

## THE FIRST YEAR

To a Lady of Rank  
*Quebec*, 3 September 1640

*Madame:*

Your letter has brought me a consolation I cannot express or sufficiently acknowledge. Even had your occupations prevented you from writing to me or mishaps of the sea deprived me of so precious a letter, I should not have failed to send you news of this dear country until the Relation shall give you more ample ones.

We have every reason then, Madame, to praise the Father of mercies for those he has so abundantly poured upon our Savages since, not content with having themselves baptized, they are beginning to become settled and to clear the land in order to establish themselves. It seems that the fervour of the primitive Church has descended to New France and that it illuminates the hearts of our good converts, so that if France will give them a little help towards building themselves small lodges in the village that has been commenced at Sillery,<sup>1</sup> in a short time a much further progress will be seen.

It is a wonderful thing to see the fervour and zeal of the Reverend Fathers of the Company of Jesus. To give heart to his poor Savages, the Reverend Father Vimont, the Superior of the mission, leads them to work himself and toils on the land with them. He then hears the children pray and teaches them to read, finding nothing lowly in whatever concerns the glory of God and the welfare of these poor people. The Reverend Father Le Jeune,<sup>2</sup> the principal cultivator of this vineyard, continues to perform marvels there. He preaches to the people every day and has them do everything he wishes, for he is known to all these nations and is held among them as a man of miracles. And indeed he is indefatigable beyond anything that might be said in the practice of his ministry, in which he is seconded by the other Reverend Fathers, all of whom spare neither life nor health to seek those poor souls that the blood of Jesus Christ has redeemed.

There has been a great persecution among the Hurons in which one of the Fathers was almost martyred by the blow of a hatchet.<sup>3</sup> A club was broken upon him in detestation of the faith he preached. There has been a like conspiracy against the others, who were overjoyed to suffer. Despite all this, at least a thousand persons have been baptized. The devil has worked in vain. Jesus Christ will always be the Master—may he be praised forevermore.

There is talk of giving us two girls of this nation and two Algonkins, these in addition to the eighteen that have filled our seminary,<sup>4</sup> not to speak of the day-girls that come here continually. I assure you, Madame, that in France it will be hard to believe the benedictions God continually pours upon our little seminary. I shall give you a few particulars so as to acquaint you with our consolation.

The first Savage seminarian that was given to us, Marie Negabamat by name, was so used to running in the woods that we lost all hope of keeping her in the seminary. The Reverend Father Le Jeune, who had persuaded her father [Noel Negabamat]<sup>5</sup> to give her to us, sent two older Christian girls with her. These remained with her for some time in order to settle her, but to no avail, for she fled into the woods four days later, after tearing a dress we had given her to pieces. Her father, who is an excellent Christian and lives like a saint, ordered her to return to the seminary, which she did. She had not been here two days when there was a wonderful change. She seemed no longer to be herself, so disposed was she to prayer and the practices of Christian piety, so that today she is an example to the girls of Quebec,<sup>6</sup> although they are all very well brought-up. As soon as she has committed a fault, she comes to ask pardon on her knees and she does the penances she is given with incredible submissiveness and amiability. In a word, it is impossible to look at her without being touched by devotion, so marked is her face by innocence and inner grace.

At the same time we were given a big girl of seventeen years whose name is Marie Amiskouevan. One could not see anything more tractable, more innocent, or more candid even than this girl, for we have never surprised her in a lie, which is a great virtue among the Savages. If her companions accuse her, she never excuses herself. She is so ardent in praying to God that it is never necessary to advise her to do so; she even leads the others, and it seems as if she were their mother, so much charity has she towards them. She has great intelligence for retaining what is taught her, especially the mysteries of our holy Faith, which makes us hope she will do great good when she returns to the Savages. She is sought in marriage by a Frenchman, but it is intended to give her to a man of her own nation because of the example it is hoped she will give the other Savages. If God would give someone in France the devoutness to help her build a little house, this would undoubtedly be a work of very great merit. This girl has helped us greatly in the study of her tongue because she speaks French well. In a word, she wins everyone's heart by her great sweetness and her fine qualities.

Your god-daughter, Marie-Magdeleine Abatenau, was given to us entirely covered with smallpox and still only six years old. She had at that age cared alone for her father and mother during the malady from which they died and with such skill that she was the wonder of everyone that saw her. No-one more obedient than this child could be seen—she even anticipates obedience, for she is skilful at taking up her position in those places where she foresees we might be able to employ her—and she does everything she is told with such good behaviour and good grace one would take her for a girl of rank. This, then, is your god-daughter, I should gladly say your daughter in Jesus Christ. I shall add for your consolation that she knows her catechism by heart, as well as the Christian prayers, which she recites with a devoutness capable of inspiring like feelings in those that see her.

