Imagining in Time

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The AANA Journal welcomes manuscripts on subjects pertinent to the history of nurse anesthetists for its new column, “Imagining in Time.” Authors are invited to submit inquiry letters or their completed manuscripts to Lee C. Fosburgh, AANA Archivist, 222 South Prospect Avenue, Park Ridge, IL 60068-4001.

René Goupil: Patron Saint of Anesthetists

René Goupil, the patron saint of anesthetists, is addressed mainly as a 17th century French surgeon who practiced his art in North America. He is also presented as a Jesuit martyr and saint. The article freely borrows from past writings of Jesuits on René Goupil.

Key words: Anesthesia history, biography of René Goupil, Patron St. René.

The surgeon

The act of baptism of René Goupil was recorded at St-Martin-du-Bois near Angers, France (Figure 1). “The fifteenth day of May, the year of 1608, René son of Hipolite Goupil and Luce Provost, was baptized, the Godfather was Rend Aulbert...” René Goupil showed a low profile until 1639 when he entered the Jesuit Novitiate at Paris. The Latin annotation preserved there described his life until then: “René Goupil from the village of St-Martin in the diocese of Anjou, born 13th of May, 1608. 31 years old. Surgeon. Knows how to read and write. Entered 26th of March.” René Goupil was well appreciated for all his surgical services. The mother superior of the l’Hotel-Dieu: “Lazarre Petitouchkaouat... afflicted with very painful sores in several parts of his body [and] with a fever that continually preyed upon him,... particularly loved the young man who offered himself to our hospital to assist the poor patients; but then it must be confessed that this good young man succored him with a charity that cannot be sufficiently praised.”

His surgical load was mainly wound dressings and bloodlettings. Occasionally, René Goupil could be called upon for resuscitating a patient in hemorrhagic shock, as during this following home visit one night:

“A band of savages had retired into the woods for purpose of making canoes, when a poor woman suddenly falls into so complete prostration that she is regarded as if dead. The Christians at once order two young men to embark, and fetch a father to baptize her. It was necessary to cross more than three leagues of water in the dead of night. The young men paddle with all their might; they arrive at St. Joseph, and urgently

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inquire for a father. Father Buteux, who was then at the residence, takes a young surgeon with him, and hastens after his prize. He reaches the cabins about an hour or two after midnight, and finds the patient pulseless; a great discharge of blood had deprived her of strength and of speech. The surgeon gives her a cordial draught, and she recovers consciousness.”

That magical drink given by René Goupil to his patient was made with the cordial waters from flowers of “bugloss, borage and chickoree” probably harvested by the Augustine sisters in the garden of their monastery. According to the present-day pharmacopeia, these blue flowers have only diuretic and diaphoretic properties!

After such results, no wonder that René

Figures:

Anesthetists Prayer to St. Rene

St. Rene, Patron of true Anesthetists, who imitated the Divine Physician in so wondrous a manner, intercede for me engaged in this ministry to the sick. Gain for me proficiency, faith, understanding, love and courage in my vocation; and help me to see Christ in the patients, whom it is my privilege to serve. Plead for me at the Throne of the Divine Physician, that I may be able to devote my entire energy to the task at hand and be free from distractions, deceit, worldliness, and unworthy emotion. Seek for me the confidence, the self-reliance, and the tact to do that which is right and necessary without any hesitation, despite whatever difficulties may arise during the course of this anesthetic. Obtain for me the moral courage to work always in accordance with God’s holy law.

Grant that in my small way I may serve not only to alleviate pain but also to draw myself and others to the love of God. Amen.

O, St. Rene, gracious Patron, hear my prayer. Help me with this anesthetic.

Nihil Obstat
Rev. Hugo Kochler
Imprimatus
* John P. Treacy
Bishop of LaCrosse

Revetend Francis Przybylski
September 25, 1951

Journal of the American Association of Nurse Anesthetists
Goupil was asked to go and take care of Indians living in Huronia, territories of Hurons south of the present-day Georgian Bay (Ontario). Along with Father Isaac Jogues, Guillaume Couture and 12 canoes full of Hurons, René Goupil was just starting this water trek when, halfway between Trois-Rivieres and present-day Montreal, Quebec, on August 2, 1642, he was captured by Mohawk warriors and taken to Iroquoia, territories of Iroquois in the northern section of the present-day New York state. With great patience and courage, he sustained tortures reserved for the prisoners of war, such as mutilation of fingers, running the gauntlet, section of the right thumb, and burns. Nevertheless, he kept dressing the wounds of both enemies and prisoners, and he even opened the vein of a sick Iroquois for bloodletting. On September 29, 1642, a young Mohawk warrior killed him with the first blow of a hatchet on the head. That happened at Ossernenon, a Mohawk castle on Yatesville Creek near present-day Auriesville, New York.  

The Jesuit

A few days after his capture and still on his way to Iroquoia, René Goupil asked Father Isaac Jogues: “My Father, God has always given me a great desire to consecrate myself to his holy service by the vows of religion in his holy society; my sins have rendered me unworthy of this grace until this hour. I nevertheless hope that Our Lord will be pleased with the offering which I wish now to make him, by taking, in the best manner that I can, the vows of the society in the presence of my God and before you. This being granted to him, he uttered the vows with much devotion,” 1 and so became a brother in the Society of Jesus.

The martyr

When writing his account of René Goupil in 1646, Father Isaac Jogues was already seeing him as “a martyr of Jesus Christ.”

“I give him this title not only because he was killed by the enemies of God and of his Church, . . . but especially because he was killed on account of prayer, and notably for the sake of the cross.

He was in a cabin where he nearly always said the prayers, which little pleased a superstitious old man who was there. One day, [Goupil] seeing a little child of 3 or 4 years in the cabin, . . . he took off his cap, put it on the child’s head, and made a great sign of the cross upon its body (Figure 2). The old man, seeing that, commanded a young man of his cabin, who was about to leave for the war, to kill him, which order he executed, as we have said.

Even the child’s mother, on a journey in which I happened to be with her, told me that it was because of the sign of the cross that he [Goupil] had been killed.” 2

The saint

Pope Pius XI canonized René Goupil in 1930 with the other Jesuit martyrs of North America. In 1940, these saints became the secondary patrons of Canada. The Catholic church erected a shrine to secondary patron saints of Canada at Midland, Ontario.

Saint René is more particularly worshipped at the Shrine of Our Lady of Martyrs of Auriesville, New York. His feast day is on the October 19, except in Canada where it is on September 26. Such was René Goupil who, in 1951 and with ecclesiastical approval, was designated as the patron saint of anesthetists by three American nurse anesthetists: Leona Higgins, CRNA (Figure 3), Sister Odila Diedrich, CRNA, and Sister Mary Yvonne Jenn, CRNA (Figure 4). 3–5 Reverend Francis Przybyszki, chaplain at St. Mary’s Hospital, in Wausau, Wisconsin, authored a prayer to St. René in 1951 (Figure 5).

REFERENCES


(2) Thwaites RG, ed. The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents, 1609-1701. Cleveland, Ohio: Burrows Brothers, 1888.


SUGGESTED READING


AUTHOR

Jean Quintal, MD, is a retired French Canadian anaesthesiologist. He has collected data on René Goupil since 1990.