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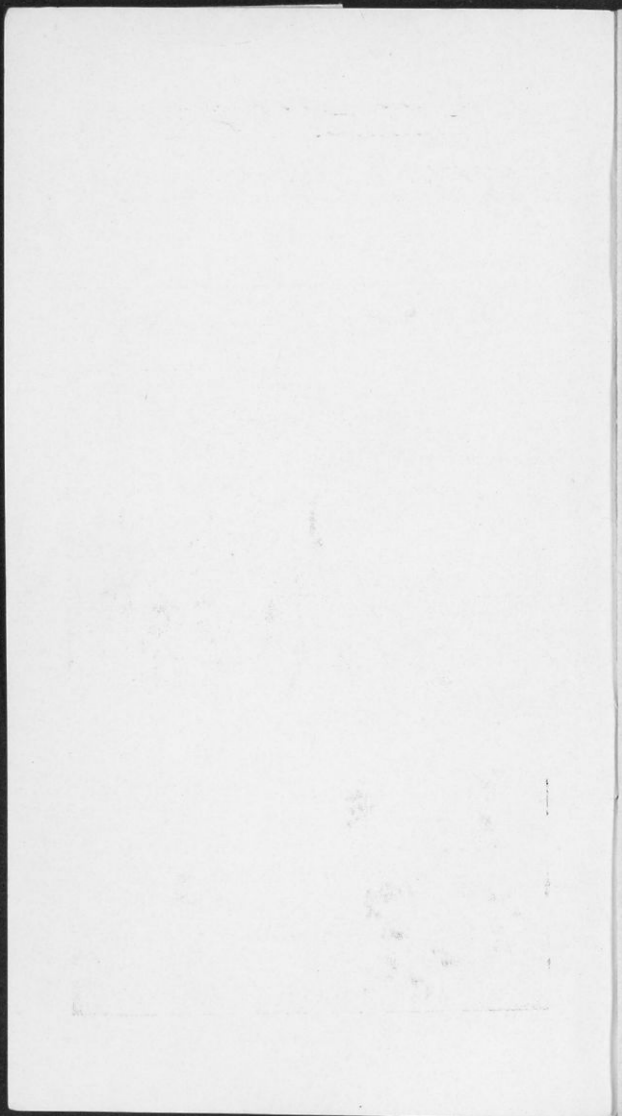
America's First  
Altar Boy  
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# America's First Altar Boy

The Life of St. John Lalande

By the Editors of The Catholic Boy





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By  
The Editors  
of  
The Catholic Boy

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# AMERICA'S FIRST ALTAR BOY

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The Life of St. John Lalande

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"Hey, Tubby, Father Mell is here," yelled Jimmy as he dashed into the tent where Tubby was peacefully reclining on his cot after the evening meal. "Where are Jack and Pete?"

At this news, slow moving Tubby jumped up with a jerk that almost meant disaster to the cot.

"Honest!" Tubby exclaimed. "Oh boy, let's tell Jack and Pete. They're out getting some more wood for the camp-fire this evening."

Jimmy, Tubby, Jack and Pete were inseparable companions. They were members of St. Mark's Church and thought the world and all of their pastor, Father Mell. Each summer St. Mark's conducted a camp for the boys of the parish on the shores of Pike Lake in the northern part of the State of Minnesota. The boys remained at Camp Chi-Shing-Wauk (the Chippewa for tall-pine-trees) for a six weeks' period and every sum-

mer Father Mell would spend the last week of the camping period with his boys.

That evening as some eighty-five boys assembled around the camp-fire burning in a natural amphitheatre and lighting up the tall Norway pines towering one hundred and fifty feet above them, there was excitement in the air such as was not present during the entire camping period.

As the flames of the camp-fire leapt high in the air the boys cheered Father Mell again and again. Songs were sung with a gusto that made up in volume for any lack of vocal training. But as the fire died down, the boys crowded around Father Mell, for their pastor was a renowned story-teller and finally, Jimmy, always quick to express his thoughts, said:

“Father, won't you tell us a story?”

“Of course, I shall,” Father Mell replied, smiling.

“What kind of a story would you boys like to hear?”

"Well, Father, as long as we are up here near the Indian reservation, wouldn't you tell us a story about the Indians?" asked Pete, always sensible and of a practical turn of mind.

"Yes, Peter," answered Father Mell, "if that is agreeable to the rest of the boys."

"Fine, Father. Go ahead Father," replied the boys in unison.

"I shall tell you a story," Father Mell began, "of America's First Altar Boy, St. John Lalande. It is a story of yelling, painted Indians on the war-path, of cruelty and suffering such as very few of us could actually believe to be true. It is a story of a boy who, with the priests he served, was so filled with love of God and zeal for the spread of Christianity that he seemed insensible to the most dreadful torments."

