



Of the Mission of St. Jean Baptiste at Onnontagué *Jesuit Relations* (1671-1672)

St. Jean Baptiste was a Catholic mission established by French missionaries of the Jesuit order. The mission was located in Onondaga (in French, Onontagué), an indigenous settlement in present-day New York state that functioned as the capital of the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois Confederacy. Each year, the Jesuits published in France a report of their missionaries' activities in France's North American territories; the selection below comes from one of those reports. A prominent figure in this selection is Garakontié, a leader in the Onondaga nation who, a couple of years before the events described here, had become Catholic. At his baptism, Garakontié had been given the Christian name Daniel.

From the Mission of St. Jean Baptiste, we receive information of two very encouraging circumstances, which plainly show us that the Faith has made great progress in that country. One is that thirty-nine persons have there received the grace of holy baptism—twenty of them entering soon after into the possession of glory. No doubt in the matter can be entertained concerning sixteen little children, while the remaining four, who were adults, gave in dying decided signs of predestination—especially a young man of twenty-five or twenty-six years. The personal kindness and help that he received from the priests of Montreal, after being ill-treated by some Frenchmen, aided not a little in winning him to God. All his family, unbelievers though they still were, often testified their gratitude and even showed themselves zealous for his salvation. His mother was the very first to make him pray to God and to invite Father Millet to instruct him—while a short time before his death, she hastened to the Father to warn him of her son's danger that he might help him to die well; and the dying man responded faithfully to all these bestowals of grace.

“I hope,” says Father Millet in his letter, “that he will not be the only Christian or the only predestined member of his family. The joy that they felt after his death, in the hope of his eternal happiness, is no small sign of their faith, and so they seem to me not very far from God's kingdom; while the great desire they evince to see the son again someday in heaven makes me hopeful of soon seeing them children of the Church.”

The other circumstance that must give much joy to all who desire to see God glorified in the conversion of these peoples is the constancy of their chief, Daniel Garakontié, in his high opinion of the faith and in his fidelity in everywhere making open profession of Christianity. He did this with all solemnity two years ago when, after being baptized at Quebec, he declared upon his return, in a public meeting, that he intended thenceforward to discharge no function of his office except so far as it should be in conformity with God's commandments. [...] The Father informs us in his last letter that Garakontié showed a truly Christian courage, the past winter, in an illness that brought him to death's door. His relatives and all the village, seeing themselves in danger of losing him, urged him with great importunity to permit, for the sake of being cured, the employment of the usual juggler's arts which pass for remedies in that country. To this he made constant and strenuous resistance. Nevertheless, a superstitious ceremony was executed in his cabin, after the custom of the jugglers when they undertake to cure some ailment. The Father, hearing of it, felt some suspicion that it had received the sick man's consent. He went to visit him

toward evening and found with him all the elders—who, believing his death to be near at hand, had come in a body to do him honor and bid him a last farewell. The sick man spoke first and said to him: “My Father, I was much distressed today on account of the ceremony which was performed, without my knowledge and out of my sight, at the other end of my cabin. ‘Alas!’ said I to myself, ‘what will Teharonhiagannra’”—Father Millet’s name—“‘think and say of me? He will believe me to be a hypocrite and dissembler.’ No, my Father, I have not changed my mind since my baptism, nor am I any longer the man to consent to such follies. I merely suffered myself to be scarified, and a little blood to be drawn from my head; but I do not think that I thereby offended God. I have too much spirit, Father, and have too solemnly promised God to keep his holy law all my life, to resume like a coward the old practices that I have renounced, and now once more renounce, with all my heart. No, my Father, I will never break my promise, even though my life should be at stake.” The Father strengthened him in these good resolutions, which afforded the company great edification.

[...A] speech from the mouth of a savage who [...] frankly declares the feelings of his heart often produces more effect upon these people’s minds than the words of the most zealous missionary—as is shown by two very recent instances. This same Daniel Garakontié, says Father de Lamberville in his letter of September 23rd, “having, on his homeward journey, encountered a kinswoman of his who was mortally ill, sought me out and asked me for some remedy for her. ‘My brother,’ said I to him, ‘the sole remedy that can avail her in her present state is baptism, to save her from hell. But she is utterly averse to receiving this sacrament, being obstinately bent on dying like her ancestors, whom she wishes to go and find in the so-called “land of souls.” If thou hast a true affection for her, exert all thy efforts to render her more docile; but make haste, for she has only a little longer to live.’ No sooner had I made this proposition to him”—these are the Father’s words—“than that genuine Christian, who possesses no attribute of the Iroquois savage but his birth and name, went to visit her and wrought on her so admirably by his zeal that she was thereupon sufficiently instructed to receive holy baptism—to the great satisfaction of all the family.”

The Father was still unable to gain access to another poor dying creature, for the purpose of speaking to her concerning her salvation, because she showed an intense aversion for such themes, as well as an incredible attachment to the native superstitions. In this difficulty, he had recourse to a woman who was a friend of that family; she was not yet a catechumen, and did not even attend prayers, but she had some knowledge of our mysteries and was well-intentioned. She met with such success from the very first time when she spoke to the sick woman about becoming a Christian, and cleverly contrived to predispose the latter so favorably toward the Father, that he was made most welcome in her cabin, and she never refused him a hearing thereafter. Being then sufficiently instructed, she was baptized; and soon after her baptism, she died a very Christian death. “Thus it is”—says the Father in closing his letter—“that in spite of intemperance, which reigns here to the greatest excess, and the other obstacles that hell is constantly opposing to the advancement of the faith, we are continually finding souls to win and fruits of the blood of Jesus Christ to gather.”

Source: Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, vol. 56 (Cleveland, OH: Burrows Brothers, 1899), 39-47, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044014366991>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Page-number indications in the source publication (marking page numbers in the original 1671-72 edition) omitted. An additional paragraph break inserted for readability. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation emended according to modern convention, except for the spelling of people’s names. Two commas omitted because rendered superfluous when part of the sentence was left out of the excerpt.

A handful of Christian terms capitalized in the source publication have been capitalized also in this edited text, as a gesture to the style of the original: *the Faith*, *the Church*, and all instances of *Father* (referring to priests). For the sake of readability, however, a number of other terms capitalized in the source have been converted here to lowercase, including the Christian terms *baptism*, *priests*, *heaven*, *missionary*, *sacrament*, *catechumen*, and *blood of Jesus*, as well as the following words used in reference to indigenous people: *chief*, *peoples*, *savages*, and *ancestors*.

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