

Jacques Marquette
"He was one of us."

In the 17th century, a select group of Jesuits were deployed to what was then called New France, now Canada and the eastern Great Lakes region of the United States. They were called "black robes" by native people because of the simple, functional cassocks Jesuits wore at that time, intended as signs of modesty and service.

Jacques Marquette was among them. Born near Laon, France, in 1637, he was cross-trained as a priest, mapmaker, navigator, and historian. Skilled at learning languages, he traveled to Quebec in 1666, where he mastered six Native American languages. Marquette and his colleagues were credited with founding the first European settlement in the Great Lake Basin at Sault Ste. Marie in 1668. Three years later he established the Mission St. Ignace, 60 miles south, which he came to regard as his home.

Like all social movements and the imperfect institutions that shape them, such initiatives inevitably leave mixed legacies: possible contributions but also ethnocentric bias, misplaced intentions, and masked self-interest. That said, there's evidence Marquette was someone though steeped in his own religious convictions and limited by them, was also empowered for a deeper vision of shared values. He held strong opinions about the integrity of cultures, spirituality, and human dignity.*

During the years Marquette canoed the waterways and traveled the forested trails of the new world, French and British fur industries were also establishing themselves as lucrative commercial enterprises in New France. High profit, unregulated economic ventures among vulnerable indigenous communities usually brought trouble.

It's no secret that native peoples were exploited and manipulated in many of the ensuing commercial transactions. Alcohol was often provided freely. Records show that fistfights and murders constellated around the interchange between traders and native peoples. Jesuits, having taken vows of poverty, were sensitive about such issues. They frequently demanded that the native people they lived among be treated fairly. Many Jesuits, Marquette among them, were openly despised for this by traders and French government officials.

Two Jesuit historians, Al Fritsch and Joseph Donnelly, has researched and confirmed the following story, using Jesuit reports from 17th century letters and journal entries from the 19th century, and indigenous oral traditions.

On a late afternoon in the spring of 1675, a lone birch bark canoe with three travelers approached the mouth of river on the shores of Lake Michigan, near what is now the town of Ludington, 90 miles south of the Straight of Mackinac. They landed their craft on a remote beach, built a small fire, then proceeded to construct a makeshift shelter for the night from branches and bark.

Two of the travelers are believed to have been of mixed tribal descent. The third was the Frenchman Marquette. That evening, after days of weakness and dysentery, the 37-year-old Jesuit priest died at the edge of the forest and water, surrounded by prayers from his two companions. The next morning, he was buried there. That place became known as the River of the Black Robe.

At the time of his death, Marquette, under request of the French government and permission from his superior had recently completed mapping and exploring the Mississippi Valley with Louis Jolliet, French Canadian explorer from Quebec. That spring Jolliet returned to Montreal. Marquette was on his way back to his home and the mission at St. Ignace.

The story now takes a fascinating turn. Two year later, in June 1677, members of the Native American community in St. Ignace traveled to his burial place. They retrieved his remains, cleansed the bones as was their tradition, and returned them by canoe north to the mission he had founded. Forty additional canoes of Huron, Ojibwa, Odawa, Potawatomi, and Iroquois tribal members accompanied the delegation as they landed at the bay in St. Ignace. Their faces were painted black in a custom of mourning.

On the morning after Pentecost, Marquette was buried at his home beneath a simple altar in the mission chapel in St. Ignace. The service was framed by sounds of drums, prayers, and rituals of a traditional pipe ceremony.

Two hundred years passed. During that time, the mission was abandoned. The village of Ignace was repeatedly rebuilt and transformed. In 1877, Peter Grondin, a Native American employee of a local businessman, discovered the site of the abandoned mission during an unrelated excavation project. Under what remained of the altar's foundation, he found a box of 19 bone, preserved in a double-walled birch-bark box.

What happened next remains a mystery. Somehow—and no story has been confirmed—the bones ended up at Marquette University in Milwaukee, though almost no one knew they were there. In 2018 a series of sensitive conversations began between the Native American people of St. Ignace and the university. Finally, the Museum of Ojibwa Culture in St. Ignace formally requested the bones and the university accepted the request.

On June 18 [2022], Marquette will be reburied at the grave site where he was first laid at rest in St. Ignace in 1677. The circle has been completed.

