

**“No Nature so Wild”
The Ursuline Nuns and Female Community in Native Conversion
to Christianity, 1639-1655**

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*For my Mother, who read everything, my Father, who solved formatting problems,
and Maxime, who was forced to visit Quebec.*

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NOTE ON TRANSLATION

The collection of letters my thesis is based upon were transcribed and compiled in their original French by Dom Guy Oury, a monk of the Saint-Pierre de Solesmes Abbey. In translating these texts, I have tried to stay as true to Marie de l'Incarnation's original intent as possible. The Project for American and French Research on the Treasury of the French Language (ARTFL) through the University of Chicago has been an invaluable resource in this regard; their *Dictionnaires d'autrefois* database allows users to search word definitions in French dictionaries by century. Using Jean Nicot's *Le Thresor de la langue francoyse* (1606) and the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française, 1^{er} edition* (1694), I have sought to recapture the meaning Marie de l'Incarnation would have intended.

INTRODUCTION

In April 1639, three Ursuline nuns and their lay benefactress arrived in Dieppe, France. Members of an order dedicated to providing female religious education, these women had spent almost four years preparing to become missionaries in New France. One of them, Marie de l'Incarnation, had learned in a vision in 1635 that it was her vocation to join the Christian mission in New France.¹ After a lengthy correspondence with Père Paul Le Jeune, the leader of the Jesuit priests in Canada, Marie de l'Incarnation had succeeded both in convincing her superiors to allow the expedition and in finding the financial support necessary to make her dream possible. The three Ursulines had earned permission to establish a convent and school for native girls in Quebec, where they would instruct their pupils in Christianity and French customs. As the women waited to embark on the ship that would take them to their long-anticipated destination, Marie wrote the first of hundreds of letters regarding her mission. "Crosses and suffering are more pleasant to me than all of the world's delights," she told her brother, "send me into the depths of the cruelest Barbary, there will be my delights, and I will treasure my little Savages more than if they had been Princesses."²

Marie de l'Incarnation and her companions docked safely in Quebec in August 1639.³ The first female religious figures in New France, the Ursuline nuns began recruiting native students for their school almost as soon as they arrived. By 1640, the seminary boasted 18 full-time native students, many of whom were orphaned Christians or daughters of converted

¹ Oury, Dom Guy. (1972) *Marie de l'Incarnation (1599-1672)*. Solesmes: Les Presses de l'Université Laval Québec. 256

² Marie de l'Incarnation to one of her Brothers, Lettre XXXVII 15 April 1639. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de Saint Pierre, 1971) 81

³ Marie de l'Incarnation to one of her Brothers, Lettre XL 1 September 1639. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de Saint Pierre, 1971). 88

families.⁴ The environment of the Ursuline school was unique for a French mission of that period. Rather than living in the native community and recruiting converts, the nuns hosted young girls who were sent by their families to live in the heart of the French settlement at Quebec. Even as a smallpox epidemic in the late 1630s set off a backlash against Jesuits living among the Huron, the Ursulines continued to enroll new students and established themselves as figures of authority among the native Christian population.⁵ The convent reached out to all demographics by providing shelter and resources for travelers, especially the elderly, but the Ursulines' main focus was the conversion and education of young, unmarried native women and girls.

The Ursulines' attention to young women and girls was the result of their order's vocation, magnified by the requirements of *cloture*: once the convent in Quebec was built, the nuns were forbidden to leave. Unlike male missionaries, the Ursulines' vows naturally focused them on female subjects. Their presence in Canada and their dedication to the education of young female natives, however, was part of a conscious effort to improve the Jesuits' system for conversion. The nuns' later arrival in Quebec allowed them to benefit from the priests' previous experience as missionaries. An enthusiastic native response to Christianity early in the mission had resulted in false conversions when the Jesuits failed to convey the permanence and exclusivity of their religion to their pupils.⁶ The priests quickly discovered the need to distinguish between sincere faith and the multitude of misunderstandings that encouraged natives to request baptism. To ensure that individuals

⁴ Oury, Dom Guy. 95.

⁵ Trigger, Bruce. G. (1976). *The Children of Aataentsic: a History of the Huron People to 1660. Vols. 1-2* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press. 590.

⁶ Trigger, B. 505

remained steadfast in their faith, the Jesuits instituted rigorous requirements that a candidate must meet before a priest could confirm conversion had taken place.⁷

The Jesuits did find sincere converts in the communities where they taught, but Marie de l'Incarnation's correspondence indicates that the Ursulines enjoyed an unusually successful conversion rate among their students. Although native seminary students represented a minuscule portion of the total native population, the nuns' goal was to create a self-sustaining Christian population that would extend into the future rather than reach widely in the present. The Ursulines incorporated their personal experiences as female Christians living within an isolated community into their students' education and plans for the future. In addition to theology, literacy, and French customs, native girls at the school learned to use Christianity as a foundation for creating their own community. They were praised for taking an interest in their peers' religious development and were required to attend religious services as a group. Educated alongside the daughters of French traders and colonists, native seminarians were nevertheless considered an autonomous population within the school.⁸

The Ursulines' intentions for their school, however, represent only part of the factors which contributed to the outcome of their efforts. Motivation among native adults to provide a Christian education for their daughters was a crucial element in populating the convent school. Much of the current historical scholarship relating to native female conversion, however, has focused on answering why adult women living in a traditional community would choose to become Christians. This debate revolves around the question of female empowerment and trade relations: whether converted women were choosing to give up their

⁷ Trigger, B. 699

⁸ Oury, Dom Guy. 202

influence in social development, or if they were in fact becoming more influential as educators and intermediaries in the fur trade. Carol Devens, in her study of women living in settled Ojibwe, Algonquian, and Montaignais Christian communities, argues that women were far more likely than men to openly oppose the Jesuit priests.⁹ Devens cites the loss of control over sex, marriage, and divorce, economic marginalization, and increased male social responsibility as threats against female status that made Christianity unappealing to these women.¹⁰ Additionally, since the Jesuits emphasized converting men, Devens proposes that the main incentives for women to convert focused on finding a Christian husband or maintaining their families' structural integrity.¹¹

In contrast, Bruce White and Susan Sleeper-Smith assert that Christianity offered women valuable influence and authority in the native community by associating them with the material opportunities of the fur trade. By converting to Christianity and marrying French fur traders, women could establish themselves as their community's provider of food, alcohol, and manufactured goods.¹² White's close analysis of fur trading journals and records suggests that women may actually have played a significant role both in producing goods for trading and as traders themselves, increasing the value of their economic contribution to the village.¹³ Sleeper-Smith's argument addresses the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a more recent time period than the Ursulines' foundation, but the cases she deals with suggest continuity following from the earlier participation of women in the fur

⁹ Devens, Carol. (1986) "Separate Confrontations: Gender as a Factor in Indian Adaptation to European Colonization in New France." *American Quarterly* 38(3) 461-480.

¹⁰ Devens, C. 469

¹¹ Devens, C. 469

¹² White, Bruce. (Winter, 1999) "The Woman Who Married a Beaver: Trade Patterns and Gender Roles in the Ojibwa Fur Trade." *Ethnohistory* 46(1). 134.

¹³ White, B. 123.

trade.¹⁴ Additionally, the prominent female role Sleeper-Smith identifies among Christian traders in the 19th century contests Devens' proposal that conversion could completely subjugate native women and erase their traditional cultural roles in the 17th century.¹⁵

Understanding adult women's motivations for conversion and the transformation of gender roles is important for the family context in which the Ursulines' students had been raised, but analyzing their individual stories as children and adolescents requires a different perspective. Unlike the adult women most current scholarship has focused on, Ursuline *seminaristes* were rarely older than seventeen and could be as young as four years old. Often either orphans or daughters of Christian families, their decision to convert came at the behest of their parents or close relatives. Students of the Ursulines grew up partially removed from native customs and accustomed to French ideas of religion and marriage. As a result, they did not generally experience first-hand the alienation of being raised in a traditional community and independently choosing to repudiate its social obligations. Although native students experienced a similar isolation and lack of community to adult converts, their relationship with native society cannot be understood solely as a transition from traditional lifeways to Christianity.¹⁶

These young women whom the Ursulines accepted into their school were individuals with no clear community of their own, raised in the transitional period between tradition and conversion. Christianity had required their families to reevaluate their fundamental treatment of marriage, life, and even death. Though their children might have been born and raised in

¹⁴ Sleeper-Smith, Susan. (Fall, 2005) "[A]n Unpleasant Transaction on this Frontier': Challenging Female Autonomy and Authority at Michilimackinac." *Journal of the Early Republic* 25(3) 426.

¹⁵ Sleeper-Smith, S. 426, 441

¹⁶ Lifeway, n. A way through life, a course of life; a way or manner of life, (in later use), esp. one that is customary or traditional. Chiefly N. Amer. in later use. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd edition. (September, 2009). "Lifeway"

a native settlement, Christians who adhered strictly to Jesuit teachings removed themselves from the traditional activities that defined daily life. In addition to the cultural duality which complicated a convert's experience, the atmosphere of native communities became increasingly hostile toward Christians as rumors circulated in the 1630s linking the Jesuits to a devastating smallpox epidemic.¹⁷ For recently converted families, the lure of a reliable and affirming Christian community for their daughters may have been an attractive alternative to the uncertainty and instability at home.

The importance of a safe community and the effect of native culture on a student's experience are evident in Marie de l'Incarnation's writing as she describes her mission. Marie's letters can be divided into two general categories by her approach to the subject: her stories are told in either a biographical or a hagiographical style. These texts are limited by Marie's unfamiliarity with native customs and her religious vocation, but each style of letter offers important insight into student life at the Ursuline school. Biographical letters yield specific information about individual students, including their parents, their reasons for staying with the Ursulines, and anecdotes about their lives at school. This information makes it possible to reconstruct the particular context in which these young women lived and trace their experiences over the course of their education. The letters' precision provides concrete examples of the expectations nuns had for their students and how young women and their families responded.

Hagiographical letters lack the factual specificity of biographical letters, focusing instead on extraordinary students who exhibited unusual piety or devotion. Some of the quotations Marie de l'Incarnation attributed to the students in these letters are particularly suspicious. The insightful, eloquent speeches she recorded seem unlikely to have been

¹⁷ Trigger, B. 590

delivered by students as young as four or six years old. Considering that these young girls had been immersed in the convent's ideology for almost their entire lives, however, it is possible that the sentiments Marie expressed were close to the truth, even if the words were not. Although these hagiographical letters are more difficult to verify and are vulnerable to distortion by both emotion and religious sentiment, they reflect the importance of building a strong Christian community for the nuns and the level of religious expression they believed was plausible among their students.

The alternative perspectives provided by these biographical and hagiographical styles, in conjunction with the wealth of topics which Marie de l'Incarnation addressed in her correspondence, permit a nuanced understanding of conversion among the convent's native student population. By examining the experiences of Ursuline students, this thesis seeks to elucidate the role of the convent's female Christian community in shaping students' faith and in determining their futures outside of Quebec. Chapter One will examine the effect of native conversion on the coherency of traditional community, as well as the unique set of social pressures which convinced parents that their daughters should be educated away from traditional communities. Chapter Two will follow with a series of three case studies, using the personal histories of Algonquian, Abenaki, and Huron students to analyze the relationship between native women and the Ursuline community. Finally, Chapter Three will focus on the particular experience of Huron Christians in the aftermath of the Huron Confederacy's dissolution, where critical social tensions demonstrate the deep fractures induced by the development of autonomous Christian communities.

CHAPTER ONE:
Strangers in a Strange Land: Christian Missionaries in New France

In September 1640, a little more than a year after the Ursuline convent's founding in Quebec, Marie de l'Incarnation sent a letter addressed to a benefactress in France detailing the school's progress. Reminiscing on the nuns' first efforts to recruit young native women, Marie recounted the arrival of their first native student, Marie Negabmat. The daughter of a prominent Montagnais leader and convert, Marie Negabmat had been brought to the Ursulines for a Christian education by the Jesuit Père Paul Le Jeune at her father's request. Although she was accompanied by two converted native women to keep her company, the young Marie was unhappy and would frequently flee from the convent to hide in the forest. Four days after her arrival she disappeared completely, seemingly confirming the Ursulines' fears that Marie could never be converted.¹ Marie de l'Incarnation and her companions had been impressed by the expressions of faith they witnessed among the Montagnais when they first arrived; this Montagnaise, however, was proving more reluctant to change.²

In fact, Marie Negabmat was not completely gone. After escaping the convent and tearing apart the dress the nuns had given her, she returned home to her father and asked to remain with him. A devoted Christian and ally to the Jesuits, Marie's father commanded her to return to the Ursuline school. Chastened, Marie Negabmat had been with the Ursulines only two more days when she underwent an incredible transformation. No longer resentful of her new home, the Montagnaise became the embodiment of Christian devotion and piety. One year later, Marie de l'Incarnation praised her as a valuable model and leader among the native students of the school.

¹ Marie de l'Incarnation to une Dame de qualité, Lettre XLIII. 3 September 1640. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de Saint-Pierre, 1971). 95.

² Marie de l'Incarnation to one of her brothers, Lettre XL. 1 September 1639. *Correspondance* ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de Saint-Pierre, 1971). 88.

Marie Negabmat's story made her a compelling representative of Marie de l'Incarnation's school, a fact the Ursuline used to win support from her correspondents in France. Confident that she had been sent to Canada to act as an instrument of God's will, Marie de l'Incarnation often included miraculous transformations of faith in her writing and described her most exceptional students as almost saintly young women. Examined within the context of the early Ursuline school, Marie Negabmat's experience is characterized by many of the obstacles the nuns would face in their mission to Christianize native girls. The child of a recent and fervent convert, Marie's need for familiar company and her attempts to escape the convent suggest that she had not absorbed enough of her father's faith to stave off the loneliness of her new environment. In Marie de l'Incarnation's account, the Montaignaise symbolically rejected a European lifestyle after her final escape by destroying the new clothing she had been given.³ Unable to return to a traditional native village and forced to live at the convent, however, Marie eventually sought companionship and purpose within the Christian community of the Ursulines.

As missionaries, the Ursulines measured their success in Marie Negabmat's conversion by the position of leadership she earned among the new native women at the school. The convent's first student, Marie would have acted as living evidence for her peers that companionship and security were available through a Christian community. Women like Marie were an investment in the school's future, guiding their peers through the twin religious and cultural transformations of conversion. The importance of bringing students into this tight-knit community resonates throughout Marie de l'Incarnation's letters; individuals who embraced their new lifestyle were rewarded with comfort and affirmation

³ Lettre XLIII, 95

from their peers while those who resisted risked being ostracized or ignored by other students.

The community created at the Ursuline school was a unique approach to the problems posed by conversion. Unlike their Jesuit fellows, the nuns established their school away from native villages and geographically isolated students from their families and friends. In order to understand why families would have been willing to separate themselves from their daughters in this way, it is necessary to explore the consequences of converting to Christianity on the convert's relationship with the traditional native community. The daughters and orphans of these families faced a unique set of social pressures separate from the challenges that adult converts encountered when they became Christian. As young, unmarried members of a society where their adopted religion barred them from participating in daily rituals and activities, the experience of the native girls who joined the Ursuline school was influenced and directed by their individual circumstances.

In order to create a more nuanced understanding of the effect of community on native converts attending the Ursuline school, this chapter will examine the social pressures that encouraged adult converts to send their daughters away and the effects of establishing a separate community with the nuns. Community is a recurring theme in Marie de l'Incarnation's letters; even as her students were dealing with their own separation from the support of traditional villages, the Ursuline's mission was to establish a supportive, self-sustaining Christian community. Although the Ursuline school included Huron, Algonquian, and Montagnais students, this thesis will focus for the most part on a Huron understanding of community. The structural difference between Huron matrilineal society and patrilineal Algonquian, Abenaki, and Montagnais societies would not have significantly altered the

nature of an individual's experience during the process of conversion. Isolation from community ritual activities and conversion for material goods were common phenomena among native people, obstacles any Ursuline student would have been forced to confront. Although the number of Huron students at the convent was low during its first few years, they became one of its largest populations during the mid-1640s.⁴ Additionally, the school's geographical location in a strongly Huron region as well as frequent Huron day students would have influenced the Ursulines' understanding of native culture and the cooperation of the student body as a whole.

Community in Huron Culture:

The traditional structure of family life among the Huron played a central role in shaping women's duties and expectations. Huron women's lives centered around caring first for their individual family units, then for the wider village community. Since women generally did not travel far from their village, they were the caretakers of family and village traditions.⁵ Responsible for the farming and gathering that produced more than two thirds of their family's diet, women also cooked, clothed their families, maintained their homes, and processed many of the skins used in the fur trade.⁶

The close association between women and their families was augmented by their relationship with extended family. Family was the basic unit of a village, consisting of a

⁴ Trudel, Marcel. (1999) *Les écolières des Ursulines de Québec, Amerindiennes et Canadiennes* (Éditions Hurtubise, Montreal). 58-60

⁵ Trigger, B. G. (1976). *The Children of Aataentsic: a History of the Huron People to 1660. Vols. 1-2* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press. 40.

My thesis draws heavily on Bruce Trigger's history for historical context and cultural information. Although other studies have been published since, Trigger's text continues to be considered the definitive ethnography of the Huron people and includes a wide variety of primary support for his argument.

⁶ Trigger, B. 34-40

woman and her daughters or a group of sisters living together in one central longhouse.⁷ On average six different women and their husbands lived within these quarters, where children would refer to all of the women as “mother” and to maternal cousins as “brother” or “sister.”⁸ The birth of daughters was celebrated, and from a young age girls would help the women of their family with household tasks. Although they received no formal training, girls were raised to cooperate and to be considerate of one another.⁹ These practices produced a close-knit community of women who relied on one another for support and assistance throughout their lives.

