During pre-Confederation Canada, the Church had a powerful and influential role in the society of New France, and there was no question of “the king’s seriousness of purpose as regards the colonies,”[[1]](#footnote-1). Louis XIV made a change when he took power. He “subscribed to the belief in the divine right of kings, that is, that monarchs derive their power directly from God”[[2]](#footnote-2) so the Church and its clergy would “carry on playing important roles.....but they were to defer to the king rather than to Rome.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This was an important change because the king’s ministers, like Cardinal Richelieu, were “high-ranking representatives of the Catholic Church,”[[4]](#footnote-4) and the king became in charge of them. He had control over the Church during his reign and increased his power by colonizing New France. By working together, the King and the Church benefited from each other, and both became powerful and wealthy. There were a number of ways that the Church was influential and helped the King of France to colonize settlements in New France in a few different ways. The Church clergy in France were in charge of organizing the *filles du roi* as a way to help the settlements grow. Also, when the Jesuits arrived in New France, they became part of the Aboriginal community. The purpose was for them to earn the trust of the Indigenous peoples. In this way, the Jesuits acted as missionaries and they hoped it would be easier to convert them to Christianity and be part of the settlements. By looking at the different ways that the Church was involved, it can be seen just how powerful the Church was at that time and how they helped New France to become a colony for France.

The Church organized the *filles du roi* and helped colonization to increase. Leduc’s article, “*A Fille de Roi’s Passage* “, explains how the priests in France selected girls to send to New France. The priests looked for girls who were healthy, good looking and most important they needed to be old enough to have children and strong enough to adapt to a harsh climate “an important consideration for a group of girls who would become the ancestors of most French Canadians.” [[5]](#footnote-5) So the priests looked for girls that attended church, where the priest would know their life story. Some were orphans who hoped for a better future or they were single and looking for a new adventure. Others were trying to escape an abusive marriage. The priest’s recruitment was important because the Church provided the girls with a new life, and also this enabled the priests to help the King’s settlements grow and prosper. The Church did not arrange these marriages for love and passion. The women took a chance on finding a husband who would support them, treat them well and maybe “love might come only after marriage—if ever.” [[6]](#footnote-6) At Sunday Mass, the Church priests announced the women’s arrival and reinforced that men were expected to find a wife soon. In 1671, Jean Talon, the Intendant of the Colony, set up a law that said if men, “were not married within fifteen days after the arrival of the vessels carrying the *filles du roi*, they would be deprived of the right to trade, hunt, or fish. And the privileges of church and community would be withheld from them.” [[7]](#footnote-7) The interest of the King’s government was to increase the settlement population. The men were encouraged and by this law, they were forced to come to church and hear the words of God. No doubt, the priests talked in their sermons about marriage and how to treat a wife and they would emphasize the importance of having lots of babies. The Church worked closely together with the King’s government to support colonization by forcing men into marriage relationships. Some men would have liked freedom, but they would never give up their job of hunting and trading because it was their survival. It was accepted in those times that the Church was the main focus of society. Many people listened to the Church’s views and followed their advice, which is shown by girls putting their trust in the Church and God to go to a strange country and get married to a stranger. The Church also forced its views on people, which is shown by the priests forcing the men to choose a wife or else risk losing privileges like hunting. The Church also looked after the girls once they arrived in New France. The women were welcomed with excitement by the Church “were you impressed when cannon shots welcomed the ship and you heard the church bells toll?....heartwarming to see the waving, cheering crowd gathered on the shore.” [[8]](#footnote-8) The Church made the girls feel special by ensuring “the arrival of the brides-to-be was a big event.” [[9]](#footnote-9) The Church controlled the whole process: finding the girls in France, sending them to New France, setting them up with nuns until they got married, supervising with chaperones the visits from eligible bachelors and finally providing a church wedding under the eyes of God and to make the marriage legal. New France began growing as a colony for the King of France.

