Why Did the Catholic Cult of Saints Not Function among the Algonquians?

MARIE-PIERRE BOUSQUET

Université de Montréal

INTRODUCTION

What is left of the Catholic heritage in Quebec’s Algonquian communities? This question is not only interesting for researchers studying belief systems, but also for those who follow and analyze Algonquian material heritage and the way in which they present their cultures to others. In fact, visitors to Algonquian communities are usually first shown the local church, especially if these have been decorated with locally produced artifacts. Since 2006, my research assistant Anny Morissette and I have studied the ways in which Algonquian peoples of Quebec express their version of folk Catholicism and how this fits their belief systems. In particular, we have begun with a study of the decorations and heritage artifacts of the province’s Algonquian missions (Bousquet and Morissette 2008).

What is “folk Catholicism”? It is not the magical counterpart to religion, as Jean-Claude Schmitt suggested (1983), nor is it the fruit of local ignorance compared to centralized theological systems. It is perhaps more useful to think of it as one of the many forms of religious expression, whether or not these forms are officially approved by the Church or its representatives. Folk religion is constantly evolving and must therefore be carefully studied over time to understand the mutation of social tensions and the dynamism of cultural constructions. Thus, I think it is more useful to speak of an “Algonquian” Catholicism, a set of beliefs and interpretations that make sense locally to the Algonquians of Quebec.

Why study Algonquian Catholicism? To begin with, Catholicism seems to have strongly influenced Algonquian daily life, not only in the calendar of feasts that was adopted but also in prayers, formulas of thanks, graces, benedictions, and wearing crosses and other medals for protection. In a Quebec that was ultra-Catholic (until the 1960s), Algonquian Catholicism...
was often lauded by the clergy; conversion by Native people to the “true” faith was taken as a concrete manifestation of the French Canadian civilizing mission and therefore of the latter’s superiority. In today’s multi-faith and secular society, it is worth asking whether Catholicism is an outmoded cosmology for contemporary Algonquians. Have they had their own Quiet Revolution, since they too have participated in the rapid evolution of Quebec society? At first glance, it would seem so, since there seem to be fewer and fewer people who adhere to Catholic practices. On the other hand, the majority of Algonquians (70 to 90 percent) self-identify as Catholics. This is paradoxical, since the churches have been more or less deserted since the early 1990s, and Catholic clergy have been under heavy fire for the alleged pedophilia of some of their members and for their role in establishing and running the much-reviled residential school system. It is possible that village elders consider Catholicism part of their traditional culture, even though they themselves may have converted to Pentecostalism, since their parents and grandparents were Catholics. Given the important role that elders play in defining tradition, it is important to decode Algonquian definitions of ‘tradition.’

In our analysis of contemporary Algonquian Catholicism, we have paid particular attention to the signification of ritual objects and their importance in Catholic ritual and in Catholic spaces such as churches. To date, we have visited four Algonquin (or Anicinabek) churches, an Innu church, an Atikamekw church, and an Abenaki church. In each case, we talked to the parish priest and to members of the local band. Comments we received about holy images and statues directed our attention to the hagiolatry, the cult of Saints, especially since this has not been well documented for First Nations, except for a few accounts by missionaries. Academic accounts are few and far between (Rigal-Cellard 2005).

In this paper, we examine how the Algonquians received the Cult of Saints; we bring into relation traditional Algonquian knowledge and beliefs about supernatural beings, with the principal figures put forward by (Oblate) evangelization and social organization, including systems of individual relations.

A CULT THAT NEVER WORKED?

