

AHATSISTARI

A WAR HERO AND SAINTLY MARTYR.

On Easter- Sunday, 1642, the small mission church of Fort Ste Marie set to its best as to decoration was overflowing with devout worshipers exultant with joy over the glorious Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus From the grave. It was holding a solemn Divine Service at which one hundred and twenty newly made Christians from the preceding day, were admitted to the Sacred Banquet of the Lord for the first time in their lives, making thus their First Holy Communion coincide with their first Easter duty. That was at the epoch of glorious achievement in the field of apostolate amongst ~~the~~ Hurons.

But the great pity for this worthy indian nation is that this happy and prosperous period of its religious history had been so soon a ~~mere~~ *fact* of the past. It came to a most lamentable end a few years later in 1649, the year of its complete collapse as a nation, brought about by the fate of a most sanguinary war.....

Among this representative group of neophytes of that Easter-Sunday just mentionned-worthy disciples of such Apostles as de Brebeuf, Daniel, Lallement.etc... the most conspicuous of all was Ahatsistari, surnamed Eustache at his baptism...the hero of this narrative...

Ahatsistari, by his warring exploits previous to his baptism had gained for himself a legendary fame, and now as a christian, he was, during the the short time ~~he lived~~ *he lived afterward*, to illustrate himself by a singular ardor in the service of God, by his devotedness to the Missionaries and his fearless attitude under the fires of the Iroquois, in which he expired ~~with~~ all the saintly dispositions of a true martyr of Christ.

2.

The Relation of the time says of him: "Son courage et les exploits qu'il accomplit tous les ans le font passer pour le plus grand guerrier qui soit dans tout le pays"

The description that follows of two of his many gallant deeds in war shall suffice to give an idea of his valour as a warrior...

"Less than one year ago", says the Relation ~~of~~ the time, "while in campaign, hazard placed him in ^{to}confrontion with an army of three hundred Iroquois. He fought them with only fifty men under his command. As soon as Ahatsistari began to shoot, the Iroquois warriors took to flight, ~~seized~~ with fright, as if the arrows coming forth from the Huron chief's bow had been so many ignite shafts hitting them, such were their swiftness and directness. Those who persisted in resisting, gained but being caught as prisoneers by the valquishing hero who brought them in bonds to his country..."

Later in the same season while in a cruise on the big lake that lies between his country and that of the Iroquois. (Lake Ontario) as the cronicle of the time gives it--our warrior happened to sight a large fleet of Iroquois canoes actually in full speed towards him. His companions' first thought was for the flight and would have been quick to it too, but electrified by their Chief who then cried ^{out} to them "not so! camarads, not so!let us go straight to them". As quick as told, they executed the command. The moment they were ready for the hand to hand fight, Ahatsistary, was by ^amasterly jump ~~inside~~ the Iroquois chief's canoe, which he had marked by the size and equipment...Then the first man he reached had his scalp splitten by a stroke of his axe, and right after, two more men

of the same canoe were precipitated^{it} into the lake by a sheer swing of his right arm. A moment after he was seen floundering into the liquid element with the rest of the occupant whom he had carried behind him by causing the boat to capsize--now swimming with one hand he strikes and massacres with the other all those within his reach.

The other canoes amazed at the unsuspected display of such a herculean valor, the like of which they had never witnessed, seeing themselves vanquished by anticipation, sought by a swift course a place of security in sufficient distance from that superhuman ^{capability} (force). ~~force~~.

Incontinently, our hero returned to this own canoe and started for those who were still in the lake and ~~at a loss with~~ ^{endangered in} their involuntary bath, whom, after rescuing, he brought prisoners in his country--to dispose of as such....

HIS CONVERSION

This man, Ahatsistari, was born a warrior. War was for him like the breath of his soul, as also his whole life had been a series of combats.

But a thing worthy of note in this famous barbarian was that his warring humor instead of interfering with his becoming a Christian did but help in bringing about his conversion, as we shall see by the following account.

