Dear Reverend Mutius Vitelleschi,

As for the mysteries of our faith (religion), although these are entirely new to their ears, they yet do not gainsay (oppose) them, or mock or scorn them; nay, rather they wonder, praise, and approve, though without keeping them long before their minds. They all have but one answer—"Such is not our custom; your world is different from ours; the God who created yours," they say, "did not create ours." In short, caught in Satan's snares, their evil habits still hold them back. Many, it is true, gladly worship the God whom we preach; but when opportunity for their old superstitions again arises, they scarcely abstain (stop) therefrom. Among other things that move them, they are frightened by the torment of hell; and, enticed by the joys of paradise, they open their eyes to the light of truth. Since we came here, two years ago, we have baptized more than 60. Of this number, some, both adults and children, have already gone to heaven, as we believe, or at least hope. We believe that many others must be allured by the prayers and examples of these. For parents yet surviving say that they do not wish to be separated from their children, and that where these have gone, they too will go after death.

Your Paternity's most humble servant, and obedient son in Christ,
(Signed)
J. DE BREBEUF
1636

Dear Reverend Mutius Vitelleschi,

Two things occurred this year, which somewhat checked (hindered) the progress of the gospel (conversions to Roman Catholicism). The first was a pestilence (disease), of unknown origin, which eight months ago spread through several villages, and caused the death of many. The divine providence (God) even so dealt with us (Jesuits) that we should not be exempt from the calamity (disease) .... The second obstacle arose from the tales spread among the people by followers of the devil,—that our Frenchmen, and we (the Jesuits) in particular, were the cause of this pestilence, and that our sole purpose in coming to their country was to compass their destruction (limit the number of Aboriginals) .... All this, moreover, not only estranged (alienated) several villages from us for a time, but also caused a determination on the part of some to remove us from their midst ....

Your Paternity's most humble servant, and obedient son in Christ,  
(Signed)  
J. DE BREBEUF  
1637

Letter from Father Jean de Brébeuf

Excerpt from a letter written by Jesuit Father Jean Brebeuf in 1637 to Reverend Father Mutius Vitelleschi, leader of the Jesuits in Rome. The letter was published in the Jesuit Relations, an annual publication of reports and letters from Jesuit missionaries. Often reports were transcribed and altered several times before publication.

Dear Reverend Mutius Vitelleschi,

We are gladly heard, we have baptized more than two hundred this year, and there is hardly a village that has not invited us to go to it. Besides, the result of this pestilence (disease) and of these reports has been to make us better known to this people; and at last it is understood, from our actions and from our truths (of religion), that we have not come hither to buy skins (furs) or carry on any traffic (trade), but solely to teach them and win them to Christ...

Your Paternity’s most humble servant, and obedient son in Christ,
(Signed)
J. DE BREBEUF
1637

Observations of Jesuit missionaries

Excerpts from a book written by Swedish Explorer Peter Kalm entitled Travels into North America, published in 1770 following his visit to North America.

All their business here is to convert the heathens (natives); and with that view, their missionaries are scattered over every part of this country. Near every town and village, peopled by converted Indians, are one or two Jesuits who take great care that they may not return to paganism, but live as Christians ought to do. Thus there are Jesuits with the converted Indians in Tadoussac, Lorette, Becancourt, St. Francois, Sault St. Louis, and all over Canada. There are likewise Jesuit missionaries with those who are not converted; so that there is commonly a Jesuit in every village belonging to the Indians, whom he endeavors on all occasions to convert ....

Peter Kalm
1770

The martyrdom of Jesuit missionaries, 1648

Painting made by Jesuit Father du Creux in 1664 depicting the killing of Jesuit missionaries in 1649 at Mission de Sainte-Marie. Father du Creux was not present during the actual incident.

(Accessed December 30, 2011) © Northern Blue Publishing
The Hurons have embraced Christianity

Excerpt from a letter written by Father Antoine Silvy from Fort Pontchartrain. The date of the letter’s publication and intended recipient are both unknown. Silvy was born in France, where he trained as a missionary with the Jesuit Society of Jesus before conducting many journeys to North America between the years 1673 and 1708. Many historians believe this letter was written to an authority figure in the Jesuit order.

Sir:

As I have told you of the Ottawas in my preceding letters I shall tell you know of the Hurons .... They bury their dead dressed in all their war accoutrements after they have anointed and painted them so that they do not reach the other world looking like some miserable wretch. They place them on little scaffolds of wood on their graves on which their token has been carved.

These Indians have missionaries and have embraced Christianity with great enthusiasm making the best Catholics. One can also say that among all the Indians, the King (God) has none more Faithful to him. They number sixty warriors.

(Signed)
Father Antoine Silvy

A varied response to Jesuit and Récollets missionaries in the Canadian colony

Excerpt from a letter written by Father Antoine Silvy from Fort Pontchartrain. The date of the letter’s publication and intended recipient are both unknown. Silvy was born in France, where he trained as a missionary with the Jesuit Society of Jesus before conducting many journeys to North America between the years 1673 and 1708. Many historians believe this letter to be written to an authority figure in the Jesuit order.