While conducting research, we noticed several interesting facts. First, there were several saints and religious figures that appeared frequently in First
Nations parishes, in murals, portraits, embroidery, or statues: Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Saint Anne, and Kateri Tekakwitha. Second, research in Oblate missionary archives (the Oblates were present in the majority of First Nations parishes) and a search of Oblate missionary literature (especially the writings of Father Carrière) showed that missionaries constantly used these religious figures in their efforts at evangelizing the Algonquians. Third, Catholicism dominated the Quebec social landscape until the so-called Quiet Revolution of the 1960s. From 1840 to 1900, the Quebec Church was in full expansion and became, in the words of Canon Groulx (in Savard 1967:263), Canada’s “most muscular institution.” Quebec Catholicism was heavily oriented to the worship of Mary, and during the nineteenth century pilgrimages to Notre-Dame and Saint Anne were common. From the 1920s to the 1950s, as described by Claude-Marie Gagnon (1986), there was a shift toward saints that were popular in France, because they personified a particular nationalist vision of society, or because they were considered accessible—ordinary people who became extraordinary because of their faith, their prayers, or their mysticism. These included Jeanne d’Arc, Saint Marguerite Marie Alacoque, Saint Philomène, and Saint Theresa of the Baby Jesus (Gagnon 1986; Albert 1998). The Jesuit Martyrs, Saint John Eudes, and Saint Marguerite Marie were the force behind the cult of the Sacred Heart, which was a symbol of the victory of piety over the sin of lack of faith in God. Along the same lines, after the Second World War, there emerged the cult of Our Lady of Fatima (who had allegedly appeared in 1917 to three Portuguese children to impart three prophecies, including the outbreak of World War II). Our Lady of Fatima became the symbol of peace and of the religious rebirth of nations. In brief, it seems that the Algonquians had readily adopted nineteenth-century saints such as Mary and Anne, but not those of the twentieth century, so dear to other Quebecers.

It is tempting to conclude that the Cult of the Saints never really caught on among First Nations peoples. But what is the truth? For the saints they did adopt, what did they represent? When evaluating what was adopted and what was ignored or rejected, we can wonder if Algonquians were influenced by the Oblates or if they were more conditioned by their local indigenous beliefs. It should be noted that only one of the parishes we studied—the Abenaki community of Odanak—was not run by the Oblates but by a diocesan priest. We believe that the saints who were adopted and whose cult has endured were those that symbolized local cultural values, especially the importance given to kinship in the dynamics of social
networks; saints and figures that were rejected represent the image of the colonial “other.”

In looking at the concordance of adopted imagery and traditional pre-Catholic shamanic beliefs, we do not posit that Christian symbols were an extension or a reinforcement of these traditional beliefs. Nor do we wish to participate in the debate about the coherence (or lack thereof) between First Nations and Christian beliefs (Delâge 1991; Dombrowski 2001). Although this question may be interesting and even significant, we hypothesize that a new belief is incorporated in tradition if it makes sense to individuals. Along with other researchers (Preston 1987; Griffiths and Cervantes 1999; Laugrand 2002), we believe that the adoption and integration of non-indigenous beliefs—regardless of whether these are coherent with tradition—is an important indicator of the political tensions and identity problems that existed at the moment of adoption.

WHAT IS A SAINT?

In Catholic belief, saints are men and women who are alleged to have physically existed (which is not always the case in reality) and lived an exemplary life as a result of their special link to God. In the Roman Catholic tradition, all believers are called upon to become saints, meaning that they can choose to lead their lives in imitation of Christ. A saint is thus a model for others. Saints are recognized after a process of canonization by the Pope, a process that acknowledges not only a person’s virtue during his or her lifetime, but also attests to the occurrence of miracles after death. This latter factor is seen as a manifestation of Divine intercession. If no miracles are attested, the person is merely beatified.1 Saints are thus mediators who can intercede with God to help obtain miracles, cures, special protection, etc. They are heroes of the faith who can grant favors during processions and pilgrimages, or in the locales in which they lived (and have thus become sacred and imbued with power). They can also be venerated at home through representations (medals, images, statues), and sometimes by lighting holy candles.

