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## 5. Father Jean de Brébeuf on the Customs and Beliefs of the Hurons (1635)

*Source: Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610–1791 (Cleveland, 1896–1901), Vol. 12, pp. 117–24.*

With its small white population and emphasis on the fur trade rather than agricultural settlement, the viability of New France depended on friendly relations with local Indians. The French neither appropriated substantial amounts of Indian land like the English nor conquered native inhabitants militarily and set them to forced labor, as in Spanish America. The Jesuits, a missionary religious order, sought to convert Indians to

Catholicism. One of the Jesuit missionaries to the Huron people in modern-day Quebec, Jean de Brébeuf, left a vivid description of the lives and customs of the Indians. In the following excerpt, he dwells upon their religious beliefs, marriage customs, and gender relations—all aspects of Indian life that seemed very alien to Europeans—and describes how he tried to convert them. De Brébeuf was killed after being captured during a war between Hurons and Iroquois in 1649.

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IT REMAINS NOW to say something of the country, of the manners and customs of the Hurons, of the inclination they have to the Faith, and of our insignificant labors.

As to the first, the little paper and leisure we have compels me to say in a few words what might justly fill a volume. The Huron country is not large, its greatest extent can be traversed in three or four days. Its situation is fine, the greater part of it consisting of plains. It is surrounded and intersected by a number of very beautiful lakes or rather seas, whence it comes that the one to the North and to the Northwest is called "fresh-water sea." [Lake Huron] . . . There are twenty Towns, which indicate about 30,000 souls speaking the same tongue, which is not difficult to one who has a master. It has distinctions of genders, number, tense, person, moods; and, in short, it is very complete and very regular, contrary to the opinion of many. . . .

It is so evident that there is a Divinity who has made Heaven and earth that our Hurons cannot entirely ignore it. But they misapprehend him grossly. For they have neither Temples, nor Priests, nor Feasts, nor any ceremonies.

They say that a certain woman called *Eataensic* is the one who made earth and man. They give her an assistant, one named *Jouskeha*, whom they declare to be her little son, with whom she governs the world. This *Jouskeha* has care of the living, and of the things that concern life, and consequently they say that he is good. *Eataensic* has care of souls; and, because they believe that she makes men die, they say that she is wicked. And there are among them mysteries so

hidden that only the old men, who can speak with authority about them, are believed.

This God and Goddess live like themselves, but without famine; make feasts as they do, are lustful as they are; in short, they imagine them exactly like themselves. And still, though they make them human and corporeal, they seem nevertheless to attribute to them a certain immensity in all places.

They say that this *Eataensis* fell from the Sky, where there are inhabitants as on earth, and when she fell, she was with child. If you ask them who made the sky and its inhabitants, they have no other reply than that they know nothing about it. And when we preach to them of one God, Creator of Heaven and earth, and of all things, and even when we talk to them of Hell and Paradise and of our other mysteries, the headstrong reply that this is good for our Country and not for theirs; that every Country has its own fashions. But having pointed out to them, by means of a little globe that we had brought, that there is only one world, they remain without reply.

I find in their marriage customs two things that greatly please me; the first, that they have only one wife; the second, that they do not marry their relatives in a direct or collateral line, however distant they may be. There is, on the other hand, sufficient to censure, were it only the frequent changes the men make of their wives, and the women of their husbands.

They believe in the immortality of the soul, which they believe to be corporeal. The greatest part of their Religion consists of this point. We have seen several stripped, or almost so, of all their goods, because several of their friends were dead, to whose souls they had made presents. Moreover, dogs, fish, deer, and other animals have, in their opinion, immortal and reasonable souls. In proof of this, the old men relate certain fables, which they represent as true; they make no mention either of punishment or reward, in the place to which souls go after death. And so they do not make any distinction between the good and the bad, the virtuous and the vicious; and they honor equally the interment of both, even as we have seen in

the case of a young man who poisoned himself from the grief he felt because his wife had been taken away from him. Their superstitions are infinite, their feast, their medicines, their fishing, their hunting, their wars,—in short almost their whole life turns upon this pivot; dreams, above all have here great credit.

