared him with the most zealous Catholics in France. St. Charles Garnier declared that "it was in this Christian that we had our hope after God."

Theresa's other uncle, Joseph Teondechoren, had steadfastly refused baptism during the lifetime of his younger brother who was surprised and killed by some marauding Iroquois on August 2, 1640. However, three days after the death of Chiwatenhwa, Teondechoren earnestly begged for baptism. In the Relation of 1642, Father Vimont mentioned that Teondechoren's conversion was due to the wonderful example of his dead brother.

Father Vimont also saw fit to add: "The conversion of this new Joseph seems so much the more important, as he had been for twenty years steeped in the practice of the Aontaenhrohi, or festival and dance of fire, the most diabolical and, at the same time, the most general remedy for maladies that there is in the country."

## **THE FAITH OF CONFESSORS**

The measure of the faith of such relatives of Theresa can be seen in the reactions of Aonetta to the death of her beloved husband Joseph Chiwatenhwa and later of Joseph Teondechoren when he lost both wife and dear child.

No doubt, young Theresa remembered well this

scene as described in the Relations. When her aunt Aonetta saw her Christian relatives weep at the grave of her husband, she exclaimed, "What is the good of all these tears? Let us endeavour to follow them up there in heaven. Let us gather there an entire family of saints. Let us all serve God faithfully, so that the unbelievers will see that our faith has not died with those who have departed, and the hope of paradise is sufficient to check our tears."

Her brother-in-law, Joseph Teondechoren, demonstrated a similar disposition of soul later in his own personal loss of wife and daughter. The non-believers approached him saying that it was his faith that had brought on these deaths. But Teondechoren, referring to the recent death of his young daughter, spoke as follows to one of the missionaries: "It seems to me that I see before me, my daughter full of joy. Her death has consoled me more than her life; my mind has not been disturbed by it. Some time ago, I gave her up to God and He has disposed of her. She belonged to Him more than to me. I do not place much value on the life we live below on earth. I prize eternity alone I prize eternity alone." (Relation of 1642)

### **Theresa's Years in Quebec**

Joseph Teondechoren knew that his brother had been anxious to send their niece, Theresa Oionhaton, to Quebec so that she could receive schooling at the hands of the newly arrived Ursulines whom Chiwatenhwa had met and admired. Accordingly, in 1640, he

arranged for Theresa to be taken to Quebec, a momentous step in the life of a young girl of about twelve years of age.

In Quebec, Theresa was placed in the care of Mere Marie de l'Incarnation, a remarkable woman and one of the great letter-writers of all time.

Theresa became the delight of the sisters. She gathered the girls of her own age into a sort of spiritual community imitating the spirituality of the sisters. They begged Father Vimont during advent to prepare them for the reception of Holy Communion at Easter. Father Vimont writes that the preparation and the fervor they displayed "astonished as much as edified us."

The sisters used to withdraw to make their annual eight days of prayer in retreat. The girls would claim that the sisters were "hiding themselves." During this time, Theresa withdrew into a small grove on the convent property, made herself a kind of cabin and passed the greater part of the day in praying to God. One of her friends, finding her there, asked what she was doing. "I am hiding," she said, "like the mothers, to pray to God for myself, for you, for the French, and for the natives." The friend told the others and at once all of them, except the two youngest, hastened to make a little house of leafy branches. They cloistered themselves within this enclosure, observed silence and spent a good part of the time in praying and reciting the Rosary with as much devotion as mature people show.

### **The Young Apostle**

Father Vimont reports that two Hurons who had spent



the winter in Quebec, returned having received baptism. One of the reasons that had induced them to accept the faith was the sight of the zeal of our young Theresa — at that time thirteen or fourteen years old. One of these Hurons decided to test the fervor of this young Christian. On the eve of his baptism he declared that he no longer believed what she taught and he did not want baptism. She became greatly excited and was seized with a holy anger. After much pleading, teaching and threatening, seeing no hope for his conversion, she rushed to the sisters. "He is lost," she said, "I am very sad. He will no longer believe in God. The devil has deceived him. He no longer wishes to go to heaven." Then, with a toss of her head that betrayed her sorrow and her zeal, she said, "If I could have broken the grating, I would have beaten him." The sisters, discovering the man's deception, could not console her. Father de Brebeuf was compelled to assure her that a trick had been played on her.