1. It is only in the canonization of martyrs that it is not necessary to prove that these individuals had heroic virtues or accomplished miracles.
Are there, then, points of convergence between this definition of a saint as a model and Algonquian beliefs? According to Delâge,

*Tout comme le panthéon des Amérindiens, celui des catholiques était peuplé d’esprits (anges, démons, saints, proches décédés, etc.), mais globalement, la place occupée par les esprits y était moindre. Les catholiques ne concevaient pas que les phénomènes naturels, les plantes et les animaux étaient habités par un esprit. Certes on concevait que Dieu ou les saints pouvaient faire pleuvoir, arrêter la grêle, faire périr les ennemis, mais sur terre, on n’accordait d’esprit qu’aux humains puisqu’ils étaient corps et âme. Dépourvus d’âme ou d’esprit, les différentes espèces de la vie animale ou végétale et les objets inanimés ne relevaient donc pas, dans la conception chrétienne, du monde spirituel. (Delâge 1991:55–56)*

We think, however, that this proposition has limits. First, did the Algonquians really have a pantheon in the same sense that the word is normally used? Pantheon refers to a Greco-Roman concept (applied to other contexts, to be sure) of a belief system linked to a plethora of gods and goddesses, non-corporeal and usually anthropomorphic entities with well-defined personalities and social identities, names, and complex biographies. They are often venerated by individuals and are endowed with mystical powers. Algonquian spirits, on the other hand, may occasionally be anthropomorphic but their most salient quality is that they can transform, often from one species to another. They are named, but these are often not personal names as such but appellations for categories of spirits (for example, Windigo, Pagak). Their biographies are therefore not individualized. In fact, anyone can be transformed into a Windigo if his negative dimension gets the better of his positive one. Anyone can become Pagak, the flying skeleton of a hunter who starved to death. Admittedly, some cultural hero types such as tricksters have human form, are named, and have real biographies: Glooskap, Tekapesh, Misabe (or Mishabais or Misape, the Big Man; see Davidson 1928). These could be considered gods, but their anthropomorphic quality is relatively unimportant. In Algonquian shamanic beliefs, supernatural entities are not classified according to their form or species but by what they have accomplished and the knowledge they impart to humans.

In any case, incarnation in a human form does not mean that an entity is human. Hallowell (1976) coined the apt expression “other than human” for these spirits. In contrast, saints are by definition human even in cases when they are mythological in origin, such as Saint Christopher.
The majority of saints are humans who have died, whereas Algonquian supernatural entities have lived since time eternal and are not dead. The argument could be made that Catholic saints are not really dead, since their exploits live on in their hagiographies, and they can still be solicited for favors associated with powers they possessed while they were alive. In the context of Algonquian tradition, there does not seem to be a tendency to preserve the memory of deceased individuals; as Sylvie Vincent has noted for the Innu (1991), kinship terms for ancestors older than four generations refer to “ancestors” in a generic manner, and the same appears to be true for Atikamekw and Anicinabe kinship terms. Specific people who are remembered after death are usually individuals someone has known personally. There are, however, a few exceptions: various oral traditions sometimes keep alive the name of particular shamans for two or sometimes three centuries if they have performed extraordinary exploits or saved other people or even the entire band from harm. There are also stories of old women whose extraordinary courage during the Iroquois (the Nadowek) Wars protected the group. Their bodies are said to have been petrified, and tobacco offerings are still left at these rock outcroppings. Some shamans whose exploits were less than beneficial to people may also be remembered for their immense powers. This is an important difference with saints, whose powers are essentially (even invariably) positive; Algonquian cultural heroes and supernatural entities can be both harmful and beneficial.

In earlier research, many informants, especially elders, insisted that they believed in the missionaries because these latter were good people (at least, such is their reputation; a few are fondly remembered, while others are known for their severity and intolerance). In a world where shamans were as much feared as respected, missionaries were seen as without sin, able to comfort people, and most importantly, able to deliver people from their fears. Even though Algonquian shamanic beliefs offer no real parallels with Catholic saints, it is possible that early audiences saw enough convergence between shamans and missionaries that the imagery of saints appealed to them.

