

Early Canadian Church History (2)

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The St. Lawrence Valley to 1629

Because of French royal and ecclesiastical policy, the Huguenots were also obliged to take Roman Catholic priests with them overseas. The Romanist clergy were mandated to provide pastoral care for the colonists. However, Pierre de Chauvin de Tonnetuit took along some Reformed pastors as well to support his plans and the Calvinist colonists. Samuel de Champlain accompanied de Chauvin de Tonnetuit as his secretary – de Champlain had likely been born into a Calvinist family, but by this time he was a Roman Catholic. From his reports we learn of the presence of Huguenot pastors in New France, although he did not record their names.

Pierre de Chauvin de Tonnetuit was to clear lands and establish a 'seigneurie' (county or district) along the same lines as what the French had in their own country. He and Pierre Du Gua de Monts were to provide for each colonist in terms of labour and the costs of living. These merchants were reluctant to engage in colonization, even to a modest extent. Instead, commerce was begun with the native peoples and the fur-trade began in the valley. Travelling along the St. Lawrence and Ottawa rivers, the armed agents of de Monts won the confidence and respect of the aboriginal population. They played a major role in the fur trade in this region. From 1609 to 1615, they were extremely successful in expanding trade into the interior and helped to draw the Hurons into the existing alliance with the Montagnais and Algonquian.

Consequently, the Huguenot settlers in New France focussed on commerce rather than agriculture. This led to their familiarity with the ancient trails used by the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy. However, it was only later in this period that the Iroquois allowed Frenchmen to travel deeper into the interior. Hurons gradually became the most important middlemen between the French and all other First Nations. The goods began flowing; copper kettles, alcohol, and weaponry were exchanged for fur that the French could use for luxury clothing items. The French regarded hunting and trapping as consistent with biblical principles, since human beings were supposed to wear clothes. They also saw the exchange of goods with native peoples as a way to transmit Christian culture, since the native people would see the value that the French put on clothing.

In the meantime, a Political Council was appointed to govern the St. Lawrence seigneurie, as well as the seigneurie of Acadia. As of 1612, they would be ruled as one region. Henry of Bourbon, the prince of Condé, was appointed as governor. He was charged to supervise New France on behalf of the French king, together with the Political Council in New France. They would carry this out alongside the trade company and its board. Samuel de Champlain became the lieutenant-governor. In 1618 a leader from among the First Nations was also granted a seat on the Council. He received a French hat – a peculiar gesture from our perspective, but an important mark of equality in that context. The Dutch Reformed pastors in the New York area were known to wear hats with a silver band to give credibility to their authority. In north-eastern Brazil around the same time, the Dutch colonists would also give hats to indigenous

leaders such as Nhandui, a powerful Tapuya chief. This allowed him to be perceived as being on the same level as the Dutch colonial leaders. Similarly, the native leader in Quebec would take his seat in the Council by making a flamboyant French gesture with his hat. Then he would be seated next to the other council members as a peer among equals.

Now all of that tells us something about the economic and social situation. But did the Huguenots also introduce their Christian beliefs?

From the outset, the Huguenots had several strategies. First, colonists began to meet every Sunday. They organized open air worship services aboard ships and in the houses they built. They did not endeavour to build churches because they were satisfied simply to have some place to gather. Besides, the French government did not allow public meetings other than those conducted by the Roman Catholic priests. Therefore, the Huguenots were prevented from building something. They avoided conflict with the government in New France.

Nevertheless, they would have their gatherings for worship. They would sing psalms – Psalm 68 and Psalm 79 were favourites. There was preaching as well, but it was really the singing that stands out in the historical record. Their gatherings became known as “chanteries.” From the complaints of the Jesuits in this region we learn that the Genevan melodies of Clement Marot were sung loudly.

Furthermore, agents were sent with Huron interpreters to penetrate deeper into the interior. Many young soldiers went into the woods and visited hidden villages. They became familiar with native customs and won friendships with the Montagnais and Algonquians. Gradually they even took over some of their lifestyle and culture. Since these endeavours were oriented to the fur trade, the emphasis fell on transforming native people by setting an example of Christian behaviour.

Also, some young native people were sent to Paris to receive an education. The French hoped that these native people would be overwhelmed with their immersion into French culture. They envisioned that they would adopt the Christian culture and be willing to spread the message of change through Christianity. However, this was an unrealized ideal since it met with fierce opposition from the French crown and government. They required the promotion and expansion of the Roman Catholic Church overseas, including in the St. Lawrence Valley. Additionally, the French regime promoted the development of agriculture instead of trade.

While the Protestants were making efforts to develop the fur trade, Samuel de Champlain was making plans to bring more Roman Catholics overseas. He urged the French king to send plenty of Roman Catholic Frenchmen from the streets and all kinds of orphanages. De Champlain wanted to spread the Roman Church through immigration, but his plans did not meet with any success until 1632. In that year, de Champlain was appointed governor of New France and his plans began to fall into place. In his mind colonists were to work the land and he also urged the Six Nations to become farmers. Hence, repeatedly he overtured the French government to publicize the availability of free farmland. He also encouraged the exploration and

development of more farmland in the St. Lawrence Valley. The Jesuits endorsed his plans, but the trade company did everything to resist.

Meanwhile, Pierre Du Gua de Monts died and Guillaume de Caen replaced him. He was a Huguenot as well. De Caen charged the trade company to follow the articles of the Edict of Nantes – that meant that there was to be a certain degree of toleration for the Reformed religion. That is why “chanteries” continued along the St. Lawrence River at places such as Cap Tourmente (just downriver from present-day Quebec City).

Nevertheless, church buildings were not erected by the Huguenots. Moderate church politics prevailed. Because the Reformed people obeyed the Roman Catholic government, one does not find anywhere a Huguenot church building from the seventeenth century in the St. Lawrence Valley. Yet, the Reformed believers did seriously worship our Lord God.

De Champlain was powerful and had some say in all sorts of developments. Still, the trade company was able to push its trade and mild ecclesiastical politics forward until 1629. Many people, especially aboriginals, detested de Champlain’s Roman Catholic politics, his policy of migration, and of agriculture. As a consequence, the trade company worked together with First Nations to help English merchants and the English crown get a toehold in this area in 1629. For a brief period, the French Roman Catholic authorities were driven out and the English took possession of the St. Lawrence Valley, including Quebec City. Quebec had been established as the capital of New France through the efforts of the Jesuits. Meanwhile, elsewhere the Scottish took Acadia and established the colony of Nova Scotia. We’ll look at that history in our next instalment.