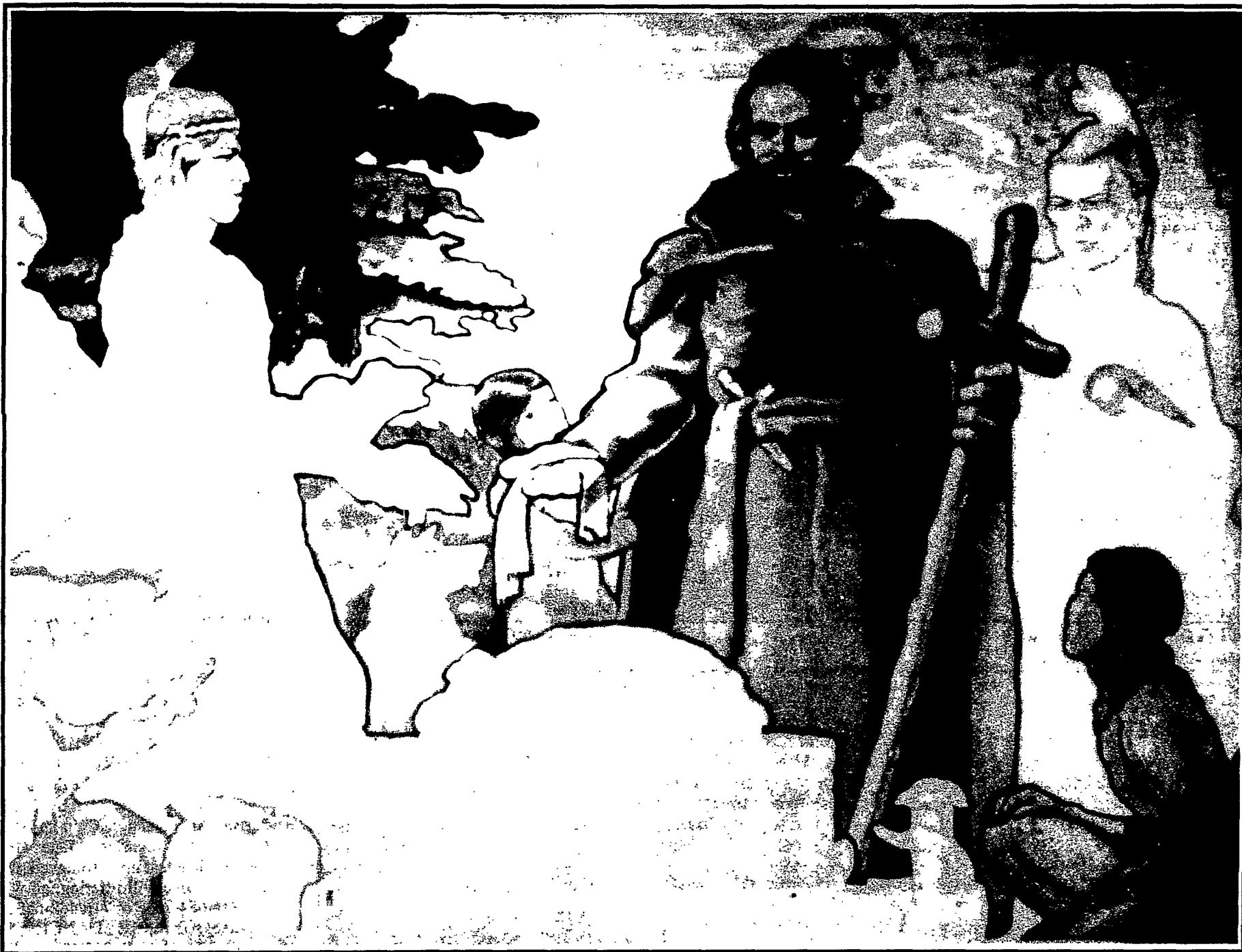


Historic missionary activity in New York State



BY LEE STRONG

When area Catholics think about missionary activity, they may well forget that Central and Western New York were themselves missionary territories only 150 years ago.

Two separate waves of missionary activity took place in this region. The first occurred in the latter half of the 17th century, as Jesuits established missions to the Iroquois Indians. The second wave took place at the beginning of the 19th century, as priests established parishes for immigrants settling in the region.

The town of Manlius, just east of Syracuse, holds a double distinction in the history of missionary activity in the New

York State.

It was there that on Nov. 14, 1655, Jesuit Fathers Peter Joseph Chaumonot and Claude Dablon celebrated New York's first recorded Mass. Shortly thereafter, the priests and the Indians living in the vicinity built a chapel — St. John the Baptist Church — the first known Catholic church in the state.

These two French priests were among a handful of missionaries who, over a 70-year period, attempted to convert the Iroquois Indians of upstate New York.

The earliest phase of this effort occurred in Albany in the 1640s. Saints René Goupil, Isaac Jogues, and Jean de la Lande journeyed into this area

and were killed by Mohawks near Auriesville between the years 1642 and 1646.

A war between French colonists and their Indian allies, the Hurons, against the Iroquois, put further missionary activity on hold for several years. In 1654, however, the Iroquois requested peaceful negotiations with the French, and the Jesuits dispatched Father Simon LeMoyne, SJ, to participate in the talks.

Father LeMoyne visited the Onondaga community at Indian Hill, near Manlius. He spent two weeks there, meeting with Iroquois leaders and ministering to Catholic Hurons the Iroquois had taken captive. Eventually, the Iroquois asked the French to establish a set-

tlement.

Father LeMoyne later returned to Canada and, in 1655, Fathers Chaumonot and Dablon began their ministry at Indian Hill.

As the two Jesuits began their work among the Indians, they found the Iroquois hesitant to accept Christianity, said Father Robert McNamara, archivist for the Diocese of Rochester.

"The Indians were very materially minded, and it was hard to get spiritual concepts across to them," Father McNamara said.

The Indians' language also contained few words expressing theological concepts, Father McNamara added. This

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