

# Ritual Faith: Jesuits and Indigenous Women in New France from 1650-1700

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*While the French sent fur traders to make economic gains for the Crown, the Jesuits also undertook another more sacred mission; that of saving indigenous peoples' mortal souls. By utilizing existing rituals and presenting them with a Christian context, the Jesuits allowed for a more fluid practice of Christianity. Indigenous women were most receptive to the Catholic message of a virgin-born, crucified, and resurrected Christ, with added emphasis on the status of women in the Virgin and Saint Anne, patron saint of New France. Their converted status afforded them more rights and privileges in their own villages, and they eventually branched off to found separated convert villages of their own. In these villages, women banded together to seek God through mysticism by harmonizing their new Catholic identity and their indigenous identities.*

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Kahnawake, a village founded in 1676 as a community for Jesuit missionaries and indigenous converts, thrived in its small corner of New France. Kahnawake began as a place for new indigenous converts to physically separate themselves from their past lives and begin anew as good Catholics.<sup>1</sup> In the village lived two young women, Tekakwitha and Tegaiguenta, also known by their Catholic names as Catherine and Marie-Thérèse. These women became fascinated with growing closer to God through “Iroquois Catholic mysticism.” Instead of turning to their Jesuit missionaries, who were the ones to introduce them to Catholicism, they turned instead to an indigenous woman by the name of Marie Skarichions. Skarichions lived with Ursuline nuns in a hospital in Quebec for a time and witnessed their penitentiary rituals during her time with them. Together, these women, accompanied by other women in the community, embarked on a spiritual journey to find God through ritual and mystic asceticism.<sup>2</sup>

Kahnawake as a convert community provides a case study for exploring the link between indigenous and Catholic rituals in practice in New France. Some rituals, such as self-flagellation, fasting, and others, began for these converts as Haudenosaunee rituals. They later took on an expanded meaning as the Jesuit missionaries gained a foothold in the region. These rituals, adopted and adapted by indigenous women who sometimes found themselves in a higher societal status thanks to Catholicism than was previously afforded to them, solidified the participatory nature of faith for these women.<sup>3</sup> The increased social standing of these female converts became an unspoken point of pride for the Jesuits, who boasted about their ability to help these women and save their souls, while simultaneously ignoring the fact that the personal rituals they witnessed preceded their arrival. Indigenous women embraced elements of their indigenous culture and traditions and incorporated them

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald F. Reid, *Kahnawàke: Functionalism, Traditionalism, and Nationalism in a Mohawk Community* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Allan Greer, *Mohawk Saint: Catherine Tekakwitha and the Jesuits* (Brantford, Ont.: W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2007), 134-135, 137.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 24.

into this new Catholic framework, thereby circumventing European expectations and maintaining a link to their land and customs. Those living in communities like Kahnawake proved that one could be both indigenous and a Catholic/Christian by adapting existing customs, including those of self-mortification, to Christian ideals, while still maintaining an indigenous identity.<sup>4</sup>

The early historiography for this topic covers attitudes of colonization in Christian mission work. The earliest sources for this historiography come from Jesuit writings, since these missionaries wrote from secondhand accounts received from indigenous peoples in their villages, as well as their own experiences. These earliest sources also serve as hagiographies, or histories with a religious focus, which were often commissioned by the Jesuits with a focus on the success stories of villages like Kahnawake. One of the earliest historical sources regarding Kahnawake is Jesuit Claude Chauchetière's memoirs of his time in Sault St. Louis. In this source, he referred to indigenous peoples as "savages" and "barbarians" in several descriptions, but used the more appropriate "Iroquois" in other instances.<sup>5</sup> He additionally cited Isaiah's prophecy about "bears and lions [dwelling] with lambs" in reference to the peace forged between the French and Iroquois following "the wars," presumably trade wars in the early Colonial period.<sup>6</sup> More often than not, Chauchetière only included the holiest highlights in his memoirs, a common approach, as the Jesuits often resisted adding their failures into their recorded correspondence.<sup>7</sup> Father Pierre Cholenec, another Jesuit missionary who functioned as Tekakwitha's confessor and official biographer, also neglected to record disagreements and divisions in the community.<sup>8</sup> Influential indigenous women in the Kahnawake community provided all of the information about Catherine Tekakwitha after her death. A Mohawk woman named Anastasia, who served as a mother figure in the longhouse, provided much of the information gathered about Tekakwitha, along with Marie-Thérèse Tegaiaguenta, Tekakwitha's closest friend and confidante, and Marie Skarichions, a woman who joined Tekakwitha and Tegaiaguenta in their quest for holiness.<sup>9</sup> The notion of the "converted savage" appears to be a constant theme in literature up to the early twenty-first century, likely due to contemporary societal attitudes towards race and inferiority.

