The Catholic Church in New France

Religion had an important role in the lives of Europeans. In France, most people were Catholic. As a result, almost all the colonists in New France were Catholic as well. An important group of colonists included the Roman Catholic priests, nuns, and missionaries who arrived from France. They built churches and held religious services, taught school, ran hospitals, and cared for the poor. Often, a priest was the most educated person in the community. Colonists who could not read or write asked him to draw up wills and record business dealings. The priest was also in charge of registering all births and deaths.

The most important goal of the Church was to spread the Catholic faith. Missionaries came to the colony to convert First Nations people to the Catholic religion. One of the first groups of missionaries were the Jesuits—members of a religious community known as the Society of Jesus.

In 1635, the Jesuits established the only college in New France where the sons of settlers could be educated. The next year, there were 20 boys studying there. The Jesuits encouraged two orders of nuns to come to New France in 1639. The nuns opened a school for girls and a hospital.

Missionaries to the First Nations

Many of the missionaries travelled on foot or by canoe into the wilderness to work among the First Nations peoples. A missionary’s life was filled with many hardships. In each village, they built a church and held services. The Jesuits were especially active among the Wendat. The Wendat referred to them as the “Black Robes” because of their long, black priests’ robes. The Jesuits tried to learn the Wendat language to earn their friendship, but progress was slow. Initially, very few Wendat became Christians.

Jesuit Relations

Every year, the Jesuits sent a report of their activities back to France. These reports, called the Jesuit Relations, contain first-hand accounts of the Jesuits’ work in the Wendat villages and some of the hardships
they faced. The *Relations* also describes the fur trade in detail. The reports are an important primary source for historical information about New France.

In the *Jesuit Relations* of 1636, Father Le Jeune describes a canoe trip into the wilderness:

"You must expect to be, at least, three or four weeks on the way; [...] to be cramped in a bark canoe in an uncomfortable position... in danger fifty times a day of being upset or of being dashed upon the rocks. During the day, the Sun burns you; during the night you run the risks of being a prey to mosquitoes. You sometimes ascend five or six rapids in a day; and in the evening the only food is a little corn crushed between two stones and cooked in clear water; the only bed is the earth, sometimes only the rough, uneven rocks, and usually no roof but the stars...."


**FIGURE 1.24** Frances Hopkins painted these images of bark canoes in the 1870s. She was the wife of a fur-trade official. Why do you think the canoe was the main form of transportation for the traders and missionaries? How do you think you would feel after travelling as Father Le Jeune describes it?
Mission at Sainte-Marie

The Jesuit headquarters among the Wendat was a mission called Sainte-Marie. It was located in what is now central Ontario. Sainte-Marie consisted of 20 buildings surrounded by stone walls and a palisade. Several priests lived there, trying to convert the Wendat to Christianity.

Some Wendat accepted the European religion. They may have genuinely believed in it, or they may have thought that converting was a sign of friendship toward the French. The French also influenced some of the Wendat by offering to trade furs and guns only with individuals who agreed to convert to Christianity. This caused conflict among the Wendat. Those who did not convert looked with suspicion at those who did.

The missionaries and the First Nations had very different ideas about life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Nations' ideas</th>
<th>Missionaries' ideas</th>
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<tr>
<td>• had their own strong spiritual beliefs</td>
<td>• wanted the First Nations to accept Christian beliefs</td>
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<tr>
<td>• used marriages as a way of cementing military and trade alliances between families and groups</td>
<td>• used marriage to increase the size of the family and the colony</td>
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<tr>
<td>• respected the power of their own shamans, or religious leaders</td>
<td>• wanted to reduce the influence of the shamans</td>
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<tr>
<td>• some First Nations groups needed to travel widely in search of game to feed their families</td>
<td>• wanted the First Nations to settle in one place where the missionaries could supervise them</td>
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<tr>
<td>• blamed the missionaries for spreading disease</td>
<td>• thought they could cure the diseases that afflicted the First Nations</td>
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Sometimes the Wendat who accepted these European ideas had difficulty relating to other First Nations peoples.
The Destruction of the Wendat

The Wendat were the main providers of furs to the French. They not only trapped furs themselves, they also collected them from other First Nations societies to bring back to the French traders. This brought them into conflict with the Haudenosaunee, who were the main suppliers of furs to the English and Dutch colonies to the south.

By the 1640s, the Haudenosaunee were raiding the Wendat to steal their furs and take captives to adopt into their own population. In 1649, they attacked the main Wendat villages near Sainte-Marie. The Wendat were already weakened by disease and divided by the influence of the missionaries. The villages were destroyed and the Wendat driven away. Some took up land around the French settlements on the St. Lawrence River. Others joined neighbouring First Nations societies.
Make a connection. Consider some of the decisions you have made in your life. What did you think about to help you make your decision?

What Direction for New France?

In the early years, the fur trade was the most important activity in the colony of New France. Not only did fur traders make money from trading, they also added territory to the French empire through their explorations into the wilderness. It was through the fur trade that the French made friends and allies of the First Nations peoples.

On the other hand, the fur trade brought the French into conflict with some First Nations peoples, principally the Haudenosaunee. After the defeat of the Wendat, the Haudenosaunee, with the support of their British allies, made life difficult for the French along the St. Lawrence River. For decades the colonists lived under the threat of attacks by the Haudenosaunee and the British.

The fur trade brought wealth, but it did not encourage the colony to grow. Even in 1645, more than a hundred years after Cartier’s arrival, there were only 600 European colonists living in New France. The fur-trading companies were supposed to bring in shiploads of new settlers and help them get established. However, the companies were not interested in settlement, they were interested only in trade.

The French government would soon have to make a decision. What direction should the new colony take? Who should be in charge—the fur traders or the government?