

Old Ignace and Friends



Native American Witnesses to our Holy Catholic Faith

by Nancy Nicholson

Have you ever thought of being a missionary priest or sister? Did you know that you don't have to wait until you are grown up, or in the religious life, to be a missionary witness to Jesus Christ and His Church? This is the story of Old Ignace and other faithful Iroquois Catholics, their friend Father Pierre De Smet, and the wonderful way that they brought the Faith to other Native Americans, while being Catholic witnesses to white trappers and settlers as well.

Thanks to the earlier Canadian missionary efforts of St. Isaac Jogues and others, a large number of the Iroquois tribe was Catholic; Old Ignace La Mousse probably learned his faith as he grew up near Montreal, in the same area that St. Kateri Tekakwitha had lived in the previous century. There, surrounded by French Canadian and Native American fur trappers, Old Ignace also embraced this livelihood, and was among those Iroquois Catholics who became valued members of fur-trading expeditions, not only because of their skill in navigating heavily-laden canoes through often treacherous rivers, but for their honesty and reliability. Daily living their faith, it was not unusual for the Indians to be heard singing religious songs to the rhythm of their dipping paddles as they traveled the dangerous waters alongside French-Canadian trappers.



Father Pierre De Smet, SJ

The fur-trading expeditions of Old Ignace eventually led him and twenty-three other Canadian Iroquois to settle in Montana, where they were accepted by, and married into, the Flathead tribe. In their new home, they continued to be a witness to their Catholic Faith, teaching the receptive Flatheads about Our Lord and His Church. Through Old Ignace, the tribe learned the Sign of the Cross and many other prayers, to keep Sunday as the Lord's Day, and to baptize those in danger of death. The Flatheads, along with the Iroquois, now began to yearn for a priest to teach them more about Our Lord and bring them the Sacraments; in 1831, they met in council and decided to send four volunteers all the way to St. Louis, Missouri, to bring back a 'Black Robe'. Because of his travels into the Pacific Northwest, Old Ignace knew of the famous explorers Lewis and Clark and

that Clark was known to be living in St. Louis. Old Ignace felt sure that Clark, a Catholic, would help them in their quest.

The four volunteers, including two Indians from the neighboring Nez Perce tribe, set out across the Rocky Mountains and the Great Plains. After months of weary travel, the small band arrived in St. Louis, met with Clark, and was happily put into contact with the Church. However, no one could understand their dialect and, more unfortunately, they soon became gravely ill. Priests were sent for, to the joy of the Indians, who "made signs of the cross and other signs which appeared to have some relation to baptism. The sacrament was administered to them; they gave expressions of satisfaction. A little cross was presented to them. They took it with eagerness, kissed it repeatedly, and it could be taken from them only after death. It was truly distressing that they could not be spoken to." Two of the Indians died; the others, unsuccessful in their efforts to communicate the need of a priest for their tribe, did not return to Montana, either.

Meanwhile, Old Ignace continued to witness his Faith and teach the Flatheads. His influence, and that of his fellow Catholic tribesmen, was such that later settlers would comment with surprise on the refusal of the Nez Perce to hunt on Sunday, because to do so would dishonor the Great Spirit. It was also noted by the settlers that those who had been reached with the Faith were peaceful and followed the Ten Commandments very strictly.

By 1835, the first volunteers still had not returned from St. Louis. Had they been killed by unfriendly tribes, attacked by wild animals, or succumbed as a result of some other calamity? Old Ignace himself, along with two of his sons, decided to undertake the hazardous journey. Perhaps Old Ignace realized that the first volunteers had not been able to communicate their desire for a priest; since he spoke French, maybe he would have more success. What joy there must have been when they arrived in St. Louis! Old Ignace was able to easily communicate their wishes, his two sons were baptized, and all received the Sacraments of Penance and Holy Communion. Oh, to have a priest of their own! Sadly, the Jesuits in St. Louis were poor, struggling, and few in number; they could spare no priests. Old Ignace and his sons, disappointed, made the long journey back to Montana.

Still determined, Old Ignace again set out for St. Louis in 1837, accompanied by a Nez Perce chief and three Flatheads. For safety, they traveled with a large group of white traders; however, they were attacked by Sioux on the North Platte River, near Fort Laramie, and Old Ignace and all his friends were killed. They had given witness to the Faith in life and death; after all and above all, Jesus Christ was their greatest Treasure, their only Goal.