Beginning in the early 2000s, attitudes began to shift towards approaching the narrative with a more holistic account of the missions in which indigenous practices became incorporated into the Christianity practiced by converts. In the book *Kahnawake*, historian Gerald F. Reid quotes David S. Blanchard, another Kahnawake historian, stating that belief in nature and the ritual practices associated with that belief continued to persist in the community alongside Catholic influence.<sup>10</sup> This admission of syncretic practices in Jesuit missions is absent in earlier writings on the Jesuits and their indigenous missions. Another example in modern scholarship is Allan Greer's *Mohawk Saint: Catherine Tekakwitha and the Jesuits*, which moves even closer into the lives of the Mohawks by placing Catherine Tekakwitha in her Mohawk context as well as her Catholic context. The shift in literature proves the importance and significance of the indigenous identities of those converts to Christianity. By holistically examining all segments of these community identities, including

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<sup>4</sup> Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 35.

<sup>5</sup> Claude Chauchetière, *Narrative of the Mission of Sault St. Louis, 1667-1685* (Kahnawake: Kaneinkehaka Raotitiohkwa Press, 1981), 27, 35, 51.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>7</sup> Greer, *Mohawk Saint*, 137.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 126, 133, 135.

<sup>10</sup> Reid, *Kahnawake*, 7.

indigenous and Catholic traditions, a more complete picture regarding indigenous and Jesuit relations begins to form. Considering Jesuit and Catholic practices in these communities to be one and the same, scholarship now provides a more realistic concept of life in these convert villages in the early Colonial period.

The Jesuits approached their mission in the new world differently than anyone else, secular or Christian, of their time. Historian Alan Greer explains that the Augustinians, a subsection of Christianity, believed that sin often resulted in paganism. Therefore, anyone outside the traditional sphere of Christianity, in this case, indigenous peoples in the “New World”, possessed little hope for “true” salvation, and found themselves without hope for redemption.<sup>11</sup> However, on the opposite end of the spectrum, secular deists believed that indigenous people followed their natural instincts as opposed to an organized religion. These beliefs caused skepticism in the claim that Christianity and its “absolute truth” could be universally applied.<sup>12</sup> In short, the Augustinians believed that the people residing in the “New World” could never find redemption due to their “outsider” status, and secular deists believed that existing indigenous belief systems functioned just as well as Christian belief systems, thereby negating the need for salvation. However, the Jesuits differed from all of these viewpoints, instead favoring a belief that all religions and cultures had a taste of Christian values already built into their codes, and that conversion was the crucial step to bring them to true Christianity.<sup>13</sup> Their job became a matter of emphasizing the Christian tendencies that already existed, leading the Jesuits to operate differently in the mission field. Their beliefs caused them to see their mission field as a crop to be harvested as opposed to a meadow to be planted, per Jesus’s words in Luke 10:2, “And he said to them, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’”<sup>14</sup> Historian Alan Greer described their struggle to balance existing theological methodologies regarding mission work within the Church and the prevalent social leanings toward secular deism outside the Church.<sup>15</sup> With this belief system in mind, the Jesuits confidently embraced their faith’s ability to stretch and encompass indigenous peoples, and reciprocated the grace extended to them through their salvation. This approach allowed indigenous practices and rituals to flourish with a hint of Catholicism, as opposed to the Jesuits prohibiting the local practices and rituals altogether. This method allowed the Jesuits the freedom to utilize existing kin structures to further their mission by working with the women in the community to spread their message. By entrusting the Catholic message to converted relatives instead of insisting that they alone be in charge of conversion, the Jesuit Father Pierre Cholenec said, “all the Iroquois who come here and then become Christians owe their conversion mainly to the zeal of their relatives; the father assures me that they do a hundred more times than he.”<sup>16</sup>

In the beginning, the Jesuits baptized those most receptive to their gospel: the sick and dying. Father Gabriel Marest wrote that in addition to their mission to indigenous peoples, they also accompanied French traders unwilling to take the

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<sup>11</sup> Greer, *Mohawk Saint*, 187.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version*. (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1,975.

<sup>15</sup> Greer, *Mohawk Saint*, 187.