As independent adults, women sought public approval of their hospitality in order to gain respect in the village; by producing a surplus of food and goods, families could entertain their friends and demonstrate their charity towards others.¹⁰ Generosity was considered the most honorable trait an individual could possess, so much so that bartering or refusing help was considered rude.¹¹ Economic activity was absorbed into the structure of social relations and contributed to both men and women’s authority within the community at large. Huron government consisted of two headmen and a general male council whose political offices were inherited matrilineally; since no decision could be enforced without public support, however, cultivating good favor and influence was valuable for any member of the community.¹²

Women’s status and authority within the Huron community as individuals was not contingent on the social standing of their husbands. Although family was the focus of daily

⁷ Trigger, B. 40

⁸ Trigger, B. 45.

⁹ Trigger, B. 47

¹⁰ Trigger, B. 50

¹¹ Trigger, B. 51

¹² Trigger, B. 55

life, women were not required to marry and premarital sex was acceptable as long as public affection was discrete. Divorce was also considered unremarkable among young couples, but once children had been born the couple's relatives and friends would make an effort to reconcile the parents' differences to preserve the family's integrity.¹³ Similarly, Algonquian women determined their own social status separate from their husbands, despite belonging to a patrilineal society. Instead, a woman's authority was earned by her membership in ritual organizations and her own social role; a woman's marital status did not define her identity.¹⁴ The arrival of French travelers in the region offered both Huron and Algonquian women an opportunity to improve their individual status by establishing kinship obligations with traders through marriage. Marrying a native woman required a Frenchman to return to her particular village when he had goods to trade and established that woman as a generous provider for her community in times of need.¹⁵ This marriage *à la façon du pays* in turn attracted the Jesuits to native villages, where they hoped to convert women and make them more suitable wives for traders.¹⁶

Religion among the Huron was a personal experience with no single path or method. Perceived as a set of lifeways that defined all of an individual's actions rather than a delimited space like French Christianity, the Huron had neither religious authorities nor shrines.¹⁷ Certain individuals, female and male, were believed to possess supernatural

¹³ Trigger, B. 49

¹⁴ White, R. (1991) *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 62.

¹⁵ White, B. 120

¹⁶ Aubert, Guillaume. (July 2004). "The Blood of France": Race and Purity of Blood in French Atlantic World." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 61(3). 450

The limited French population in Canada, with almost no women, meant fur traders often married native women who were not Christian. According to Catholic teaching, this was a sin which threatened their salvation. The Jesuit priests hoped that if native women converted, French traders would make more appropriate marriages.

¹⁷ Trigger, B. 75

powers and collective celebrations such as feasts and ceremonies took place frequently in villages, but each Huron individual discovered his or her own personal lifeway within that structure.¹⁸ The Huron believed that all things, whether living or inanimate, had souls that contributed to good fortune or failure. Although the Huron did not recognize an organized hierarchy of deities, they would invoke the sky or lesser spirits in times of need or for good luck.¹⁹ Generosity remained an important sign of honor and respect as it was with human companions, and offerings of tobacco were intended to appease dangerous spirits.²⁰

Although an individual's relationship with religion was respected and encouraged to be innovative, community-based religious societies and rituals had a place in Huron social life as well. Curing societies that specialized in healing different illnesses were a means of complementing secular authority with ritual status.²¹ Membership was generally open to any individual who had been cured by the society, and often could be inherited by members of the cured individual's family. Each different type of illness had its own curing society, and members specialized in treating these illnesses through rituals, spells, and dances.²²

Feasts were another way of drawing the Huron community together, often accompanying council meetings and celebrating victory or good fortune.²³ The Feast of the Dead, one of the most important Huron rituals or ceremonies, brought the entire Huron Confederacy together every ten to fifteen years. Following eight days of speeches and feasting, the bodies of all of the deceased since the last Feast of the Dead would be washed and reburied in a communal grave.²⁴ Once the dead had been permanently laid to rest, the

¹⁸ Trigger, B. 76

¹⁹ Trigger, B. 76

²⁰ Trigger, B. 76

²¹ Trigger, B. 80

²² Trigger, B. 81

²³ Trigger, B. 85

²⁴ Trigger, B. 87

Huron believed that their spirits would be released and could begin their final journey into the land of the dead.²⁵ At the same time as the living Huron worked through their personal grief, the Feast of the Dead was intended to symbolize reconciliation between the Confederacy's different clans and villages. The collective effort of burying the dead together promoted peace and goodwill among the living, while the redistribution of gifts recompensed families who had lost a member.²⁶

The Feast of the Dead represents the wide scope of community within Huron society, but religion, economy, and social expectations created an environment at the basic family level where children, especially women, were raised to live and think in terms of the collective. Throughout childhood and adolescence, the Huron were encouraged to first consider their companions' needs and how they could contribute to the prosperity of their village as a whole. They were accustomed to living within this tight-knit community, making the process of conversion as an individual a lonely and isolating experience. Huron cultural beliefs encouraged acceptance as individuals explored their religious vocation, but strict adherence to Christian ideals excluded converts from participating in the myriad of "pagan" rituals that characterized daily life. As Christian missions expanded in New France, isolation from the native community became one of the main obstacles opposing French priests' success.

The Jesuit Mission:

Initial missionary efforts among the Algonquian and Huron were organized by the Recollet priests early during the first French settlement in Canada. After the French regained

²⁵ Trigger, B. 87

²⁶ Trigger, B. 88

control of the region from the British in 1632, however, the Jesuit Order of Priests took over from the Recollets as the main Christian order in Canada and began a widespread, coordinated missionary expedition.²⁷ Almost a century after the French first arrived in Canada, the Jesuits inherited a mission that had never experienced any significant success. Like the Recollet priests they followed, the Jesuits chose to live individually or in pairs among the native populations they planned to convert. The priests were willing to tolerate native cultural practices they considered trivial or morally compatible, but vocally condemned any religious deviation from the Christian way.²⁸ In the late 1630s, after several years of struggling with ineffective methods of conversion, the Jesuits began instituting a series of changes to their missionary plan. Led by Père Paul Le Jeune, they introduced a new method of conversion among native peoples based on an intellectual study of their customs, languages, and vices.²⁹

Père Jean de Brébeuf took charge of reforming the Jesuit system and identified several chronic flaws in both the Recollet and Jesuit method of teaching Christianity to native peoples. Although the Jesuits spoke and taught in the language of the village where they lived, poor translation and cultural mistakes contributed to a fundamental misunderstanding of Christianity by their pupils.³⁰ The rigid structure of European religion, with its hierarchy of leaders, exclusivity, and unfamiliar penances, was entirely alien to the native

²⁷ Trigger, B. 467

Aggression between France and Britain during the Thirty Years' War led to Quebec's capture by the English during a brief period from 1628 – 1632. As a result, missionary efforts in New France were disrupted and French traders were not able to contact their native counterparts. When Quebec was returned to France in 1632, Cardinal Richelieu's advisor (a Capuchin) undermined the Recollet request to return to New France and an active Jesuit campaign earned them religious control of the colony.

²⁸ Trigger, B. 470

²⁹ Trigger, B. 468

³⁰ Trigger, B. 504

understanding of life.³¹ Among the Huron, individuals were encouraged to join different religious societies and explore their relationship with the natural world – in becoming Christians, many thought they were in fact joining a curing society that could coexist with their other beliefs.³²

The Jesuits took advantage of this confusion at first, hoping to supplant native shamans and establish themselves as the community's religious authorities, but they quickly discovered that Christian principles were not compatible with native lifeways.³³ Unfamiliar and ill-at-ease with native language, the Recollets and the Jesuits had made the mistake of teaching Christianity by equating their own religious rites with native practices. Drawing parallels between curing societies and Christian community, shamans and priests, healing rituals and baptism, and spiritual power and God's miracles created an easy informal structure for Jesuits to teach. The meaning and the significance the Jesuits attached to their religion, however, was lost in translation. Often, for example, natives identified baptism as a powerful healing ritual, but did not understand that by being baptized they were making a lifelong commitment to Christianity and promising to repudiate their old system of beliefs.³⁴

For the Jesuits, the cycle of baptism and relapse that developed out of this misunderstanding was the worst possible outcome for their mission. As Catholics, they believed that an unbaptized soul could still be saved after death if it had lived a good and virtuous life, but one who had accepted baptism and then lapsed into heresy jeopardized its

³¹ The personalized relationship between individuals and religion and the collective political structure of the Huron, Algonquian, and Abenaki contributed to this obstacle for the Jesuits; for individuals accustomed to individual religious exploration, the transition to European hierarchy was complicated.

Day, Gordon M. and Bruce Trigger. "Western Abenaki." (1978) *Handbook of North American Indians: Northeast. Vol 15.* ed. William C. Sturtevant. (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution) 157.

Trigger, B. 508

White, R. 26

³² Trigger, B. 505

³³ Trigger, B. 502

³⁴ Trigger, B. 505

chance for salvation.³⁵ The priests soon discovered that misinformation was not the only obstacle they would need to overcome. The perception of baptism as a healing ritual both attracted converts and perpetuated rumors that the Jesuits wielded subversive powers.³⁶ In each case, the effect of baptism on the sick and dying was used as evidence; friends of the Jesuits defended the ritual with examples of miraculous recoveries from death and prolonged life after baptism.³⁷ Meanwhile, their detractors argued that many converts also died shortly after being baptized, an accusation that drew circumstantial support from the suspicious way smallpox epidemics seemed to follow the Jesuit priests.³⁸

The Jesuit mission was also undermined by the same fur trade which enabled the French to maintain their empire in the Great Lakes region. In a well-intentioned attempt to encourage conversion and test the character of their allies, French trading companies openly favored Christian traders with better prices and goods.³⁹ Since converted traders lived on land claimed by the French and shared their religion, they could be considered French subjects and were entitled to the same prices and opportunities as French traders would be.⁴⁰ Christian traders were given special gifts and places of honor when councils were held by French officials, making them appear more powerful than their unconverted peers.

Additionally, the French government in Quebec allowed only Christians to carry firearms; any trader who wished to traffic or carry weapons was required to convert.⁴¹ The Jesuits were transparent in their support of this measure, writing that “[t]he use of

³⁵ Trigger, B. 503

³⁶ Trigger, B. 500

³⁷ Trigger, B. 505

³⁸ Trigger, B. 500

Thwaites, R. Gold. *The Jesuit relations and allied documents: travels and explorations of the Jesuit missionaries in New France, 1610-1791; the original French, Latin, and Italian texts, with English translations and notes*. Vol. 8. (Cleveland: The Burrows brothers company, 1896-1901.) 87

³⁹ Trigger, B. 547

⁴⁰ Trigger, B. 547

⁴¹ Trigger, B. 700

arquebuses...is a powerful attraction to win them [to Christianity]...⁴² These offers were attractive enough that the Jesuits assumed any native traders approaching them for baptism were motivated by material desires.⁴³ Although this was not an ideal method of conversion, the Jesuits hoped that trade incentives in conjunction with Christian communities and approachable missionaries would eventually develop true Christian faith among their converts.

Pleased by the interest traders expressed in Christianity but desiring to test the sincerity of their converts, the Jesuits instituted new standards for baptism among native peoples. Although they continued to perform emergency baptisms for the sick and dying, the priests insisted on long, arduous demonstrations of a candidate's devotion to God before they would allow him or her to be baptized.⁴⁴ These probationary periods lasted for months and were intended to separate true believers from casual converts. This practice endured among the Ursulines, whose students eagerly anticipated the day of their first communion, and among the native Christian villages that developed at Trois Rivières.⁴⁵ In spite of the rigorous process now required for baptism, traders and their families remained interested in converting to Christianity; by 1648 more than half of Huron traders were baptized Christians, even though less than 15% of the population had converted.⁴⁶

The Jesuit mission made some notable advances during the 1630s, but by the end of the decade a backlash against Christianity had begun within the native community that threatened many of the priests living in villages. The suspicion and mistrust fostered by the perceived relationship between baptism and death developed into the belief that the Jesuits

⁴² Thwaites, R. Gold. 25:27

⁴³ Trigger, B. 700

⁴⁴ Trigger, B. 700

⁴⁵ Lettre XLIII. 95.

⁴⁶ Trigger, B. 700

deliberately brought plagues of smallpox into villages to destroy all native people, finishing off those who survived with baptism.⁴⁷ The prayers Jesuits performed in the evening and their request for individuals' names further fueled rumors of black sorcery, and in 1639 a devastating smallpox epidemic seriously damaged the convert base the priests had created. Sweeping from New England through the St. Lawrence River Valley, the epidemic decimated both the Algonquian and Huron populations. Approximately only half of the Huron population of 1634 remained once the plague had run its course.⁴⁸

Many unconverted Huron took advantage of the aftermath of the smallpox epidemic to convince Christian relatives or friends that they should return to their traditional ways. Scholars have suggested that the Jesuits may actually have aided the spread of the disease by traveling between villages, lending credence to the native accusation that the French priests had cursed the villages they visited with illness.⁴⁹ Regardless of the truth, however, many Huron came to believe that the Jesuits' inability to cure smallpox was in fact evidence of an underlying plan to destroy their people. Opponents of the Jesuits looked to the past for support, using the fate of the village Ihonatiria in 1638 as an example presaging the 1639 epidemic. The heart of the Jesuit mission, Ihonatiria had been so ravaged by disease that its inhabitants began to proclaim that "...after having caused the death of all those in the quarter where we [the Jesuits] had first settled, we went through all the other villages to create the same havoc..."⁵⁰ Within the year the settlement was abandoned and survivors sought refuge in healthier villages, while the Jesuits transferred their mission to a more populated area.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Trigger, B. 590

⁴⁸ Trigger, B. 589

⁴⁹ Trigger, B. 590

⁵⁰ Thwaites, R. Gold. 17:115

⁵¹ Trigger, B. 563

The fracture in Huron society signaled by the 1639 smallpox epidemic, however, did not completely destroy the Jesuit mission. The relationships the priests had cultivated with several prominent native leaders of different nations continued to support the Christian mission. The Jesuits' strongest converts stood alongside them in troubled times. During the 1640s, Noël Negabmat served as an intermediary and diplomat between the French, Huron, and Algonquian.⁵² A Montagnais leader who had converted to Christianity and was baptized in 1638, Negabmat also convinced his wife and family to become Christians. His daughter Marie Negabmat's presence at the Ursuline school brought him into repeated contact with the convent, and Marie de l'Incarnation praised him as "...an excellent Christian, and who lives like a saint..."⁵³ The rapport that developed between the Jesuits and Negabmat granted the priests vital access to a loyal translator and intermediary. Thinking of the future trials his people faced, Negabmat reflected "...I will never change in regard to what you taught me... I am almost wholly French."⁵⁴

Another significant native ally for the Jesuits was Joseph Chihwatenha, the Huron nephew of a prominent leader in the village Ossossané.⁵⁵ Baptized in 1637, Chihwatenha's piety and devotion impressed both the Jesuits and the Ursulines, and under his influence his close relatives quickly coalesced into a model Christian family. The first Christian family in Ossossané, they relied upon one other for spiritual support since they could no longer participate in the rituals which composed daily community life.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, Chihwatenha

⁵² Monet J., Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online. "Negabamat, Noël."
<http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=483>

⁵³ Lettre XLIII, 95.

⁵⁴ Thwaites, R. Gold. 38:65

⁵⁵ Trigger, B. Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online. "Chihwatenha, Joseph."
<http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=128>

⁵⁶ Trigger, B. "Joseph Chihwatenha." DCBO.

became an influential and outspoken supporter of the Jesuit priests, for whom he gave speeches and sermons to encourage other Huron to convert.⁵⁷

Chihwatenha promised great potential for the Jesuit mission, but his fate was a warning of the dangers priests and their allies faced. In the summer of 1639 Chihwatenha faced accusations of helping the Jesuits destroy his own people, a charge he vehemently denied. He continued to advocate for the priests, however, insisting that "...I am allied with them [the Jesuits] – not to ruin the country...but to maintain the truths they have come to announce to us."⁵⁸ Encouraging those he met to convert to Christianity, in particular his own elder brother Teondechoren, Chihwatenha remained the priests' loyal supporter.⁵⁹ In spite of his defense, Chihwatenha's vocal support of the Christian faith ultimately placed him in the path of violence. While he and his nieces were working in the fields on August 2, 1640, Chihwatenha suddenly instructed the young girls to return home alone "...telling them they were not in a secure place."⁶⁰ Later that afternoon he was found murdered in the field, a crime the Huron of Ossossané attributed to a Seneca war party.⁶¹

Reviewing the events of that afternoon, however, Bruce Trigger proposes that Chihwatenha was actually murdered by Huron of his own village, since Chihwatenha did not apparently expect any Iroquois to attack his daughters as they traveled home alone. His decision not to accompany and protect them suggests he sensed he was a target of the Huron for his statements, but that his family would remain safe. Warnings from Teondechoren that Chihwatenha was courting death, as well as defiant statements from his family following the

⁵⁷ Trigger, B. 565

⁵⁸ Thwaites, R. Gold. 12: 247

⁵⁹ Trigger, B. 599.

⁶⁰ Thwaites, R. Gold. 20: 81

⁶¹ Thwaites, R. Gold. 20:79

murder, imply that they also believed the community had been involved.⁶² Additionally, Trigger argues that it is highly unlikely the Jesuits were not aware of Huron involvement in Chihwatenha's death. Their silence may have been to dissociate themselves with the dead man and ensure their own safety within the community.

