

October 19th is the memorial of Saints John de Brébeuf and Isaac Jogues. The Great Commission from Jesus to the apostles is to go to the ends of the earth baptizing in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit and teaching the faith.

When the Jesuits in France decided to send a missionary team to present day Canada, Father John de Brébeuf was eager to bring the Good News to the New World. He and his fellow Jesuits spent their initial years learning the language and customs of the indigenous people. They wanted to understand how they already understood God so they could effectively preach about Jesus Christ. After a period of seven years of study and living in relative harmony, they felt they understood well enough to begin their missionary call to bring Christianity to the Native tribes they encountered. In addition to their faith they shared their medical knowledge and agricultural skills. John de Brébeuf founded schools and wrote a catechism and dictionary in the Huron language. He baptized 7,000.

In 1649 he was captured by the Iroquois who had attacked the Huron village where Fr John was staying.ⁱ In the Office of readings we have an excerpt from the mission journal of St. John de Brébeuf. He wrote:

For two days now I have experienced a great desire to be a martyr and to endure all the torments the martyrs suffered.... I vow to you, Jesus my Savior, that as far as I have the strength I will never fail to accept the grace of martyrdom, if some day you in your infinite mercy should offer it to me, your most unworthy servant.... On receiving the blow of death, I shall accept it from your hands with the fullest delight and joy of spirit.... My God, it grieves me greatly that you are not known, that in this [harsh] wilderness all have not been converted to you, that sin has not been driven from it.ⁱⁱ

John and his companions were martyred March 16th 1649. “Those who sow in tears shall reap rejoicing” (Psalm 126:5).

The Iroquois Nation was at war with the Hurons and saw the French missionaries as allies of their enemies. In 1642, an Iroquois war party captured Fr. Isaac Jogues taking him to a Mohawk village near present-day Auriesville, New York. Fr. Isaac was tortured and forced into slavery for over a year. After a ransom was paid, he was able to leave and return to France. His hand had been mutilated and he needed special permission to celebrate Mass. Pope Urban VIII approved the dispensation, saying, “It would be a shame that a martyr of Christ not drink the blood of Christ.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Undeterred by the harsh treatment he had received, Fr Isaac returned to the mission fields and undertook a mission to foster peace between the Iroquois and the French. Near Auriesville, he was attacked and martyred.^{iv} The blood of martyrs often tills the soil for the growth of the church. The Indian who had taken Fr Isaac’s life was later baptized and joyfully took on the Christian name Isaac. “Those who sow in tears shall reap rejoicing.”

Ten years later, Kateri Tekakwitha, was born in Auriesville. When of age, she wholeheartedly embraced the Catholic faith and encountered resistance from her native tribe. When Kateri died in 1680 at the age of 24, the scars of smallpox from her early childhood miraculously disappeared. This miracle and others benefiting ill, and infirm Indians helped for a wider acceptance of the Christian faith among the Native tribes. “Those who sow in tears shall reap rejoicing.”

ⁱ ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-voices/16th-and-17th-century-ignatian-voices/st-john-de-brebeuf-sj/

ⁱⁱ catholicculture.org/culture/liturgicalyear/calendar/day.cfm?date=2020-10-19

ⁱⁱⁱ loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/saints/saints-stories-for-all-ages/saints-isaac-jogues-john-de-brebeuf-and-companions/

^{iv} vaticannews.va/en/saints/10/19/sts--john-de-brebeuf-and-isaac-jogues--priests-and-companions--j.html