One Jesuit wrote that some Hurons, returning from Quebec were so satisfied with the conversation that they had enjoyed with Theresa, that they did not know which most to admire, "a little Huron girl who had preached to them about God . . . or the nuns who had taught her and turned her thoughts towards heaven."

Two other Huron converts returning from Quebec remarked:

*"She will be the greatest mind among the Hurons when she returns.*

*She, Mere Marie, who taught her daughters, doubtless is one of the greatest minds of France."*

Not the least of the graces that were Theresa's was the gift of appreciation and the art of expressing it. Before leaving Three Rivers enroute to Huronia, she sent a letter in her own handwriting to the Mother Superior. She gave it to Father Joseph du Peron for delivery. Here is a translation of it as it was written in Huron:

*"My good Mother, I am about to leave. I thank you for having taken such good care of me and for having taught me to serve God well.*

*Do I thank you for a trifling matter? I shall never forget it."*

### **The Young Captive**

Within two days of the departure of the Hurons from Three Rivers, while still on the St. Lawrence River, they were attacked by an Iroquois war-party. Those who were not killed were taken prisoner. Among this group was Theresa, her uncles, the future saints Isaac Jogues and Rene Goupil, the Donne Guillaume Couture and two young children. All were tortured except Theresa and the two children.

What an inspiration must have been the conversation and heroic example of Jogues, Goupil, Couture and the brave Christian Hurons for the young Theresa. What a consolation she must have been for those whose life was spent in bringing Christ to such as she.

The French tried in many ways to have Theresa released. Some three years later, Jogues, who had eventually escaped from the Iroquois, with the help of some sympathetic Dutch, returned to the Mohawk Country



to try to negotiate a peace treaty (May, 1646). He met Theresa among Iroquois fishermen. She had remained steadfast in her faith and had continued to tell her beads on her fingers.

He had a conversation with her, encouraged her to hope for freedom and instructed her. He told her that on behalf of the Ursulines of Quebec, Governor Montmagny was doing much to gain her release and that the Algonquins were joining the cause on her behalf. Later, Jogues gave the Mohawks 5000 wampum beads for her freedom. She had been given by the Mohawks to a member of the Onondaga tribe in marriage. The Mohawks declared themselves willing to release her on her return to their country, offering 1500 wampum beads as a pledge of good faith. She lived in a cabin apart from the Onondaga village where she remained a prayer woman and reared her family in peace.

### **Theresa's Convert**

In Father LeMercier's letter to his superior of 1654, he reports that Father Simon LeMoine had met Theresa on August 7th of that year. It was the cause of great joy for him. Theresa, wishing to "pour out her heart to me away from all the noise and in quiet, invited me to go and see her in an outlying cabin where she dwelt." He claimed great consolation in witnessing the faith that was hers in captivity, "and with no help except that of heaven!"

Theresa had with her a young captive of the Neutral Nation, between fifteen and sixteen years old, whom

she loved as her own daughter. She had instructed her so well in the faith and in prayers which they recited together for Father LeMoine that he was amazed. He asked her why she had not baptized the girl herself, "since she has as strong a faith as you yourself, since she is a Christian in her morals, and since she wishes to die a Christian?" Theresa had not thought she could do this and begged him to baptize her then and to give her Theresa's name. That was the first baptism of a grown person at Onnontagé, for which we are indebted to the piety of a Huron woman, our Theresa.

Father LeMoine writes "The joy which I experienced at this was sufficient to make me forget all my past fatigues. When God prepares a soul, the consummation of its salvation is soon accomplished.

In the fall of 1655, she travelled with a baby in her arms three leagues from her home to await the arrival of the "Black Robes", Fathers Chaumonot and Dablon on the occasion of their journey from Quebec to Onondaga.

Then she fades from the written history of her day, a sad little figure haunting our imagination of what might have been, but just as she was in her day a model for children, a challenge for youth, an inspiration for her elders and a consolation to missionaries, so too she remains today.

**MARTYRS' SHRINE**

Midland, Ontario

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