As regards morals, the Hurons are lascivious, although in two leading points less so than many Christians, who will blush some day in their presence. You will see no kissing nor immodest caressing; and in marriage a man will remain two or three years apart from his wife, while she is nursing. They are gluttons, even to disgorging; it is true, that does not happen often, but only in some superstitious feasts,—these, however, they do not attend willingly. Besides they endure hunger much better than we,—so well that after having fasted two or three entire days you will see them still paddling, carrying loads, singing, laughing, bantering, as if they had dined well. They are very lazy, are liars, thieves, pertinacious beggars. Some consider them vindictive; but, in my opinion, this vice is more noticeable elsewhere than here.

We see shining among them some rather noble moral virtues. You note, in the first place, a great love and union, which they are careful to cultivate by means of their marriages, of their presents, of their feasts, and of their frequent visits. On returning from their fishing, their hunting, and their trading, they exchange many gifts; if they have thus obtained something unusually good, even if they have bought it, or if it has been given to them, they make a feast to the whole village with it. Their hospitality towards all sorts of strangers is remarkable; they present to them, in their feasts, the best of what they have prepared, and, as I have already said, I do not know if anything similar, in this regard, is to be found anywhere. They never close the door upon a Stranger, and, once having received him into their houses, they share with him the best they have; they never send him away, and when he goes away of his own accord, he repays them by a simple "thank you."

About the month of December, the snow began to lie on the ground, and the savages settled down into the village. For, during the whole Summer and Autumn, they are for the most part either in their rural cabins, taking care of their crops, or on the lake fishing, or trading; which makes it not a little inconvenient to instruct them. Seeing them, therefore, thus gathered together at the beginning of this year, we resolved to preach publicly to all, and to acquaint them with the reason of our coming into their Country, which is not for their furs, but to declare to them the true God and his son, Jesus Christ, the universal Saviour of our souls.

The usual method that we follow is this: We call together the people by the help of the Captain of the village, who assembles them all in our house as in Council, or perhaps by the sound of the bell. I use the surplice and the square cap, to give more majesty to my appearance. At the beginning we chant on our knees the *Pater noster*, translated into Huron verse. Father Daniel, as its author, chants a couplet alone, and then we all together chant it again; and those among the Hurons, principally the little ones, who already know it, take pleasure in chanting it with us. That done, when every one is seated, I rise and make the sign of the Cross for all; then, having recapitulated what I said last time, I explain something new. After that we question the young children and the girls, giving a little bead of glass or porcelain to those who deserve it. The parents are very glad to see their children answer well and carry off some little prize, of which they render themselves worthy by the care they take to come privately to get instruction. On our part, to arouse their emulation, we have each lesson retraced by our two little French boys, who question each other,—which transports the Savages with admiration. Finally the whole is concluded by the talk of the Old Men, who propound their difficulties, and sometimes make me listen in my turn to the statement of their belief.

Two things among others have aided us very much in the little we have been able to do here, by the grace of our Lord; the first is, as I have already said, the good health that God has granted us in the

midst of sickness so general and so widespread. The second is the temporal assistance we have rendered to the sick. Having brought for ourselves some few delicacies, we shared them with them, giving to one a few prunes, and to another a few raisins, to others something else. The poor people came from great distances to get their share.

## Questions

1. Which aspects of Indian practices and beliefs does de Brébeuf find admirable and which does he criticize most strongly?
2. How do Huron gender and family relations seem to differ from those of Europeans?

*"We saw also a hideous monster . . ."*

## JOLLIET AND MARQUETTE TRAVEL THE MISSISSIPPI

June 10–17, 1673

FATHER JACQUES MARQUETTE

**T**he Jesuit Jacques Marquette founded missions at Sault Ste. Marie and St. Ignace in present-day Michigan before joining the voyage of Louis Jolliet, a Jesuit-educated explorer, down the Mississippi. They started from the Bay of Puan, now Green Bay.

The explorations of Jolliet, Marquette, and others such as Robert Cavelier and Sieur de La Salle helped the French establish outposts in the Great Lakes and Mississippi regions. (In 1682 La Salle claimed the river and all of its tributaries for France. He named the region Louisiana, after King Louis XIV. He also tried to honor Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the king's legendary minister of finance, by renaming the river "Le Colbert.")

The French outposts hindered the westward movement of the British colonists, leading to the French and Indian War in the 1750s (see page 45).