Comments in brackets are not part of the original document. They have been added to assist the reader with difficult words.

Sir:

All the Indian missions of this colony are strongholds surrounded by stones, except those of the Hurons. One or two missionaries live with them and give all possible care and instruction to persuade them to live according to our religion. They teach them our rites and encourage them to abandon drunkenness, their chief vice.

They have succeeded well in regard to the Hurons who love four leagues from Quebec on the North Shore of the river. These are the obedient Indians who drink neither whiskey, wine nor beer.

It seems marvelous that Indians whose one greatest passion is to drink and to inebriate themselves are persuaded to not drink at all although having every opportunity to do so. They are always in town coming to trade or sell the wares they possess ....

All these missions are controlled by the Jesuits except those of Sault au Récollets and Nipissing which are controlled by the priests of the Seminary of Montreal. Those of the Micmacs are managed by a priest of the Quebec Seminary and by a Récollets Father, the same as at Fort Frontenac and Fort Pontchartrain of Detroit.

Fire and Fear of being wounded by arrows are risks these missionaries run. The Iroquois have burned some, binding them to the stake and piercing them with arrows. Some drunkards or Indians who appear to be drunk, come and hurl stones at them when the missionaries notify the villagers of prayers. Other Indians hunt them in their cabins, abuse them when they come to teach, casting all manner of blasphemies and thousands of wrongs on them. But none of this dissuades them and they do all they can to convert them.

(Signed)
Father Antoine Silvy

Are only the sick willing to convert?

Excerpt from a letter written in 1637 by Francois le Mercier that was published in Jesuit Relations, an annual publication of reports and letters from Jesuit missionaries. Often reports were transcribed and altered several times before publication.

Comments in brackets are not part of the original document. They have been added to assist the reader with difficult words.

Jesuit Relations
1637

On the twelfth of, Father Pijart made a trip to Khinoaacreant, three little hamlets two leagues from us. There he encountered a man who seemed about to die. He took the opportunity to instruct him and speak to him of baptism. The sick man listened to him willingly at first, and even indicated that he would be glad to be baptized. But his wife, coming unexpectedly, turned him from his purpose (changed his mind), telling him that it would not be proper for him to go to heaven, since none of his relatives were there. She told the Father that he need not go to any further trouble, especially as the sick man was not in the possession of his faculties (not mentally stable) and did not now know what he was saying. And so matters went no further, though fortunately for him, his sickness was not fatal.

It is a thing altogether worthy of compassion to see how some of them take the speeches we give them about heaven. On one occasion, an Indian told father superior that they were not very well pleased when we asked the sick where they wished to go after death, to heaven or to hell. "That is not right," said he. "We ourselves do not ask such questions, for we always hope that they will not die and that they will recover their health." Another one said, "For my part, I have no desire to go to heaven; I know no one there, and the French who are there would not care to give me anything to eat." For the most part, they think of nothing but their stomachs and of the means for prolonging this miserable life ....

On the same day, we baptized in our village an Indian named Onendouerha and his wife, both of whom were very ill. Some days before, they had asked for baptism with a great deal of fervor and thoroughly satisfied the father superior when it became necessary to instruct them individually. Yet both are still in good health. It is a source of grief to us that because we have not yet wholly converted towns, we afterward get nothing but empty words from these new Christians, whom we baptized only when they appeared to be on death’s door. (If they recover), the torrent of old customs and common superstitions bears them away. We are daily expecting that it will please God to take care of this, and we hope soon to be granted this favor from heaven.

Francois le Mercier

Excerpts from a letter written by Jean Pierron between 1669 and 1670 that was published as part of the Jesuit Relations, an annual publication of reports and letters from Jesuit missionaries. Often reports were transcribed and altered several times before publication.

Comments in brackets are not part of the original document. They have been added to assist the reader with difficult words.

Jesuit Relations
1669–1670

In eight months I have baptized only fifty-three persons, nearly all of whom have gone to heaven. If I have contributed to the salvation of even one soul, I should consider myself more than adequately recompensed for all my efforts, for Christ gave his blood for that soul.

I have made use of every device that God has suggested to me to make them give up their bad habits, for to convert these peoples, you must begin by touching their hearts before you can convince their minds. It is with this in mind that I painted some spiritual and devout pictures that have been powerful assistance in teaching them. I do the catechism twice a day, with all the success that could be expected of these poor Indians, though I often was surprised at the quite extraordinary impression that the word of God made on their souls.

I have attacked drunkenness and debauchery (excessive indulgence in sexual pleasures), which are, as it were, the divinities (god-like) of this country, for these people are madly attached to them. These vices I have combated by invoking fear of God’s judgment and, along with that, the dread of the armed might of a great king, whose name alone is enough to hold them to their duty. I have tried to win them over with the greatest possible gentleness and intimacy.

At first I had thought that, in order to establish Christianity on a solid basis among these peoples, it was necessary to make use of reading and writing, two things of which the Indians have no knowledge. Accordingly, I spent months teaching both to our Iroquois children and, as a result, some of them did learn to read and write fairly well. But I did not have a sufficient supply of the little rewards that one needs to keep children interested in this pursuit, and, moreover, I was left with too little time for the essential duties of my mission. And so I had to find some other expedient (method) which would be just as effective but would leave me more time for the responsibilities of my ministry.