Chihwatenha's death is significant in understanding the danger Jesuits and native converts risked by living in the traditional native community. Soon after his brother's murder, Teondechoren seemingly converted to Christianity in protest and sent one of their nieces away to the protection of the Ursuline school.⁶³ Chihwatenha had been subject to accusations of sorcery as early as his baptism in 1637, but decisive action was only taken after the 1639 epidemic appeared to prove how dangerous the Jesuit were. Around the same time, Père Jean de Brébeuf was personally targeted by native opponents to conversion and became extremely ill after a shaman predicted his imminent death.⁶⁴ Père Paul Ragueneau survived a similar encounter when a sick woman's husband attacked him with a hatchet for baptizing his wife. Fortunate to escape uninjured, Ragueneau returned the next day to finish the ceremony before she died.⁶⁵ The Jesuits refused to allow these violent episodes to deter them, however; Marie de l'Incarnation remarked that "...they seek only to suffer for Jesus Christ and to earn souls for him."⁶⁶

The Jesuits' zeal for their mission and their willingness to die in the process was characteristic of their devotion to Christianity, but many native converts were not prepared to face equal hardship as a result of their religion. The exclusive nature of the Christian religion

⁶² Trigger, B. 600

⁶³ Trigger, B. 600

⁶⁴ Thwaites, R. Gold. 19:179

⁶⁵ Marie de l'Incarnation to Mère Jeanne-Françoise Le Vassor, Lettre XLV. 4 September 1640. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de Saint-Pierre, 1971). 104

⁶⁶ Marie de l'Incarnation to Mère Ursuline de Ste-Catherine, Lettre L. 13 September 1640. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de Ste-Pierre, 1971). 118

and the suspicious circumstances that surrounded Jesuit behavior had fractured the native community. By isolating themselves and their followers from traditional rituals and ceremonies, the Jesuits made themselves targets and placed converted natives under a great deal of social strain. Maintaining the Christian faith within this environment, without the support of a true community and facing the censure of relatives and friends, would have been emotionally and spiritually taxing as well as physically dangerous. It is at this time that parents with young daughters or daughters of marriageable age would have begun looking for ways to provide their children with this missing support.

The Ursuline Alternative:

Arriving in Quebec during the summer of 1639, Marie de l'Incarnation and her fellow Ursulines founded their school just as the smallpox epidemic was intensifying across the Saint Lawrence River Valley.⁶⁷ The nuns were astonished and grateful to find students almost as soon as they arrived; in 1640, they hosted 18 full-time young native women in addition to various day students who did not live in the convent.⁶⁸ Some of these young women and girls had personally requested to attend the Ursuline school, while others had been sent by their parents or recommended by the Jesuits. Students came from a variety of backgrounds – there were individuals from among the Huron, Algonquian, Montagnais, and Abenaki – but they shared at least one important characteristic: all had already been

⁶⁷ Oury, Dom Guy. (1973) *Marie de l'Incarnation (1599-1672)*. Solesmes: Les Presses de l'Université Laval Québec. 319.

⁶⁸ Lettre XLIII, 95.

introduced to Christianity, either by converted family members or Jesuit priests in their community.⁶⁹

Christianity isolated converts from their native communities, regardless of how close they remained with their friends and neighbors. The association between daily life and traditional religious beliefs meant that converts who strictly observed Christianity could not participate in feasts, dances, and healing ceremonies, effectively cutting them off from the most social parts of Huron life.⁷⁰ Although the presence of Jesuit priests living in their villages would have helped forge a sense of common identity among converts, the missionaries did not have the resources or the cultural familiarity to replace the lost support of the traditional community.

Christianity required a fundamental change in a convert's personal lifestyle as well, since they needed to renounce the rituals and charms they had once used for luck or good health.⁷¹ One anonymous convert prepared a feast after his baptism, where he announced to his companions "...I am no longer... slave to the Dreams and the Devils that you honor. I quit their service, I abandon their pernicious ceremonies; I separate myself completely from you..."⁷² As a direct result of his declaration, the convert was subjected to "violent attacks" and attempts to draw him away from Christianity. The Jesuits were aware of the personal upheaval their followers experienced after conversion, but offered him only the power of prayer as solace during this experience. The priests' moral and political aversion to what

⁶⁹ Marie de l'Incarnation to P. Paul Le Jeune, Lettre XLI. January 1640. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury. (Solesmes: Abbaye de Ste-Pierre, 1971). 91

⁷⁰ Trigger, B. 709

⁷¹ Trigger, B. 709

⁷² Thwaites, R. Gold. 23:163

they considered a primitive culture prevented them from adapting Christianity's regulations and hierarchy to ease the transition out of traditional native life.⁷³

Meanwhile, the consequences of this social isolation were reinforced by the physical threats which developed against native converts during the late 1630s. While the threat of danger alone may have been a factor in some converts' decision to abandon Christianity, deaths like Joseph Chihwatenha's would also have been a reminder of the permanent rift Christianity created between an individual, his family, and his community. Not only were converts isolated from the traditional community in living and social arrangements, but after death they were buried separately and the Christian afterlife had no room for their ancestors or unconverted acquaintances. They would not be reburied with the rest of their tribe during the Feast of the Dead, either, a permanent separation that threatened Huron unity as a whole.⁷⁴

For Christian parents looking to replace the close-knit sense of a traditional community in their children's lives, the Ursuline mission provided an ideal solution. The cooperative, self-sustaining lifestyle the nuns offered corresponded roughly to the community-centered living Huron women were accustomed to. At the Ursuline school, students were guaranteed a Christian education in an environment where there would be no temptation to return to traditional beliefs, a center for girls to develop their own Christian community, as well as food and shelter for vulnerable children and the sick or elderly during the winter hunting months. For young women in volatile situations, such as Teondechoren's niece, the school could also be a place of retreat, where they would be safe from the physical threats being made against their families.

⁷³ Trigger, B. 710

⁷⁴ Trigger, B. 711

For converted young women, however, the Ursulines would have been most valuable as a resource for learning to build a new community. A community of Christian women themselves, the nuns were familiar with how valuable the affirmation of living and sharing with others of the same faith could be. The Ursulines provided a foundation on which students could build their lives; since native students lived and were taught together regardless of their tribe, their identity as Christians would gradually supersede their original cultures. Although the nuns were as rigid as the Jesuits in their vision of Christianity, they were able to provide the moral and social structure that was lacking in traditional villages. The Ursulines reinforced this structure by actively seeking Christian husbands for their students, preferring native converts to French traders.⁷⁵ If possible they would grant a dowry and a home to the newly-wedded couple, an investment in their future and their children's futures as Christians living in a European environment.⁷⁶

The attraction the Ursuline style of community held for native Christian parents is evident in Marie de l'Incarnation's letters. The daughters of many important Christian families figure prominently in her correspondence, whose devotion and piety she praises. These students are frequently identified by both a first and last name, such as Agnès Chabdikuchich, Marie-Magdeleine Amiskoveian, or Marie Negabmat, reinforcing their family connection. Although women would choose a Christian name once they were baptized, the retention of either their original name as a surname or a shared name with their relatives suggests an interest in retaining their native roots. Additionally, the close association the nuns made between their students' futures and their parents' religious commitment demonstrates that the *seminaristes* were expected to become missionaries and

⁷⁵ Lettre XLIII, 95

⁷⁶ Marie de l'Incarnation to Mère Jeanne-Françoise Le Vassor, Lettre LII. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de Ste-Pierre, 1971). 124.

spokeswomen for Christianity themselves. By taking young women as boarders, the Ursulines provided the dual opportunity of educating them as missionaries and teachers while freeing their parents to aid the Jesuits in their undertaking.

The Ursuline school was, in fact, regularly used as a safe haven where daughters could be left when their parents could not care for them. Marie de l'Incarnation noted in 1646 that "Our greatest harvest is Winter, when the Savages go on their six month hunts, leaving us their daughters to teach. This time is precious to us...."⁷⁷ The school was a foundation of community for adults as well as children; converted parents chose to have the Ursulines stand in for the protection and home that would originally have been provided by the women and extended family of the traditional native community.

Similarly, the Ursulines accepted girls among their students who had been orphaned or who had lost their mothers at a young age. In one case, a two-year old child was sent to the Ursulines after her mother's death so that she could become a nun, only to have her father die soon after. When the nuns spoke of her parents after their deaths, she would reply "I have no parents other than the Virgin Girls who wear black, these are my mothers, my father told me so before his death, and commanded me that I obey them, and that he gave me to them so that they would be my Mothers."⁷⁸ Coming from a child no older than three or four at the time when she spoke, it is understandable that she would have accepted to replace her mother with the Ursulines, but her father's confidence in the nuns' ability to raise his daughter demonstrates his attachment to the community they were building.

⁷⁷ Marie de l'Incarnation to her son. Lettre XCVII. 29 August – 10 September 1646. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de Ste-Pierre, 1971). 286

⁷⁸ Lettre XCVII, 287

Forging a Christian Community:

Creating a sense of community among converted native girls benefited the Ursuline mission as well as being an attractive solution to isolation for their parents. The trials of the Jesuit mission had demonstrated how difficult it could be to sustain faith without a strong sense of community. By building a common Christian identity among their students, ensuring they married native men and providing them with the resources for living their adult lives in a comfortable European style, the Ursulines were building the foundation for the self-sustaining converted population and filling the void of missing customs and social activities. The nuns' project was on a much smaller scale than the Jesuits' regional missionary effort, but their meticulous approach won powerful results from their most sincere converts.

The Ursulines' process of education began by separating their students from the traditional native environment altogether, encouraging them to rely on one another for both spiritual and practical support. As Christian educators, the nuns intended to develop their students' religious faith, prepare them for motherhood, and fashion them into role models for society.⁷⁹ By grouping all native students together, regardless of the length or circumstances of their stay, the Ursulines emphasized the universality of the Christian identity. This unity and the network of support that developed among the students was intended to solve the problem of conversion for material profit and relapse after baptism that had plagued the Jesuits during their mission. The entirety of the native girls' education was structured to keep them together during their lessons and to focus their attention on one another as a community.

⁷⁹ Fahmy-Eid, Nadia and Micheline Dumont, eds. *Maîtresses de maison, maîtresses d'école: femmes, familles et éducation dans l'histoire du Québec*. (Montréal, Qué.: Boréal Express. 1983) 53

The most basic expression of community among the Ursulines' students was religious; from the time they arrived, native girls were encouraged to examine each others' consciences and guard against their peers' transgressions. This custom was intended to be an expression of love and caring for their companions, as well as a humbling practice that reminded students there was always room for improvement. One student, when asked what she thought of a punishment she had received, replied, "I thought....that I am loved and that I am punished to bring me [faith], since I have none: I who have been taught am much more guilty than my companion who sinned, and was never taught."⁸⁰ By teaching their students to open their hearts to their friends' criticism and to actively strengthen the faith of other Christians, the Ursulines were teaching at once the basis of missionary devotion and the necessary elements of a collective Christian lifestyle.

The Ursulines wished to make all of their students devoted Christians, but the focus of Marie de l'Incarnation's letters shows that the girls who took charge of the native students as spiritual leaders were most cherished. Often the daughters of strongly Christian families, these girls encouraged their peers to become more pious and to imitate the nuns' ascetic lifestyle. One of the older students offered comfort and reassurance to her younger peers, teaching them to obey the nuns and fearing that they might lapse in their faith.⁸¹ Another student, however, chose to lead by example; her fasting and personal penance during one Easter celebration drew other students to join her to prove that they could match her piety.⁸² These expressions of devotion were praised by Marie de l'Incarnation, who repeated the stories multiple times to both her own correspondents and the Jesuit priests. The evolution of

⁸⁰ Marie de l'Incarnation to her son, Lettre LXXIII. 30 September 1643. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de Ste.-Pierre, 1971). 202

⁸¹ Lettre XLI, 91

⁸² Marie de l'Incarnation to Mère Ursule de Ste-Catherine, 29 September 1642. Lettre LXV. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury, (Solesmes: Abbaye Ste-Pierre, 1971). 166

natural leaders among the Ursulines' students offered hope that their small missionary efforts could spread beyond the converted population.

The plans the Ursulines made for their students' futures reinforce the idea that they were expected to take on leadership roles within the native community as well as within the school population. According to Marie de l'Incarnation, native parents and Ursulines alike speculated that students would be able to teach Christianity effectively to their own children and to unconverted natives once they returned home.⁸³ The Ursulines used every possible means to improve their students' chances once they left the convent. Although Marie de l'Incarnation mentioned various French fur traders courting her students, she made it clear that the nuns preferred for young women to marry Christian native men.⁸⁴ Young couples could support each other's faith, especially if one or the other seemed fragile or uncertain outside of the convent environment.⁸⁵ Donations by the Ursulines and their benefactors in France provided further support, providing graduating students the materials and money necessary to comfortably establish their households after French custom.⁸⁶

The importance of adult converts to this burgeoning community, however, should not be discounted. As Marie Negabmat's early attempts to escape evidence, parents often played a decisive role in convincing their daughters to stay with the Ursulines. Although some of the older students chose to join the Ursulines of their own volition, the parents of young girls had often vowed their children would become Christians and sought to educate them accordingly. The influence of these adults is underscored by an anecdote in one of Marie de l'Incarnation's letters, when three seminary students were called home by their parents to

⁸³ Lettre LXV, 167.

⁸⁴ Lettre XLIII, 95

⁸⁵ Lettre LXXIII, 201

⁸⁶ Lettre LII, 124

help hunt. Marie explained that “They suffered great pain resolving themselves to this voyage, because they were to be deprived of the holy Mass and the practice of the Sacraments for three months; but their parents being among our principal Christians we were not able to refuse...they left us with a great many tears.”⁸⁷ The Ursulines’ inability to retain their students against their parents’ wishes demonstrates that in order to create the close-knit Christian community they envisioned among the native girls, it was also necessary to maintain strong relations with the already-converted population.

Conclusion:

In contrast to the Jesuits’ strict approach to conversion, the Ursulines sought to make their school seem like a natural surrogate community for Christian families and their daughters. Placing students in an isolated environment reduced their exposure to influences that might have undermined their faith without completely removing them from a native lifestyle. This compromise proved to be attractive in times of disease or social unrest, when young children would have been at risk both spiritually and physically. This allowed the Ursulines to complement the Jesuits’ efforts to create separate Christian native villages by training strong, educated women to build families with converted men. The religious and material resources the Ursuline school provided for its students would allow them to become teachers and leaders in their communities, making Christianity more accessible among native peoples and allowing it to address their specific needs.

⁸⁷ Lettre LXV, 161-162

CHAPTER TWO: Conversion in an Ursuline Context: Three Case Studies

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of Marie de l'Incarnation's *Correspondance* is the intimate portrait she shares of her students' daily lives and concerns. Unlike in the *Jesuit Relations*, where women are often anonymous or mentioned in passing, the girls in Marie's letters express their personal doubts, interact with one another, are homesick, and develop individual personalities. Marie's personal contact with seminary students, both as a teacher and as a spiritual guide, created a bond between them that she described as being even closer than her students' relationships with their birth mothers.¹ Writing to Jesuits, benefactors, and friends in France, Marie was uniquely positioned as a community leader to share anecdotes about her native students that offer insight into their natures and spiritual experiences.

In reading these letters, however, it is important to keep in mind that the students Marie chose to write about were often selected to encourage donations from benefactors with whom she corresponded. There is a marked absence of stories of failed conversions or escaped students in the Ursuline's letters during the 1640s; the unhappy students she described always ultimately embraced Christianity in a state of miraculous devotion that Marie attributed to God's grace. Her fundamental belief that the French mission was guided by God and was bringing true civilization to the people she regarded as "*Sauvages*" also means that Marie was not inclined to look closely at the motivations that led her students and their parents to seek a Christian education.

The students who appear most frequently in Marie's correspondence were the most pious, with the most potential for becoming persuasive missionaries. These women do not necessarily represent the universal experience of native boarders living with the Ursulines; it

¹ Marie de l'Incarnation to P. Paule Le Jeune, Lettre XLI. January 1640. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de Saint-Pierre, 1971). 91.

is reasonable to suggest that some of the students did succumb to the homesickness and isolation that Marie described in her letters. A teacher as well as a caretaker, however, Marie de l'Incarnation was familiar with the spiritual strength of certain individuals and their potential to become influential leaders in the Christian community. Although they may not have represented all native seminary students, the women she chose to write about in her letters exemplify the religious experience and sense of community the Ursulines sought to cultivate.

This chapter will explore the experiences of three such students through Marie de l'Incarnation's writings, supplemented by the *Jesuit Relations* and personal letters. Marie-Magdeleine Amiskoveian, Angèle, and Thérèse Oionhaton were all students who arrived at the Ursuline convent between the years 1639 and 1642. Early students whom the Ursulines found remarkable for their piety and devotion to the Christian cause, each of these women features in multiple letters from Marie de l'Incarnation's correspondence. Their stories can be followed from their arrival at the convent to their departure and marriage, creating an unusually complete depiction of their lives. Using their challenges and concerns as a window into the obstacles facing both native students and their Ursuline teachers, this chapter will examine the personal motivations that urged women to join the convent. Additionally, this chapter will use the information remaining about these women's lives after leaving the convent to establish how their educations altered their decisions in marriage and raising families, as well as religious education's consequences for the communities in which they lived.

Marie-Magdeleine Amiskoveian: Early Students and Marriage

[Marie-]Magdeleine Amiskoveian is comfortable in daily life as if she had been raised among us; there cannot be seen a disposition sweeter and more flexible; she holds all of her companions to their responsibilities, she experiences God's works extremely well.²

Marie-Magdeleine was something of an anomaly for the student population in the convent – seventeen at the time that the school was founded, she had already begun her Christian education almost five years before in 1635.³ The Jesuits had founded a seminary for boys in Quebec that same year and offered separate schooling for girls at the home of the French widow Marie Rollet. As one of those students, Marie-Magdeleine had been baptized in late 1637 or early 1638 and was already ahead of many of her peers in her lessons by the time she joined the Ursuline nuns.⁴ Her ability to adapt to daily life in a French home and assume the responsibilities of such a setting were likely the result of her four years with Marie Rollet. Marie de l'Incarnation marveled that the young woman could have been raised by the French, and to a certain extent she had been. Seventeen years old when she joined the Ursulines in 1639, Marie-Magdeleine had been living with French teachers, away from her parents and a traditional Algonquian community, since she was thirteen.