This bay is about thirty leagues long, and eight broad in its greatest breadth, for it grows narrower and forms a cone at the extremity. It has tides that ebb as regular as the sea. We left this bay to go to a river [the Fox River] that discharges itself therein. . . . It flows very gently. . . . We next came to a village of the Maskoutens, or nation of fire. . . .

The next day, being the 10th of June, the two guides [from the Miami tribe] embarked with us in sight of all the village, who were astonished at our attempting so dangerous an expedition. We were informed that at three leagues from the Maskoutens, we should find a river which runs into the Mississippi, and that we were to go to the west-south-west to find it, but there were so many marshes and lakes, that if it had not been for our guides we could not have found it.

The river upon which we rowed and had to carry our canoes from one to the other, looked more like a corn-field than a river, insomuch that we could hardly find its channel. As our guides had been frequently at this portage, they knew the way, and helped us to carry our canoes overland into the other river, distant about two miles and a half; from whence they returned home, leaving us in an unknown country, having nothing to rely

upon but Divine Providence. We now left the waters which extend to Quebec, about five or six hundred leagues, to take those which would lead us hereafter into strange lands.

Before embarking we all offered up prayers to the Holy Virgin, which we continued to do every morning, placing ourselves and the events of the journey under her protection, and after having encouraged each other, we got into our canoes. The river upon which we embarked is called Mesconsin [Wisconsin]; the river is very wide, but the sand bars make it very difficult to navigate, which is increased by numerous islands covered with grape vines.

The country through which it flows is beautiful; the groves are so dispersed in the prairies that it makes a noble prospect; and the fruit of the trees shows a fertile soil. These groves are full of walnut, oak, and other trees unknown to us in Europe. We saw neither game nor fish, but roebuck and buffaloes in great numbers. After having navigated thirty leagues we discovered some iron mines, and one of our company who had seen such mines before, said these were very rich in ore. They are covered with about three feet of soil, and situate near a chain of rocks, whose base is covered with fine timber. After having rowed ten leagues further, making forty leagues from the place where we had embarked, we came into the Mississippi on the 17th of June.

Behold us, then, upon this celebrated river, whose singularities I have attentively studied. The Mississippi takes its rise in several lakes in the North. Its channel is very narrow at the mouth of the Mesconsin, and runs south until it is affected by very high hills. Its current is slow, because of its depth. In sounding we found nineteen fathoms of water. A little further on it widens nearly three-quarters of a league, and the width continues to be more equal. We slowly followed its course to the south and south-east to the  $42^{\circ}$  N. lat. Here we perceived the country change its appearance. There were scarcely any more woods or mountains. The islands are covered with fine trees, but we could not see any more roebucks, buffaloes, bustards, and swans.

We met from time to time monstrous fish, which struck so violently against our canoes, that at first we took them to be large trees, which threatened to upset us. We saw also a hideous monster; his head was like that of a tiger, his nose was sharp, and somewhat resembled a wildcat; his beard was long; his ears stood upright; the color of his head was gray; and his neck black. He looked upon us for some time, but as we came near him our oars frightened him away.

When we threw our nets into the water we caught an abundance of sturgeons, and another kind of fish like our trout, except that the eyes and



nose are much smaller, and they have near the nose a bone like a woman's busk, three inches broad and a foot and a half long, the end of which is flat and broad, and when it leaps out of the water the weight of it throws it on its back.

Having descended the river as far as  $41^{\circ}28'$  we found that turkeys took the place of game, and the Pisikious that of other animals. We called the Pisikious wild buffaloes, because they very much resemble our domestic oxen; they are not so long, but twice as large. We shot one of them, and it was as much as thirteen men could do to drag him from the place where he fell.

About the end of June, we embarked in presence of all the village, who admired our birch canoes, as they had never before seen anything like them. We descended the river, looking for another called Pekitanoni [the Missouri] which runs from the north-west into the Mississippi, of which I will speak more hereafter.

As we were descending the river we saw high rocks with hideous monsters painted on them, and upon which the bravest Indians dare not look. They are as large as a calf, with head and horns like a goat; their eyes red; beard like a tiger's; and a face like a man's. Their tails are so long that they pass over their heads and between their fore legs, under their belly, and ending like a fish's tail. They are painted red, green, and black. They are so well drawn that I cannot believe they were drawn by the Indians. And for what purpose they were made seems to me a great mystery.