The Church also played a part in colonization because it sent the Jesuits to New France and encouraged them to become part of the Indigenous communities. The goal was for the Jesuits to get the Indigenous peoples to trust them, and once they became friends, the Church hoped it would be easier to convert them to Christianity and be part of the settlements.  In the collection, *Jesuit Relations*, a Jesuit wrote in a letter about his experience with the first peoples. The letter shows that the Jesuit had proof to himself that God does miracles, and the Indigenous people were in awe because a life was saved. Father Biard visited St. Sauveur, to see if it would be a good place for a settlement. He heard mourning cries. A native father holding his son that he thought was dying. Father Baird baptized the child and then gave the child to the mother. The child began to eagerly breastfeed. The savages “remained there, fixed and immovable..... These good people looked upon him as though he were more than man ..... [The child remained healthy.] See now that God does not leave his law without authentic testimonies, nor his goodness without admirable results”[[10]](#footnote-10) The Jesuits wanted to learn their language so they could communicate, their culture and stories so they could understand their ways, their government so they could understand their village structure. They learned their daily routines like hunting and eating their traditional foods like pemmican. Living with the natives so closely should have helped the Jesuits to convert them more easily. However, when it was time to start teaching the first peoples about religion, the Jesuits only knew what they were trained for and that was their beliefs, their culture, their European ways of doing things. The Church had hoped that the values and beliefs of the Jesuits would help toward colonizing New France but it was not such a successful mission as they had hoped.

Jesuits as missionaries had a goal to start teaching Christianity to the natives. Some natives accepted the new religion they were taught, but “others incorporated certain Christian elements into their lives, while rejecting the essence of the white man’s message. Most native Americans reaffirmed their traditional beliefs and strenuously resisted Christianity.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The problem was the Jesuits came with their own values and culture based on what they were taught by their families, the European society and the training they got from their religious order. They wanted the native people to become like Europeans. The Aboriginal person had “to renounce not only his own personal past, but that of his forefathers as well, forsaking and despising all traditional beliefs and practices.”[[12]](#footnote-12) The Church did not embrace the Indigenous society and did not think they were destroying a whole culture in the process. The methods the Jesuits used in order to try to convert the Indigenous people were not in tune with people who “were caught between competing and rival rituals, one that they had practiced from childhood, the other brought by the invaders”[[13]](#footnote-13) Indigenous people believed that every object had a spiritual force looking after it. Nature and the environment was part of their everyday life and religion. The Jesuits were telling them that this belief was wrong, saying that “God did not dwell in nature but ruled over it and he gave it to man, his creation, the power to do with it whatever man wished,”[[14]](#footnote-14) First peoples were told that they had to worship the Christian god and no other, but their religion was more flexible. They believed spirits were all over nature. They had many ceremonies honoring nature and these ceremonies and rituals could be easily changed from year to year. Natives would listen to the ideas of Heaven and Hell and it was so different from what they believed. They thought life in the afterlife, “life in those villages was believed to resemble life on earth with its daily round of eating, hunting, farming, and war-making. Missionary efforts to impress Indians with the delights of heaven met with disbelief and derision to the idea of hell,” [[15]](#footnote-15) The Jesuits had a hard time converting the native people and “it did not take long for Jesuit administrators to realize that theology, philosophy and classical studies were neither the only nor the best preparation for evangelizing the American Indian.” [[16]](#footnote-16)

Both the King of France and the Church strived to create many settlements and in this way colonized New France. The King had the divine right of kings while he was ruling and the clergy deferred to the kind in all matters. There were always obstacles and difficult measures that the Church faced in achieving this goal of helping to colonize New France and spread the word of Christianity, and basically, they were successful. New France grew to be a prosperous colony. The Church may not have been as successful as they hoped when it came to converting the Aboriginal people, but the Church was a strong force in the society of that time period. The Church did help form what the colony of New France would be like as a society. Not everyone would have wanted to listen to the Church or follow their rules, but the Church did have an influential role on the whole society and in each person’s life in some way.

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**History Research Paper: The Role of the Church in New France**

History 1120

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3. Ibid, p. 107 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, p. 115 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Adrienne, Leduc. “A Fille de Roi’s Passage,” Beaver Vol. 81, Issue 1 (Feb/Mar 2001), p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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7. Ibid, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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