"St. John Lalande," continued Father Mell, "who may be appropriately named 'America's First Altar Boy' was born in Dieppe, France, during the early part of the seventeenth century. Little is known of

his early life. It is presumed that as a boy he played among the wharves and on the ships that were anchored in the harbor of Dieppe, from which seaport so many French explorers left on that perilous journey across the sea to New France. Evidently as a boy he heard many tales of this new land and his imagination must have been fired with the strange and exciting tales of adventure he heard from those who returned. We can picture him as a boy sitting on a wharf, his chin cupped in his hands, his eyes gazing dreamily across the Atlantic to America, the land of adventure and romance, where men were living lives more exciting than those portrayed in any story book. Here, too, he must have met and conversed with those heroic missionary priests leaving their native land to bring the true faith to the savages of America and they evidently left a lasting impression on his youthful mind as we will see later in the story.

“The next information we have of St. John Lalande,” Father Mell con-



tinued in his deep, rolling voice, "is that he had arrived in the land of his desire. How he came to America or what his exact purpose was in coming we do not know. We hear of him in Quebec where he has become a *donne*, that is, an assistant to the missionary priests. From Quebec he accompanied different missionaries on their journeys to various Indian villages, serving Mass, instructing savages, sharing all the hardships and dangers of missionary life. Around Quebec, St. John not only taught catechism to the converted Indians, but also assisted in tending the sick and wounded in the hospital and helped the missionary priests in a hundred different ways.

"But before continuing with the story, I want you to tell me, Jack, just how much you know of Indian villages," Father Mell said with a twinkle in his eyes, turning toward the tall, lanky member of our quartet.

"Well, Father," answered Jack, evidently embarrassed, "all I know is

what I have seen when we visited the Indian village near Cass Lake. They live in tar-paper shacks, not very clean, and one day I guess they were having pole-cat for dinner."

At this the other boys broke out into hearty laughter, for they all remembered how an Indian squaw had coaxed easy going Jack into her shack to purchase a pair of moccasins and how he came dashing out, holding his nose, as if a whole tribe of braves was after him.

"I think you have a pretty fair knowledge of living conditions among the Indians, Jack," continued Father Mell. "But did you ever stop to think just what a hardship this was for America's First Altar Boy and the missionary priests he accompanied when making journeys to the Indian camps? We obtain a good idea from the letters written by these missionaries to their friends at home.

"The dwelling of a missionary was a miserable hut made by covering poles with bark. This hut, or wigwam, as it was called, was so small

that those inside could not stand up or lie down at full length. During the day the occupants had to remain either sitting or kneeling. At night it was impossible to stretch out, so they had to sleep curled up with their feet almost roasting from the fire and their heads chilled by contact with the cold ground or the snow.

“The most dreadful thing of all,” continued the story-teller, “was the smoke. It was so dense in the hut that it frequently caused blindness. The eyes smarted as if salt were poured into them, and they continually ran water for a considerable period. In winter the water flowing from the aching eyes made it almost impossible to see when going outside, and this made it necessary for the missionary to have someone lead him when he was traveling. Then there was the lesser martyrdom suffered from fleas, lice and vermin. The Indians did not mind this plague, but to the missionary it was torture.

“The food they ate was very coarse and frequently there was not enough

for all. Instead of sitting at a nice clean table, they sat around a large dirty dish placed on the ground and everyone, even the dogs, ate from that same dish. Instead of napkins the Indians wiped their hands and mouths with their long hair or on the back of some mangy dog. After the meal the dish was not washed, but the dogs were put on K. P. and washed the dish by licking it.

“There was so much filth around the cabins that it bred disease and in their ignorance the Indians thought that such disease was the anger of some offended spirit, or they attributed it to the presence of the missionary. This imperiled the missionary's life, for at any moment some disgruntled savage might sink a tomahawk into his skull thinking that he was slaying the cause of the misfortune. This caused the missionary to live in constant fear, because he did not know when a frenzied savage might run him through with a knife or knock his brains out with a club, as happened in not a few cases.”

As Father Mell continued with his story the camp-fire burned lower and the crackling of the dying embers was plainly heard.

“These were only a few of the hardships and dangers experienced while among the friendly Indians. But these intrepid men, future saints of God, did not come to America to win the souls of only a few Indians to God. They enlarged their field of labor to include those tribes which were hostile to the French. It was from these that America's first Altar Boy received the crown of martyrdom.

“The most ferocious Indians were the Iroquois, who were a confederacy of five nations dwelling along a line running through central New York, and embracing from East to West the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas and Senecas. It may be said that the Iroquois was the Indian of Indians, and the Mohawk was the Iroquois of the Iroquois. Savage, inhuman, no torture was too cruel for them to employ. It was amazing

that human beings could endure that which the first American martyrs suffered and survived. Yet through all their tortures the spirit of patience, fortitude and forgiveness prevailed.

“Many attempts were made to convert the Iroquios, but not with much success. After a treaty had been signed between the Iroquois and the French, the missionaries thought that new effort should be made to convert these most savage of savages. Accordingly Father Isaac Jogues was chosen to make the initial effort. The mission was fraught with danger, and almost certain death by torture at the hands of the treacherous Mohawks awaited those who would constitute this perilous apostolate. Knowing this, John Lalande begged that he be permitted to be the companion of Father Jogues on this journey.

