

QUALITIES OF 17th CENTURY INDIANS



COURAGE

Among the Indians, the training in courage was rather painful at times. For example, Lescarbot tells us, the Indians were not afraid of "putting red hot coals on their arm and letting their skin burn so as to leave permanent scars. . . and showing off these scars as proofs of their great courage."

It's mainly during torture that this courage shows: "It's hard to believe with what steadfastness prisoners bear their enemies' cruelties; they defy them in the middle of torture to the point of upbraiding them for not knowing how to make them suffer and claim they would treat them much more cruelly if they held them

in their own territory. Seeing them sing in the middle of blazing fire, one would think they are insensitive to fire. "So you'll kill me," they say to their torturers, "you'll burn me, but you must know that I killed and burned many of your people. If you eat me the thought that I ate a few of your own people will comfort me. So go ahead, do as you like."

Fr. Lafiteau bears out Fr. Le Clercq's testimony: "This heroism is real and the effect of great and noble courage. It seems they ready themselves for such eventuality from early childhood. We have seen children holding their bare arms against each other and, inserting a red hot coal between them, challenging each other who would bear the pain more steadily and longer."

In time of famine courage is a very precious quality among the Indians. "My host," says Fr. Lejeune, "used to tell me during those times of great famine: "Chibiné, keep your soul firm, withstand hunger, you'll go two days, at times, three or four, without eating. Don't lose courage, when the snows come we will eat."

"That the courage of these people be animated by motives of revenge, honor or self-interest, I readily admit on the strength of (Nicolas) Perrot's word," says Fr. Tailhan, "but what civilized man is not savage on this score."

Two young Eskimos, 18 to 20 years of age, attacked three large polar bears. Without rifles, they came within 8 to 10 feet of them and, seizing the chance when the raging animals turned upon their dogs, they aimed their harpoons at them. Had they not had this weapon with them they would have used their knives, a very dangerous move. They would not have escaped without a scratch.

To bring this topic to a close, let us say with Fr. LeClercq that they have strength and a great deal of perseverance in suffering steadfastly the usual trials and tribulations of the human condition. Their great courage shows above all in the weariness of war, hunting and fishing where they suffer the worst with admirable endurance.

HEROISM

We will cite only one fact related by Fr. Chaumonot: "It deals with amoral pagans. . . It concerns a young man traveling with his sister in very cold weather. Seeing her in danger of freezing to death, he took off his large fur blanket and covered her with it. He urged her to run for her life, while he would remain behind in her flimsy clothing. The poor girl hurried to her village while her unfortunate brother lay dying of cold, a heroic victim of brotherly care."