<sup>16</sup> “Of the Mission of St. François Xavier du Sault near Montreal, 2 January 1677” JR 60:290 (as quoted by Greer, *Mohawk Saint*, 102).

journey without a chaplain and cared for the souls of those in their charge.<sup>17</sup> They baptized indigenous peoples whom they thought to be in danger or near death during these journeys. Marest describes the baptism of one “Iroquois Savage,” saying that he wished the warrior’s baptism could wait until he could be properly catechized. However, given the danger the man faced, Father Marest decided that immediate baptism would be the best course of action in order to prepare the man’s soul.<sup>18</sup> According to Greer, converting indigenous peoples close to death became a coveted prize in a high stakes game; either the person would die with a sinful conscious and therefore be resigned to Hell and damnation, or they would confess their sins and blissfully live forever in Heavens.<sup>19</sup> The prevailing belief held that if an indigenous person died quickly after baptism, they had no chance to return to their “pagan” ways.<sup>20</sup>

In another passage, Marest states that he baptized two indigenous children on the verge of death due to long term illnesses. The Father baptized them after making their father promise to bring the children back next spring for them to be properly instructed in Christianity if they recovered. One of the children died, but the father kept his promise and brought the other child to Marest the next spring.<sup>21</sup> This more desirable outcome pleased the Jesuits, since children were too young to have truly sinned during their “Age of Innocence,” and were therefore pure souls that were taken straight to Heaven.<sup>22</sup> The “Age of Innocence” is a longstanding concept in Christianity that states that children are incapable of sin before a certain age, due to the fact they cannot comprehend what actions constitute a “sin.” The belief follows that if a child dies before reaching the stage where they comprehend the magnitude of sin, they are immediately taken to Heaven due to their innocence.

Kaskaskia, a convert community in the area, reportedly had a population with up to 8,000 people.<sup>23</sup> The French present in the area called Lake Michigan “the Lake of the Illinois,” as a reflection of the prevalence of the Illini community.<sup>24</sup> The Illini, who lived outside the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, possessed strong trading ties with the French due to strife with the Haudenosaunee for refusing to trade furs with their Illini neighbors, whilst still continuing to trade with the French.<sup>25</sup> While these communities competed in trade, the women of these tribes played similar roles in their respective religious spheres.

One way that the Jesuits worked within indigenous communities involved observing indigenous rituals and assigning them an additional Catholic component. Fasting had long been an indigenous, specifically Potawatomi, practice, but the Jesuits repurposed ritual fasting with a Biblical meaning, posing it as a petition instead of a competition.<sup>26</sup> Originally in these circles, fasting occurred as something more akin to a sport. Indigenous men in particular would hold competitions to see who could thrive the longest without food. The Jesuits took this tradition and added a religious component to reflect an upstanding Christian virtue. Sleeper-Smith describes a

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<sup>17</sup> Marest, Gabriel. Letter to Father de Lamberville. 1743, in John Lockman. *Travels of the Jesuits, into Various Parts of the World*. (London: T. Piety, 1762), 476.

<sup>18</sup> Marest, “Travels of the Jesuits,” 485.

<sup>19</sup> Greer, *Mohawk Saint*, 6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Marest, “Travels of the Jesuits,” 489.

<sup>22</sup> Greer, *Mohawk Saint*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 14.

<sup>24</sup> Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

Potawatomi man who fasted longer than was traditionally required for Catholics, impressing even the Jesuits around him.<sup>27</sup>

Additionally, by recognizing and expanding the women's existing influence in the Ilini community, the Jesuits worked within existing indigenous frameworks to reach those tribes and communities. In the Ilini tribe, women outnumbered men, sometimes leading to abusive polygamous marriages. The Jesuits used female saints, such as Saint Anne, patroness of Canada, to reach these women, and, upon conversion, granted these women a higher position in society.<sup>28</sup> As a result, the Jesuits trusted these women to become the catechizers, interpreters, and Catholic points of contact for their communities.<sup>29</sup> In at least one community, women led devotions and small sacraments like the baptism of a child near death when a priest was nowhere to be found.<sup>30</sup> All of this was made possible by the increase in status afforded to converted women in indigenous communities.