As we fell down the river, and while we were discoursing upon these monsters, we heard a great rushing and bubbling of waters, and small islands of floating trees coming from the mouth of the Pekitanoni [Missouri], with such rapidity that we could not trust ourselves to go near it. The water of this river is so muddy that we could not drink it. It so discolors the Mississippi as to make the navigation of it dangerous. This river comes from the north-west, and empties into the Mississippi, and on its banks are situated a number of Indian villages. We judged by the compass, that the Mississippi discharged itself into the Gulf of Mexico.

Having satisfied ourselves, we resolved to return home. We considered that the advantage of our travels would be altogether lost to our nation if we fell into the hands of the Spaniards, from whom we could expect no other treatment than death or slavery.

PAUL LE JEUNE AND JEROME LALEMANT

FROM *The Jesuit Relations* (1640)

*The Jesuit priests Paul Le Jeune and Jerome Lalemant were missionaries to the native peoples in the territories claimed by France. In the Relation of 1640, Father Le Jeune reported from Quebec while Father Lalemant corresponded from the mission among*

the Hurons. These highly educated and dedicated men, along with other missionaries, learned the languages and gained an understanding of the cultures of the native peoples as they lived among them and worked to convert them to Christianity. They wrote extensively of their experiences among the Algonquin and Iroquoian peoples. While the missionaries expressed some appreciation of certain aspects of native cultures, such as a lack of avariciousness, they did not see the cultures as civilized. Their observations thus reveal not only native ways but also how Europeans thought of Indians in comparison to themselves. In 1639 and 1640, a smallpox epidemic spread through the St. Lawrence Valley and into the interior of Canada. Reports on the contagion show not only its fatal course but also how women in religious orders were integral to the mission. On the other hand, the reports also show how the spreading sickness increased the animosity of many natives toward the priests in their midst. Some Native Americans saw the "Black Robes" as evil sorcerers while the missionaries, in turn, often denigrated the natives' spirits and spiritual leaders as demons.

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## Of the Hospital.

The hospital Nuns arrived at Kébec on the first day of the month of August of last year. Scarcely had they disembarked before they found themselves overwhelmed with patients. The hall of the Hospital being too small, it was necessary to erect some cabins, fashioned like those of the Savages, in their garden. Not having enough furniture for so many people, they had to cut in two or three pieces part of the blankets and sheets they had brought for these poor sick people. In a word, instead of taking a little rest, and refreshing themselves after the great discomforts they had suffered upon the sea, they found themselves so burdened and occupied that we had fear of losing them and their hospital at its very birth. The sick came from all directions in such numbers, their stench was so insupportable, the heat so great, the fresh food so scarce and so poor, in a country so new and strange, that I do not know how these good sisters, who almost had not even leisure in which to take a little sleep, endured all these hardships. . . . All the French born

in the country were attacked by this contagion, as well as the Savages. . . .

In brief, from the month of August until the month of May, more than one hundred patients entered the hospital, and more than two hundred poor Savages found relief there, either in temporary treatment or in sleeping there one or two nights, or more. There have been seen as many as ten, twelve, twenty, or thirty of them at a time. Twenty poor sick people have received holy Baptism there; and about twenty-four, quitting this house of mercy, have entered the regions of glory. . . .

. . . Father Claude Pijard, who has had charge of the instruction of the poor of this house, during the entire winter, has given me a little relation, couched in these terms: "In the morning, we had the Savages say prayers, and, some time after, the holy Mass was celebrated, at which those who had been baptized were present; after dinner, we had them recite the catechism, and then gave them a little explanation of it, usually adding some pious story that one of the Savages repeated. In the

evening, they made their examination of conscience; they confessed and received communion every two weeks, and would have done so oftener if we had permitted them. They showed their devotion by often visiting the most holy Sacrament, by saying their rosary several times a day, by singing spiritual canticles, which have succeeded their barbarous songs,—in short, by fasting throughout the sacred forty days, for those who could do so. . . .”