Marie-Ursule Gamitiens, the god-daughter of Mademoiselle de Luynes, is only five or six years old. Small though she is, we have no trouble getting her to make her Christian devotions, for she is no sooner awake than she prepares herself to pray to God. She says her rosary during Mass and sings hymns in her Savage tongue.

Agnès Chabdikouechich was given to us at the same time. The name Agnes suits her very well, for she is a lamb in gentleness and simplicity. Some time before she entered the seminary she met the Reverend Father de Quen in the woods where she was cutting her provision. She had no sooner seen him than she threw her hatchet aside and said, 'Teach me.' She did this with such good grace that he was sensibly touched by it and, to satisfy her fervour, brought her and one of her companions to the seminary, where in a short time they were fitted for Holy Baptism. She has made very great progress with us in the knowledge of the mysteries and, as well, in good manners, embroidery, reading, playing the viol, and a thousand other little skills. She is only twelve years old and made her First Communion at Easter with three other companions.

Nicole Assepanse was given to us the same day at the age of seven. Her parents, who are among the most prominent of the Savages, begged us to receive her for a time because she could not accompany them to the hunt. This girl has a mind so open that she is as capable of instruction as a girl of twenty. She was only five months in the seminary and was able to recount the principal points of our Faith and knew the catechism and Christian practices perfectly. When her mother came to fetch her on her return from the hunt, the innocent had her pray. I admired the simplicity of the mother, who was not yet baptized, in receiving instruction from her daughter with so much ardour and docility.

Overjoyed at hearing her daughter pray and respond to the catechism, she said, 'My daughter, you will instruct your father and me. If you wish to remain longer in the seminary where you are so much loved, you will become even better fitted to do it.'

The girl nevertheless could not leave her mother whose only child she was, but she said, 'Though I wish to go, it is not because I lack for anything. I eat as much as I wish, the virgins give me fine clothes and love me very much, but I cannot leave you.'

As she said these words, she was taken away to be brought back to the cabins, where she is admired by all the Savages.

It would take me too long to speak to you separately of them all but I shall tell you in general that these girls love us more than they love their parents, showing no desire to accompany them, which is most extraordinary in the Savages. They model themselves upon us as much as their age and their condition can permit. When we make our spiritual exercises, they keep a continual silence. They dare not even raise their eyes or look at us, thinking that this would interrupt us. But when we are finished, I could not express the caresses they give us, a thing they never do with their natural mothers.

Four of them received communion at Easter. They performed this act with such purity that the slightest shadow of sin frightened them, and with so much ardour and desire for union with Our Lord that, as they waited to receive it, they cried out, 'Ah, when will Jesus come to kiss our hearts?'

When the Reverend Father [Claude] Pijart, who had baptized and instructed them for communion, saw them behave with angelic modesty, he could not restrain his tears.

We have had eighteen girls, not to speak of the Savage women and girls, who have permission to enter the place set aside for the instruction of the French and the Savages and come there very frequently.

After instruction and prayers we feast them according to their fashion. Their own hunger is the clock by which they judge when it is time for a meal, so when we prepare food for our seminarians, we must also provide for any others that might unexpectedly arrive. This is the case particularly in winter when the old people cannot accompany the other Savages to the hunt, for if they were not cared for at that time they would die of hunger in the cabins. God granted us the grace to be able to succour them till springtime so that they kept us good company, and it will be a singular consolation to us to be able to continue to do this with the help of charitable persons in France, failing which it will be absolutely impossible, our little seminary not being able to suffice by itself for the great expenditures required for the maintenance of seminarians and assistance to the other Savages as well.

I assure you, Madame, that the expenditure for all this is not believable. We brought clothes sufficient for two years; it has all been used this year so that, having nothing more in which to dress our girls, we have even been obliged to give them some of our own things. All the linen Madame our foundress gave us for our own use and part of what our Mothers in France sent us has likewise been used to clean and cover them.

It is a singular consolation to us to deprive ourselves of all that is most necessary in order to win souls to Jesus Christ, and we would prefer to lack everything rather than leave our girls in the unbearable filth they bring from their cabins. When they are given to us, they are naked as worms and must be washed from head to foot because of the grease their parents rub all over their bodies; and whatever diligence we use and however often their linen and clothing is changed, we cannot rid them for a long time of the vermin caused by this abundance of grease. A Sister employs part of each day at this. It is an office that everyone eagerly covets. Whoever obtains it considers herself rich in such a happy lot and those that are deprived of it consider themselves undeserving of it and dwell in humility. Madame our foundress performed this service almost all year; today it is Mother Marie de Saint-Joseph that enjoys this good fortune.