Although little is known about her origins before 1635, Marie-Magdeleine's arrival at the convent as a baptized Christian introduced an important cultural resource to the Ursulines and helped establish the convent as a functioning mission. The education Marie-Magdeleine received with the Ursulines polished the preparation she had been given by Marie Rollet,

² Lettre XLI, 91

³ Marie de l'Incarnation. Footnote 11. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de Saint-Pierre, 1971). 100.

⁴ Thwaites, R. Gold. *The Jesuit relations and allied documents: travels and explorations of the Jesuit missionaries in New France, 1610-1791; the original French, Latin, and Italian texts, with English translations and notes*. Vol 14. (Cleveland: The Burrows brothers company, 1896-1901.) 126

permitting her to move to Trois Rivières in 1641 in search of a suitable Christian husband.⁵ The circumstances that preceded her marriage, both at the convent and in Trois Rivières, reveal important information about the Ursulines' goals and the material resources they were able to provide for their older students. This section will examine the influence of dedicated Christian students on the development of the convent during its early years, beginning with Marie-Magdeleine's significance first as a student and then her potential as a graduate.

Marie-Magdeleine's early Christian familiarization equipped her with a unique set of talents that were critical for the Ursulines as they established their credibility among native people. Marie de l'Incarnation noted that Marie-Magdeleine had taken responsibility for keeping her peers in line almost immediately after her arrival, but the Algonquian girl also possessed a practical knowledge of French that the Ursulines used to their advantage. Marie de l'Incarnation openly admitted that "[t]his girl has helped us a great deal in studying the [Algonquian] language, because she speaks good French."⁶ Marie and her companions had arrived in Quebec directly from France, without any knowledge of the languages their pupils would speak. Although the Jesuit priests and French traders were able to communicate in native languages, having a translator such as Marie-Magdeleine allowed the nuns to begin a careful study of language with a bilingual source. In order to escape the miscommunication that had plagued Jesuit efforts at conversion, Marie de l'Incarnation devoted her time to authoring a series of Algonquian dictionaries, prayer, and lesson books written for her native

⁵ Thwaites, R. Gold. 20:129

⁶ Marie de l'Incarnation to une Dame de qualité, Lettre XLIII. 3 September 1640. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury. (Solesmes: Abbaye de Saint-Pierre, 1971). 95

students.⁷ Marie-Magdeleine's ability to speak both French and Algonquian provided the nuns with an invaluable resource as they sought to learn native languages.

Marie-Magdeleine's usefulness as a translator was complemented by her eagerness to understand the complexities of Christian faith. It is evident from Marie de l'Incarnation's writing that the Ursulines identified this trait in their pupil early on and chose to cultivate her for future missionary work. Describing Marie-Magdeleine's education, Marie de l'Incarnation wrote that "[Marie-Magdeleine] has a good mind to remember what we teach her, particularly regarding the mysteries of our holy faith, which makes us hope that she will do great good when she will have returned with the Savages."⁸ Devoted to prayer and knowledgeable in theology, Marie-Magdeleine's relationship with her peers may have encouraged the nuns to put faith in her ability to teach. Marie de l'Incarnation described her as being so kind to the younger students, and such an encouragement in developing their faith, that she might have been mistaken for their mother.⁹ Representing a potential future for wary, unbaptized students, Marie-Magdeleine's presence as a cultural mediator was preparing her for a life in missionary work even as it set the tone for the new structure of the native community the Ursulines were creating.

Marie-Magdeleine's role within the Ursuline convent as a student and translator is indicative of the community the nuns sought to develop, but as an individual she also serves as an example of the future life for which Ursulines prepared their students. In spite of her piety and devotion to Christianity, Marie-Magdeleine had no intention of taking the veil. The Ursulines and the education she received were instead a means of establishing the ties that

⁷ Oury, Dom Guy. *Marie de l'Incarnation (1599-1672)*. (Solesmes: Les Presses de l'Université Laval Québec, 1973) 343

⁸ Lettre XLIII, 95.

⁹ Lettre XLIII, 95

would enable her to find a suitable Christian marriage and live a secure life. Marie-Magdeleine's personal future as an intermediary between the French and her own nation would be determined as much by the husband she chose as by the religion she had accepted. An educated, refined young woman, Marie-Magdeleine was faced with the choice between marrying a Frenchman or an Algonquian as she prepared to leave the Ursulines.

Marie de l'Incarnation expressed her opinion of Marie-Magdeleine's marital options in a letter from September 1640, about a year after the Algonquian girl arrived at the convent. The Ursuline wrote to one of the convent's French benefactresses that Marie-Magdeleine was being courted by a Frenchman who visited her at the school, but worried that this was not the life for which her student had been prepared.¹⁰ As the wife of a Frenchman, presumably a fur trader, Marie-Magdeleine could be guaranteed access to the Christian sacraments and spiritual guidance she had become accustomed to while living in Quebec. If her husband established himself as a reliable trader with her original village, her personal social status would be improved as the marriage ensured his continued loyalty to the community.¹¹ From a French perspective, Marie-Magdeleine's union with a trader would have been desirable as well; during that period, a woman's status as a respectable Christian was valued more highly than her race.¹² As a baptized Christian, Marie-Magdeleine offered the benefit of access to native communities and reliable translation without risking her French husband's salvation.

¹⁰ Lettre XLIII, 95

¹¹ White, Bruce. (Winter, 1999) "The Woman Who Married a Beaver: Trade Patterns and Gender Roles in the Ojibwa Fur Trade." *Ethnohistory* 46(1). 130

¹² Aubert, Guillaume. (July, 2004) "The Blood of France: Race and Purity of Blood in the French Atlantic World." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 61(3). 450.

The French conception of race in the 17th century focused on social class and religion, where a union between an "inferior" woman and a "superior" man would not jeopardize blood purity. As a result, French officials in Canada were satisfied that any native "cultural deficiencies" would be erased if a native woman converted to Christianity. Additionally, unions between traders and converted women were encouraged since these would preclude French men from becoming involved with one or more unconverted native wives.

In the minds of the God-serving Ursulines, however, fur trade alliances came second to establishing a self-sustainable and growing Christian population among native peoples. Marie de l'Incarnation's conscious disapproval of Marie-Magdeleine's French courter demonstrates that the Ursulines actively sought marriages that would open new communities to Christian missionaries. She stated this expressly in her letter: "...we design to give her to one of her own Nation because of the example that we hope she will give to the Savages."¹³ Marie-Magdeleine had already demonstrated her value as a Christian educator during her time at the convent. Her relationship with younger students and the care she dedicated to their religious development were evidence to the Ursulines that with the right resources she would dedicate her energies to converting her neighbors as well. If she were living in a community of potential converts, Marie-Magdeleine's Algonquian identity in conjunction with her knowledge of Christian doctrine would make her a far more approachable source for her interested fellows than one of the Jesuit missionaries.

In preparing Marie-Magdeleine for life outside of the convent, Marie de l'Incarnation was determined to create the most favorable conditions. "O if God were to give the devotion to some person of France to help her build a small house! She would make without a doubt a work of very great merit."¹⁴ Sent directly to one of the convent's benefactresses in France, this plea was an open request for funds to be collected and sent to Quebec to establish Marie-Magdeleine in her own Christian household. These resources would indeed be furnished in 1641, when Marie-Magdeleine departed from the convent to live at Trois Rivières with a dowry of furniture and clothing.¹⁵ The Ursulines' investment in her future was rewarded by Marie-Magdeleine's constancy in her faith; the young woman "...was courted and entreated

¹³ Lettre XLIII, 95

¹⁴ Lettre XLIII, 95

¹⁵ Thwaites, R. Gold 20:129

by several young pagans, but ... showed that Jesus Christ has attractions stronger than nature.”¹⁶ Having refused her unconverted suitors’ attention, Marie-Magdeleine finally chose to marry an Algonquian Christian.¹⁷

The consciously Christian household Marie-Magdeleine established would have been a clear message to both the community where the young woman lived after her marriage as well as a message to her fellow students. The structure of her “small home,” built in a European style and intended for one family, stood in contrast to the communal longhouse Algonquian women generally inhabited with their extended families.¹⁸ Marie de l’Incarnation wished to ensure that Marie-Magdeleine set a suitable example for her neighbors, abiding by French customs and raising her children as Christians. By providing her with a home, the Ursulines also insured against Marie-Magdeleine’s loss of faith. This would likely have been one of Marie-Magdeleine’s most vulnerable periods as a Christian convert as she learned to live married and independent of spiritual guidance for the first time. Making her the mistress of her own home, a place where her family alone lived, was intended to boost the young woman’s confidence in addition to making her a living example of the reward of French education.

The establishment of a French home for Marie-Magdeleine also carries implications that Marie de l’Incarnation did not expand on in her letter. As a student of the Ursulines, Marie-Magdeleine’s maternal treatment of her peers had impressed the nuns and encouraged them to believe that she would be an effective missionary.¹⁹ Raising her own children in

¹⁶ Thwaites, R. Gold 20:129.

¹⁷ Marie de l’Incarnation, Lettre LII Footnote 7, ed. Dom Guy Oury *Correspondance*, (Solesmes, Abbaye St. Pierre, 1971) 124.

¹⁸ Day, Gordon M. and Bruce Trigger. “Algonquian.” (1978) *Handbook of North American Indians: Northeast. Vol 15.* ed. William C. Sturtevant. (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution) 796.

¹⁹ Lettre XLIII, 95

isolation from the traditional atmosphere of a longhouse improved the likelihood they would be baptized as true Christians. Marie-Magdeleine had begun her education as a young girl staying in the private home of a French woman; it is possible that the nuns hoped their pupil might establish something similar for the young children in her new community. By offering a Christian education for the young daughters of her converted neighbors, Marie-Magdeleine could have prepared them to be sent to the Ursulines once they reached a suitable age.

Unfortunately, Marie-Magdeleine disappeared from the Ursuline record after her marriage and departure from the convent, making her continued relationship with the convent pure speculation. It is not possible to tell what became of her marriage or how she fared as a Christian outside of the school, but her presence in Marie de l'Incarnation's letters offers insight into the experience of early students and the foundation of the native community they created. Marie-Magdeleine was a seminary student for a little less than a year, but her contribution to the Ursulines' understanding of their pupils set a tone that is echoed in Marie de l'Incarnation's descriptions of girls who came after her. For the period that she was present, Marie-Magdeleine was an example of Marie de l'Incarnation's ideal convert: a young native girl who embraced God, who was devoted to helping her peers, and who was eager to learn Christian mysteries.

Angèle: Troubled Conversion

The R. Père de Quen told us that she would make difficulties for us, and that he believed in a short time she would escape the convent walls, and that she would try her best to return with the pagan she loved. We received her with affection in spite of this. She was sad two or three days, then all of a sudden she became sweet-tempered like a child: she desired ardently to be taught and to receive the holy Baptism.²⁰

Unlike Marie-Magdeleine's idyllic role in the Ursuline convent, Angèle's experience as a Christian was plagued by obstacles and difficulties from the start. The daughter of Abenaki converts, she secretly married a native man in her adolescence and only convinced her mother and father to accept her marriage on the condition that her husband would convert to Christianity with her and give up the other woman he had married.²¹ Like many native converts, however, the young man's faith lacked a strong foundation and he quickly abandoned Christianity to return to traditional ways.²² Angèle's parents removed her from the marriage, fearing their daughter's soul was in danger, and sent her to the Ursulines to be reformed during the winter of 1641. The events which characterized Angèle's conversion – her parents' disapproval of her marriage, her banishment to the convent, and her victimization by the Christian community she joined after leaving the Ursulines – exemplify the identity crisis that converts faced as they tried to reconcile their ancestors' traditions with the restrictions Christianity imposed upon them.²³

²⁰ Marie de l'Incarnation to Mère Ursule, Lettre LXV, 29 September 1642. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de Saint-Pierre, 1971). 163.

²¹ Lettre LXV, 163

²² Letter LXV, 163

²³ Marie de l'Incarnation does not specify what community Angèle was sent to, but R. Père de Quen's activity in the Christian mission at Sillery during 1642 and the settlement's close proximity to Quebec suggests this is where Angèle's family lived after she left the Ursulines.

Tremblay, Victor. Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online. "Quen, Jean de."
<http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=543>

The concerns Père de Quen expressed when Angèle first arrived at the convent also carry implications for the nature of the Ursulines' native community.²⁴ Although Marie de l'Incarnation's letters focus on those students who transitioned well, Angèle's story provides a brief glimpse into the misery and loneliness that could accompany conversion. Angèle's association with the native Christian community both inside the convent and out, as well as her complicated relationship with her husband, enables a new perspective on the conflicts young converts faced than Marie-Magdeleine, described in the previous section. At different periods in her life, the Ursuline convent would represent stability and reassurance as Angèle transitioned into Christianity. This section will explore the different pressures that factored into Angèle's decision to become a Christian and her relationship with the various communities she inhabited.

Angèle's initial contact with Christian identity did not come out of personal interest: Angèle's parents converted without her and had begun making plans for her to be instructed in the faith and marry a Christian man.²⁵ Marie de l'Incarnation indicates that at the time of her marriage, however, Angèle still considered herself a "Pagan."²⁶ In her mid- to late-teens, Angèle was at an age when she would have been looking forward to a future and a marriage according to Abenaki customs when her parents decided to change their plans for her.²⁷ Angèle's secret marriage suggests that she was not happy with this sudden intrusion of Christian values into her life. Although she and her husband were willing to appease her parents by promising to convert, Angèle appears reluctant to allow her parents' religion to determine her future completely.

²⁴ Lettre LXV, 163

²⁵ Lettre LXV, 163

²⁶ Lettre LXV, 163

²⁷ Day, Gordon M. "Western Abenaki." (1978) *Handbook of North American Indians: Northeast. Vol 15.* ed. William C. Sturtevant. (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution) 155-156.

From the Ursulines' point of view, Angèle's identity as a Christian was problematic from the start. Raised with Abenaki lifeways and married to a man who converted at her parents' demand, Angèle had all of the signs of a Christian who would not last. Her parents' identification with the Christian faith might have provided her with the incentive to maintain their family's integrity in the present and potentially join them in the afterlife, but even this was compromised by her marriage to a non-Christian. The converts most likely to remain converted during the early 1640s were those who had a strong system of Christian support within the community; the stronger a family's conviction in Christ and their unity as a whole, the more likely individual members would remain committed to the faith. In Angèle's case, however, her loyalties were divided between her parents and her husband. Angèle was a young woman who had only recently been introduced to Christianity – as long she lived with her husband, she retained an incentive for remaining committed to traditional lifeways.

Angèle's parents recognized the precarious situation they faced and wasted no time in taking action. Once it became evident that their daughter's husband would not honor his promise to convert, "...the Parents were obliged to remove this woman from him and to give her to us."²⁸ Père de Quen's involvement in bringing Angèle to the convent suggests that he was also involved in her parents' decision to remove her, possibly as the priest they consulted regarding their daughter's lapse of faith. The willingness of Angèle's parents to entrust the Ursulines with their daughter exemplifies the level of respectability the convent had achieved within the converted native population. Almost three years after it had been established, the Ursuline school was perceived as a secure community outside of the traditional village where the faith of eager converts and reluctant daughters alike was fostered.

²⁸ Lettre LXV, 163

Once Angèle had arrived at the school, Marie de l'Incarnation recorded having witnessed an incredibly rapid transformation of faith. According to the Ursuline, it took only two or three days before their new pupil began to beg for instruction and "...she no longer wanted to see her husband unless he was made Christian, and her parents permitted it."²⁹ Marie de l'Incarnation gave no explanation for this sudden change of heart, not even attributing it to divine grace. The description of Angèle's character up to this point in the letter, as well as the almost saintly treatment her actions receive from Marie later on, suggests that this period of two or three days may actually have been altered by the Ursuline to better suit her narrative. Marie frequently describes a period of three to four days between an individual's arrival and the advent of her faith in her letters on reluctant converts, a number which is suggestive of Christian theology.³⁰ It is possible that, in light of Angèle's problematic relationship with Christianity, Marie decided to clearly designate the role of God's grace in her pupil's life.