Not too far away, a young woman named Marie Rouensa converted to Catholicism and began teaching her fellows the Bible and Christian virtues as taught to her by the Jesuit missionary, Father Jacques Gravier.<sup>31</sup> At seventeen years old, young and old members alike of her community started to flock to Rouensa's father's cabin in order for her to teach them these new ways.<sup>32</sup> Originally, Rouensa decided to be the best possible Catholic and not marry, contrary to her family's wishes. Her father, a Kaskaskia chief, encouraged an advantageous marriage to a French fur trader. However, this man possessed a reputation for mocking the Jesuits, and Rouensa initially refused, an authority granted to her by virtue of her Catholic conversion.<sup>33</sup> By refusing marriage in order to remain a virgin, she could have the Jesuits' full support in upholding one of Catholicism's highest ideals. She eventually consented to marry, but even after her marriage, she continued to teach the Bible and to utilize her influence with the Jesuits and French law to further impact her society and her family. In her will, she would use both elements to dictate the terms under which her children would receive their inheritance.<sup>34</sup> According to Father Gravier, Marie Rouensa participated in 200 baptisms in Kaskaskia between March 30 and November 29 of 1693.<sup>35</sup> Using her power and influence, she helped shape her community, despite her sex. Others in her community showed that by adapting rituals, one could be both indigenous and Catholic. Kaskaskia was an important community in shaping Jesuit and indigenous relations through fur traders and marriage alliances.

In Susan Sleeper-Smith's *Indian Women and French Men*, she discusses an Ilini woman named Marie Madeleine who lived among her indigenous community as a Catholic without French neighbors or priests. Smith details that she likely became the principal lay practitioner in her village, leading devotions, and on Sundays became responsible for longer religious services. She may have even presided over the baptism of children near death. As a result, she became the most prominent Catholic member of her community.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 24; Marest, "Travels of the Jesuits", 483.

<sup>29</sup> Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 21.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 26, 28.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 30.

This particular mission field spanned from the Montreal area to the modern Great Lakes region and encompassed a complex cultural system within the Five Nations Iroquois Confederacy. The Confederacy controlled the Montreal area and encompassed the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk nations by the 1600s.<sup>37</sup> The Confederacy traditionally claimed territory south of Lake Ontario, with the Genesee River to the west and the Mohawk River to the east, as well as land to the north and west of Lake Ontario. Part of the land around Hochelaga, today known as Montreal, likely also belonged to the Confederacy.<sup>38</sup> However, archaeological evidence supports the notion that the Five Nations developed to the south of Lake Ontario, or possibly even migrated further south.<sup>39</sup> The Five Nations shared a culture, a government system, a linguistic group, and they traced their descent through the female bloodline.<sup>40</sup> Tasks fell along gendered lines with men clearing fields, hunting, and healing the sick, while women worked the fields, carried and cleaned game, raised children, and actively mourned the dead.<sup>41</sup> Brandão explains that longhouses typically housed at least one extended family and about thirty people with a mother, her children, and her daughter's children. Instead of husbands living with their wives, they lived with their mothers, brothers, and sisters.<sup>42</sup> Villages and tribes sustained themselves by with hunting, fishing, and farming.<sup>43</sup> Tightly knit clans and distinct hierarchical authority characterized these communities, however, younger members of the community found ways to express concerns to their elders.<sup>44</sup> In a story recounted by Brandão, a young Haudenosaunee man who converted to Christianity wanted to stop his elders from drinking to excess. Instead of outright telling his elders his wishes, he stumbled and poured all the alcohol out onto the floor. Everyone present laughed off the boy's clumsiness, but he avoided offending his elders.<sup>45</sup> As the laws and traditions of the clan prevented clan leaders from possessing the power explicitly to command clan members to follow their bidding, they instead framed their wishes as requests so as to not offend their community.<sup>46</sup> Even when deciding to send troops to battle, the highest elders had to request that the community consider sending warriors instead of demanding their wishes be met.

As time passed, communities specifically for converted indigenous peoples, such as Kahnawake, began to form. These communities became places where converts to Catholicism, usually women, could live without the temptations that accompanied living with their tribes. No one expected that converts should entirely negate their indigenous identities — in fact, quite the opposite.<sup>47</sup> These women continued to take part in indigenous rituals while Catholic, and vice versa. They lived in traditional longhouses with a similar hierarchical structure revolving around the oldest woman in the house. These women also took part in religious services and ceremonies and helped build other communities around these ideals.<sup>48</sup> Their families could visit as

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<sup>37</sup> José António Brandão, *“Your Fyre Shall Burn No More”: Iroquois Policy toward New France and Its Native Allies to 1701* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 2, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>45</sup> Father Cholenec, in [Dablon], *Relation of 1677 and 1678*, JR 1:59 (as quoted in Brandão, *Your Fyre Shall Burn No More*, 20).