“This young man knew full well the dangers of the expedition. He knew how Father Jogues and other priests had been treated on their previous ef-

forts to convert these savages. He remembered how they were compelled to run the gauntlet, beaten with rods and thorny clubs; how their fingers were burned and bitten and twisted; how they were taken captive and for weeks, led from one Mohawk village to another, were subjected to the most horrible of cruelties.

“John Lalande remembered how the missionaries, after undergoing tortures all day, were thrown flat on the ground at night. Their bodies were stretched out by fastening their hands and feet to stakes driven in the ground. He remembered the stories telling of how the Indian children had their turn at torturing the captives while in this position. The most sensitive parts of the captives' bodies were pierced by awls and sharp pointed sticks. Thin slices of flesh were cut from their thighs, the nails pulled from their fingers and toes, hair jerked out of their heads and burning wood-ashes scattered on the raw, gaping wounds of the vic-

tims who were unable to move their bodies to shake them off.

“Yet all this knowledge did not frighten John. He was determined to be the companion of brave Father Jogues, even if death awaited him at the end of the journey. Accordingly on September 27, 1646, Father Jogues and John Lalande left for the Mohawk country even though they had heard, while making preparations at Quebec for the journey, that all was not well.

“Meanwhile a change came over the Iroquois. A series of scourges afflicted that part of the country toward which Father Jogues and John Lalande were traveling. A contagious disease claimed many victims. Following this a plague of worms destroyed nearly all the crops. Being superstitious, the Mohawks attributed this to a box of mission goods left in their care by Father Jogues when he had helped to negotiate the treaty. The medicine men, envious of Jogues' power, fanned these suspicions into a flame.



“As a result two factions sprung up, one desirous of keeping the treaty and the other determined on war. The war party finally prevailed. Then one band of savages started on the warpath for Montreal and the other for Fort Richelieu. This latter band met Jogues and Lalonde on the way, captured them, stripped them of their clothes, beat them, subjected them to various cruelties and led them captive to the same village where Jogues had suffered so much on a previous occasion.

“On October 17, 1646, conch shells announced to those left in the village of Ossernenon that a war party was returning with captives. Soon the party arrived and as they were brought across the river in canoes, two lines were formed on land by the braves, squaws and children with a lane between, through which the captives were forced to go. They were beaten with thorny sticks and long iron bars as they ran the gauntlet. After this they were threatened with death. Father Jogues was accused of

bringing death and disaster to the Mohawks. One enraged savage sliced pieces of flesh from their backs and arms and devoured them before their eyes saying: 'Let us see if this white flesh is the flesh of a Manitou.' One squaw grabbed up a stone knife and hacked at the thumbs of John Lalande but he did not flinch. He simply turned his eyes toward Father Jogues, who with a sign bade him to suffer for the sake of Christ.

"After practicing other tortures a division arose among the Indians as to the ultimate fate of Jogues and Lalande. The Wolf and Tortoise families were for saving the prisoners, but the Bear family insisted on death. Final action was postponed until a council of the sachems of the entire nation should decide the problem. But the Bear family, correctly surmising that the council would declare in favor of the captives, decided to take matters in their own hands.

"On the evening of the next day, members of the Bear clan invited Father Jogues to their cabin for some

food. There is no doubt but that Father Jogues had his misgivings regarding the invitation. Perhaps he was even warned by some friendly Indian. Yet resigning himself to the will of God he accepted the invitation and followed them to the cabin. As he reached the lodge he pulled back the bear skin that constituted the swinging door and stooped to enter.

“At that instant a tomahawk swished through the air and buried itself in his skull. He fell forward, dead. Father Jogues had made the supreme sacrifice. Immediately his head was cut off and placed on one of the palisades surrounding the village, the face turned in the direction of the road by which he had come.

“That night, while members of the tribe were torturing some of the Indians taken captive with Jogues and Lalande, three members of the Bear clan sneaked into the tent in which John Lalande was held captive. Outside the tent all one could hear was the thud of a tomahawk, the sound of a falling body, the words ‘Jesus,

Jesus, Jesus.' Then all was silent. John Lalande's head was cut off and placed next to that of Father Jogues and his body was thrown into the river. America's First Altar Boy had run the gauntlet for Christ."

As Father Mell concluded his story an absolute silence prevailed. Usually after a story the boys would give a cheer for the story-teller, but this evening every boy sat quietly as if lost in thought. Finally Pete broke the stillness with a question.

"When is St. John's feast day, Father?"

"His feast is on September 26th," answered Father Mell. "St. John Lalande was beatified, declared blessed, together with the other seven American martyrs, on June 21, 1925. He was canonized on June 29, 1930. But I think it is past your usual bedtime. I am afraid I kept you up longer than the rules allow. Let's all kneel down and we will say our night prayers."

That evening as the boys retired to their tents a silence prevailed which

was not present during the five previous weeks of camp. They would never forget the story of St. John Lalande, America's First Altar Boy.

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