# ***The Jesuit Relations (1640)***

# Paul LeJuene and Jerome Lalemant

## Introduction

By the 1630s, New France stretched from the coast of Louisiana to Northern Canada, and remained sparsely populated outside of Montreal and New Orleans. Outside of the towns, New France was primarily populated by a wide-variety of Indian Nations, French colonists involved in the fur trade (mostly beaver), and Catholics Priests known as the Jesuits, sent throughout the Northern regions (north of the Ohio River) to live among the Native Americans with the intention of converting them to Catholicism. As the moved south and west from Quebec, Jesuit priests and nuns constructed small missions consisting of a church, hospital, and modest housing. The Catholic Diocese, located in Montreal, required each Jesuit mission to submit an annual report of the activities and events of the past year. The “Relation,” as the report was called, included individual journals kept by all of the priests in the mission detailing everything from the weather to detailed accounts of their interactions with local Native Americans.

In the Relation of 1640, Father Paul Le Jeune reported from Quebec while Father Jerome Lalemant corresponded from the mission among the Hurons. Le Jeune founded the Notre Dame de Recouvrance in Angers, Quebec, 200 miles west of Montreal. Lalemant founded Sainte-Marie among the Hurons about 500 miles away in what is now Midland, Ontario. Both Jesuits learned the languages and gained an understanding of the cultures of the different Indian Nations as they lived among them and worked to convert them to Catholicism. In 1639/40, a smallpox epidemic spread throughout Canada and the Ohio River Valley. Some Native Americans fled to the Catholic missions in search of healing and protection. Others saw the French as responsible for the spread of illness and death and responded accordingly.[[1]](#footnote-1)

## Primary Source

**Of the Hospital.**

The hospital Nuns arrived at Kébec[[2]](#footnote-2) on the first day of the month of August of last year. Scarcely had they disembarked before they found themselves overwhelmed with patients[[3]](#footnote-3). The hall of the Hospital being too small, it was necessary to erect some cabins, fashioned like those of the Savages[[4]](#footnote-4), in their garden. Not having enough furniture for so many people, they had to cut in two or three pieces part of the blankets and sheets they had brought for these poor sick people. In a word, instead of taking a little rest, and refreshing themselves after the great discomforts they had suffered upon the sea, they found themselves so burdened and occupied that we had fear of losing them and their hospital at its very birth. The sick came from all directions in such numbers, their stench was so insupportable, the heat so great, the fresh food so scarce and so poor, in a country so new and strange, that I do not know how these good sisters, who almost had not even leisure in which to take a little sleep, endured all these hardships. . . . All the French born in the country were attacked by this contagion, as well as the Savages

In brief, from the month of August until the month of May[[5]](#footnote-5), more than one hundred patients entered the hospital, and more than two hundred poor Savages found relief there, either in temporary treatment or in sleeping there one or two nights, or more. There have been seen as many as ten, twelve, twenty, or thirty of them at a time. Twenty poor sick people have received holy Baptism there; and about twenty-four, quitting this house of mercy, have entered the regions of glory

Father Claude Pijard[[6]](#footnote-6), who has had charge of the instruction of the poor of this house, during the entire winter, has given me a little relation, couched in these terms: "In the morning, we had the Savages say prayers, and, some time after, the holy Mass was celebrated, at which those who had been baptized were present; after dinner, we had them recite the catechism[[7]](#footnote-7), and then gave them a little explanation of it, usually adding some pious story that one of the Savages repeated. In the evening, they made their examination of conscience; they confessed and received communion[[8]](#footnote-8) every two weeks, and would have done so oftener if we had permitted them. They showed their devotion by often visiting the most holy Sacrament, by saying their rosary several times a day, by singing spiritual canticles, which have succeeded their barbarous songs, - in short, by fasting throughout the sacred forty days, for those who could do so[[9]](#footnote-9)

"I have often wondered," says the Mother [Superior], "how these persons, so different in country, age, and sex, can agree so well. In France, a Nun has to be on her guard every day in our houses, to prevent disputes among our poor, or to quell them; and all winter we have not observed the least discord among our sick Savages, - not even a slight quarrel has arisen.

"The remedies that we brought from Europe are very good for the Savages, who have no difficulty in taking our medicines, nor in having themselves bled[[10]](#footnote-10). The love of the mothers toward their children is very great, for they take in their own mouths the medicine intended for their children, and then pass it into the mouths of their little ones." Thus the good Mother wrote to me.