**Some Successes**

In order to present Algonquian views and not limit ourselves to missionary accounts, we asked people about the representations of saints in their
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communities’ churches and about images of saints in people’s homes. Interviews with local people, a classic means of ethnographic research, are all the more indispensable in a context where one cannot rely simply on the presence of a particular object or image in a church. Since at least the Vatican II Council of 1965 (and likely even earlier), missionaries had encouraged the production of objects to fill their churches, in order that these spaces better reflect the cultural identity of their parishioners. We thus began our research with the idea that a statue or painting of a saint made by a Native artisan would be a good indicator of the importance of the saint in question for the artist who produced the image. However, this is not always the case. Some of the objects we studied, which were made by Native artisans, were produced on commission; these objects reflect the vision of the clergy, and not necessarily that of the artist or the parishioners. On the other hand, we found objects that had been purchased outside the community by local parishioners and then integrated into the church décor.

The four saintly images that seem to be the most respected are those of the Virgin Mary, Saint Anne, Kateri Tekakwitha and Jesus (these are not presented in order of their importance). Of the four, three are women: is this connected to the fact that today the majority of active practitioners of the faith are women? Mary has been the object of numerous cults: Our Lady of the Rosary, Notre Dame du Cap (a local cult), and Our Lady of Fatima. The Oblate archives show that these missionaries encouraged the cult of Mary among the Algonquians. For example, Father Guéguen had the Amerindians sing the Ave Maria Stella when he arrived or left the Weymontaching mission (Carrière 1978), while Father Arnaud, among the Innu, “a fait l’impossible pour orner toutes ses chapelles de statues et de toiles en l’honneur de Marie” (Carrière 1958:176). Since the 1860s, the Feast of the Assumption (15 August) has been marked at Betsiamites by a procession (Carrière 1958:57); and in 1870, a medal of the Virgin was used to calm “un jongleur qui se disait possédé du démon” (Carrière 1978:125).

The Virgin Mary was already the object of a cult before the arrival of the Oblates in Quebec in 1841. As William B. Hart noted (1999), the Jesuits had encouraged the cult of the Mary in New France, especially among the Hurons and Iroquois:

The evidence suggests that while many devout Indians shared the Jesuits’ image of the blessed Virgin as the holy mother of Christ, many converts viewed Mary as a usable orenda, or spirit, whose power was accessible to
meet native needs. For many converts to Catholicism, the blessed Virgin stood as a gateway to Christianity, a ‘bridge builder’ as one historian has put it, ‘to other cultures, and other traditions.’ (Pelikan 1996:67) (Hart 1999:67)

The Oblates continued this cult, which is not surprising given that Mary is the patron saint of the order (which is in fact named for the Virgin). She was chosen as a symbol by the order’s founder because she embodied the ideals of the Oblate project: “une personne marchant à la suite du Christ, engagée dans l’apostolat au service et à l’instruction des pauvres.” They incorporated her name in many of the missions they founded (for example, the Innu village of Mani-Utenam, “village of Mary,” whose church is under the patronage of Notre-Dame-du Cap; or the Anicinabe community of Maniwaki, ‘land of Mary’). Since 1902, the Oblates have been in charge of North America’s most important Marian sanctuary, Notre-Dame-du-Cap, at Cap-de-la-Madeleine. In 1954, the centenary of the proclamation of the dogma of Immaculate Conception and the golden jubilee of the establishment of Notre-Dame-du Cap, the Oblates organized the first pilgrimage specifically created for Native peoples. Delegations representing thirty First Nations came to pray and rejoice, celebrate mass, and participate in dances, a parade of allegorical carts and a torchlight procession. Published in the journal Le Nouvelliste, Mgr. Routhier’s speech compared the Virgin to “la nature que connaissent bien les Indiens”:

Mgr Routhier leur a expliqué que la Vierge est encore plus belle que les beaux lacs perdus en forêt, la neige éblouissante des Rocheuses, l’original au majestueux panache, les grands hommes au front élevé et digne, la femme qui porte toute sa dignité de mère, plus belle aussi que les beautés surnaturelles que l’on admire dans la vie des saints et des grands missionnaires. (Guy 1954:13)