~~This Haron warrior, worthy of the antique Heroes of Rome and Cartage--it must be remarked, was subjected to a long period of probation before admission to Baptism...not that he ever was inwardly adverse to the~~

This Huron warrior, worthy of the antique Heroes of Rome and Cartages - it must be remarked, was subjected to a long period of probation before admission to Baptism...not that he ever was inwardly adverse to the Christian Faith, since he took from the beginning a real concern in the true Religion--such concern as to prompt him to apply for Baptism right then, and maintained this attitude ^{all along} without faltering; none the less, the Missionaries were barring him from the ritualistic entry of the Church.

They differed his Baptism because of certain pagan practices of an idolatric nature to which he adhered and would not readily give up, although otherwise affording in his moral conduct nothing why he should not be accepted as a fit candidate to Baptism. At last, after years of patient expectation, ^{+ having duly completed} ~~duly terminated by~~ a course of instructions ~~as a crowning complement~~ to his information previously acquired, that last ^{time} the whole winter, during which ^{his} ~~preparation~~, the aspirant's ^{to all pagan practices} renunciation having been satisfactorily demonstrated, Ahatsistari was then allowed to present himself with the other Catechumens at the Mission Ste Marie for a final examination. Accordingly on the day appointed was he seen at the mission amongst the other aspirants. His answers to the questions proved satisfactory since he came out with a judgment all in favour of his admission to the Sacrament to be administered two days hence on Holy Saturday.

Before proceeding any farther with our Hero, let us take heed of what was revealed of his past life as a result of his test examination. Incidentally with other questions the Priest interrogated him as to his inner feelings relatively to the Sacrament of Baptism. Our conspicuous Catecumen answered in a way that, although typical, was a true revelation of his soul and at the same time a convincing plea in his favor as to the point ~~to be obtained~~ at issue.....

"Faith is deeply set in the bottom of my heart," he said to the Father, "my demeanor during the whole winter is a sufficient guarantee of the verity of my work. In a few days I must start again for the war; now if I happen to be killed during the combat, while still a pagan, where shall my soul go? "If you could see through my heart as clearly as does the Master of our lives you would have already made me a christian a long time and so the fear of hell would not be haunting me all the time, but specially, when by affronting the enemy, I expose myself to death. What shall I do then if you do not baptize me? I cannot baptize myself. All I can do is to declare sincerely to you how I learn to become a Christian, and after that if my soul happen to fall into the hand of the devil for dying unbaptized the fault shall be onto you. Anyway, I shall never stop praying to God now that I know Him, perhaps He will have mercy on me, since He is, as you say, so kindly disposed toward men, even more still than the Blackrobe..."

"When and how the thought of ever becoming a christian sometime in your life, began to take shape in your brain...?" asked the Father.

"Long ago, even before the coming of the Blackrobes the answer was, "I have been many times preserved from peril wherein most of my comrades perished...I knew very well, it was not by myself if I were thus rescued from danger. My inner conscience was telling me that a certain Genius more powerful than any of those who are familiar to my compatriots, and whom I knew not, was assisting me with his saving succour,

"While the Hurons were attributing all their good luck to their dreams, on my part I was convinced that all their fanciful theories were but senseless aberration.--I knew nought else beyond that.

"But the moment I heard of the great God that ye, Black-Rôbes, are preaching and what that Jesus Christ had done on earth, I recognized Him and resolved to acknowledge Him all my life. Going to war, morning and night, I recommended myself to Him. From Him, I am sure, came all my victories.. In Him I believe. In His Name I ask of you to baptize me, so that after my death this Jesus might be merciful toward me onto salvation."

After such a plea it would have been criminal to afflict with a refusal such a heavenly marked soul, and the Father either could by no means think of denying him any longer, a favor so genuinely desired.

Our hero was baptized very few days after, if not even on the following, on Holy Saturday, together with that substantial batch of Hurons, as described in the beginning, making their first Holy Communion on the Easter Sunday that followed their baptism.

In the same week, our neophyte Eustache (name given him at his baptism) was already starting with a few other Huron braves, military equipped, to join groups already gone ahead on the war-path...

Ahatsistari's Capture and Death.

On the thirteenth of June of the year 1642, a flotilla of twelve canoes mounted by forty sturdy Hurons, was pulling off on the small river running at the foot of Fort Ste. Marie, en-route to Quebec. The voyage, especially at that time was beset with dangers, greatly exposed to eventual attacks by the lurking Iroquois always in readiness from their leirs to open fire on travellers.