The Savages who leave the hospital, and who come to see us again at St. Joseph, or at the three Rivers, say a thousand pleasant things about these good Nuns. They call them "the good," "the liberal," "the charitable." The Mother Superior[[11]](#footnote-11) having fallen sick, these poor Savages were very sorry, the sick blaming themselves for it. "It is we who have made her sick," they said; "she loves us too much; why does she do so much for us?" When this good Mother, having recovered, entered the hall of the poor, they knew not how to welcome her enough. They have good reason to love these good Mothers: for I do not know that parents have so sweet, so strong, and so constant an affection for their children as these good women have for their patients. I have often seen them so overwhelmed that they were utterly exhausted; yet I have never heard them complain, either of the too great number of their patients, or of the infection, or of the trouble they gave them. They have hearts so loving and so tender towards these poor people that, if occasionally some little present were given them, one could be very certain that they would not taste it, however greatly they might need it, everything being dedicated and consecrated to their sick. This charity had to be moderated, and an order was given them to eat at least a part of the little gifts that were made to them, especially when they were not strong. I am not surprised if the Savages, who recognize very clearly this great charity, love, cherish, and honor them.

Father Buteux wrote, some days ago, to the Reverend Father Superior that a woman who had remained a long time at the hospital did a great deal of good among the Savages of her nation, instructing them with much fervor. This is the common practice of those who have passed the winter in this holy house; they afterwards preach to their compatriots with great zeal.

**Of the Condition of the Country.**

Let us come to the disease which, having put everything in desolation, gave us much exercise, but was also an occasion of much consolation to us, - God having given us hardly any other harvest than from that quarter.

It was upon the return from the journey which the Hurons had made to Kébec, that it started in the country, - our Hurons, while again on their way up here, having thoughtlessly mingled with the Algonquins, whom they met on the route, most of whom were infected with smallpox. The first Huron who introduced it came ashore at the foot of our house, newly built on the bank of a lake, - whence being carried to his own village, about a league distant from us, he died straightway after. Without being a great prophet, one could assure one's self that the evil would soon be spread abroad through all these regions: for the Hurons - no matter what plague or contagion they may have - live in the midst of their sick, in the same indifference, and community of all things, as if they were in perfect health. In fact, in a few days, almost all those in the cabin of the deceased found themselves infected; then the evil spread from house to house, from village to village, and finally became scattered throughout the country.

## **Of the Persecutions Excited Against Us.**

The villages nearer to our new house having been the first ones attacked, and most afflicted, the devil did not fail to seize his opportunity for reawakening all the old imaginations, and causing the former complaints of us, and of our sojourn in these quarters, to be renewed; as if it were the sole cause of all their misfortunes, and especially of the sick. They no longer speak of aught else, they cry aloud that the French must be massacred. These barbarians animate one another to that effect; the death of their nearest relatives takes away their reason, and increases their rage against us so strongly in each village that the best informed can hardly believe that we can survive so horrible a storm. They observed, with some sort of reason, that, since our arrival in these lands, those who had been the nearest to us, had happened to be the most ruined by the diseases, and that the whole villages of those who had received us now appeared utterly exterminated; and certainly, they said, the same would be the fate of all the others if the course of this misfortune were not stopped by the massacre of those who were the cause of it. This was a common opinion, not only in private conversation but in the general councils held on this account, where the plurality of the votes went for our death, - there being only a few elders who thought they greatly obliged us by resolving upon banishment.

What powerfully confirmed this false imagination was that, at the same time, they saw us dispersed throughout the country, - seeking all sorts of ways to enter the cabins, instructing and baptizing those most ill with a care which they had never seen. No doubt, they said, it must needs be that we had a secret understanding with the disease (for they believe that it is a demon), since we alone were all full of life and health, although we constantly breathed nothing but a totally infected air, - staying whole days close by the side of the most foul smelling patients, for whom every one felt horror; no doubt we carried the trouble with us, since, wherever we set foot, either death or disease followed us.

In consequence of all these sayings, many had us in abomination; they expelled us from their cabins, and did not allow us to approach their sick, and especially children: not even to lay eyes on them, - in a word, we were dreaded as the greatest sorcerers on earth.

Wherein truly it must be acknowledged that these poor people are in some sense excusable. For it has happened very often, and has been remarked more than a hundred times, that where we were most welcome, where we baptized most people, there it was in fact where they died the most; and, on the contrary, in the cabins to which we were denied entrance, although they were sometimes sick to extremity, at the end of a few days one saw every person prosperously cured. We shall see in heaven the secret, but ever adorable, judgments of God therein

The reasons which we have thus far adduced, on account of which the barbarians suspect us of being the cause of their diseases, seem to have some foundation; but the devil did not stop there, - it would be a miracle if he did not build the worst of his calumnies[[12]](#footnote-12) on sheer lies. Robert le Coq, one of our domestics, had returned from Kébec in a state of sickness which caused as much horror as compassion to all those who had courage enough to examine the ulcers with which all his limbs were covered. Never would a Huron have believed that a body so filled with miseries could have returned to health; regarding him then as good as dead, there were found slanderers so assured in their falsehood that they publicly maintained that this young Frenchman had told them in confidence that the Jesuits alone were the authors and the cause of the diseases which from year to year kept depopulating the country