Creating a relationship between Biblical stories and Angèle's spiritual experience would have been a conscious decision by Marie to erase any doubts her audience might develop regarding the sincerity of Angèle's faith. The Algonquian's experience with religion could be compelling for Christians, but her complicated relationship with religion required a sense of purpose and guidance in order to achieve this. Indeed, Angèle's religious conversion after arriving at the convent was not the end of her trials; before she could

²⁹ Letter LXV, 163

³⁰ Although no definitive studies have been conducted on numerical symbolism in missionary writings, Marie's close association with Christian theology and conviction that she was performing God's will would have encouraged her to seek further proof of divine intervention. Her consistent description of miraculous conversion taking place over two to three day periods is suggestive; if the students she witnessed were as unfamiliar with Christianity as she describes, it seems unlikely they would have become such devout Christians over such a short period of time. The numbers three and four are reminiscent of the rebirth of Jesus and Lazarus, as well as the Holy Trinity. It is possible that Marie altered her accounts to encourage her audience's faith in the spiritual rebirth of her students and miracles in New France.

become a candidate for baptism, Angèle was removed from the school by her parents and returned home to live with them.³¹ Although Angèle was living with her parents in a community of Christians, a settlement large enough to merit its own church where Père de Quen served as priest, her former husband continued to live nearby.³² The converted community forbade Angèle to have any contact with him, but using flattery and threats he managed to corner her in a Frenchman's empty house. Although Angèle insisted that "...what I want to believe is all good, I want to be baptized, I love obedience," her husband begged her to return and be his wife.³³

Angèle managed to escape her husband, but not her neighbors' suspicions. Once she confessed that the encounter had taken place, the community turned on her as a criminal and a liar. Native converts began to discuss amongst themselves what would be the appropriate punishment for her, one that would teach other women and children not to disobey. Some went so far as to suggest death, but more moderate voices reminded them that this was only Angèle's first offense.³⁴ Finally, the community agreed on a public beating, to take place in front of the church. A representative of the village met Père de Quen in the church to notify him of Angèle's transgression and the community's decision. Preoccupied, de Quen misunderstood the circumstances of the crime and approved the punishment.³⁵

Throughout this judgment, Angèle remained silent and made no action to defend herself or prove her innocence. She allowed herself to be led to the church, where all of the Christian women and girls of the village were required to witness her punishment. Before he began, the man who had volunteered to punish Angèle announced, "Listen, listen Frenchmen,

³¹ Lettre LXV, 163

³² Lettre LXV, 164

³³ Lettre LXV, 163

³⁴ Lettre LXV, 164

³⁵ Lettre LXV, 164

know that we love obedience: Here is one of our girls who has disobeyed, and it is for this that we punish her as you punish your children. And you, Savage girls and women, this will come to you as well if you disobey.”³⁶ After Angèle had been lashed for the third time, Père de Quen realized what he had unwittingly approved and ran out of the church to stop her punishment. Angèle clothed herself without reproaching her punishers and asked that de Quen baptize her. The Jesuit priest refused, still not convinced of her innocence, and ordered her to return to the Ursulines to prove her commitment to the faith.³⁷

For the second time, then, Angèle found herself sent to the convent to strengthen and improve her dedication to Christianity. The young woman’s ordeal in the interim between these stays is characterized by several themes: the Christian community’s refusal to believe her profession of faith, her personal humility, and the religious zeal demonstrated by both herself and the members of her community. It is possible that Angèle’s patient piety was imposed on her story by Marie for the same reason that the timeframe for her conversion was altered: Angèle’s willingness to accept penance and quiet devotion to Christianity in the letter would make her a compelling figure for a French audience seeking evidence of God’s work in the Canadian wilderness. Marie reinforces this piety by describing a conversation between them shortly before Angèle’s baptism, where the young woman asserted she had forgiven those who beat her because “...I wanted to suffer this punishment to prepare myself for baptism, and I supported this in peace because Jesus endured and paid for me.”³⁸ Marie de l’Incarnation offered this statement as proof that Angèle was an exceptional convert, even among those students the Ursulines saw baptized in their convent.³⁹

³⁶ Lettre LXV, 164

³⁷ Lettre LXV, 164

³⁸ Lettre LXV, 164

³⁹ Lettre LXV, 165

The structure of Marie de l'Incarnation's narrative focuses on the strength of her student's devotion, diverting the audience's attention from the implications of the obstacles Angèle faced in terms of the transition from traditional to Christian community. The choice she was forced to make between her husband and her parents, as well as the resistance he exhibited at her decision, distinguishes the dilemma converts faced as they straddled the divide between Christianity and native lifeways. Angèle's relationship with her husband demonstrates the importance of creating a community for converts such as the one the Ursulines developed. Although Angèle had decided she did not want contact with him as long as he refused Christianity and as long as her parents disapproved, forcing her husband to abide by this decision was next to impossible. Relationships developed before conversion did not simply disappear after a stay with the Ursulines, especially a relationship as emotionally tumultuous as Angèle's marriage. Her husband's goal had been to have her renounce her new religion and return to him; the fact that Angèle was not trusted to communicate with him suggests that the community was not convinced of the depth of her faith.

Those suspicions may not have been entirely unjustified: part of the reason Angèle's neighbors did not believe her when she confessed the encounter may be that there seem not to have been any other witnesses.⁴⁰ If only Angèle and her husband were present, it is questionable how much of Marie de l'Incarnation's retelling is incontrovertible fact. Angèle's return to the convent was intended by Père de Quen and her parents as an effective means to renew her faith after she met her husband and lapsed in her Christian belief; Marie herself suggests that Angèle's parents had removed her from the school too soon after her

⁴⁰ Lettre LXV, 163

first arrival.⁴¹ Although the letter implies that Angèle was innocent and her punishment unjustified, her baptism did not come until after she had completed a considerable probationary period at the convent.⁴² The Ursulines offered an environment at their school where Angèle would be surrounded by young native women living through the same cultural dislocation with which she was struggling. Keeping her isolated within the convent community until she had proven her commitment to Christianity and completed her baptism was a means of further fortifying Angèle against the emotional test of outside life.

The zealous overreaction of native converts to Angèle's transgression can also provide a window into the value of a controlled community like the Ursuline school for missionary purposes. The focus of her punishers on addressing female disobedience and the extreme suggestion of execution are reminiscent of the tenuous male control Carol Devens describes in her examination of native Christian villages during the same period.⁴³ The community Angèle lived in had access to only one Jesuit priest at any time, a circumstance which would have left native converts responsible for making day-to-day religious decisions with little or no oversight. In Angèle's case, Père de Quen's distraction while the community decided her punishment directly resulted in her beating. As adults dealing with unfamiliar customs, prohibitions, and a significant shift in male and female responsibilities, these men appear to have erred on the side of excess punishment rather than jeopardize their control over the community. Indeed, the statement made by the man who beat Angèle that "...we

⁴¹ Lettre LXV, 163

⁴² Lettre LXV, 164

⁴³ Devens, Carol. "Separate Confrontations: Gender as a Factor in Indian Adaptation to European Colonization in New France." *American Quarterly* 38(3) 1986. 462.

punish her as you [the French] punish your children” demonstrates the extent to which the performance taking place was alien to the individuals involved.⁴⁴

Devens identifies shifting power dynamics between genders as the main reason why men were more likely to be happy in convert settlements than women.⁴⁵ Women living in a native Christian setting suffered a severe loss of control over their marriages, their bodies, and their social opportunities that often did not sit well with individuals who were not convinced they wanted to convert. Angèle’s severe punishment, explicitly intended to warn other women in the village against disobedience, points to the same kind of unrest Devens identifies among Christian settlements with independent women. Removing Angèle from that situation and sending her to the Ursuline convent, however, underscores the advantage of a female Christian boarding school over missions in the community. Instructing students in their duties as Christian wives and housekeepers away from the example of traditional lifeways offered an opportunity to replace the resentment that characterized Devens’ rebels with a sense of responsibility towards the Christian structure of family.

Additionally, living among the Ursulines guaranteed young native women the full attention of Christian nuns and peers to address their questions and concerns. Rather than vying for the attention of a single Jesuit priest, students at the convent were encouraged to make decisions and offer advice to their peers while being constantly overseen to avoid the injustice and misunderstanding exhibited by Angèle’s punishment. As has been demonstrated with Marie-Magdeleine in the previous section, students were trained to

⁴⁴ Lettre LXV, 164

Abenaki and Huron parents customarily did not strike their children. The speaker’s particular emphasis on the punishment of French children suggests he was emulating French practices, not abiding by his own.

Day, Gordon M. 155.

Trigger, B. 47

⁴⁵ Devens, C. 462

understand the nuances of Christian theology so that they would be capable of making difficult judgments even when there was no priest available for advice. Ideally, a young woman who graduated from the Ursuline school would possess not only the self confidence necessary to stay strong in her faith outside of a Christian setting, but also the deference to inhabit the role of a well-behaved Christian wife.

The other advantage of a convent education, from which Marie-Magdeleine had also benefited, was the Ursulines' assistance in organizing a suitable Christian marriage for their students. Almost exactly a year after Angèle's baptism, she reappears as the subject in one of Marie de l'Incarnation's letters. In September 1643, a prominent Abenaki captain left his people to live in Quebec to be baptized and educated as a Christian. Marie took pride in "...the fervor of these good Novices: they are not content to believe in Jesus Christ, but zeal carries them away in such a manner that they are not happy, and think they only half believe, unless everyone believes as they do."⁴⁶ This Abenaki captain decided he would devote his entire life to spreading Christianity among his people, and on the same day he was baptized the Ursulines arranged for him to marry Angèle.⁴⁷

As with other marriages Marie de l'Incarnation organized, Angèle's wedding to the Abenaki captain carries the traces of an Ursuline plan. The young woman's previous experience in marriage had not ended well, but with this union the Ursulines sought to provide her with the best possible opportunity for preserving her Christian faith. Unlike in her secret marriage, Angèle's new husband had already demonstrated his devotion to Christianity and had been determined worthy of baptism. This would remove the responsibility of encouraging her husband's faith from Angèle, while ensuring that she would

⁴⁶ Marie de l'Incarnation to her son, Lettre LXXIII. 30 September 1643. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de Saint-Pierre, 1971). 200.

⁴⁷ Lettre LXXIII, 201

not be tempted to neglect her own belief. Instead, Angèle and her husband could develop their faith together and provide support for one another once they had left the Christian environment of French settlements.

Additionally, Angèle was an important resource for her husband while he advanced his mission to spread religion among other nations. She could bring the personal experience of a difficult transition to Christian customs to women who might be facing similar circumstances and act as an example of a Christian wife in her relationship with her husband. The Ursulines would have expected Angèle to be actively involved in her husband's mission as a woman who was educated and confident in her faith, reaching out to women and young girls as both a teacher and a friend. Without leaving their convent, the Ursulines were in the process of creating an ever-growing network of families and women who could influence the extension of Christianity throughout the Great Lakes region.

Some of Angèle's story is necessarily problematic – Marie de l'Incarnation's letters reinterpreted stories and speeches that had been recounted to her by Jesuits priests, not necessarily Angèle herself. Even if the young woman had been the one to tell her story, the circumstances suggest she had motive for changing such events as her secret encounter with her first husband for the sake of her own personal safety. Her marriage at the end of Marie's second letter suggests that ultimately she did become comfortable with Christianity and was considered reliable enough to be released from the convent. Her troubled experience in conversion, however, is emblematic of the fact that not all women were as tranquil and confident in Christianity as Marie-Magdeleine is portrayed to have been. The Ursulines were not teaching in a vacuum; their pupils were sent out into a native context that was still

troubled and unsure of how to deal with this new native factions developing among the French allies.

Thérèse Oionhaton: Conversion out of Context

She is a good Christian whom we have had for two years; she knows how to read and write; she was returning to her country to help those of her sex towards the faith and towards our customs.⁴⁸

The young niece of Joseph Chihwatenha, the Huron convert and martyr who had acted as a mediator for the Jesuits, Thérèse Oionhaton presents a unique case among Marie de l'Incarnation's letters. Unlike the short time span of other students' stories, Thérèse occupies eight letters in Marie's published correspondence, spanning from 1642 until 1653, including one short missive the young Huron wrote herself. Even more unusual, these letters were all written after Thérèse's departure from the convent, when she was kidnapped by the Iroquois traveling home from Quebec. Marie's letters allow us to follow the diplomatic efforts made by the French to retrieve Thérèse from the Iroquois, as well as providing insight into her education, her family, and her relationship with her peers. Eleven years after her capture, Thérèse had married an Iroquois man and never returned home, but she remained a dedicated Christian. This section will examine how her personal history and preparation for missionary work allowed Thérèse to hold onto her faith under such inhospitable circumstances. Only fourteen years old when she was captured, Thérèse provides a uniquely thorough story of permanent conversion under adverse circumstances.

Born in the late 1620s into a Huron family living in the village Ossossané, Thérèse was approximately ten years old when her uncle Joseph Chihwatenha converted to

⁴⁸ Marie de l'Incarnation to Mother Catherine-Agnès of S. Paul. Lettre LXII. 30 August 1642. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de St. Pierre, 1971) 152.

Christianity and was baptized by a Jesuit priest.⁴⁹ Although his baptism took place when he was sick with smallpox during an epidemic, circumstances which often signaled that the convert would abandon Christianity after he was cured, Chihwatenha dedicated his life to his new religion and became a close friend of the Jesuit priests.⁵⁰ Soon after his recovery, Chihwatenha insisted that his entire family be baptized, including his son, a nephew, and three nieces, among whom would have been Thérèse. He visited Marie de l'Incarnation in Quebec in 1639 and began to act as a missionary among the Huron in spite of growing resentment against the Jesuits and rumors that Chihwatenha himself was trying to destroy Ossossané.⁵¹

Vocal in his commitment to Christianity and trying to convince his brother Teondechoren and other kinsmen to convert, Chihwatenha was killed under suspicious circumstances in August 1640. The Jesuits did not contest the community's explanation that he had been murdered by two Seneca, but the threats Chihwatenha had received and statements by his nieces suggest that the killing had been carried out by Huron from Ossossané.⁵² In spite of his prior opposition to the Jesuits, Teondechoren converted to Christianity three days after his brother's death. In the wake of Chihwatenha's death and the possible threat posed by living in Ossossané, Teondechoren decided to send Thérèse to the Ursuline convent as a Christian.⁵³

Thérèse quickly became one of the Ursuline convent's prize pupils; accounts of her evangelical efforts in the *Jesuit Relations* date from before she was captured and praise her devotion to the Christian faith. A girl of eleven or twelve years old when she arrived in

⁴⁹ Thwaites, R. Gold. 15:81

⁵⁰ Trigger, B. 550

⁵¹ Trigger, B. 599

⁵² Trigger, B. 600

⁵³ Trigger, B. 616

Quebec, Thérèse was described as magnetically appealing to both her peers and adults. One Easter, Thérèse took notice of the nuns' spiritual penance and decided she would like to practice similar evidence of her faith. She mentioned to one of her friends as she prepared to leave that she was going "...to hide myself like the Virgin girls; and there I will pray to God for all of the Savages and the French and for all of you, so that he might have mercy on you, and during all that time I will speak to no creature but only to God."⁵⁴ Although Thérèse discussed her plan with only one student, the idea spread through the school and her classmates hurried to join her. Marie de l'Incarnation observed that these girls sequestered themselves from the school and stayed in absolute silence, until finally "...they spent all of this time in such great gentleness that they had to be forcibly withdrawn for having too much zeal and severity."⁵⁵

Thérèse was not a leader or a moral advisor among her peers in the same fashion as students before her; although her peers actively sought to copy her, Thérèse remained relatively independent from the school population. Older students such as Marie-Magdeleine took on motherly roles in relation to the younger students, reassuring them and acting as guides as they navigated the new environment of the Ursuline convent. In Thérèse, however, the nuns had found a convert who was innovative in her personal relationship with Christianity and who was eager to spread her faith as a missionary. Thérèse appears to have been more interested in reaching out to unconverted souls than actively helping her peers refine their faith, but her intensity inspired that same fervor in the girls surrounding her.

The active interest Thérèse took in converting others impressed the nuns almost as much as the strength of her conviction in Christianity. In the winter of 1641-1642, a pair of

⁵⁴ Marie de l'Incarnation to Mother Ursule de Ste-Catherine, Lettre LXV. 29 September 1642. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de Saint Pierre, 1971). 166.

⁵⁵ Lettre LXV, 166

Huron hunters stayed in Quebec to be instructed in religion by a nun who spoke their language.⁵⁶ During their visits to the convent, these men were deeply impressed by Thérèse's thorough understanding of Christianity and her willingness to converse with them on the subject. Thérèse stayed in close connection with them until they were at the point of baptism, when one of the hunters decided to test if her faith ran as deeply as she claimed.⁵⁷ The next time he saw her, this man pretended he no longer believed in God and refused to speak with Thérèse about religion or baptism. When Thérèse heard this, she became extremely concerned for his well being and lectured him on the danger of renouncing Christianity. He continued to reject any advice she offered, in spite of her stories about Demons, fire, and torture. Finally, his laughter and apparent derision in the face of Christianity caused Thérèse to burst into tears, exclaiming to the Ursulines "Ah!...he is lost, he has left the faith, he will not be baptized: He has caused me so much pain to watch him speak against God, that if there had not been a grill between him and me, I would have thrown myself on him to beat him."⁵⁸

Thérèse's distress was so great that the Ursulines were truly convinced they had lost their new convert; the nuns were not appeased until he had personally explained that his interview with Thérèse had been a trick.⁵⁹ The two men were baptized on schedule, but Thérèse's role in their conversion left a lasting impact on her reputation among both native and French Christians. The *Jesuit Relation of 1642* includes a long account of Thérèse and the converted native hunters, as well as a description of her status among Christians outside of Quebec. Although the sources are not identified by name, it is likely that the "two

⁵⁶ Lettre LXV, 165

⁵⁷ Lettre LXV, 166

⁵⁸ Lettre LXV, 166

⁵⁹ Lettre LXV, 166

Novices” the priest mentions, returned from Quebec and impressed by their experience at the convent, are the same men Marie de l’Incarnation describes.⁶⁰ Their praise of her constancy in faith, her zeal, and her love lead them to speculate that Thérèse would be “...the greatest wit among the Hurons when she will have returned.”⁶¹ The author of the passage names Thérèse as the inspiration and example that drove these men to continue to strengthen their faith.