Nothing but extreme necessity could motivate a voyage in such circumstances. The Missionaries were in dire need of new supplies. For two consecutive years already, in consequence of that hateful

state of hostilities , all communications had been cut off with Quebec which was then the unique provisioning base for all the Indian Missions in this part of the country... notwithstanding that, as they were so hard pressed, over there, they had to go. Accordingly the crew was a selection of Christian Hurons taken among the bravest; those who volunteered were ready to sacrifice even their lives for the success of the undertaking. In definitive the whole flotilla was placed under the captainship of our neophyte Eustache Ahatsistari as one best reputed in every regard, ~~among all~~ and mainly for his bravery and military hability.

Father JOgues was the one missionary priest chosen to accompany the travellers,...sent by the Superior of the Hurons Missions to act in his name at Quebec, and negotiate down there the affairs of the Missions.

They succeeded on their ^{Way} down to reach Quebec without having to record any incident with the enemy.

After fifteen days spent in buseness operations and fixing the cargo, the flotilla was on its way back, laden with supplies mostly intended for the Missionaries. The party was cheerful, counting much in their devout confidence upon the same heavenly protection for a happy return to their country.

Our travellers had already ascend the St.Laurence up to Three-Rivers, (ninety miles above Quebec) and even past that town the distance of about thirty miles, when they were surprised by an ambushed party of Iroquois waiting for them. Under their sudden volley of deadly shots, confusion first set in amongst the travellers, and then rout followed soon after...The few braves only who afforded resistance in the panic could by no means sustain the

shock. The disaster was materially complete for those Hurons and the whole body of Missionaries at the Hurons'...the result--most lamentable morally. Apart those who found security in a swift flight through the woods, all fell into the hands of the attackers as war captives. Twenty out of forty were involved in the same calamity and in face of the same awful fate...

Among those captives, to mention a few names, the most conspicuous was the Jesuit Issac Jogues (now a Saint). After him, comes René Goupil (un donné) a voluntary domestic, who was in his captivity to win the crown of Sainthood by dying a martyr at the hands of the Iroquois at the old Mohawk village, Assernenenon, today Ausresville...In third instance let us name he with whom we are primarily interested, our Hero, the valient Ahatsistari...all these forming with their companions^a group destined to worst potential fate on earth at the hands of their captors. They were tightly bound ~~as~~ as war captives, and as such immediately subjected to all sorts of tortures which those hainous and vindicative savages used to afflict their victims with in such eventualities.

The Martyr

In this momentous circumstance and fierce encounter just described, it would seem that Ahatsistari's war star had grown dim even altogether eclipsed since he was then foreonce defeated, and by his very capture reduced now to a complete disability.

Events under the firmament of the heavens have sometimes strange and incomprehensible turns. A man's earthly destiny is quickly changed and and for a saintly individual it is always for his better goodos superior advantage, even if aparently or according to the visible world

they spell catastrophe, humiliation, sufferings and misery...It was so with our Hero.

The great God of Heaven who had presided over his military successes since his youth, has equally presided at his defeat for his greater glorification, i.e. to place him under another Guiding Star of a more substantial lustre..to make him shine henceforth as a christian hero and a wonder to all, by his superhuman endurance, humility and firmness in the abyss of woes wherein his revengeful enemies have plunged him.

Here let it be said for Ahatsistari's lasting military reputation that his bravery has been the cause of his capture. As he had been the first on the defence, and the most advanced to the front, so has he been the first to be caught.

Let us quote what his Holy companion and Father in Christ, Father Jogues, wrote of him in this connection.

"At last they brought to shore this brave Christian Captain, Eustache Ahatsistari, who, as he saw me, exclaimed: 'Ah! Mon Père, I had sworn onto you that I would live or die with you!'"

"His sight," continues the holy Missionary, "transpierced my heart. I spoke a few words to him, but I do not remember what I told him right then."

"Among all our Huron captives," always according to Father Jogues, "the most illustrious was the valiant Eustache."

As an excess of tortures above those exercised against the others, he (Eustache) had his thumbs cut off, and the dolorous amputation performed, had ~~by force~~ ^{by force} a sharp reed introduced into the gastly cut, and made tear it way through fibers and nerves of his forearms up to elbows.