Our informants were not moved by Mary’s traditional Catholic qualities, such as her pity for poor people, her beauty, or her majesty. Nor were they impressed by her virginity. Most mention her role as mother of Christ. Women especially mentioned that her status as mother is pivotal in representing the power of Amerindian women, as well as their cultural and religious authority. This has often been mentioned in research on Amerindian feminism (Udel 2001). As a mother, Mary witnessed the violent and dramatic death of her only son, which many Amerindian women (as well as men) have also experienced. As the patron saint of First Nations
people, she is well respected and appealed to when people need spiritual help to deal with the problems of being parents.

Saint Anne is also well respected. Once sterile, she was given the power of life by God so she could give birth to Mary. She is thus Christ’s grandmother, which elevates her status to elder. She is the object of a celebrated pilgrimage, to Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré. These two women are invoked in cases when people seek cures, fertility, and general well-being. As Denis Gagnon has noted (2005), the Innu adopted Saint Anne in the middle of the nineteenth century and fused her cult with their traditional shamanic cosmology, first to favor their survival while living in the bush and, later, since the 1970s, to resolve social problems linked to sedentarization. This trait is also present among the Anicinabek and the Atikamekw.

Kateri Tekakwitha is treated differently. First, she is not a mother. Her hagiography insists that she was the “lily of the Mohawks.” While her father was Mohawk, her mother was Anicinabe. One would therefore think that the Anicinabek might have adopted her as their patron saint. This is not the case, however. An interview (February 2007) with an Anicinabe parish priest suggested that the Oblates encouraged her adoption. She is well-respected but her help is not often invoked. A former priest had even instituted, in the 1970s, celebratory feasts in August that lasted four days, which involved processions, forest retreats (where masses were celebrated in her honor), and large feasts that brought together various bands. These feasts were abandoned in the 1990s after one priest accused of pedophilia left the community and another was promoted to bishop. Other priests in Innu and Abenaki parishes suggested the same thing. The cult of Kateri took hold in their parishes in the twentieth century only after the priests made extraordinary efforts. Three churches we visited had some relics of Kateri, and they all had sculptures or images that the priests had bought or ordered from local artisans (Photo 1). One of the priests even began his Sunday masses with a prayer to Kateri, in the hope that she would perform a miracle so she could be canonized and made a saint. Informants say she is respected because she is Amerindian; a few mentioned that she interceded on their behalf, but they represent a small minority.

In 1939, the Church chose Kateri Tekakwitha “pour revitaliser l’évangélisation des autochtones dans le sens de ce que l’on nommerait plus tard l’inculturation” (Rigal-Cellard 2006:7). As Bernadette Rigal-Cellard noted (2005), Kateri shares with Mary the quality of being a virgin at her
According to Rigal-Cellard, the cult of Kateri among Amerindian Catholics is a way of fusing their beliefs about contemporary healing practices and revitalized First Nation identities, a way of reconciling with history and healing the wounds of colonization.

The last successful transplant is Jesus. He is represented on the large cross above the altar and in the highly original Stations of Cross that often adorn the walls of Algonquian community churches. In the Catholic world, images of Christ have become increasingly important since the Vatican began stressing His role in the 1950s. A hymn to Christ in Abenaki has even become a national anthem of sorts for the Abenaki Nation. Our informants,
however, also project their own meaning on the image of Christ. He is a son who suffered. As a son, He is associated with His mother and grandmother but also with His stepfather, Joseph. Our informants do not consider Joseph an object of devotion, though he is highly respected, as Carrière notes when commenting on Father Guéguen’s missionary activity:

[. . .] un Indien de Manawan lui avait demandé d’acheter une statue de saint Joseph tenant l’Enfant-Jésus dans ses bras et avait offert la somme de trente dollars pour cet objet. On attendait l’arrivée des Indiens de Coucoucache pour faire la bénédiction de cette statue. (Carrière 1978:149)

Today, even if he is somewhat forgotten, his image is represented in First Nations churches. He, like other Catholic saints, is represented in a way that stresses an “Indian” identity: sometimes his statue is painted to darken his skin, and other times, the flower he holds in his hand in statues sited in non-First Nations churches is replaced by a walking stick, a hammer, or an axe (Photo 2).