Thérèse’s powerful relationship with these two Huron converts would have been further incentive for the Ursulines to prepare her for becoming a missionary once her education was complete. As the niece of a man who had been martyred for Christianity, Thérèse’s resolute faith may have been fueled by the exclusion and hardship her family had faced as a result of conversion. This, in conjunction with an education from the Ursulines, granted Thérèse access to the spiritual and emotional tools necessary to withstand the pressure of acting as a missionary in an unwelcoming community. The Ursulines’ intention to prepare Thérèse for a life of missionary work is confirmed by her guardians’ pleasure when they arrived to bring her home in August of 1642. Marie de l’Incarnation wrote that “...they saw her as clever as a French girl, they heard her speak two or three languages, and they already believed that she would be a model for their Nation and the Mistress of Huron girls and women.”⁶² Bolstered by her family’s high hopes, provided with a dowry to make a suitable marriage by the Ursulines, and prepared to share her love for Christianity, Thérèse left the convent and headed home with the Jesuit Père Jogues, her uncle Teondechoren, and their companions.⁶³

⁶⁰ Thwaites, R. Gold 22:195

⁶¹ Thwaites, R. Gold 22:195.

⁶² Lettre LXV, 167

⁶³ Lettre LXV, 167

The focus of so many preparations and aspirations, Thérèse would never reach her destination. Traveling through the Saint Lawrence River Valley, she and her companions were attacked by a Mohawk raiding party.⁶⁴ Thérèse, Père Jogues, Teondechoren and about twenty of their companions were taken as prisoners.⁶⁵ A flurry of letters written by Marie de l'Incarnation regarding Thérèse's misfortune and her prospects for the future followed her disappearance. Marie feared that most of the prisoners, including Jogues, Teondechoren, and several other prominent Christian warriors, would be burned or tortured to death, but retained a sliver of hope for Thérèse's survival.⁶⁶ Several Algonquian women who had been captured separately but later escaped from the same village remembered that Thérèse and one of her young cousins had not been marked like their companions, suggesting that her captors intended to keep her alive for marriage.

Encouraged by this news, Marie's letters regarding the circumstances of Thérèse's capture remained subtly optimistic in spite of her grim speculations on torture and death. Even as she lamented what she considered to be Jogues' inevitable and brutal death, the Ursuline wondered if this misfortune had not been part of a larger plan by God to introduce Christianity among the Iroquois through Thérèse.⁶⁷ The presence of Père Jogues and her uncle, Teondechoren, for however long they might survive, may have been a reassuring factor in Marie's calculations as she wondered if marriage to a pagan would jeopardize Thérèse's faith.

Marie's focus on Thérèse's future among the Iroquois reveals two key elements of their relationship as teacher and student. First, Marie did believe Thérèse's Christian faith

⁶⁴ Lettre LXII, 151

⁶⁵ Trigger, B. 638

⁶⁶ Lettre LXV, 168

⁶⁷ Lettre LXII, 152

could withstand captivity among the Mohawk, even though the Ursuline had heard and witnessed enough stories of failed conversion to understand that her missionary project was not guaranteed success. But in spite of these stories, Marie did ultimately believe that her pupil could not only remain Christian but that she could even begin to convert her captors. Second, Marie saw her school's process of conversion as reaching beyond the individual students who attended the seminary. The recurring question of Thérèse's marriage ran deeper than ensuring that her husband did not jeopardize her faith; Thérèse could use her status as a wife and a mother to raise her children as Christians and to create a model Christian family. In addition to teaching her beliefs to the women and girls in her community, she had the opportunity to demonstrate that satisfaction and success could be derived from the Christian way of life.

Thérèse's experience would have been interesting as an example of Ursuline education if her story had ended with her capture and Marie's theories. Her occasional reappearance in Marie's correspondence and the *Jesuit Relations* over the next eleven years, however, provides a unique insight into the enduring quality of her faith and her relationship with the French. Almost exactly a year to the day from when Marie de l'Incarnation wrote her first account of Thérèse's capture, the Ursuline related in a letter that Thérèse had stayed fast in her faith, while Père Jogues was still alive among the Mohawk against all odds.⁶⁸ There is no mention of whether or not Thérèse had been married at that time, but Marie did know that Jogues was instructing some of the Iroquois in Christianity.

Two years later, in the September of 1645, Thérèse's liberty became part of negotiations between the French and Iroquois for a peace settlement. Although most of the

⁶⁸ Marie de l'Incarnation to her son, Lettre LXXIII. 30 September 1643. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury. (Solesmes: Abbaye de Saint-Pierre, 1971). 201.

settlement's demands were related to trading rights, the status of native French allies, and territory, one request by the French Governor asked specifically for the return of "...little Thérèse, and a young French boy captives of the Iroquois."⁶⁹ By this time Père Jogues had been released from Mohawk captivity to act as a mediator in Quebec for the negotiators, which may account for why Thérèse is identified by name among the number of Huron prisoners whose release might have been requested. The hope these negotiations offered never came to fruition, however; Thérèse was not returned home in spite of the settlement and in fact never saw her original home again. The mere inclusion of her release in the peace talks, however, indicates the impact she had made on the French during her stay at Quebec.

At the same time that negotiations offered the hope that Thérèse might return home, a letter from Marie de l'Incarnation in the September of 1646 provides the first meaningful look into her life after captivity. Marie's information was based on a report Père Jogues sent to Quebec after returning in May to visit the Iroquois following the treaty negotiations. Jogues met Thérèse on his way to the Mohawk village, and stopped to have a conversation with her.⁷⁰ The young woman was happy to see him and promised she had remained faithful in her commitment to Christianity, to which Jogues replied that he had come bearing the ransom for her release. The Jesuit attributed Thérèse's coming freedom to the new peace between the Iroquois and the French, as well as a financial compensation he was bringing to the family that had clothed and fed her while she was a captive. Thérèse was delighted to hear that she might return home; she wanted to resume her studies with the Ursulines and

⁶⁹ Marie de l'Incarnation to her son, Lettre XCII. 14-27 September 1645. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury. (Solesmes: Abbaye de Saint-Pierre, 1971). 259.

⁷⁰ Marie de l'Incarnation to her son, Lettre XCVII. 29 August – 10 September 1646. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de Saint-Pierre, 1971). 281.

become more knowledgeable about the Christian religion.⁷¹ Promising he would return soon to find her, Jogues continued his journey to the Iroquois village.

This brief encounter provides some evidence for Thérèse's quality of life among the Mohawk. She appears not to have been persecuted for her insistence on remaining Christian, in spite of animosity between Jesuits and the Iroquois and the death of several of her fellow prisoners for voicing their religion.⁷² After four years in captivity, Thérèse had allowed herself to be assimilated to a certain extent into daily life; although she would not have participated in religious rituals and feasts, Jogues met her fishing by the riverside with a group of Mohawks. She had no access to the spiritual guidance that was customary in the Ursuline convent, however; Thérèse had been reluctant to leave the shelter of the school, and her desire to return suggests she may have considered it to be more of a home than her family in Ossossané. It had been six years since Joseph Chihwatenha died and she had been sent away; living with the Ursulines would have returned the sense of a Christian community and spiritual support she had missed in a way that she did not believe Ossossané could.

Unfortunately for Thérèse, she was fated to never return to either the Ursuline convent or Ossossané. When Père Jogues arrived at the Mohawk village dressed in his religious garb, he was murdered by the Iroquois and his body displayed as a warning for other priests.⁷³ There is no recorded explanation as to why Thérèse was never retrieved under the terms of the peace negotiations, but the death of her deliverer and the loss of her ransom may have been enough for her to be forgotten by the French civil government. As communication broke down and the Jesuits became preoccupied with missions closer to

⁷¹ Lettre XCVII, 281.

⁷² Trigger, B. 646.

⁷³ Thwaites, R. Gold 31:117.

home, Thérèse disappeared from the written record until a Jesuit priest named Simon le Moyne visited her village of Onnontagé in 1653.

Approximately twenty-five years old at that time, Thérèse had been in captivity for eleven years. Following Jogues' death, she had married an Iroquois man and moved to the Iroquois settlement Onnontagé but remained dedicated to the Christian faith.⁷⁴ Marie's confidence in the lasting nature of her student's faith had been justified: in spite of her isolation and adverse circumstances, Thérèse had found some companions in other Huron Christian captives and became the head of a longhouse which was home to several other families.⁷⁵ The status she gradually gained in the community would have allowed Thérèse to maintain her identity as a Christian, leading a small convert community slightly apart from life in Onnontagé. Thérèse even went so far as to instruct a young Neutral captive in the Christian faith. When Simon le Moyne arrived in Onnontagé, she sought him out to test her pupil and decide if she was ready for baptism. Le Moyne was so surprised by how well the young woman knew her lessons that he asked why Thérèse had not gone ahead and baptized the girl herself.⁷⁶ Always modest, Thérèse replied that she had thought she could only baptize an individual who was about to die.

The baptism of Thérèse's Neutral goddaughter represented the first baptism in the village of Onnontagé, a fact Simon le Moyne took pride in.⁷⁷ The young woman was christened Thérèse after her instructor two days before le Moyne left for Quebec.⁷⁸ Le Moyne's 1653 report is the last time Thérèse Oionhaton was mentioned in either the *Jesuit*

⁷⁴ An Ursuline to P. Paul le Jeune, Lettre XVIII. 1653. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de Saint-Pierre, 1971) 988.

⁷⁵ Lettre XVIII, 988.

⁷⁶ Thwaites, R. Gold 41:103

⁷⁷ Thwaites, R. Gold 41:103.

⁷⁸ Thwaites, R. Gold 41:107.

Relations or Marie de l'Incarnation's *Correspondance*. Physically isolated from the Quebec community, Thérèse finally disappeared into silence and there is no account of her married life or death. Her experience however, was exceptional in the context of the Ursuline missionary experiment. Thérèse's continued faith in spite of captivity, separation from her family, and marriage to a pagan man is an extreme example of the success the nuns hoped to achieve through the education they provided. The young woman had no access to Christian services or sacraments, and was largely deprived of even the Christian companionship the nuns depended on to soften the hardships converts faced in native society. In the face of these odds, Thérèse not only maintained her faith, but even shared her religion with those around her.

Not all of the credit for Thérèse's success can be accorded to the Ursulines, however. The young woman's ability to retain her identity in captivity was the sum of her personal experiences; the loss of her uncle at a young age, her experience in conversion and missionary work, and her personal experiments with religion had granted her the autonomy that bolstered her faith in captivity. An individual who had been deprived of her family and traditional lifeways for such a significant period of time before she had been taken prisoner, Thérèse may have felt she would lose herself completely if she faltered in her devotion to Christianity. As such, maintaining her religion may also have been a way of retaining a sense of self amidst the dislocation and isolation of captivity. The Ursulines focused on creating a surrogate community for their students, but when her situation became dire Thérèse retained the ability to survive as a Christian on her own.

Conclusion:

As individuals transitioning out of their traditional pattern of lifeways, Marie-Magdeleine, Angèle, and Thérèse each took advantage of the Ursuline's community resources to reconcile themselves with the separation conversion forced upon them. Their prior exposure to Christianity through family members and the Jesuit priests provided a reassuring sense of religious support outside of Quebec, but the socialization they were exposed to at the convent was key to establishing their commitment to Christianity. The Jesuits themselves identified the Ursulines' students as being uniquely confident: "...these children will be much firmer in the faith...for they are under continual instruction, they see nothing that does not influence them to virtue."⁷⁹ The relationships students developed at the convent prepared them for missionary work among their own nations, a calling all three of these young women embraced. Capable of developing a separate, minority religious community and preserving their faith without clerical guidance, Marie-Magdeleine, Angèle, and Thérèse surpassed Marie de l'Incarnation's expectation for "*Sauvagesse*." Their influence among native people was anticipated by the Jesuits, who expected them to strengthen the convert population. This Christian expansion, however, would come at a price for traditional society, a phenomenon this thesis will explore among the Huron in Chapter Three.

⁷⁹ Thwaites, R. Gold 20:127

CHAPTER THREE: A Volatile Combination: Christianity among the Huron

The establishment of the Ursuline convent and its school for native young women coincided with the final decade of the Huron Confederacy. By 1648 the delicate balance between maintaining trade relations with the French and resisting religious missionaries was generating frustration among Huron traditionalists. The Jesuits' close association with French trade deflected any blame onto native converts, whom many blamed for the Confederacy's disunity. Animosity between traditionalist and convert factions split the Huron community, until the severity of these internal fractures in 1648, coupled with a lack of French military support, left the Confederacy vulnerable to attacks by the Iroquois. By 1649, the Huron Confederacy was gone.

Compared to the scale of Huron society during the decade of the 1640s, Ursuline graduates represent a very small minority. These women were neither numerous enough nor influential enough to significantly alter the outcome of the Confederacy, but it is possible to examine their experience in terms of a wider transformation of the Huron understanding of community. Although Marie de l'Incarnation's letters do not specifically address Huron students' reaction to the social upheaval of the 1640s, trends within the student body and among the school's graduates indicate that a Christian education did alter a woman's reaction to the events taking place around her. Ursuline education and training as female missionaries introduced a lasting effect on Huron women's conception of their place within society.

Although the previous two chapters do not distinguish Huron students from their peers at the Ursuline convent, this chapter will focus entirely on the Huron experience and its effects on outside historical events. The nuns did not discriminate between students of different nations, but the unique circumstances Huron graduates faced within their own

community justifies this focus. A sedentary people, the Huron found it difficult to restructure their community to accommodate the introduction of Christianity. The resulting tension was pronounced throughout the 1640s during the swift decline of the Confederacy, providing an ideal context for analyzing the effect of the Ursulines on native community. This chapter will argue that, while Ursuline graduates were not numerous, their mindset exemplifies the motivations of Huron Christians both before and after the Confederacy's collapse in 1649. Additionally, this chapter will explore the effect of the Huron refugee population in Quebec on the Ursuline student population and the nuns' adjustment to this sudden sequence of events.

The Huron Confederacy – a Fracturing Community

The turbulent relationship between the Jesuits and traditionalist Huron during the decade of the 1630s had prompted missionaries to focus on developing independent Christian convert communities.¹ Following the same method employed by the Ursulines, these villages sought to isolate converts from traditionalist influence and directly contributed to the development of factions within the Huron nation. Although Christian converts always remained a minority within the wider population, an individual's decision to convert often triggered a chain reaction among his or her acquaintances. Family and friends, threatened with separation from the new convert both in daily life and after death, would often convert to preserve their relationship.² The Jesuits used this fact to their advantage, as well as the widespread belief that the French might eventually restrict trade to Christians, to create separate villages of Christian converts where families could focus solely on their faith.

¹ Trigger, Bruce (1976). *The Children of Aataentsic: a History of the Huron People to 1660. Vols. 2* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press. 687.

² Trigger, B. 700

The settlement of Ossossané became one such religious settlement after its relocation during the early 1640s.³ The same community which had organized Joseph Chihwatenha's death in 1640 because of his association with the Jesuits, Ossossané became the first major Christian religious center for the Huron at the end of the decade.⁴ The Chihwatenha family's persistence and unwavering dedication to Christianity made them central figures in Ossossané church and valued sources of advice. Teondechoren, the family's spokesman after his brother Joseph's death, was consulted by headmen on public business until he finally asked to be allowed time to focus on his relationship with God.⁵ Dedication to Christianity had spread considerably beyond Chihwatenha's legacy; the Jesuits described the Ossossané congregation as "...a little lump of gold refined in the furnace of many tribulations, which have at last separated true from false..."⁶ Indeed, the Jesuits were so confident in the community's Christian faith that they entrusted a native convert with leading the church's services when the priests were absent.⁷ By 1643, there was such a high proportion of converts within the Ossossané population that the Jesuits expected the village to soon become entirely Christian.⁸

The transformation of communities such as Ossossané from traditional Huron settlements into Christian strongholds required a fundamental shift in the structure of power and authority. Early converts had found it difficult to reconcile the ritual requirements of leadership with the stringency of their new religion; Christianity isolated these individuals from participating in the curing societies, feasts, and religious responsibilities which defined

³ Trigger, B. 668.

⁴ Trigger, B. 702

⁵ Thwaites, R. Gold. *The Jesuit relations and allied documents: travels and explorations of the Jesuit missionaries in New France, 1610-1791; the original French, Latin, and Italian texts, with English translations and notes.* Vol 21. (Cleveland: The Burrows brothers company, 1896-1901.) 155

⁶ Thwaites, R. Gold. 21:157

⁷ Thwaites, R. Gold. 21:159

⁸ Trigger, B. 702

traditional responsibilities. The increasing concentration of Christians during the 1640s led individuals to reconcile their religious and political requirements in innovative ways. When one headman insisted on resigning his public office rather than perform rituals, "...the Council decided that it was necessary to divide the office...that someone else should thereafter take charge of the matters forbidden by the faith...called the Devils' Deputy..."⁹ The new political influence of Christian converts was complemented by their economic advantages. Although the French never restricted trade exclusively to converts, they were favored with gifts and quality goods, as well as being the only native group with access to buying firearms.¹⁰

By 1645, Huron Christians had become comfortable enough in identity and numbers to begin worshiping publicly and organizing religious processions.¹¹ These conspicuous displays of Christian faith, previously conducted in a private and subdued manner, antagonized supporters of traditional Huron lifeways. The Jesuits were personally protected from danger by their ties to French trade; bitterness and hostility between traditionalists and converts, however, erupted into violence against the latter.¹² Although Christians were favored by the French, they were not guaranteed physical protection from their neighbors. The Jesuits reported that converts were threatened daily for not participating in rituals; one man refused to speak even after he "...heard the threats uttered against him, and saw the hatchet already raised over his head..."¹³ Physical attacks and disintegrating family ties drove a wedge deeper and deeper between the two factions. The coherency of the Huron conception of community had been fatally compromised when Christians began to transfer

⁹ Thwaites, R. Gold. 28:89

¹⁰ Thwaites, R. Gold. 25:27

¹¹ Trigger, B. 714

¹² Trigger, B. 716

¹³ Thwaites, R. Gold. 23:53

their allegiance away from the immediate village. By insisting on the primacy of Christian identity, the Jesuits replaced responsibility to friends and neighbors with a focus on Quebec as a spiritual center.