Besides the Savage women and girls, whom we receive in the house, the men visit us in the parlour, where we try to give them the same charity we do their women, and it is a very

sensible consolation to us to take bread from our mouths to give it to these poor people, in order to inspire them with love for Our Lord and for his holy Faith.

But after all it is a very special providence of this great God that we are able to have girls after the great number of them that died last year. This malady, which is smallpox,<sup>7</sup> being universal among the Savages, it spread to our seminary, which in a very few days resembled a hospital. All our girls suffered this malady three times and four of them died from it. We all expected to fall sick, because the malady was a veritable contagion, and also because we were day and night succouring them and the small space we had forced us to be continually together. But Our Lord aided us so powerfully that none of us was indisposed.

The Savages that are not Christians hold the delusion that it is baptism, instruction, and dwelling among the French that was the cause of this mortality, which made us believe we would not be given any more girls and that those we had would be taken from us. God's providence provided so benevolently against this that the Savages themselves begged us to take their daughters, so that if we had food and clothing we would be able to admit a very great number, though we are exceedingly pressed for buildings. If God touches the hearts of some saintly souls, so that they will help us build close to the Savages as we have the design to do,<sup>8</sup> we will have a great many girls. We are longing for that hour to arrive, so that we will be more perfectly able to do the things for which Our Lord sent us to this blessed country.

For all lodgings we have only two small rooms, which serve us as kitchen, refectory, retreat, classroom, parlour, and choir.<sup>9</sup> We have had a little church built of wood, which is pleasing for its poverty. There is a little sacristy at the end in which sleeps a young man who is in the service of Madame de la Peltrie. He serves us as extern and provides us with all our necessities. No-one would believe the expenses we incur in this little house, though it is so poor that we see the stars shining through the ceiling at night and we can scarcely keep a candle alight because of the wind.

I shall tell you how we are able to hold so many people in so small a place. The ends of the rooms are divided into alcoves made of pine-boards. One bed is close to the floor and the other is as if on the roof of the first, so that one must climb up to it by a ladder. Despite all this we consider ourselves happier than if we were in the best-appointed monastery in France. It seems to me that we are too well-off for Canada where I myself expected to have for all lodging only a cabin made of bark.

My sisters say to me sometimes, 'If we have trouble in Canada, it is from not having any and from not suffering enough.' We rejoice when we are given nothing so we can be poor in all things.

In consequence, Madame, are we not the happiest and most fortunate of the earth? I cannot express the happiness in my soul. Bless for me the Author of such great mercies towards

so unworthy a creature. It seems that our good Master Jesus takes pleasure in our deprivations. We had requested workmen from France to build us lodgings in the place we had chosen near the Savages. We have not been sent a single one, our affairs not permitting it, and we have even been told that we cannot live, maintain seminarians, and build. So here we will be for a long time to come in our little alcoves if divine Goodness does not assist us in ways it alone can know. Madame our foundress is full of goodwill towards us and of the desire to build us lodgings, but her kinsmen do not permit her to act in accordance with her zeal.

This, Madame, is a little account of the present state of our seminary which is, as you see, in the pure providence of God. As you are visited by several powerful persons, I beg you to be pleased to recommend it to them and, if divine Majesty touches the heart of some of them, Monsieur de Bernières, who has charge of our affairs and sends us our necessities, is the one to whom they should address themselves.<sup>10</sup> For the love of Jesus Christ, whom you love, make yourself the mediator for the poor Savage girls. A great number will be lost if we do not save them from this calamity, and this we cannot do because of our insufficiency, both of lodgings and of food.

We had one baptized a few days ago, who had been on the point of being lost. She had been abandoned by her whole nation and no-one would dare give her to us lest she infect our seminarians. A miraculous change was seen in her, for she became all at once as tractable as a child and it would be impossible to see anyone more ardent in the practices of our holy Faith. She requested baptism with importunity and, receiving it, responded as if she had been a catechumen all her life. When the Reverend Father Buteux, who sent her to us from Trois-Rivières and knew her in her unruliness, came to see her, he had tears in his eyes at seeing her so modest in her behaviour and so inclined towards the good. He said to me with great joy, 'If you had done only this one good deed since you have been in this country, you would have done much and you would be more than recompensed for your pains by the conversion of this soul.'

To God alone be the glory, for it is he that does all things.

I make you this account, Madame, to give you reason to praise anew the Author of so many blessings, for I should not be able to express all he does in this country. The Relation will tell you some of it, but in truth it is not able to tell everything, and if it could it would not be believed. But finally, if we are worthy to suffer some travails, be persuaded, Madame, that you will have a great share in them. Grant me also the grace of giving me a share of your merits and of considering me, in the heart of gracious Jesus, your . . .