It is important to note that, like Joseph, the statues or images of saints that are Indianized are Mary and Jesus (we have seen Indianized representations of Saint Anne only on banners made especially for the pilgrimage at Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré). For example, Mary may be shown wearing a headband with a feather, a representation that we find in the Oblate iconography even before later representation by Native artisans. Jesus is represented as an Indian when he is shown as an infant baby in his cradle (which can be a little canoe or a *tikinagan*, an Algonquin baby carrier) or on a crucifix (Photo 3). This externalization of Indian physical semblance, which was reappropriated by Native artisans, began at a time when, paradoxically (as our informants told us), Amerindians tended to deny or to reject their Native identity, particularly when they had light skins. This period is associated with the release of children from the Native residential schools. At the same time, however, it corresponded with a quest for identity which was expressed in different ways, including the identification of these saints as Natives.

In sum, Kateri aside, the most respected and invoked saints in First Nations cults are closely associated with the family, which is a reflection of the importance of kinship in Algonquian societies; and all of these can be represented as members of First Nations.

**SAINTS IN DAILY LIFE**

Images of Catholic saints were undoubtedly important to Algonquian peoples in the past, but are they still present in contemporary daily life? Admittedly, we only saw images of saints in the houses of elders and former students of residential schools. Although there are no private altars as such, there were very often portraits of Mary with rosaries draped on the picture. These were often been bought at souvenir shops at pilgrimage sites, but also at variety stores. Pictures of Kateri, almost as popular as Mary, often come from the local church when in the past priests distributed free calendars and posters (today, local parishes are often unable to do so for financial reasons). Cars often have small images of Kateri hanging from the rearview mirror next to a dream catcher or a fresh scent pine tree. As Jacques Rousseau noted (1961), since the 1950s souvenir shops have sold them as images of patron saint and protector of travellers, equivalent of Saint Christopher. Unlike other saints, Kateri is found in the houses of nonbelievers as much as in the
homes of the faithful. Everyone is aware that she was Amerindian. Images of Saint Anne are less common, usually limited to being incorporated in holy candles or in small illustrated prayer cards tacked to a wall.

Saint Joseph is conspicuously absent in homes, unless a male resident in the house is called Joseph and received an effigy of the saint as a gift. Practicing Catholics often have many crucifixes as well as portraits of Pope John-Paul II (who beatified Kateri). Rosaries and crucifixes that once were adornments for Innu, Anicinabek, and Atikamekw women’s clothing have been relegated to walls or simply eliminated. People who still acknowledge the power of saintly images invoke them for protection. All saints are equally efficacious in this respect. Only in one case did we find an image of Saint
Theresa of the Holy Infant, who is with Saint Francis Xavier patron saint of the missions, but we were unable to discover the symbolism of this image for the house’s residents.

LESSER SUCCESSES AND FAILURES

There are other lesser-known saints represented in First Nations parishes. For example, St. Eugene of Mazenod is present in all Oblate parishes since he is the founder of the order. Lay people, however, barely acknowledge his existence. The Holy Canadian Martyrs, Saint George and Saint Clothilde, are barely noticeable in the churches to which they gave their names. Sometimes, people have negative reactions to certain statues: “If it were up to me, I’d tear it down”; “that one comes from the Bishop; we just don’t care.” Sometimes, local guides have done some research and try to explain the link between saint, parish, and people. For example, one of our guides at Odanak explained that he had taken the time to understand how he could identify with the images he was showing us. He ignored some saints, either because they were, in his words, responsible for “cultural ruin” or because they were too closely associated with a colonial agenda; for example, Saint Francis of Sales, the patron of writers and journalists and an advocate of universal education, is not well-regarded because First Nations depend on an oral and not written tradition. But our guide accepted the Archangel Michael because he is known as a courageous and powerful warrior; Saint Francis of Assisi because he spoke with animals and so is equated with Glooskap; and Saint Anthony of Padova because he was Saint Francis’ righthand man.