Distancing religious community from Huron settlements, especially those with a large proportion of Christians, gave traditionalists cause to doubt converts' commitment to the confederacy. Between 1645 and 1648, conflict with the Iroquois developed an anti-Jesuit faction within the Huron that argued that Christian headmen were responsible for complications in the peace process. Convinced that the Iroquois had refused the peace proposal out of fear that Huron converts would use religion to fracture their coherency, the anti-Jesuit leaders even went so far as to propose that an alliance with their enemies would be preferable to losing their culture and autonomy to the French.¹⁴ Although the majority of traditionalists disagreed with these radicals, the mere suggestion of rupturing the Huron-French alliance in favor of the Iroquois demonstrates how vulnerable internal divides and irresolute French support had made the Huron.

The Huron never acted to divorce themselves from the French and factional animosity continued to undermine their defense against the Iroquois. In late 1648 traditionalists in Ossossané were forbidden from practicing a ritual dance and their leader was expelled from the village, a series of events which would never have been imaginable in Huron settlement before.¹⁵ Christian piety had become so powerful in Ossossané, however, that the settlement was referred to as “‘The Believing Village,’ ...for there were very few infidels left.”¹⁶ The Jesuits were proud that no “public sin” had been committed in over a year, but only three days later Ossossané was attacked and completely defeated by the Iroquois. This war party

¹⁴ Trigger, B. 745

¹⁵ Trigger, B. 762

¹⁶ Thwaites, R. Gold. 34:217

had penetrated Huron territory undetected and struck a series of decisive blows against their enemies while Huron factions continued to fight each other.¹⁷

The Iroquois assaults which followed were devastating for Huron settlements, destroying two villages entirely, capturing or killing hundreds, and forcing more to flee the area.¹⁸ The presence of Iroquois so early in March 1649, in conjunction with a poor harvest the previous summer, demoralized the remaining Huron, who anticipated another winter season of hunger and hardship. Villages were abandoned as inhabitants attempted to find refuge among trade partners farther from the danger, a diaspora which taxed these settlements' resources and contributed to a prolonged famine among their inhabitants.¹⁹ Ossossané itself was the first to be abandoned, many Christians choosing to spend the winter in the village Gahoendoe where the Jesuits had fled after attacks on St. Ignace and St. Louis.

The winter of 1649 dealt the final blow to the coherency of the Huron Confederacy, as famine and disease decimated the remaining population.²⁰ Most refugees at Gahoendoe submitted to Jesuit leadership, recognizing that the French controlled almost all of the settlement's resources. The Jesuits reported thousands of conversions and baptisms between 1649 and 1650, numbers which were skewed by traditionalists desperate for food and clothing.²¹ The starvation at Gahoendoe, where refugees stayed alive by eating the deceased, convinced the Jesuits that "...the hand of God...chose to preserve us that we might lead to Heaven the remnant of this dying people."²² When spring finally arrived, those who had managed to survive parted ways. Some devoted Christians chose to settle in Quebec and the

¹⁷ Trigger, B. 763

¹⁸ Trigger, B. 763

¹⁹ Trigger, B. 770

²⁰ Trigger, B. 781

²¹ Trigger, B. 781

²² Thwaites, R. Gold, 35:97

native convert communities which surrounded it, while others remained at Gahoendoe or were absorbed into other nearby tribes.²³

Those Huron who settled in Quebec remained committed to their French allies, but among captives and traditionalist Huron the dispersal was remembered as the result of French betrayal. Many recent converts abandoned Christianity out of resentment that the priests had lived off of a private store of supplies at Gahoendoe, blaming Jesuit black magic for their people's misfortune.²⁴ Other Huron captured by the Iroquois spoke out against the French, bitter at their allies' failure to support the Confederacy's military defense. As a people, the Huron never recovered from the events of 1648-1650. Although there was still talk of reforming the Confederacy in 1665, the possibility of truly doing so had died out long before.²⁵ The separate Huron factions had diverged too much for them to share a common identity; Christianity had made their understandings of community incompatible.

Ursuline Students in the Huron Community:

It was this fracturing world which framed the experiences of Huron students at the convent and which defined their experiences when they returned to their families. The main purpose of an Ursuline education was to create self-sufficient, confident women with the religious independence to maintain their autonomy within a traditional society.²⁶ The Ursulines' project was on such a small scale that it would most likely have been insignificant in a peaceful environment; their students could have quietly coexisted thanks to the Huron philosophy of religious relativism. Because of the tension which existed between

²³ Trigger, B. 782

²⁴ Trigger, B. 830

²⁵ Trigger, B. 818

²⁶ Fahmy-Eid, Nadia and Micheline Dumont, eds. *Maîtresses de maison, maîtresses d'école: femmes, familles et éducation dans l'histoire du Québec*. (Montréal, Qué.: Boréal Express. 1983) 53

traditionalists and Christians, however, as well as converts' tendency to isolate themselves from the general community, these young women's experiences outside of the convent must be interpreted in terms of the wider break-up of the Huron Confederacy.

The detached sense of community which characterized Christians within Huron society is exemplified by the Ursuline students. The Ursulines' intention was to have their students create a separate religious community that would sustain their faith in spite of a traditional environment. Christianity came before any other identity, a lesson which threatened the coherency of Huron villages. Ursuline students were accustomed to supporting their peers' faith and were familiar with Christian theology, knowledge which they shared to make the Christian faction an independent community. The attachment these young women had to the convent also introduced a subtle consequence for the native faction: former students respected the Ursulines as religious authorities and associated the convent with spiritual guidance and protection. Their mission was to spread the Christian message among their people, but they remembered Quebec as a religious capitol.

The roots of this attachment to Quebec are evident in young women's reluctance to leave the convent when their parents came to retrieve them. Marie de l'Incarnation often refers to the dismay her students express when it came time for them to leave even temporarily; they preferred to remain at the convent, where they had reliable access to Mass and the holy sacraments.²⁷ Returning to a village environment was a significant adjustment from the constant devotion of the convent, but it is conceivable that students' reluctance to leave also stemmed from their trepidation at leaving a stable environment. The Ursulines' most exemplary Christians lived in the convent for a year or more, during which time they

²⁷ Marie de l'Incarnation to Mère Ursule de Ste-Catherine. Lettre LXV, 29 September 1642. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de St. Pierre, 1971) 161.

developed relationships as mentors and spiritual guides for their peers.²⁸ Once they arrived in a Huron settlement, however, there was no guarantee these young women would find the same level of religious intimacy they enjoyed with the Ursulines. Students were at once separated from both the teachers and the companions who had helped shape their religious identity.

One student who manifested this desire to return to the Ursulines consistently after her departure was Thérèse Oionhaton. Although Thérèse acknowledged her duty to return to her parents, Marie de l'Incarnation admitted "I do not know who felt more reluctance and pain, her in leaving us, or ourselves in losing her...."²⁹ Later, Marie reflected that their grief may have been in anticipation of Thérèse's capture and adoption by the Mohawk. Thérèse underwent the worst possible scenario for an Ursuline student; in one day, she was deprived of both her family and her Christian companions. In addition to remaining a faithful Christian during her captivity, Thérèse never forgot the school where she had been so content. She came into contact with the Jesuits twice more after 1642 and expressed the hope that she might someday return to Quebec to continue her education.³⁰

When Thérèse encountered Père Jogues in 1646, she informed him that "...she would be delighted to return to us so as to recapture her belief in the works of God and her piety."³¹ Jogues was closely involved with the Huron mission and should have been able to tell Thérèse that Ossossané was fast becoming a Christian household with her family at its

²⁸ Marie de l'Incarnation to her Son. Lettre LXXIII, 30 September 1643. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de St. Pierre, 1971) 202; and Lettre LXV, 165.

²⁹ Lettre LXV, 167

³⁰ Marie de l'Incarnation to her Son. Lettre XCVII, 29 August-10 September 1646. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de St. Pierre, 1971) 281
Thwaites, R. Gold. 41:102-103.

³¹ Lettre XCVII, 281

center.³² Her own education was meant to make her "...the model of their Nation and the Mistress of the Huron girls and women."³³ Thérèse's main thought upon encountering her old friend after almost four years in captivity, however, was to return to the Ursulines. The family dedication which had torn Thérèse from Marie de l'Incarnation in 1642 was not strong enough to replace her memory of the convent when she might finally be ransomed.

Thérèse's personal timeline may have factored into her longing to return to the Ursulines; the young woman had been approximately eleven years old when she was first sent away and was sixteen or seventeen when she met Père Jogues in 1646. She had been out of immediate contact with her family for almost all of her adolescent life, while the memories she drew on to support her faith in captivity were those of the Ursuline nuns and the seminary. As a result, it is likely she felt a closer connection to the community she had left than the one to which she had been returning in 1642. Additionally, Thérèse had been deprived of Catholic mass or sacraments for almost four years; she appears to have favored the Ursulines as a purer, more reliable community where she could revitalize her faith. Ossossané in 1646 boasted a permanent church, where both Jesuit and native preachers conducted Catholic services, but Thérèse's conception of religious community was inextricably linked to Quebec and the convent. Her responsibilities might be for her family and to bring conversion to new individuals, but her home was with the Ursulines.

Among students who did safely travel between Quebec and Huron villages, Thérèse's dream of returning to the convent manifested itself as a cyclical relationship with the Ursulines. Leaving Quebec was not a permanent break from the nuns; the traffic of visitors at the convent was influenced by seasonal incentives that took families away from their

³² Trigger, B. 702

³³ Lettre XCVII, 167

homes. In the same year Père Jogues visited Thérèse, Marie de l'Incarnation noted that "Our greatest harvest [of souls] is Winter, when the Savages leave for their six month hunts, leaving us their daughters to be taught. This time is precious to us..."³⁴ This phenomenon signals a shift in the adult understanding of community which would have translated to their children; the Ursulines had become reliable protectors and providers for Christian converts.³⁵ For young girls raised in this pattern, it would have been natural to associate the Ursulines with their winter home and their parents with their summer home. Their notion of what composed a unified community changed geographically as it expanded to permanently include Quebec.

An Ursuline Haven:

Thérèse's departure from the Ursuline convent in 1642 marked the beginning of a transitional period for the school population; while communities like Ossossané were developing strong Christian populations, the Ursulines were entering a four year period during which they would enroll no Huron women as seminary students at all.³⁶ Montaignais and Algonquian students remained, and the Ursulines did continue to receive Huron men, women, and children as day students at the convent. The absence of Huron boarders, however, was never addressed in Marie de l'Incarnation's correspondence. Those individuals who did visit the convent were often in Quebec for trade or for the winter season;

³⁴ Lettre XCVII, 286.

³⁵ Marie de l'Incarnation to une Dame de qualité, Lettre XLIII 3 September 1640. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de Saint Pierre, 1971). 97

³⁶ Trigger, B. 800

Huron visitors were impressed by the Ursulines' learning and religious authority.³⁷ Parents, however, had ceased to send their children to be permanent students at the convent.

There are several possible reasons for this change. The number of Huron students in the convent's early years was small; Thérèse was the only boarder named in their records at the time of her departure, suggesting most Huron had a relationship with the school as day-students.³⁸ Like Thérèse, early Ursuline students generally came from Christian families, which did not become prevalent among the Huron until the mid- to late-1640s. The number of Huron students at the convent during the school's first four years in existence appears to have been small to begin with – Thérèse was characteristic of these students, the daughter of a prominent converted family. The year Thérèse left the convent, she was the only Huron student staying with the Ursulines at a time when Christianity was growing within Huron settlements. Families converting during this period would have experienced a wider network of support and access to Christian affirmation than their predecessors. With the establishment of a church, the reliable presence of a Jesuit priest, and the incorporation of native preachers into the community at Ossossané, Quebec was no longer the only competitive option for a respectable Christian education.

The availability of a Christian education close to home meant the opportunity for families to avoid the long separation necessitated by convent life. Marie de l'Incarnation was astonished by the attachment of native parents to their children, "...the Savages love their children extraordinarily, and when they know they are sad they override all consideration to

³⁷ Thwaites, R. Gold. 31:177

³⁸ Trudel, Marcel. (1999) *Les écolières des Ursulines de Québec, Amerindiennes et Canadiennes* (Éditions Hurtubise, Montreal). 118

reclaim them, and we are obliged to hand them over.”³⁹ A strong sense of responsibility to family characterized the young women who stayed at the convent, whom Marie described as favoring their parents’ wishes over their own when it came time to leave.⁴⁰ Huron families may have seen an opportunity to avoid the distress of separation by taking advantage of the new religious resources in their own communities and sparing their daughters the anxiety that characterized new students at the convent.

The decision to stay away from the Ursuline convent would have been further reinforced by tension in the relationship between the Huron and the Iroquois. Thérèse herself had been kidnapped by a Mohawk raiding party on her return to Ossossané, a reminder that even traveling with a band of Huron warriors and relatives did not guarantee safety. The next Huron student arrived in 1646 with a devoted Christian man who spent the winter with the Ursulines’ chaplain.⁴¹ Although she arrived safely in Quebec, Iroquois raids delayed her departure until 1648, indicating the vulnerability of young women over the course of such an expedition.⁴² It is possible that, in light of Thérèse’s kidnapping, other women’s parents kept them home for their own safety. As long as the native settlement offered Christian education and services, exposing young women to the risk and danger of traveling to the convent may have seemed unnecessary.

The young woman who joined the school in 1646 was the first of an influx of Huron students that began within two years. The *Register of the Arrival and departure of little french and savage girls* records a remarkable transformation in the student population coinciding with the disintegration of the Huron Confederacy. In the last five months of 1650

³⁹ Marie de l’Incarnation to her Son, Lettre CCXXXVII 1 September 1668. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de St-Pierre, 1971) 809

⁴⁰ Lettre LXV, 162

⁴¹ Thwaites, R. Gold. 31:175

⁴² Trigger, B. 800

alone, the Ursulines received twelve Huron women as long-term *seminaristes*.⁴³ Eight of these had been collected and accompanied by the Reverend Père Ragueneau, who was at that time the Jesuit leader of the Huron mission. Entries into the *Register* were not recorded regularly, but they do show that in almost every year between 1650 and 1658 the Ursulines admitted at least four new Huron students.⁴⁴ Many of these students were accompanied by a Jesuit priest when they arrived, suggesting that they were collected and evacuated out of dangerous areas.

Safety had become a serious concern for Huron parents; the threat of Iroquois attack outweighed any risk that might have deterred them sending their daughters to Quebec in 1646 or 1647. By 1650, the Huron Confederacy had been completely dispersed as Christians fled to Quebec or to join captive relatives among the Iroquois, while the remaining traditionalists sought refuge among other nations.⁴⁵ During the same month that Père Ragueneau arrived, Marie worried that Iroquois forces might attack Quebec itself. The convent was a strong building within the secure compound of the city, but Marie still warned that “...nevertheless what has taken place in all of the Huron *bourgs* which were ruined by fire and by weapons (because they were certainly powerful) should make the French apprehensive of a similar accident, if they don’t come promptly to our aid.”⁴⁶ Although

⁴³ *Régistre des Entrées et sorties des petites filles françaises et sauvage de 1641*. Pensionnat ling.1.1.1 Les Archives du Monastère de Québec. Québec City, Québec. 22

⁴⁴ *Régistre*, 22-30

The original Ursuline convent was destroyed in a fire in 1650, resulting in the severe damage or loss of almost all of their records. The nuns originally kept two student registers, one for French students and one for natives; since the native register was almost entirely destroyed, the nuns copied what remained (and what they remembered) into the French register. As a result, records of native students at the convent before 1650 are irregular and often lack detail.

⁴⁵ Trigger, B. 784

⁴⁶ Marie de l’Incarnation to her Son, Lettre CXXVIII 30 August 1650. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de St-Pierre, 1971). 394

bourgs in the 17th century referred to a village or collection of buildings surrounded by fortified walls. *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française, 1694 (1st edition, ARTFL Project)*

Marie had her doubts, Huron refugees remembered that the convent would offer them food and supplies as well as physical protection.

Many also believed that the Jesuit settlement at Trois Rivières would be the Iroquois' next target, which may have factored into the sudden evacuation to Quebec of Huron women by Père Ragueneau.⁴⁷ In two short years, the stability and resources of the Huron Christian community had been exchanged for a makeshift settlement of refugees. Even under threat, the Ursuline convent was a more secure environment for young women than the living conditions of their families. The school would continue to improve as a result of the conditions of Huron converts throughout the decade of the 1650s; even without providing a comprehensive record of the native students who attended the seminary, the *Register* evidences a continuous flow of Huron women entering and leaving the convent as students from 1650 until 1658.⁴⁸

In addition to hosting full-time students, the Ursulines provided religious services and advice for Huron women and girls living nearby who could not attend the seminary full-time.⁴⁹ The community the nuns served was no longer a distant mission, but an immediate and tangible presence for refugees in Quebec. The Ursulines supplied food and clothing for Huron living within the city walls, as well as seeking French sponsors to keep Huron students at the convent over the long term.⁵⁰ Even the convent's complete destruction by fire after Christmas in 1650 only served to strengthen the nuns' resolve and inspire sympathy among the refugee Huron themselves. Huron leaders organized a gift of wampum for the Ursulines, declaring "...let us weep for our misfortunes which were solely ours before, but which we

⁴⁷ Lettre CXXVIII, 394

⁴⁸ *Régistre*, 22-30

⁴⁹ *Régistre*, 22

⁵⁰ Thwaites, R. Gold. 35:209

now share in common with these innocent maids.”⁵¹ The Ursulines’ association with the Huron now reached beyond the student population and deep into refugee settlement.