The Holy Jesuit seeing such cruelty could not withhold his tears

that were rolling down his cheeks from his flooded eyes,--so great was his compassion for the sufferer. Upon noticing the fact, the heroic patient, fearing that his torturers might interpret these tears in the eyes of his good Master as an effect of fear for himself, forgetful of his own tortures told them, in defence of the Jesuit's reputation, that the tears which were filling his eyes emerged from his heart through sympathy for him as their unique cause, not at all drawn from any feeling of fear."For", he said: "you can bear testimony that you have never seen him cry or weep in torture, nor his face lose anything of its serenity.

Upon this, the future Saint and Martyr replied to his dearest friend and disciple: "Although my sufferings are immense, they are not so painful to my body as thine pitiful condition is to my heart...Courage ! dearest friend, He to whose eyes nothing passes unnoticed shall know how to reward hereafter all what thou art now suffering on earth for his love.

"I am keeping memory of those many fortifying truths of our Holy Religion,"replied Eustach, "it is why I will stand firm unto death." In fact, his constancy has always been admirable, and his endurance superhuman.

The day previous to their capture, as if moved by an inner premonition of the tragical fate that was awaiting them, while at Three-Rivers, the whole Huron squad agreed in having a fraternal reunion, a kind of revival meeting in which, after going to confession, they mutually exhorted each others in the Lord in order to dispose their souls to bravely meet with any fate or calamity that might befall them on their long journey homeward.

The way those good Christians acted in the circumstance reminds one an assembly of early times Christians placed in face of their persecutors exhorting each others to martyrdom.

"Let us remember, Brothers," broke out one most recommendable one ^{among} for his age and vertue, "we did not embraced the Faith to be preserved of all evils of earth,...but we did embrace it to save our souls and to be happy up above in Heaven..." and continued on this stirring theme to the end of his harangue, after which they all swore fidelity to God. Then they started one at a time to speak out in a fervor in his own feelings.

It was soon Ahatsistari's turn to speak. "Could it ever be," he began, "that any of us might give up believing in God even if we should undergo burnt onto death at the hands of our enemies, As for me, if ever I happen to fall into the hands of the Iroquois, I cannot expect to escape alive, but before they put me to death I shall tell them of the great God who made the univers...of ^{an} eternal fire below prepared for all such as would not honor Him...of a place of infinit happiness in Heaven--everlasting abode of our immortal souls and of our bodies that shall arise impassible on the great Resurrection-Day...To this I shall add that in these eternal Truths is found the object of my consolation and perseverance...They may then let loose against my body all the instruments of their cruelty, They may be able to drain my life with my blood out of my body, but to extirpate from my heart the thought that after my death I shall enjoy an infinit happiness beyond the sky, they shall never do. One day and a half ^{past and} had hardly this magnanimous Indian was suddenly placed with his brave companions in face of of the very apprehended foe.

There, as soon as the fire opened, our Hero was seen with his arms in hands and a cry onto God on the defensive; and without relenting his ardor in the fight, one could hear his voice resounding above all the clamors of the combat: "Great God! ^{to Thee} alone is my recourse...,"

light and submit his will to the yolk of Christ. Thou shall tell them moreover, that I am so convinced of these truths taught us by the Black Robes as to certify that unless they follow the path of God, we shall be forever separated in after death. As for me in any place whatsoever I might happen to be on earth. I mean to live and expire in God.

On the following day, this magnanimous Indian was suddenly placed in face of his terrible foes who, like a swarm of Vampires emerged into sight; then as soon, arms in hands and a cry to God he was on the defensive; and without relenting his ardor in the fight, one could hear his voice resounding above all the clamors of the combat: "Great God, to Thee alone have I recourse....!"

He was the first caught as his intrepidity had him exposed most to the front.

This great God whom Eustach Ahatsistari so confidently invoked, heart his prayer, indeed, and also brought him succour, in a way best possible in giving him the supernatural strength to endure the cruel torments inflicted to him after being tied to the stake, with a pa-
torments inflicted to him while at the stake. Firebrands, burning coals, instruments of many kinds--red hot ^{sharp} or otherwise, were in no way absent in his execution...Our ^{Eustache} (Hero) ^{born} suffered every torture without a moan nor a cry...with a patience and resignation worthy of a Martyr of Christ, preaching God to his executioners up to the end....