When the sad news of their deaths reached the Flathead tribe, two Iroquois, Young Ignace and Pierre Gaucher, bravely set out to complete the mission begun six years before. Traveling with a group of Hudson's Bay fur trappers, they heard of a Black Robe who was bringing the Truths of the Faith to the Pottawatomie at a little mission in Council Bluffs, Iowa. There, these dedicated Catholic Iroquois met the missionary Belgian priest, Father Pierre De Smet. Touched by their earnest request for 'Black Robes', Father De Smet decided to return to St. Louis with the Indians and plead their case before his Bishop, offering himself in their service.

Permission was soon granted for Father De Smet to return and establish a mission for the Flatheads; since winter was coming on he decided to wait until spring to make the journey. Young Ignace would stay with him in St. Louis, to begin gathering supplies and guide their party back to Montana. Pierre Gaucher, alone and facing cruel winter snows and extreme hardship, walked the more than 1,600 miles across the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains to bring the joyful news back to the waiting tribe.



P. J. De Smet S.J.

In March of 1840, Father De Smet and Young Ignace began their long and difficult journey. Traveling first by steamboat up the Mississippi, they soon switched to horseback. Father De Smet, plagued by bouts of malaria, rode until he could no longer stay in the saddle. Ill, and traveling in the wagon over roadless, rough terrain, Father De Smet found himself tossed "in the most singular positions; now my feet would be in the air, now I would find myself hidden like a thief between boxes and bundles, cold as an icicle or covered with sweat and burning like a stove ... During three days when my fever was at its highest, I had no water but what was stagnant and dirty."

Despite the hardships of the trail, Young Ignace was surely filled with happiness at the prospect of bringing the Holy Faith to his tribe. He faithfully accompanied Father De Smet along parts of what would become the Oregon Trail, seeing buffalo, antelope, prairie dogs and wolves as they crossed the Great Plains to Laramie, Wyoming. Alerted to their arrival by Pierre Gaucher, (who had finally reached Montana in April) the chief of the Cheyennes gave them warm welcome. He begged them to dine with him, saying, "Be welcome, I have had my three best dogs killed in your honor; they were very fat." After the meal, Father De Smet was delighted to have the opportunity to give a teaching on the Ten Commandments and Creed to the receptive Cheyenne.

Leaving Laramie, the party traveled past the Sweetwater and across the Continental Divide in the great Rocky Mountains. Still several hundred miles from the home of the Flatheads, Young Ignace and the 'Black Robe' were surprised to be met by ten members of the tribe, come to escort them safely across the Tetons. At the Tetons, they were even more delighted to discover more than 1,500 Flatheads and Pend d'Oreilles camped there, awaiting their appearance. For four days, all stayed encamped while Father fulfilled the Indians' desire for teaching on the Faith of the True God.

Then they began the trek up the Snake River, now with more than two thousand Native American men, women and children, supplies, prancing horses, and barking dogs. July found the throng moving slowly toward home in the Bitterroot Valley of western Montana. All along the way, they stopped for daily instruction. The Indians were so glad to finally have access to the instruction of

their beloved 'Black Robe', that even those who were ill made sure that they were carried to the meeting place so they might not miss any opportunity to learn their Faith.

At these daily gatherings, Father taught the good people the Our Father, Hail Mary, and the Apostle's Creed, and promised a new silver medal to the first person who could recite all the prayers perfectly. Very shortly thereafter, an elderly Flathead recited, without one error, all the prayers; he was promptly awarded the medal and made a catechist. So fervent was the elderly Indian in his teaching that, within ten days, large groups of men and women could be heard throughout the camp, memorizing the prayers as they went about their daily tasks. Each Sunday en route, the Indians erected an altar of willow branches for the celebration of Holy Mass. With great reverence, all knelt and joined in the prayers, each in his own language: Iroquois, Flathead, Nez Perce, and Latin.

In time, because Old Ignace and his Catholic family and friends were willing to sacrifice even their lives to bring the Faith to their people, Young Ignace and the 'Black Robe' did arrive and settle in what is now part of the Flathead Indian Reservation in western Montana. There, on Sept. 24, 1841, Father De Smet established St. Mary's Mission. In his first two months with the Flatheads, Father baptized 600 men, women, and children, including the chiefs of the Flatheads and Pend d' Orielles.

If you would like to learn more about Old Ignace and Father De Smet, you may read more about their lives, their love for God, and their adventures in the following books, from which the quotes in this story were taken. If you cannot locate them in your library, it is possible that they can be requested on inter-library loan from your state library. Perhaps you and your family might also be able to visit some of the historical sites mentioned in the story.

Pioneer Catholic History of Oregon, Fr. Edwin O'Hara, 1911

Black Robes and Indians on the Last Frontier, Sr. Maria Raufer, O.P., 1963

Black Robe, John Upton Terrell, 1964