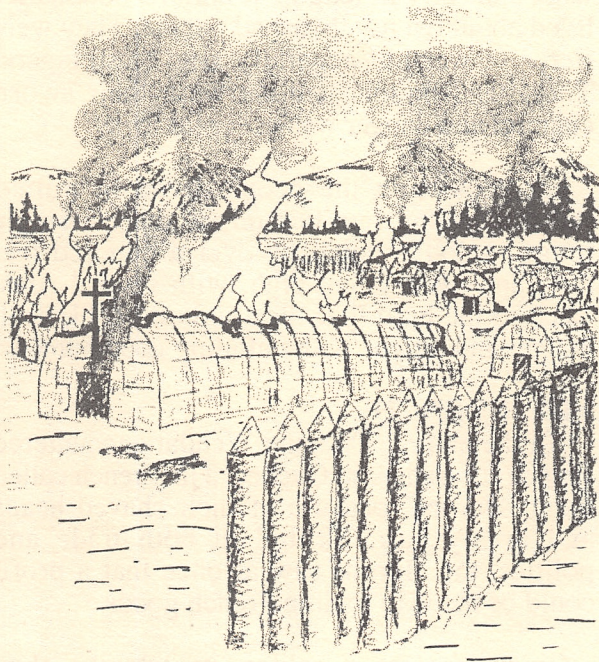


The Huron Holocaust



The Hurons were a great nation. The first to hear the Gospel and to receive Christ. Yet after only a few short years they were utterly destroyed.

How could God allow this to happen? Especially to a people among whom the flame of faith burned so brightly. Yet the eyes of faith can discern the plan of God, even in what seems to be only disaster.

THE WENDAT

When our land was covered in dark forests and still mostly a mystery to the whiteman, the Wendat, meaning 'Island people', lived in what is now Ontario. They were a tall good looking race who lived by hunting and farming. They were also talented traders who bartered with neighboring tribes for goods.

Their territory was not large, only thirty miles wide and forty in length. Within its boundaries lived about twenty thousand people. They were fierce in war but generally kind to strangers. The five Iroquois nations were their sworn enemies and danger was never far away.

For protection the people lived in walled villages. Many families might share a single lodge. A lodge could be over a hundred feet long and twenty feet high, with several fires. Used to the hard life, they endured cold, heat, hunger and fatigue with unfailing good humor.

THE FRENCH

In the early 1600's the Wendat encountered French fur traders in Quebec. The French called them 'Hurons' because of their shaved heads and bristly hair. Skilled in both trade and politics, the Hurons saw at once that a profit could be made in trading French goods.

Quick to seize a golden opportunity, they soon made treaties with the French that gave them control of the fur trade. As a sign of good will the Hurons agreed to allow Catholic missionaries to live in their villages.

THE "BLACK ROBES"

The only missionaries then in Quebec were the Franciscans. They were too few and poor to undertake such a mission, and invited the help of the Society of Jesus. These 'Jesuits' had a reputation for great learning and iron discipline, and were widely renowned for their courage and holiness.

THE FIRST CONVERTS

Slowly and painfully a small community of Christian believers was formed. They were carefully instructed in Christian prayer, faith and morality. Those who accepted baptism knew well the price they might have to pay. Often they were treated as outcasts and had to endure taunts, mockery and sometimes death.

These were no faint-hearted followers of Christ. Their fervor was like that of the early Christians. Traditional Hurons bitterly opposed this new religion. They felt it would spell the end of their ancient way of life and did their best to discredit it in every way.

IROQUOIS ATTACKS

But suddenly a greater threat was upon them all. The Iroquois were making ever deeper raids into Huron territory, their eyes on the control of the fur trade. Since they couldn't make a deal with the Hurons, they decided to exterminate them. It was a deadly struggle. Many people were killed, captured and tortured. At the same time the new faith in Jesus was spreading rapidly everywhere throughout the nation.

MARTYRDOM

In March of 1649 the Iroquois launched a series of surprise attacks on the Huron villages and burnt them to the ground. People young and old were slaughtered mercilessly. The Iroquois hated the Black Robes and the new religion even more than they hated the Hurons. A host of Huron Christians and their priests were captured and forced to run the gauntlet. Hundreds were horribly tortured to death.

