

Religious Role

One of the seigneur's duties was to provide his habitants with a church. These churches were usually small wooden stone buildings. Each area, or parish, was also supposed to have its own priest. Often there were not enough priests, so one priest would have to travel from parish to parish.

The priests performed many services for the people:

- spiritual service—celebrated mass, heard confessions, baptized babies, performed marriages and funerals
- legal service—recorded business transactions, drew up marriage contracts, drew up wills
- government service—registered births and deaths, acted as government officials, relayed government announcements
- personal service—provided the latest news and gossip from other parishes

For the habitants, the church was the centre of religious life and much of their social life. The priests provided community leadership and tried to see that the teachings and wishes of the Roman Catholic Church were followed.

The three main towns each had a church. The church in Quebec was a stone cathedral with an organ and bells. The bishop or another high-ranking priest conducted the mass.

One of the goals of the Roman Catholic Church was to convert the Native peoples to Christianity. Priests and nuns continued to do missionary work throughout the homeland of the First People and on the reserves in New France.

Role in Health Care

The Church was the only institution in New France outside of the family that cared for the sick, the elderly, orphans, and people with disabilities. This type of care usually became the work of the nuns. These women worked very hard in very difficult conditions to ease suffering and help the habitants. The Ursuline nuns established the colony's first hospital in Quebec in 1639. In 1659, they established a hospital in Montreal.

Educational Role

The Church was the only source of education in the royal colony. The priests and nuns taught children the Roman Catholic religion, reading and writing in Latin and French, and arithmetic. Many children, especially boys, did not get any schooling at all. In Quebec, Bishop Laval's seminary trained those boys who were planning to enter the priesthood. Boys who were not intending to become priests often remained **illiterate** because they were needed to work on the farms. The shortage of priests also made it



In 1640, most children in New France were taught by their parents. These Native children, being taught by the Ursuline nuns, probably had lessons in the Roman Catholic religion, French, and basic mathematics.

difficult to provide boys with schooling. Girls often received a better education than their brothers. The Ursuline nuns established schools for young Native and French girls at Quebec and Trois Rivières. In Montreal, a nun named Marguerite Bourgeoys started the same type of school for girls (see page 34). Some nuns travelled to the seigneuries to teach the children. In 1676, a boarding school was set up for the daughters of rich merchants and colonists.

In most European countries at this time, women were poorly educated, if they were educated at all. European visitors to New France were often surprised to find that many women of New France were more educated than their husbands.

Canada Revisited

Noël Levasseur (1680–1740)

Noël Levasseur, an artist born in Quebec, carved many of the statues and altars in Quebec's new churches and chapels. He also carved furniture, family coats of arms, and ornamentation for the houses and shops of New France. Handcarved wooden scrolls of the royal coat of arms of France, dating from 1727, are on display in the Quebec museum and in the National Archives of Canada.

Illiterate—able to read or write at a low level of skill or not at all