<sup>46</sup> Brandão, *Your Fyre Shall Burn No More*, 21.

<sup>47</sup> Greer, *Mohawk Saint*, 100.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 127.

long as they agreed to the rules— no excessive drinking and no polygamy, thereby ensuring that no one endured an imposed separation of family. In addition, the women of the community could come and go as they pleased.<sup>49</sup> The relative freedom afforded to these women in addition to higher social status meant that on occasion, life in these villages could prove to be relatively better than one's home village.

An indigenous practice that the Jesuits repurposed in this particular community concerned the use of self-harm to reach the divine. A tradition of self-harm already existed among indigenous people in preparation for war, with practices involving ritual burning and freezing to prepare the body for extreme circumstances to come. When the Jesuits witnessed these practices from converted women, done out of shame that they felt about their past lives, the Jesuits became alarmed, and introduced other tools that seemed less dangerous, such as the hair shirt (made of animal hair and designed to irritate the skin), iron girdle, and whip. The Jesuits believed that indigenous peoples, specifically female converts, as they took their past transgressions most seriously, would utilize these new, arguably less extreme, forms of self-mortification as an expression of penitence.<sup>50</sup> By molding the already existing tradition of self-harm to fit Catholic motives, the Jesuits continued to work within the framework they found when trying to convert indigenous peoples to Christianity.

Greer described Father Chauchetière, a Jesuit minister to Kahnawake, as saying that some women experienced “horror” when thinking about their former lives, leading to extreme rituals of penitence. One woman, a mother, jumped into the freezing water along with her three-year old daughter because the mother could “see” the life of sin her child would lead. The child, pulled from the water half dead, survived, following medical attention.<sup>51</sup> Greer, quoting Chauchetière, wrote, “The horror that new Christians of the Sault felt for the life they had led among the Iroquois before they were baptized so aroused them against sin that they did not spare themselves.”<sup>52</sup> By utilizing the techniques handed to them by their ancestors, by the Jesuits, and by the Ursuline nuns via Marie Skarichions, an indigenous woman who spent time with the Ursulines in Quebec, they began to self-flagellate in the extreme behind the Jesuits' backs.<sup>53</sup>

Some women in Kahnawake decided that the Jesuits had a direct pathway to God, and they wanted one as well. Even before her friends became involved, Father Cholenec records that Tekakwitha “made it a point to... give her soul its own food while making her body starve.”<sup>54</sup> Cholenec makes it clear that she carried out this penance without any sort of ecclesiastical guidance and without the proper instruments: that she merely began these ritual penances under the direction of the Holy Spirit alone.<sup>55</sup> Catherine Tekakwitha and several other women decided that the Jesuits, who were white men, knew the direct way to God, and purposefully kept their secret from the converts. The women thought that by taking these rituals to the extreme, a new path to God would present itself as a reward for their devotion. Tekakwitha and her sisters embraced their new Catholic identity by adapting

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>51</sup> Pierre Cholenec, *Catherine Tekakwitha: Her Life*, trans, William Lonc (Halifax, N.S.: W. Lonc, 2003), 44.

<sup>52</sup> Greer, *Mohawk Saint*, 132.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>54</sup> Cholenec, Pierre. *Catherine Tekakwitha: Her Life*, 19.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 20.

indigenous rituals into their framework of their new form of penitence carried out by Ursuline nuns as suggested by Marie Skarichions.<sup>56</sup>

The Ursulines, known for fasting, self-flagellation, hair shirts, and other mortifications, became the ideal for which some young converted indigenous women would aspire. The Ursulines hid those mortifications from everyone else except their sisters, creating an intense bond of sisterhood. Iron belts and girdles, or strips of iron studded with barbs, were usually wrapped around various parts of the body with soft flesh in order to cause irritation. Sometimes a hair shirt would also be worn in order to further irritate the wounds, as a constant reminder of their sins.<sup>57</sup> Some women also refused medical attention in order to continue their practices, and possibly even deepen their pleasure in those practices.<sup>58</sup> At times no one would know the extent of the damage until a sister's body was prepared for burial by the other nuns in her convent, and there appears to have been a veneration of those women who chose to self-mutilate, as they were held in high esteem in their communities.<sup>59</sup>

