



Sts. Isaac Jogues, John de Brébeuf, and Companions



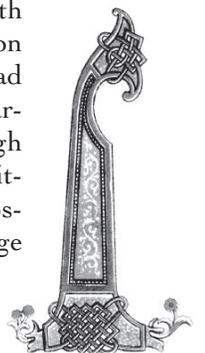
North American Martyrs, by Timothy Schmalz

BORN 1607; DIED 1646 (JOGUES),
BORN 1593; DIED 1649 (BRÉBEUF)
PRIESTS AND MARTYRS
FEAST DAY: OCTOBER 19

IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY, eastern North America was viewed by Europeans as a “savage wilderness.” There were no cities, but only villages and small towns carved out of a vast continental forest. Missionaries went to live in the worst conditions they could have imagined, among people whom they experienced as barbarians, but also loved as souls created by God. They lived in the midst of constant suspicion and were always blamed for a village’s misfortune (this was a period when, among other things, ep-

idemics of measles and smallpox were common and deadly, and crops failed several times). Eight of these missionaries, six French Jesuit priests Sts. John de Brébeuf, Noel Chabanel, Antony Daniel, Charles Garnier, Isaac Jogues, and Gabriel Lalemant and their companions Sts. René Goupil, a surgeon, and John de Lalande suffered martyrdom between 1642 and 1649.

The men who became known as the North American martyrs were assigned to the Huron and Iroquois tribes. John de Brébeuf, who had been a tubercular invalid as a seminarian, arrived in Quebec, Canada in 1625. Although his first efforts among the Hurons were fruitless, in his nearly twenty-five years as “Apostle to the Hurons” he wrote a Huron-language





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dictionary and catechism and saw over seven thousand conversions. Antony came in 1632 or 1633, Isaac and Charles in 1636, René in 1639, Noel in 1643, John de Lalande in 1642, and Gabriel in 1646.

Both Isaac and John de Brébeuf prayed for suffering and even martyrdom. Gabriel vowed to sacrifice his life for the conversion of the Indians. Noel, despite being revolted by the food and way of life of the Hurons, vowed to stay among them until death. That they were facing martyrdom became ever more likely, as there was a long-running war between the Hurons and various Iroquois tribes.

Isaac evangelized the Hurons until 1642, when he and René were captured by the Mohawks, an Iroquois tribe. They were taken to Ossernenon (now Auriesville, New York). René, who because of ill health had been unable to complete his training as a Jesuit priest and became instead a surgeon, asked Isaac to allow him to take vows as a Jesuit. They were tortured, including running a gauntlet of clubs and having their forefingers chewed off. Isaac's thumb was also cut off. René was tomahawked soon afterward, but Isaac endured a year-long enslavement until he escaped with the assistance of Dutch colonial officials. He returned to France and for a while was not allowed to celebrate Mass because of his mutilated hands. He returned in 1644 and was captured again in 1646, at Ossernenon, to which he had returned as an emissary of peace along with John de Lalande. After being subjected to torture, both were tomahawked.

In 1648, Antony was martyred in the midst

of an Iroquois attack on the Huron village of Teanaustaye (near modern Hillsdale, Ontario). He baptized as many of the panicked villagers as possible, went to warn a church full of villagers to flee, and braved the Iroquois alone, dying in a fusillade of arrows.

In 1649 John de Brébeuf and Gabriel were captured, taken to what is now Saint-Ignace, Ontario, and subjected to the worst torture of any of the martyrs, including beating and red-hot hatchets and lances on their bodies. John de Brébeuf preached to both his captors and the other Christian captives, which resulted in his nose and lips being cut off. The priests were then drenched with boiling water and parts of their bodies cut off and roasted in front of them before their hearts were torn out of their bodies, after which the Iroquois drank their blood.

Next to be martyred was Charles. The Huron village of Saint-Jean, Quebec was also attacked by the Iroquois in 1649 and, as Antony had, he baptized and heard confessions in the midst of the attack until he was shot with a musket and given a death-blow with a hatchet. Because of fears for his safety, Noel was recalled but, unable to keep up with his companions, he was caught and killed by a Huron who had been baptized but later apostasized. The manner of his death is not known.

Martyrdom is an extraordinary grace, given by God to few. These men, courageous even in an extremity of physical pain, thought only of the people they had come to serve and so gained not only eternal glory but also the eventual Christianization of nearly every tribe that they had encountered.