Some days later, God inspired me with an idea that is much easier and which produces great results among these peoples. It is a game designed to capture our Indians by means of what they most love, for gaming (playing games) constitutes their principle activity when they are not at war. Thus, I hope to bring them to their salvation through the very thing that so often brought about their ruin.

... This game communicates its message through pictures and provides sound instruction by means of the emblems with which it is filled. Those who wish to amuse themselves with it have only to look at it to learn all that they have to do to live a Christian life. They will remember all that they have learned and never be able to forget it.

A Jesuit preaches to a first Nations crowd

Drawing completed by C. W. Jefferys was published in his book The picture gallery of Canadian history in 1942.
Work of the missionaries

Excerpt from a teaching guide created by the Critical Thinking Consortium entitled, Early contact and settlement in New France, published in 2002.

… Even with the financial and moral support of the French government, the Jesuits had little success in Christianizing the Aboriginal people. Parents refused to send their children to be educated in the Catholic missions unless bribed and the children who remained frequently ran away, grew ill or died. The Jesuit practice of corporal punishment (i.e., using physical means of punishing misbehaviour) was foreign to Aboriginal child-raising practices. Marie de l’Incarnation started the Ursuline Order in France and was invited to New France by the Jesuits in the hope that the Ursuline Order would be more successful in converting Aboriginal people to Catholicism or to a European way of life. The hospitals they established were more successful than the schools.

A number of Aboriginal people agreed to leave their sick and aged in what they called the “House of Death” (due to its high mortality rate), rather than leave them to die during summer migrations, as was their culture. These hospitals, which were originally created to meet the health needs of Aboriginal communities, began caring for the slowly growing French Canadian population. These religious hospitals became the primary source of medical care for French Canadians until late 20th century in Quebec.

Mother Marie de l’Incarnation teaching Indian children


At the outset, missionaries of both sexes believed they would easily Frenchify the Native peoples, but the opposite happened instead. The conversion of Native peoples required considerable effort on the part of French missionaries, who had to explain God and the mysteries of the Christian faith in Native languages which they had to learn by ear, without dictionaries or reference works.

Although not a complete failure, results among Native peoples were disappointing. First of all, in their own communities Native children generally enjoyed completely liberty until puberty. This made being shut away and subjected to strict discipline both difficult and disheartening for them. To make matters worse, the content of French teaching (reading, writing, learning a trade) bore no relation to the actual needs of Native peoples. All of their learning traditionally came from community elders and included mythology and spirituality, as well as the teaching of practical skills in agriculture, hunting, fishing, trapping, food preservation, survival in the forest, pharmacopeia, crafts, etc.

As for the failure of “civilization”—despite the repeated orders of the King, and his wish that all “savages” be Frenchified, in order to assimilate with the French—it is easily explained. For one thing, Native peoples had a traditional lifestyle that was nothing like that of Europeans. More to the point, the French language had no use to Native peoples, even in commerce, since the fur trade was conducted solely in Native languages.

Questioning the reliability of Jesuit first-hand accounts


Certainly, the Jesuits were relatively successful as missionaries, and their descriptions of their successes are not solely exaggerations. However, their need to create a favourable impression in the minds of potential financial supporters, as well as their need to gain points against their critics, cannot be overlooked in any consideration of the ideals of Christian Piety and devotion represented in Relations. On more than one occasion, the Jesuits referred to the Relations and their accounts of the good behaviour of Christians as a form of tribute which their audience expected them to provide. Whether intentionally or not, the Jesuits use their Relations to advance points of doctrine and theology, and their representations of newly converted Christians were useful devices for illustrating the possibility of a natural grace and for arguing that all human beings were capable of salvation.

In 1632, Cardinal Richelieu gave the Jesuits a monopoly over the Canadian mission field. Their work began in earnest. Yet when they opened a school for Native children, they encountered the same problem as the Récollets had.

Enlisting Native students was difficult because their parents often refused to let the children go. The priests had to give presents to the parents in order to gain students for the seminary. Many students ran away, and others became ill and died. The deaths increased the parents’ resistance to their children’s schooling, as did the French custom of physically punishing children, a practice foreign to the Natives’ approach to child-rearing.

The arrival of the Ursuline nuns in Quebec in 1639 marked the beginning of their outreach to the First Nations. The Jesuits invited them to Christianize and to “civilize” the young Native girls. But the Ursulines, despite determined efforts on their part, had little success. In 1668, Marie de L’Incarnation, founder of the Ursuline Order in New France, wrote, “We have observed that of a hundred that have passed through our hands we have scarcely civilized one. We find docility [easy to be taught or trained] and intelligence in these girls but, when we are least expecting it, they clamber over our wall and go off to run with their kinsmen in the woods, finding more to please them there than in all amenities of our French house.”

The Ursulines proved more successful in their hospital work. A number of First Nations people agreed to leave their aged and infirm at what they called “house of death” (the mortality rate being so high) rather than to abandon them to die while travelling to their hunting territories.