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“I have often wondered,” says the Mother [Superior], “how these persons, so different in country, age, and sex, can agree so well. In France, a Nun has to be on her guard every day in our houses, to prevent disputes among our poor, or to quell them; and all winter we have not observed the least discord among our sick Savages,—not even a slight quarrel has arisen.

“The remedies that we brought from Europe are very good for the Savages, who have no difficulty in taking our medicines, nor in having themselves bled. The love of the mothers toward their children is very great, for they take in their own mouths the medicine intended for their children, and then pass it into the mouths of their little ones.” Thus the good Mother wrote to me.

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The Savages who leave the hospital, and who come to see us again at St. Joseph, or at the three Rivers, say a thousand pleasant things about these good Nuns. They call them “the good,” “the liberal,” “the charitable.” The Mother Superior having fallen sick, these poor Savages were very sorry, the sick blaming themselves for it. “It is we who have made her sick,” they said; “she loves us too much; why does she do so much for us?” When this good Mother, having recovered, entered the hall of the poor, they knew not how to welcome her enough. They have good reason to love these good Mothers: for I do not know that parents have so sweet, so strong, and so constant an affection for their children as these good women have for their patients. I have often seen them so

overwhelmed that they were utterly exhausted; yet I have never heard them complain, either of the too great number of their patients, or of the infection, or of the trouble they gave them. They have hearts so loving and so tender towards these poor people that, if occasionally some little present were given them, one could be very certain that they would not taste it, however greatly they might need it, everything being dedicated and consecrated to their sick. This charity had to be moderated, and an order was given them to eat at least a part of the little gifts that were made to them, especially when they were not strong. I am not surprised if the Savages, who recognize very clearly this great charity, love, cherish, and honor them.

Father Buteux wrote, some days ago, to the Reverend Father Superior that a woman who had remained a long time at the hospital did a great deal of good among the Savages of her nation, instructing them with much fervor. This is the common practice of those who have passed the winter in this holy house; they afterwards preach to their compatriots with great zeal.

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## [Of the Condition of the Country.]

Let us come to the disease which, having put everything in desolation, gave us much exercise, but was also an occasion of much consolation to us,—God having given us hardly any other harvest than from that quarter.

It was upon the return from the journey which the Hurons had made to Kébec, that it started in the country,—our Hurons, while again on their way up here, having thoughtlessly mingled with the Algonquins, whom they met on the route, most of whom were infected with smallpox. The first Huron who introduced it came ashore at the foot of our house, newly built on the bank of a lake,—whence being carried to his own village, about a

league distant from us, he died straightway after. Without being a great prophet, one could assure one's self that the evil would soon be spread abroad through all these regions: for the Hurons—no matter what plague or contagion they may have—live in the midst of their sick, in the same indifference, and community of all things, as if they were in perfect health. In fact, in a few days, almost all those in the cabin of the deceased found themselves infected; then the evil spread from house to house, from village to village, and finally became scattered throughout the country.

## Of the Persecutions Excited Against Us.

The villages nearer to our new house having been the first ones attacked, and most afflicted, the devil did not fail to seize his opportunity for reawakening all the old imaginations, and causing the former complaints of us, and of our sojourn in these quarters, to be renewed; as if it were the sole cause of all their misfortunes, and especially of the sick. They no longer speak of aught else, they cry aloud that the French must be massacred. These barbarians animate one another to that effect; the death of their nearest relatives takes away their reason, and increases their rage against us so strongly in each village that the best informed can hardly believe that we can survive so horrible a storm. They observed, with some sort of reason, that, since our arrival in these lands, those who had been the nearest to us, had happened to be the most ruined by the diseases, and that the whole villages of those who had received us now appeared utterly exterminated; and certainly, they said, the same would be the fate of all the others if the course of this misfortune were not stopped by the massacre of those who were the cause of it. This was a common opinion, not only in private conversation but in the general councils held on this account, where the plurality of the votes went for our death,—there being only a few elders who thought they greatly obliged us by resolving upon banishment.

What powerfully confirmed this false imagination was that, at the same time, they saw us dispersed throughout the country,—seeking all sorts of ways to enter the cabins, instructing and baptizing those most ill with a care which they had never seen. No doubt, they said, it must needs be that we had a secret understanding with the disease (for they believe that it is a demon), since we alone were all full of life and health, although we constantly breathed nothing but a totally infected air,—staying whole days close by the side of the most foul-smelling patients, for whom every one felt horror; no doubt we carried the trouble with us, since, wherever we set foot, either death or disease followed us.