According to the Jesuits questioned by Rigal-Cellard (2006:39–40), after incultration²:

les Autochtones se sont mis à redécouvrir leur propre mythologie, et se sont aperçus des correspondances avec la Bible. Ainsi, ils aiment beaucoup l’Ancien Testament et ses histoires et ils acceptent la genèse littéralement. Ils ont en revanche du mal à accepter l’injonction biblique faite à l’homme de dominer la nature et les animaux puisque leur culture n’établit pas de hiérarchie entre les créatures. Ils se sentiront par conséquent très proches

². In its theological sense, the term *inculturation* signifies the rooting or grounding of the evangelical message in the culture of a people.
de Saint François d’Assise, et également de Saint Joseph, ce brave homme qui obéit et fait son travail sans rien demander à personne. . . .

We are uncertain if the weakening of interest in Saint Joseph is due to the fact that Algonquian people no longer identify with him. Our findings, however, suggest that the popularity of some saints derives from the links that Algonquians are able to establish between the saint and a traditional mythical figure.

As one of our priest-informants told us, in his Anicinabe parish accepting or rejecting certain saints is demonstrated by parishioners banishing a statue to the basement and replacing it with another. By comparison, however, another priest in an Innu community witnessed the importance given to the Virgin Mary (especially the Virgin of Fatima) when an old and rotting statue portraying her while kneeling and surrounded by children was repaired with funds collected independently by a local committee of older parishioners. The priest was not involved. At the inauguration of the renovated statue in 2006, the committee placed a plaque on the pedestal with the expression, “Nitshissitenan–On se souvient” (a reference to the motto of Quebec) as a way of remembering the arrival of the Oblates to a site that would later become a reserve. This spontaneity suggests that the gesture can be linked to a sense of heritage, to an attempt to preserve local history. Our Lady of Fatima is also popular at Odanak, attested to by there being a side chapel dedicated to her. A local artist, Adrien Panadis, in 1947 created a scene with children kneeling in front of Mary; the children were depicted wearing moccasins. The nuns who lived there at the time, however, had them replaced with sabots, arguing that the children were Portuguese. The painter’s intentions had been clear, trying to establish a link between the praying children and First Nations children (Photo 4).

Why did saints popular among other Quebecers not have the same success among Algonquians? Several hypotheses come to mind: first, the Oblates consciously tried to create cults dedicated to Jesus, Joseph, and Mary (Carrière 1978:62). They were not entirely successful, as has been mentioned above, since the cult of Joseph never caught on. The Oblates were not the first to encounter this resistance; their predecessors had had

3. We thank our Odanak informants for sharing this anecdote.
no more success. Another hypothesis was formulated by Jeremy Boissevain (1966:17):

Il est frappant de constater que, dans les pays catholiques où existe un important culte des saints, ainsi l’aire méditerranéenne et l’Amérique latine, on a aussi un système politique qui, s’il n’est pas fondé sur les relations patron-client, est pour le moins fortement influencé par ces relations. Ces pays diffèrent des pays catholiques, situés plus au nord de l’Europe, où le culte des saints est beaucoup moins pratiqué, et où les relations patron-client sont moins importantes. Je ne prétends pas qu’il y a un lien causal entre le culte des saints et un système de patronage politique, bien que ce puisse être le cas. Mais il est évident, je pense, que le patronage religieux et le patronage politique se renforcent l’un l’autre. Chacun sert de modèle à l’autre.