The Jesuits tried to control the rituals carried out by Mohawk women when they took a turn toward the extreme. Father Cholenec introduced hair shirts, as well as iron girdles as tools of self-mortification for penance as an attempt to regulate the practices, with Cholenec personally giving Tekakwitha a small iron chain belt to moderate her practices.<sup>60</sup> Greer writes that the confessors became concerned by the women's behavior, both in its subversive nature as well as the risk posed to their health, and tried to use these tools to curb the intensity of their ascetic practices. However, in some cases, this attempt at moderation caused the women to become more intense in their self-mortification in response to the confessors' attempts to spare them bodily harm.<sup>61</sup> Greer reasons that it is entirely possible that the women of Kahnawake who engaged in these ascetic practices did so in order to bolster their physical boundaries and push them closer to experiencing the divine.<sup>62</sup>

Tekakwitha lacked the constitution necessary to withstand the pressure her body was under. She died at about twenty four years old, and her legend in Kahnawake continued to inspire other sisters to take up her search for closer contact with the divine. Despite the extreme lengths gone to in the case of Tekakwitha, indigenous women continued to blur the line between Catholic and traditional indigenous rituals. Father Cholenec states that after her death, other women tried to carry on in Tekakwitha's example, but "encountered difficulties that they admitted they had not the strength to overcome, such was the opposition between this kind of life and the ordinary life of a native."<sup>63</sup> They believed their only option was to renounce a second marriage, should they become widows at a young age, showing that many young women eventually married despite Tekakwitha's vow of celibacy. The women believed that this was the closest they could ever reach to Tekakwitha's sainthood.<sup>64</sup>

When she passed, Tekakwitha became venerated as the "Mohawk Saint," with Father Chauchetière, who stayed with her at her deathbed, writing a biography of her and crediting her with keeping him in the ministry. Her confessor, Father Cholenec, became later tasked with writing a less glowing biography, as the Jesuits' bias

<sup>56</sup> For more on the Ursulines, see Esther Little's *The Many Captivities of Esther Wheelwright*.

<sup>57</sup> Ann M. Little, *Many Captivities of Esther Wheelwright*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 59.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>60</sup> Cholenec, *Catherine Tekakwitha: Her Life*, 7.

<sup>61</sup> Greer, *Mohawk Saint*, 122.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>63</sup> Cholenec, *Catherine Tekakwitha: Her Life*, 37.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.



prevented them from portraying an indigenous woman as the absolute perfect Catholic. He addressed her with parts awe and condescension when describing her deeds, unlike Father Chauchetière, who credited her with his career. Her case shows that while the Jesuits appreciated the effort these indigenous women made, they could not allow Tekakwitha to be a perfect Catholic. She could be either indigenous or Catholic, but not both together.

On October 21, 2012, Pope Benedict XVI completed her canonization process in St. Peter's Basilica. Greer views her as a "nationalist icon for American Catholics" due to her status as both "noble savage and woman/girl."<sup>65</sup> Her portrayal has shifted throughout the centuries, as the "noble savage," from the Jesuits through an early Victorian feminist lens, through a lens of racial difference, and now through a combination of her many coexisting identities.<sup>66</sup> Tekakwitha remains one of the best known examples of this *tabula rasa* for indigenous Catholics, but there have likely been thousands of others who have walked similar paths that will never be known to history. Her story involves adaptation, faith, and determination to reach a God that became precious to her in a short amount of time, and exemplifies Jesuit and indigenous relations in the beginning of New France.

Indigenous women adapted their rituals and therefore were able to maintain their indigenous identity while simultaneously adopting Catholicism. There is evidence that these women performed these rituals not only as Catholics, but also as autonomous indigenous women that held their own agency in a shifting geopolitical and religious landscape. These Jesuits made the transition to Catholicism easier by working within the indigenous cultures in order to bring Christianity to New France. These examples prove that indigenous women could blend cultures with deftness and ease, while still balancing communal relations as well as their experiences with the divine.

American society has ignored indigenous culture from before this country's beginnings. Most people learn of the violent methods used to impose Christianity and erase indigenous culture onto America's existing population. This study of the Jesuits and their work among indigenous populations reveals another path to Christianity in the "New World"—a way that involved integrating belief systems and working within existing frameworks to preserve culture and save souls. By uncovering and learning from the Jesuit ways of missions, one can learn how to navigate two distinctly different cultures and how to successfully integrate them to create a blended society. Our country could reverse the narrative of indigenous peoples merely succumbing to Western religion; instead, they could see the intention and agency inherent in these stories of conversion.

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<sup>65</sup> Greer, *Mohawk Saint*, 194.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

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