In consequence of all these sayings, many had us in abomination; they expelled us from their cabins, and did not allow us to approach their sick, and especially children: not even to lay eyes on them,—in a word, we were dreaded as the greatest sorcerers on earth.

Wherein truly it must be acknowledged that these poor people are in some sense excusable. For it has happened very often, and has been remarked more than a hundred times, that where we were most welcome, where we baptized most people, there it was in fact where they died the most; and, on the contrary, in the cabins to which we were denied entrance, although they were sometimes sick to extremity, at the end of a few days one saw every person prosperously cured. We shall see in heaven the secret, but ever adorable, judgments of God therein. . . .

The reasons which we have thus far adduced, on account of which the barbarians suspect us of being the cause of their diseases, seem to have some foundation; but the devil did not stop there,—it would be a miracle if he did not build the worst of his calumnies on sheer lies.

Robert le Coq, one of our domestics, had returned from Kébec in a state of sickness which caused as much horror as compassion to all those who had courage enough to examine the ulcers with which all his limbs were covered. Never would a Huron have believed that a body so filled with miseries could have returned to health; regarding

him then as good as dead, there were found slanderers so assured in their falsehood that they publicly maintained that this young Frenchman had told them in confidence that the Jesuits alone were the authors and the cause of the diseases which from year to year kept depopulating the country. . . .

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But let us return to our Savages, excited against us on account of the disease, and to those impostors who had maintained that Robert le Coq had so confidentially informed them of the black magic arts and the execrable spells with which we were causing them all to die. It was not very difficult to refute these calumnies, since he who was said to have been the sole source of all these rumors—not being dead, as they had supposed, but having recovered perfect health—could belie all those who previously maintained they had heard the thing from his lips. But what? falsehood gets the better of the truth; the slanderers find more credit than the one who justifies us. . . . but the demons are like thunders, which make more noise than they do harm,—for all these threats have had but little effect. We are alive, thank God, all full of life and health. It is indeed true that the crosses have been stricken down from above our houses; that people have entered our cabins, hatchet in hand, in order to deal some evil blow there; they have, it is said, awaited some of ours on the roads, with the intention of killing them; the hatchet has been lifted above others, and the blow brought within a finger-length of their bare heads; the Crucifixes which were carried to the sick have been violently snatched from us; blows with a club have been mightily inflicted upon one of our missionaries, to prevent him from conferring some baptism. *Sed nondum usque ad sanguinem restitimus*; our blood and our lives have not yet been poured out for him to whom we owe all our hearts. Our soul is in our hands, and this is the greatest favor that we hope to receive from the great Master who employs us,—namely, to die for his holy name, after having suffered much.

Not that I do not forever praise this great God of goodness, for having thus far protected us with so much love: for it is truly an unspeakable happiness for us, in the midst of this barbarism, to hear the roarings of the demons, and to see all hell and almost all men animated and filled with fury against a little handful of people who would not defend themselves; to see ourselves shut up in a place fifteen hundred leagues from our native land, where all the powers of the earth could not warrant us against the anger of the weakest man who might have designs on our lives, and where we have not even a bag of corn which has not been furnished us by those who incessantly parley about killing us; and to feel at the same time so special a confidence in the goodness of God, so firm an assurance in the midst of dangers, a zeal so active, and a courage so resolute to do all and to suffer all for the glory of our Master, so indefatigable a constancy in the labors which increase from day to day. So that it is easy to conceive that God is the one who espouses our cause; that it is he alone who protects us, and that his providence takes pleasure in manifesting itself where we see least of the human.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Was saving the sick or saving souls the first priority for the missionaries? How did the former affect the latter?
2. How did Le Jeune describe the Indians, nuns, and priests? What did those descriptions reveal of his beliefs about the three groups?
3. How does Lalemant believe the disease spread? What did the Hurons believe caused and spread the disease? What do those sentiments reveal about how these people explained catastrophe?
4. How did Lalemant react to the increasing animosity and aggressiveness of the Hurons? What does that say about the influence of religious beliefs in European expansion?