As the traditional community disintegrated and the number of Huron students attending the school increased, the convent became an intergenerational haven as well as a substitute for the village center. One woman, Cecile Arepoatsi, arrived with her daughter and two other Huron girls to be students at the convent in 1650.⁵² Widowed and only 23 years old, Cecile was employed as a servant by the Ursulines while her daughter attended the seminary.⁵³ Cecile and her daughter Marie A8entonhon8en maintained a relationship with the convent that endured for almost a decade. Although their stay was interrupted by trips outside of Quebec and both ultimately left the Ursulines to live with Huron refugees, Cecile and Marie’s commitment to the school was a testament to its status as a surrogate community. Marie de l’Incarnation had an affectionate relationship with Cecile, whom she called “...a very good Christian...” and for whom she expressed deep concern when Cecile was injured jumping from a window during the Christmas fire.⁵⁴ Cecile was committed to the convent community during her stay and actively recruited students for the nuns. The student register indicates that Cecile would sometimes leave the convent for periods of time, and that she was responsible for introducing a total of five Huron girls to the convent between 1650 and 1652, including her own daughter.⁵⁵

Marie A8entonhon8en followed a similar pattern of extended stays during her time at the convent. The student register does not mention Marie leaving with her mother after their

⁵¹ Thwaites, R. Gold 36:217

⁵² *Régistre*, 22

⁵³ Thwaites, R. Gold. 36:213

⁵⁴ Marie de l’Incarnation to her Son, Lettre CXXXIII 3 September 1651. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de St. Pierre, 1971). 413

⁵⁵ *Régistre*, 23

initial arrival together in 1650, suggesting that Cecile was comfortable leaving her daughter alone with the nuns for extended periods of time. In November 1657, the Ursulines recorded that Marie was leaving their school "...after having lived in the seminary about five years where we Gallicized her and taught her to read and write."⁵⁶ The inclusion that she had been in the convent about five years seems to indicate that Marie did consistently attend the school from 1650 to 1652; her relationship with the Ursulines, however, was markedly longer than any of those Marie de l'Incarnation described before 1650.

Cecile and her daughter joined the Ursulines in the aftermath of the collapse of the Huron Confederacy, a decade during which it was uniquely difficult for them to either join or create a Christian community among their own people. Marie Antoinette was been closely affiliated with the convent for more than five years when she departed, and less than six months later she had returned.⁵⁷ Although there were Christian native communities nearby in villages such as Saint Marie, these women chose to return to the convent and in Cecile's case brought even more young women with them. Something more powerful than the promise of an education attracted them to the Ursulines; the disintegration of the Confederacy had permanently changed the expectations of Huron converts prepared by the nuns.

Huron Converts among the Iroquois:

The development of Christian faction during the 1640s had signaled the beginning of the end for the Huron Confederacy, but converts' faith was severely tested by their nation's final collapse. Trade incentives and opportunism in conjunction with loosened restrictions

⁵⁶ *Régistre*, 29

⁵⁷ *Régistre*, 30.

on baptism had characterized the conversion of many Huron during that decade, particularly among men.⁵⁸ Although strongly faithful Christians migrated to Quebec for access to the spiritual resources of the Jesuits, Huron refugees explored other alternatives as well.⁵⁹ Some traditionalists remained in the community of Gahoendoe, but a significant number of Huron from both sides were captured by the Iroquois and incorporated into their communities. Resentment against the Jesuits and the French for failing to come to their aid encouraged less committed captive converts to renounce their Christian faith.⁶⁰ Perceived French indifference to Huron farmers who were captured during peacetime seemed for some captured Huron to confirm the traditionalists' accusations. Faced with the need to survive without the Huron community, these individuals believed they would be best served by cooperating with the Iroquois.⁶¹

Disillusionment did not reign completely over the Huron in captivity, however. A number of Christians living among the Iroquois had chosen voluntarily to be captured for the sake of keeping their families intact.⁶² Women in particular clung to their religious faith despite the vocal condemnation of the Jesuits by other Huron captives.⁶³ These women risked being branded as witches for continuing their religious practices, but the decision to retain their adopted religion may have been influenced by a desire to retain an element of their personal identities. Separated from blood kin and with their Huron identities permanently lost, Christianity could provide a sense of purpose and self within the disorientation of captivity. By insisting on a Christian education for their children, captive

⁵⁸ Trigger, B. 332

⁵⁹ Trigger, B. 784

⁶⁰ Trigger, B. 833

⁶¹ Trigger, B. 832

⁶² Trigger, B. 832

⁶³ Trigger, B. 833

women maintained an element of the family identity they had previously cherished. Thérèse Oionhaton became a leader of one of these small Christian enclaves, leading prayers and constructing a community according to her own religious values.⁶⁴

The division of Huron Christians between the Ursulines and Iroquois settlements served the missionary cause in spite of the physical and ideological risks to these converts. The persistence of pockets of Huron Christianity among the Iroquois, although they lacked the political influence they wielded in Huron settlements a few years before, encouraged the gradual introduction of Jesuit negotiators.⁶⁵ Huron animosity against the Jesuits for their perceived betrayal was not enough to turn the tide of sentiment completely against them. Hoping to build favor with the French and even possibly benefit from their relationship, some Huron converts among the Iroquois advocated for Jesuit priests.⁶⁶ Although support from Hurons was not a guarantee of safety for the Jesuits, their presence encouraged Jesuit missionary efforts among the Iroquois. In spite of the very real threat of physical danger, the Jesuit willingness to become martyrs for their cause urged them to take advantage of any welcome they might find.

The remaining Huron students at the seminary fostered these tenuous ties between Christian missionaries and the Iroquois. Among these young women, the decision between moving to an Iroquois settlement and remaining in Quebec required them to reconsider their notions of community and autonomy. Although the majority of Ursuline students expected to return to their families rather than take the veil, their options became increasingly limited as the 1650s progressed. Without any secure Huron settlements, a graduate's options would

⁶⁴ An Ursuline of Quebec to P. Paul Le Jeune, Appendix XVIII 1653. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de St. Pierre, 1971). 988

⁶⁵ Thwaites, R. Gold. 52:163

⁶⁶ Trigger, B. 834

have been limited to Christian native communities, joining another nation, or living within a French settlement. Rejoining their families was not a simple endeavor; continued raids and attacks by the Iroquois ate away at the Huron population throughout the decade, forcing some young women to consider permanent separation from their parents.⁶⁷

For one Ursuline student, Christian identity overpowered even her affection for her parents. Captives among the Iroquois, her mother and father invited her to leave the convent and live with her family. Instead, she accused them of abandoning her, adding "...are you not ashamed to leave the country of prayer, to go to a place where you will be in danger of losing your Faith?"⁶⁸ The strong association Ursuline students exhibited with their Christian identities can be traced back to their extended separation from the general Huron population. The Ursulines had intended for them to be anchors in the creation of a new Christian community, a plan which necessarily required them to favor their Christian identities over their Huron ones. Although older students arrived at the convent believing they would eventually return to their families, they would have become accustomed to seeking companionship among young women of other nations.

In the case of the student who refused to join her parents, her family had converted to Christianity before they were captured. Her parents' decision to give her a Christian education among the Ursulines and their acquiescence when she refused to leave suggest that she would have continued to enjoy spiritual support from her family had she chosen to leave with them.⁶⁹ Adhering to Christianity as a captive was dangerous, however, especially as it represented an identity that should have been discarded when an individual assimilated into their new village. The danger of life among the Iroquois would not have been attractive to a

⁶⁷ Trigger, B. 813

⁶⁸ *Correspondance* Appendix XVIII, 988

⁶⁹ *Correspondance* Appendix XVIII, 988

young convert living comfortably among the Ursulines; students increasingly long stays at the convent, however, developed a new type of Huron ambassador.

Although tension ran deep between the Iroquois and the remaining Huron, French officials during the 1650s took advantage of brief periods of peace to strengthen their own position in the region. In addition to sending the Jesuits out among the Iroquois, the French also encouraged negotiators to visit Quebec where they could see the French establishment and trade. The presence of Christian Hurons in captivity had already introduced French religious and cultural customs to the Iroquois; the Ursulines sought to use this to plant the seeds for more extensive missionary work. When Iroquois ambassadors, among them a female *Capitaine*, visited the convent in 1655 Marie de l'Incarnation specifically chose the Huron student Marie A8entonhon8en to represent the school's native students.

Marie de l'Incarnation's choice appears to have been one calculated to touch the hearts of her guests. Her visitors had come to negotiate the terms of a peace settlement which included a provision expressing Iroquois interest in Christianity and allowing two Jesuit priests to settle in their country.⁷⁰ In addition to their interest in French religion, this group of Iroquois had also encountered Père Simon le Moyne before they left for Quebec, the same Jesuit who was the last to contact Thérèse Oionhaton in 1646.⁷¹ Le Moyne had written to Marie de l'Incarnation confirming the ambassadors' interest in developing peace between the French and Iroquois. Marie de l'Incarnation uncovered a subtle connection between Thérèse's fragile enclave of Christian Huron and the Huron refugees by choosing Marie A8entonhon8en as the seminary's representative. Although there is no evidence that this was her intention, Marie de l'Incarnation's actions may have prompted her visitors to reflect on

⁷⁰ Marie de l'Incarnation to her Son, Lettre CLXVIII, 12 October 1655. *Correspondance* ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de Saint Pierre, 1971). 565

⁷¹ Lettre CLXVIII, 564

the network of Ursuline students developing throughout the region and their commitment to Christianity.

Certainly, the Iroquois visitors were very impressed by the education Marie A8entonhon8en displayed. Over the course of the five years she had lived at the school Marie learned to speak, sing, and write in Latin, French, and Huron. Marie's recital of the Catechism was followed by a short speech, where she exhorted her audience to make peace with the French so that her Iroquois "sisters" could join her at the convent as students.⁷² The *Capitainesse* was so impressed by the girl's demonstration that "...she promised her daughter [to the Ursulines] while caressing her [Marie] as only the Savages do."⁷³ Two of the visitors demonstrated such fervor that they were baptized at the convent chapel during their visit. Later, Père Chaumonot wrote to Marie de l'Incarnation saying the *Capitainesse* would soon be sending her sister to the school, since her daughter was too young to travel.⁷⁴ Regardless of the fruits of the Iroquois trip, however, the encounter represented a shift in the nuns' understanding of the Huron student community.

As long as Huron settlements and villages existed, the Ursulines had expected that their students would eventually return to a native setting. Faced with the drastic transformation war wrought on Christian families during the 1650s, however, the nuns considered new futures for Huron students. The conjecture that a native student might consider taking vows was repeated frequently in Marie de l'Incarnation's letters as Huron women began staying at the convent for periods of five to seven years. Additionally, it was not unusual for a student who had left the convent to return for either a short or an extended stay; both Marie A8entonhon8en and her mother Cécile Arepoatsi gradually accustomed

⁷² Lettre CLXVIII, 565

⁷³ Lettre CLXVIII, 565

⁷⁴ Lettre CLXVIII, 566

themselves to life outside the convent in this way.⁷⁵ Absences from the school as well as the Ursulines' large number of day-students were a result of the settled Christian Huron population in Quebec, making the missionary preparation Thérèse had once received redundant for later Huron students.

Instead, Marie de l'Incarnation's correspondence increasingly speaks of using Huron converts as a means of reaching out to other nations, primarily the Iroquois. The Jesuits' investment in maintaining ties with Christian groups among the Iroquois was complemented by Marie de l'Incarnation's interest in introducing potential Iroquois converts to the Huron in Quebec. In addition to showcasing Marie A8entonhon8en to the Iroquois ambassadors, the Jesuits and Ursulines arranged to have some Iroquois volunteers from the same group stay in Quebec's Huron settlement, "...delighted by the good example which our Christians have given them."⁷⁶ Although the Jesuits would never establish a very popular or successful mission among the Iroquois, their efforts did briefly help revitalize the relationship between the French and the Huron. The Ursulines continued to accept Huron students and identify them as such through the 1660s. None of these, however, achieved the same significance or leadership status as Thérèse Oionhaton and Marie A8entonhon8en had once done.⁷⁷

Conclusion:

Given the relatively small number of Huron students who graduated from the Ursuline convent during the period 1639-1655, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that their experiences were a significant factor in the decline and collapse of the Huron Confederacy. Even their presence at the school itself was only temporary, an experience

⁷⁵ *Régitre*, 30

⁷⁶ Lettre CLXVIII, 566

⁷⁷ Trudel, M. 207

which affected their personal lives and individual relations more than it did their neighbors. Examining these young women's lives at the convent during this period of upheaval does, however, demonstrate how vital the concept of community remained among Christian converts. The introduction of Christianity to traditional Huron society had effected a permanent transformation of its function; a fact which did directly lead to Huron dissolution. For a sedentary society where political office, community, and religion were intimately intertwined, the introduction of an isolated and uncommunicative faction was ultimately fatal.

The same characteristics which drove the development of these factions and transformed the lives of converts provided Ursuline graduates with the opportunity to preserve their personal identities when their Huron ones had been compromised. The continued loyalty of Huron students to the convent and their Ursuline teachers is a reflection of how deeply important the Christian community had become for them; unlike the captives who became resentful and distrustful towards the French, these young women found refuge in Quebec. Their relationship with Christianity as a spiritual and communal experience may only have been feasible with the personal, small-scale approach of the convent, but its results were effective enough to bear them through the tumult of the 1650s. The same religion which had divided their nation provided *seminaristes* with a lasting identity, regardless of whether they were captives of the Iroquois or refugees in Quebec. Marie de l'Incarnation would have considered their commitment to the faith evidence of her mission's success; her students, however, had been left with almost nothing else on which to rely.

CONCLUSION

Nearly four hundred years after Marie de l'Incarnation crossed the Atlantic, the Ursuline nuns still live and teach in Quebec City. What was once a female boarding school has now become a day school for both girls and boys, but the past is still cherished dearly. A small museum stands on the foundations of an original building from 1639, where visitors can admire embroidery and artifacts dating back to the convent's origins. One exhibit recreates the living conditions of early students; in the stairwell ascending to the second floor, the names of native *seminaristes* have been painted on the wall. Among these are Marie-Magdeleine Amiskoveian, Thérèse Oionhaton and Marie A8entonhon8en, reminders of the convent's original missionary ambitions.

Marie de l'Incarnation remained dedicated to her vocation until the end of her life, but old age introduced cynicism to her missionary aspirations. "It is something very difficult, if not to say impossible to Gallicize or civilize them [native girls]," she wrote to her son three years before her death, "...we have remarked that out of one hundred of those who have passed through our hands, we may have civilized one."¹ Marie remained fond of her students despite their failings, but her fascination with their piety and docility had vanished. Like the Jesuits before her, Marie had begun to realize that her own faith in Christianity was still not enough to completely replace native traditions. Her students were respectful and obedient, but they were not, as she put it, French.

The Ursuline school was distinctive for its development of community as part of the conversion process, a quality which appeared at first to solve the alienation and persecution that afflicted followers of the Jesuits. The nuns did fall into the trap of providing material

¹ Marie de l'Incarnation to her Son, Lettre CCXXXVII 1 September 1668. *Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes - Abbaye de Saint Pierre, 1971) 809

incentives, however, using food and clothing to attract native families to their convent.² Since Marie's records did not follow up with her students after they left the convent, there is no definite answer to why her students did not live up to her expectations. The issue of community, however, may have played one final role in this. It is possible that students, when placed in an environment as deeply religious as the convent, imitated their peers' behavior in order to be accepted. The Ursulines rewarded students who exhibited good Christian behavior and encouraged girls to examine each other for faults. Since most of the students had already been exposed to Christianity at home or with their families, it would not have been difficult for them to adapt to their new community's expectations.

The patterns of student behavior Marie observed in her letters lend possible support to the notion of faith under pressure. Miraculously short conversions, intense piety, and the emergence of influential native role models may have been symptoms of students' desire to be accepted. Some students did truly believe – they had been raised in families where conversion was a serious matter or had been raised by French missionaries almost their entire lives. The *seminaristes'* intense displays of devotion were surprising even to the nuns; Marie frequently wrote home saying that she had never seen such piety among the French.³ Her pessimism later in life, however, suggests converts were not able to maintain that fervor outside of the convent.

The school's focus on community produced the results Marie wished to see among her students, but she invariably worried when it came time for young women to return home. This was their most vulnerable time as Christians, especially if their peers influenced their

² Marie de l'Incarnation to P. Paul Le Jeune, Lettre XLIII, 3 September 1640. *Correspondance*, Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de Saint Pierre, 1971) 91.

³ Marie de l'Incarnation to P. Paul Le Jeune, Lettre XLII March 1640. *Correspondance*, Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye de Saint Pierre, 1971) 93

religious expression. Marie's main complaint in 1668 was that young women acted pious at the school but their faith waned once they returned to their families. If students were taught to rely on their community to behave appropriately, it may be that returning home provided them with a new set of standards to live by. At the convent girls were surrounded by religious fervor; at home, almost none of the Christian converts they met would have been exposed to the level of education seminary students received. An Ursuline graduate may have retained the habits she learned in school at first, but as time passed and she established her own family it seems reasonable to suggest her beliefs moderated.

Ironically, Christian native settlements seem to have been difficult places for Ursuline students to maintain their faith. Marie's anecdotes suggest her pupils endured longest when their faith was actively questioned or denied. Thérèse and Angèle used their Christian identity to outlast their intimidators, focusing on the convent's lessons to preserve their sense of self. Since they were defiantly opposed to the treatment they received, these young women clung to the memory of the Ursulines. In a more comfortable, Christian environment, however, students may have found it easy to become unconsciously absorbed into habits or beliefs the Ursulines denounced. The flaw in Ursuline education was that eventually students would leave.

In spite of disappointment and recidivism, the Ursuline convent persisted in offering religious education for young native women. Marie de l'Incarnation herself believed against all she had seen that Canada would someday be populated entirely by Christians. As a Christian, Marie's plan was for the future; eventually, if enough students passed through her convent, she could succeed.

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