Thus, Vincent Lemieux (1982) suggests that in Quebec God can be considered “comme un « patron » qui comprend, auprès duquel peuvent intervenir des saints, qui sont des patrons inférieurs et en particulier la Vierge Marie” (1982:18). Scholars such as Robbins (1973) have argued that patron-client relationships are not unknown among Algonquians, just as egalitarianism is typical of the kinship links that govern relationships.
in hunting groups. The idea of extending the concept of patronage to Algonquian politics is not without problems, however, if it means an asymmetric exchange of services and asymmetric power relations. As Morantz argues (1982:483) for the Cree, Chiefs had authority but were more the “first among equals.” This seems to be true for the Algonquian neighbours of the Cree. Furthermore, there seems to be no trace of patronage in the religious dimension: there are no confraternities or similar Amerindian institutions that organize relationships to sources of power. In Quebec, the missionaries integrated First Nations people into existing groups such as 4-H clubs and the Knights of Columbus. This, however, was one-sided, since Amerindians never adopted these institutions and abandoned them at the same time or even before they stopped going to mass. Nor was God thought of as a powerful patron. He seems to have been conceived more as a kind of manager of the world. Saints, therefore, were not necessarily seen as intermediaries between man and God, as they are in the more hierarchical non-Amerindian versions of Catholicism. Nor have they taken the place of traditional animal-masters, who remain active, according to Algonquian beliefs, in regulating hunting.

Another hypothesis is that Algonquians only adopted the Saints that had some Algonquian-like traits or that embodied some aspects of their history. Even Saint Juan Diego, in 1531 the first Indian to receive an alleged visitation by the Holy Virgin, was not adopted by the Algonquians despite efforts by the Oblates (Guy 1954). Juan Diego may have been Amerindian, but he was from Mexico and therefore had few traits that made sense to the Algonquians. Elsewhere, the cult of saints may have been adopted because they were local heroes who played very precise historical roles—founders, creators, national icons, healers, protectors. In the Algonquian context, saints did not occupy the same roles and were largely identified as belonging to a foreign world.

CONCLUSION

The adoption of Catholicism by Algonquians was conditioned by local considerations. Dogmas and practices were incorporated or interpreted to make sense of the world in local terms. The few saints who became objects of devotion among First Nations people in Quebec seem to have been icons used for protection and healing, practices that were coherent
with shamanism and neo-shamanism. They are often invoked for the values they embody, which are not always those that are tied to their biographies. The saints that “work” in the Algonquian context also embody the respect normally due to elders, who also happen to think of Catholicism as part of Amerindian tradition. Saints also represent those moral values considered indispensable to remedy the social problems found in contemporary Reserve communities, especially notions of sharing and helping others.

At the same time, knowledge of saints is not transmitted. Apart from the four main figures described here, young people in general are unable to identify images of other saints, nor do they know anything of their biographies. Young parents rarely name their children after saints; if they do, it is only unwittingly. For example, since the 1990s francophone parents have been giving English names to their children, especially names that are common in popular culture. Is this a way of overcoming a colonial heritage? It is certainly possible, since they are invoking models that have little or nothing to do with the images put forth by the missionaries. The growing presence of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches in First Nations communities in Quebec also contributes to the weakening of any saintly cults. These faiths place Jesus at the center of their message, to whom each believer has a personal relationship; there is no need for saints or even the clergy to act as intermediaries.

In fact, the growing presence of Evangelicals is probably a critical factor in the weakening of saintly cults. Not only do these faiths emphasize Jesus, as already mentioned, but they also stress the fear of the Devil and his manifestations. We have not mentioned the Devil nor angels (who are almost completely absent in churches today, unless they are incorporated into older architectural details such as sculptures). The Devil was of course rarely mentioned in the same breath as saints, but our informants insist that the missionaries did speak of him nonetheless. Evangelicals emphasize only God and the Devil, with no intermediaries between these two entities and believers. Is their success explained by the rejection of a hierarchy of spirits and intermediaries? Do Algonquians identify more closely with a belief system that stresses personal contact with the Creator and his chief enemy? Although we have limited our analysis to Catholicism and shamanism, it is certainly possible that to understand better Algonquian beliefs it may be necessary to consider the other elements that have entered the religious pantheon in recent years.
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