

The story of St. Jean de Brebeuf

In 1625, at age 32, St. Jean de Brebeuf (1593-1649) became one of the first five Jesuit missionaries to travel to Canada to bring the Catholic faith to the Hurons. He was ideally suited for his task: He was blessed with great strength and stamina, he had a natural gift for learning languages, foreign cultures and unfamiliar customs did not trouble him, and he had great patience. He was also incredibly productive: once he became fluent in the Huron language, he compiled a Huron phrase book and wrote Huron grammar to help future missionaries, translated a catechism into Huron, and even wrote a Christmas carol in Huron.

Although the Hurons admired Brebeuf's many fine qualities – they even gave him a Huron name, Echon, He-Who-Carries-the-Load, a tribute to his physical strength – they were not inclined to convert to Catholicism. Initially, the only Hurons the Jesuits baptized were dying infants and dying adults (which led the Huron sorcerers to say that baptism must be lethal). In 1635, during a severe drought, the Huron sorcerers claimed that the wooden cross that stood before the Jesuits' cabin was the cause and should be torn down. Brebeuf suggested the Hurons join him and his fellow missionaries in repenting for their sins and praying for God's mercy. The priests began a novena of Masses and daily processions through the village, all in honor of St. Joseph. On the ninth day, the rains came and some Hurons began to have second thoughts about the Christian God. In time, de Brebeuf and his fellow Jesuits would convert virtually the entire Huron nation.

But there was something else remarkable about him, and the French missionaries, and the French in Canada in general. Unlike other European colonists in the Americas who abused,

enslaved or exterminated the people of the New World, the French respected the Indians. It was French policy to make Catholics of the tribes, but the French colonial government as well as the Jesuit missionaries did not expect the Indians to abandon their ways and live like Europeans any more than Jesuit missionaries in Asia expected the Chinese or the Japanese to give up their culture. The Jesuits only discouraged those Huron customs that violated the tenets of the Catholic faith, such as polygamy.

Throughout the 1640s the Jesuits expanded their missions throughout French Canada, but at the same time they were conscious that their situation was becoming increasingly dangerous. The Iroquois, a confederation of five tribes, were the bitter enemies of the French and the Hurons, and in the 1640s they began raiding Huron villages, slaughtering the inhabitants and carrying off prisoners whom they either tortured to death or kept as slaves.

Before dawn on March 16, 1649, an Iroquois war party stormed over the palisade of the Mission of St. Louis. Many of the Hurons escaped into the forest, many Huron warriors died defending their families, and many more were taken prisoner. Among the captives were Father de Brebeuf and Father Gabriel Lalemant who had arrived in Canada only seven months earlier. The deaths the two Jesuit martyrs endured at the hands of the Iroquois is too gruesome to describe here.

St. Jean de Brebeuf is a national hero in Canada, a favorite son of the Society of Jesus. And since 1925, Jean de Brebeuf and Gabriel Lalemant, along with five other Jesuits martyred by the Iroquois, have been venerated as saints.

(Excerpted from "[Priests who made a difference](#)," by Thomas J. Craughwell, OSV Newsweekly, 6/17/2009