Numerous stories have been handed on of these first Native martyrs for Christ. Men, women and children refused to give up their faith preferring torture and death to losing eternity. Their enemies were astonished at how they faced their deaths joyfully praising God. This persecution lasted about eighty years.

For nine days the priests prayed, imploring the blessing of rain. On the last day the Heavens opened and it rained for a month. The crops were saved and there was food in plenty that year. The Hurons were impressed and a few began to consider their teaching more seriously.

FIRST FRUITS AND TRIALS

Then in 1637, after eight years of effort the first Huron convert was baptised. He was a well respected man in his fifties named Peter Tsiouendaentaha. A few months later the great Joseph Chiwatenhwa also became a believer.

But each time the Jesuits gained ground for Christ, it seemed that trouble came. Crop failure, drought, Iroquois attacks and epidemics struck in quick succession. Often they were blamed for all the trouble. Still many Hurons did not want to endanger their monopoly on the fur trade by harming them.

In those years a deadly smallpox epidemic was sweeping through the whole world. It was not long before both missionaries and Hurons were laid low. Many died. No one as yet knew its cause or its cure. The Huron healers were helpless before this devastating disease. Some said it was part of a Jesuit plot to destroy them so the French could occupy the land.

People turned against the Black Robes. They were mistreated and threatened. A council of the clans was held which decided that they should be killed. The Jesuits prepared to die. They wrote their last testaments and entrusted their valuable Huron dictionaries in the safe keeping of their first convert Peter.

One priest, Jean de Brebeuf, whom they called Echon, held his own death feast in the Huron tradition and invited everyone to attend. There he spoke so well and with such fearless courage that instead of being killed, they were allowed to stay. Gradually the epidemic abated.

The first Jesuit 'Black Robes' believed that the Gospel message must be adapted to the Huron culture in order to be understood. They applied themselves to mastering the difficult Huron tongue, and learning the beliefs and customs of the people. They lived in their lodges, shared their work and ate their food.

Their manner of life and strange ceremonies puzzled the Hurons. These Black Robes were not at all like the other French who were greedy for furs and chased their women. They were considered a great novelty and Hurons came from all around to see them and examine their strange belongings.



The priests preached to them the truths of the Christian faith. They explained about Jesus and salvation, the joys of heaven and the danger of hell. A few people expressed some interest but most were indifferent and satisfied to follow the traditional ways. Some however began to fear them as powerful French sorcerers.

In 1635, drought threatened the crops. For weeks there was no rain. When the shamans' most powerful incantations produced no results, the Hurons begged the Black Robes to make it rain. They explained that only God could do this. But they would offer a novena in honor of Our Lady asking this favor.

THE NATION SCATTERED

Iroquois warriors wiped out the Neutral and the Tobacco people. They seemed unstoppable. The people made plans to flee. Fr Chaumonot wrote how he paused to pray before the ruins of his chapel, his face filled with pain. Ignace Onakonchiaronk a staunch Christian spoke to him.

“Aronhiatiri, many of our Christian brothers are dead or captive; those who remain are about to scatter in every direction, and to run the risk of losing the Faith. Is that not what is troubling you? Alas, my brother, is it for us to seek to know God’s designs? Can we really understand them? What are we? Nothing.

He knows well what should be done, and sees more clearly than we do. Do you know what he will do? Those Christians who are about to disperse will carry their faith with them, and their example will make other Christians where there are none as yet. ...”

His words were words of prophecy. In the destruction of this nation, a living faith was scattered to the four directions, like a flower that blooms and dies, whose seeds are carried away by the winds. In a thousand places the words of the Gospel took secret root and began to grow.

Christian Hurons found refuge among the Ojibway and the Chipewa. They travelled south to the nations along the Mississippi and to the Sioux and the Cree in the west. The example of the captive Christians led many of their Iroquois masters to embrace the very faith that they had fought against with such fury.

In the centuries to come, many among these tribes were to welcome the Gospel, recognising in it a truth they already partly possessed. The seeds of faith that had been planted through the fiery holocaust of a once great Huron nation, had helped to prepare the way of the Lord.