But why would Native American people want to welcome back the remains of a *zhaaganaash* (Anishinaabe for “white man”), now that history has well documented the devastating results of missionary work, including the loss of indigenous culture and traditional beliefs alongside the genocide of native people nationwide?

Francie (Moses) Wyers, cultural teacher for the Museum of Ojibwa Culture and member of that community's oldest Native families responds, “I respect other opinions. But our own oral tradition has passed down the story, over hundreds of years, that Father

Marquette was beloved by our tribal community. That he lived among us, shared our life together, respected our teachings. He cared for our people. He was one of us.”

Tony Grondin, a descendant of Peter Grondin, holds similar convictions. “Jacques Marquette was given, by my ancestors, the honor of being a sacred pipe carrier. For us, this is a sign of respect and honor. It means such a person shares our values, understands and respects our spiritual teachings. He lived among us. Showed kindness. Fought to protect our tribal communities. While being true to his own faith and mission, he honored and practiced many of our spiritual traditions. It was our tribal people who buried him 345 years ago.”

Marquette’s legacy continues to spark colliding points of view. He is regarded by many secular historians primarily as a French explorer who, along with Jolliet, mapped the Mississippi River. In portraits and painting, he is often portrayed with minimal reference, if any to his vocation as a Jesuit priest. The voice of Grondin and Wyers provide a different perspective that needs to be honored.

Shirley Sorrels, director of the Museum of Ojibwa Culture, is currently coordinating logistics for the upcoming reburial. “Our community is preparing with our Jesuit friends,” she says, “for a time of sacred ceremony and remembrance. Our intention is that it will be not only a cultural healing but a spiritual one.”

Marquette’s bones will be formally buried at his original grave site on June 18 by descendants of the Native American peoples among whom he lived. Representatives from Jewish, Buddhist, Christian, and the Three Fires (Ojibwa, Odawa, and Potawatomi) spiritual traditions will be present. On that day, the sound of eagle whistles will drift over the waters of the bay. Time will stop in St. Ignace.

Jacques is coming home.**

--Jon Magnuson, “Marquette’s bones,” *Christian Century*, June 15, 2022, pp. 28-31.

*Jesuit discipline rested upon an intensive four-week personalized spiritual experience: *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*.

“These *Exercises*, which use knightly, military imagery, expresses essentially a spirituality of service. One of the most important documents in the history of Christian spirituality, this book is a manual of discipline that teaches the life of the Spirit to others and asks the Christian disciple to reflect continuously on the life, death and resurrection of Christ” (Ursula King, *Christian Mystics*, p. 145).

Thus, a discipline that calls a Jesuit to live a life as an imitator of Christ in service to others has enabled many of its missionaries to be sensitive to the culture and beliefs of indigenous people in many parts of the world, “[w]hile being true to his own faith and mission.”

**After several years of listening and, at times, difficult discussions, in 2015 the Rocky Mountain Synod of the ELCA returned to the Four Winds American Indian Council the land where an old church building in Denver, CO stood. In returning this land the synod recognized that it never had a right to the land in the first place. In *Christian Century*, March 11, 2020, p. 25, Sky Roosevelt-Morris of the Shawnee and White Mountain Apache Nations expressed the significance of that event:

“It is good for us to see that not all religious-oriented folks are indoctrinated in colonialism or indoctrinated in racism—that there are people who see the error in the history of their religion or their

spirituality or their life ways, and take an opportunity to do something different. The people of the Rocky Mountain Lutheran Synod made me deeply question some of my own biases toward religion.

Decolonization is giving land back to indigenous peoples, period. Because this is our land. And we belong to the land; the land doesn't belong to us. We are part of it long before invasion happened.

When we talk about decolonization, we're talking not only about giving land back but about decolonizing our minds, decolonizing our lives so that indigenous life can exist in this time, in this space, in an authentic original, ancestral way, without being questioned, without being diminished, without being appropriated, without being captured or mistreated. For too long we've been refugees in our own homeland. And so, when I think about decolonization, I think about indigenous peoples being free in their own homeland.

And to me, this is what decolonization in practice looks like—decolonizing this small place in the city of Denver and making other people aware of it.”