But let us return to our Savages, excited against us on account of the disease, and to those impostors who had maintained that Robert le Coq had so confidentially informed them of the black magic arts and the execrable spells with which we were causing them all to die. It was not very difficult to refute these calumnies, since he who was said to have been the sole source of all these rumors, - not being dead, as they had supposed, but having recovered perfect health - could belie all those who previously maintained they had heard the thing from his lips. But what? falsehood gets the better of the truth; the slanderers find more credit than the one who justifies us but the demons are like thunders, which make more noise than they do harm, - for all these threats have had but little effect. We are alive, thank God, all full of life and health. It is indeed true that the crosses have been stricken down from above our houses; that people have entered our cabins, hatchet in hand, in order to deal some evil blow there; they have, it is said, awaited some of ours on the roads, with the intention of killing them; the hatchet has been lifted above others, and the blow brought within a finger-length of their bare heads; the Crucifixes which were carried to the sick have been violently snatched from us; blows with a club have been mightily inflicted upon one of our missionaries, to prevent him from conferring some baptism. Sed nondum usque ad sanguinem restitimus[[13]](#footnote-13); our blood and our lives have not yet been poured out for him to whom we owe all our hearts. Our soul is in our hands, and this is the greatest favor that we hope to receive from the great Master who employs us, - namely, to die for his holy name, after having suffered much.

Not that I do not forever praise this great God of goodness, for having thus far protected us with so much love: for it is truly an unspeakable happiness for us, in the midst of this barbarism, to hear the roarings of the demons, and to see all hell and almost all men animated and filled with fury against a little handful of people who would not defend themselves; to see ourselves shut up in a place fifteen hundred leagues from our native land, where all the powers of the earth could not warrant us against the anger of the weakest man who might have designs on our lives, and where we have not even a bag of corn which has not been furnished us by those who incessantly parley about killing us; and to feel at the same time so special a confidence in the goodness of God, so firm an assurance in the midst of dangers, a zeal so active, and a courage so resolute to do all and to suffer all for the glory of our Master, so indefatigable a constancy in the labors which increase from day to day. So that it is easy to conceive that God is the one who espouses our cause; that it is he alone who protects us, and that his providence takes pleasure in manifesting itself where we see least of the human

1. *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*. [Full source](http://moses.creighton.edu/kripke/jesuitrelations/relations_19.html) is believed to be in the public domain. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Quebec, a providence in Canada. Quebec and its capital, Montreal, served as the commercial and political center of the New France. French remains the primary (and official) language in Quebec and every so often they vote on seceding from Canada. No so far, though. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In 1639, a group of Ursuline Nuns arrived in New France. The Ursuline Order was founded with the mission of educating girls and caring for the sick and needy. The three nuns who came to New France learned the language of the local Native Americans so they could convert and education their children. The Nuns arrived during the smallpox epidemic and also ran a hospital to serve the sick and dying. Sister Marie of the Incarnation led the Ursuline Order of Nuns in New France until her death in 1762. She was later canonized by the Catholic Church, meaning the Church made her a Saint (she is now known as Saint Marie of the Incarnation). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Le Juene and Lalament refer to Native Americans as “Savages” throughout the source. You should not do the same when writing in your own voice in 2019. A direct quote requires exact language but otherwise, please use the appropriate contemporary terms for race and ethnicity. The Guidelines have more information about terms for race. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 1649. The Spanish have been in Mexico and the Southwest for over 100 years. The Dutch arrived around the same time as the French. British colonists arrived in Jamestown, Virginia in 1609 and Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620. By 1649, enslaved Africans were being bought and sold throughout all of the colonies, including the French city of New Orleans, located in the southernmost region of New France. Things are happening. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jesuit priest working with LeJuene and Lalament. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Catechism generally means instruction in the principles of a religious faith. In the Catholic Church, Catechism takes eight years of study before Confirmation in the Church. Catholic Sunday School is also called Catechism or CCD, referring to the church association responsible for Catholic education. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Two of the 7 Holy Sacraments of the Catholic Church include Confession (called Penance and Reconciliation) and Holy Communion (called Eucharist). Catholics confess their sins to the Priest who then confers penance, usually consisting of prayers and devotionals intended to renew your faith in God without your previous sins. Catholic communion requires the priest to bless the Eucharist – a holy wafer and goblet of wine (now it’s water) – thus transforming it into the body and blood of Christ in a religious ceremony known as transubstantiation. For Catholics, Holy Communion is the third of seven sacraments received. It occurs only after receiving Baptism, and once the person has reached the “age of reason” (around 8 years old). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Rosary is a Roman Catholic devotion (daily prayer) for the Virgin Mary. The Rosary is usually practiced with a string of 5 or 15 beads significant to the progression of the prayer cycle. “The most holy Sacrament” refers to a period of spiritual cleansing. Catholics attend mass every day, sometimes more than once, and generally dedicate their time to devotion and prayer. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “Bloodletting” refers to the “medical” practice of draining a person of blood to keep their body in balance and ward off disease and death. It is as bad as it sounds. Bloodletting persists in the religious practices of some churches. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Sister Marie of the Incarnation. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Derogatory statements about a person. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The shedding of our blood. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)