

Homily for Feast of the Canadian Martyrs
September 26, 2019

Today is the Feast Day of the Canadian Martyrs, sometimes known as the Feast of St. Isaac Jogues and Companions. ¹

They worked in the wilderness, among people with whom they had little in common other than their common humanity, far from their homelands, sometimes together, sometimes apart, always bound to the Lord, in “New France,” in the 17th century. Their work defies imagination even today. In the Book *Saint Among the Hurons*, we are told the story of Jean de Brebeuf.

Born in 1593, Jean de Brebeuf set sail for New France in 1624, as a robust man, thirty-two years old.

Jean and his companions reached Quebec on June 19, 1625, and immediately began to prepare for his journey to the Huron nation. Happily, he had a great talent for something that would prove critical in his work. The great explorer Samuel de Champlain wrote about Brebeuf,

"[H]e had such a striking gift for languages that...he grasped in two or three years what others would not learn in twenty."

That facility would assist him in working with a people with whom he shared little in common, save their common humanity. To enter into their world Jean resolved to do everything according to their customs, no matter how strenuous, eating their food, sleeping as they did, working as hard as they did.

Jean's first journey to the Huron homeland, 800 miles from Quebec, was grueling. Jean tied his shoes around his neck, hiked up his cassock and climbed into the bark canoe. Once he arrived, Jean wrote a Huron grammar and translated a catechism in the local language. Brébeuf would spend three years among these families before being asked to return to Rouen in 1629, after political difficulties made it harder for the French to remain. Despite the normal prejudices about the native peoples common at the time, Jean had grown to admire and love those with whom he lived. At times their generosity astonished him:

We see shining among them some rather noble moral virtues. You note, in the first place, a great love and union, which they are careful to cultivate....Their hospitality to all sorts of strangers is remarkable; they present to them, in their feasts the best of what they have

¹ This is taken from https://www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/feast-north-american-martyrs-0?gclid=Cj0KCQjww7HsBRDkARIsAARsIT4irEK2ALp3Uepw6AKRi7b-tuzdIs_hacIhkG4L3lrZl-TTbe9lww4aAjQYEALw_wcB

prepared, and, as I said, I do not know if anything similar, in this regard, is to be found anywhere.

When he returned to New France six year later in 1635, he was cheerfully welcomed by his Huron friends. Immediately he and Antoine Daniel, another Jesuit, began their work in earnest. (They were one of several Jesuits working in the region at the time.) Near a town called Ihonotiria, near current-day Georgian Bay, Fathers Brébeuf and Daniel began teaching the people about Christianity. They were later joined by two other French Jesuits, Charles Garnier and Isaac Jogues.

False rumors circulated that Jean was in league with a sworn enemy of the Hurons, the Seneca clan of the Iroquois. So he prudently moved to another site, Saint Louis. On March 16, the Iroquois attacked the village and took the Hurons, who were mainly Christians, along with Jean and another Jesuit, Gabriel Lalement, prisoner. He knew that the possibility of martyrdom was imminent.

The Iroquois heated hatchets until they were glowing red and, tying them together, strung them across his shoulders, searing his flesh. They wrapped his torso with bark and set it afire. They cut off his nose, lips and forced a hot iron down his throat, and poured boiling water over his head in a gruesome imitation of baptism. They scalped him, and cut off his flesh while he was alive. Finally someone buried a hatchet in his jaw.

After 14 years as a missionary, Jean de Brébeuf died on March 16, 1639. He was 56. At his death his heart was eaten as a way for the Iroquois, who were stunned by his courage, to share in his bravery. Eight other Jesuits were martyred around this same time, and are now referred to as the Canadian Martyrs.