

Historical Insights

by Daria Sockey

Joseph the Huron (by Antoinette Bosco)

Joseph the Huron is a surprise. We read his marvelous, inspiring story of faith and courage, and are left wondering why we have not heard of him before. There are many biographies for adults and children of St. Kateri, who was born a generation later. Numerous books about her were published for both adults and children long before she was honored by the Church with beatification and canonization. Although Joseph Chiwatenwa is given honorable mentions in various (now mostly out-of-print) works about the Jesuit missions to the Indians, there doesn't seem to be any book-length work about him other than this one by Antoinette Bosco, written for young people.

It's slightly ironic, but this 17th century Native North American is a role model for the New Evangelization. Pope St. John Paul II said that the New Evangelization movement would be new not in content—the faith does not change—but in its “ardor, methods, and expression.” How perfectly Joseph the Huron fits that description. His **ardor** made him want to speak of nothing but God and heaven to everyone around him; he didn't labor under the error that this was the “job” of the priests. So great was his joy to know the God of Love that he could not wait to share this good news with others. The **methods** Joseph and the Black Robes developed were certainly new: translating and paraphrasing the Mass into the Huron tongue while the Mass was in progress, and holding public Q&A “interviews” where Joseph played the role of seeker and skeptic as the Black Robes explained the faith. As to a new **expression**, Joseph Chiwatenwa's contribution cannot be overestimated. The Jesuits, despite their keen practical intellects, were often stymied in explaining many concepts to the Indians. The Quebec Jesuit superior, Fr. Jerome Lalemant, S.J. noted with dismay that the parables of Jesus were filled with items that, for the Hurons, did not exist: leaven or yeast, pearls, prison, mustard seeds, wine and wineskins, lamps, candles, sheep and sheepfolds. Joseph collaborated with the Black Robes in making connections between these unknowns and concepts that were familiar to the Huron culture.

At the same time, Joseph could embrace a break with cultural traditions for the sake of something greater. Joseph's early recognition of the beauty of faithful, lifelong marriage prepared him to receive the Gospel. The Christian ideal of marriage was a starting point which accustomed Joseph to taking the road less traveled. In this area Joseph's example is—once more—strangely relevant to our own times in a way that probably wasn't apparent to our author when she wrote this book in 1961. A “lived” respect for marriage (as opposed to lip service) has been declining for half a century. This decline has accelerated rapidly in the last decade as politics caught up with a post-Christian culture. Our current laws and culture assign even less meaning to marriage than did the spouse-swapping Hurons. Perhaps a new generation of converts will arise from the young, victims of sins against marriage and the family, who are searching, like Joseph Chiwatenwa, for a better way to live.

Internet research on Joseph will reward the researcher with a few additional facts about his life. As you search, keep in mind that there are alternate spellings of Joseph's Huron name. “Chiwatenwa” will give you one set of results, “Chiwatenha” will yield another, and “Chiwahthenha” a third. For an especially rewarding (and lengthy) piece, look up “Friends of God: The Early Native Huron Church in Canada.” This article contains the complete text of that

long prayer composed by Joseph which is quoted in *Joseph the Huron*. It also tells us that Therese, the native girl who went to school at the Ursuline convent and was captured by Iroquois, actually did *not* entirely disappear to history. She eventually married one of her Iroquois captors, and on several occasions had brief contact with itinerant Jesuits, letting them know that she still persevered in her faith, and that she was responsible for converting one other captive. The same article tells at length about the further missionary activities of Joseph Teondechoren and other Indian converts.* You may also wish to look up “The First Missionaries on Lake Champlain,” a chapter from an out-of-print book on New York History. This piece draws heavily on Jesuit records about the Huron converts, and confirms the information about Therese.

We might wonder why there apparently was no process launched for the eventual beatification and canonization of Joseph Chiwatenwa. He seems at least as worthy as St. Kateri Tekakwitha of this honor. The reasons are many and complex. The troubles faced by the Jesuits in Canada from the French/English/Indian wars led to their eventual expulsion from Canada by the victorious English and the seizure of all their property. Not long afterward, political intrigue in the Vatican brought about a suppression of the order which lasted for 40 years. Given these factors, it is remarkable that the causes of the North American martyrs (Isaac Jogues, Jean Brebeuf, and others) and eventually, that of Kateri Tekakwitha, were ever revived and completed. It is also understandable that the memory of a native martyr from the decimated Huron tribe came near to being lost altogether. Though Joseph may never be raised to the ranks of official saints, that should not stop any of us from remembering him, imitating his virtues, and asking his intercession in prayer. Indeed, the existence of these unofficial saints, whose lives we discover like hidden treasure, is heartening. They are signs that sanctity is not the purview of a chosen few, but the goal for all of us.

*This account also depicts Therese as a daughter of Joseph Chiwatenwa, rather than of his brother, Peter Saoekbata.