

Homily for the Mission Mass
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Memorial of Saints John de Brébeuf, Isaac Jogues, and their companions
Wednesday, of the 29th Week in Ordinary Time (Year 2) | October 19th, 2022 AD

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My dear brother priests, deacons, [consecrated religious,] young people, and all gathered here, it is good to be with you today. It is certainly part of God's providential love for us that our Mission Mass today is being celebrated on this Memorial of Saints John de Brébeuf, Isaac Jogues, and their companions of the Society of Jesus, known as the North American Martyrs. John was born in Normandy, France, in 1593, and Isaac was born in Orleans, further south in France in 1607. Isaac, it turns out, was the middle child of nine, the same number of children that my own parents had! Both of them as young men entered the religious order of the Society of Jesus, commonly known as the Jesuits. John (in French, Jean), naturally talented as a student, was not able to finish many of his later classes because he contracted tuberculosis in his 20s. Thanks be to God, he survived that deadly disease, and, as it would turn out, the Lord would make up for all those lost years of studies, for he had a natural talent for learning language. Isaac was homeschooled until he was 10 and then began studying at Jesuit schools, hearing stories as a young man of other Jesuit

missionaries who had just reached the East Coast of North America, including Jean Brebeuf, who had gone on his first mission there from 1625 until 1636.

Jean brought back to Isaac, who had just been ordained a priest in 1636, stories of the challenges and deprivation he experienced in the New World. The hardships of winters in what is now the Northeastern USA and Southeastern Canada, sheltered by nothing more than a wigwam. Also, diseases and plagues threatened to rip through the villages of the Hurons and Algonquians, when the priest was the only one able to care for the sick. Some of those years he was all alone in those villages, working to learn the languages used by those tribes, and trying to convince them of his goodwill and love for them. When he wrote back to his brothers in France, his letters were filled with these and more trials, yet his zeal to bring the Gospel to so many who had never heard it never wavered! Rather than be discouraged, Isaac, and others, were filled with hope and desire to bring Christ to all those who had never gotten to know Our Lord. Isaac asked to be sent back with Brebeuf, and they, with a few others, returned to the New World in 1636. The companions of Saints John de Brébeuf and Isaac Jogues who shared in their martyrdom here in North America were Antony Daniel, Gabriel Lalemant, Charles Garnier, Noel Chabanel, René Goupil, and Jean de la Lande.

It was a journey of eight weeks by ship to get to Canada, and another several weeks carrying all their belongings along trails and primitive roads before they made it to modern-day Quebec. Isaac wrote back to his mother: “I do not know [what] it is to enter Heaven, but this I know – that it would be difficult to experience in this world a joy more excessive and more overflowing than I felt in setting foot in the New World, and celebrating my first Mass on the day of Visitation.”

It was a joy that would be tested, but which he would never lose in the years to come. Isaac was struck immediately by a fever which was then tearing through the Huron village and which the natives blamed on the newly arrived priests. It was a hard beginning for the small group of missionaries, but after a year of giving themselves entirely in love for the people, and teaching the basics of Christianity, they found some villages starting to invite them to come and teach them the Gospel. It was their Christ-like love: living as the people lived, working to learn their language and ways, preaching with care and simplicity, that won their trust. Failure seemed more frequent than success, yet they simply kept doing what they could to tell them about Jesus.

It was in 1542 that Isaac and one other priest were captured during a raid on the Hurons by the Iroquois. Isaac actually had successfully hidden from the

raiding party but gave himself up when he saw that the rest of the village had been taken prisoner and would need him for comfort and to strengthen their Christian faith. They were tortured mercilessly: beaten, slashed, burned, and mocked. Throughout the years of his imprisonment, Father Isaac continued to baptize and hear the confessions of the other prisoners, enduring winters with little food and clothing, knowing that the cross was always part of the Christian's following after Jesus. Jean and some of the others had been captured later that same year, and tortured to their death. To the end they did not complain of their pains, but keep praying and forgiving their captors.

Isaac, after a few years of imprisonment, was helped to escape when the Iroquois took him with them on a trading expedition to Beverwijck, now near the city of Albany, New York. He was smuggled out of that village and down to the Island of Manhattan, becoming the first priest to visit what would eventually become New York City. He was taken back to France, arriving on Christmas morning, and hailed as a "living martyr" by Pope Urban VIII. His hands were so mutilated that he had to receive special dispensation from the Holy Father to celebrate Mass again, which he did with incredible joy after years being deprived of that most important part of being a priest. He was able to visit his mother who was still alive.

But Isaac did not consider his call from Jesus to have been completed yet. After only a year and a half back home, he asked to be sent again to the New World, and not just to any of the peoples there, but specifically back to the Iroquois who had treated him with such horrible tortures. His captors were shocked that he had returned, but were willing to engage in conversation with him, one of his projects being to establish a lasting peace between them, the Hurons, and the French. His work was not to last long though: in September of 1646, the 43-year-old priest was on a mission between the Iroquois camp and the Huron one when the Iroquois decided to return to the warpath. They captured Father Isaac and his two companions and killed all of them only a few days later. Perhaps of greater testimony to his holiness than anything else, the man who had murdered Jogues converted to Christianity himself and took the Christian name, Isaac Jogues.

There is a connection between the amazing story of Father John de Brébeuf and Father Isaac Jogues and their companions with our readings for Mass today. St. Paul writes to the Ephesians, "To me, the very least of all the holy ones, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the inscrutable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for all what is the plan of the mystery hidden from ages past in God who created all things, so that the manifold wisdom of

God might now be made known through the Church.” Paul is overwhelmed by the joy that is his to bring the Gospel and power of Christ to all peoples. Christian faith is offered to everyone! The salvation, healing, help, and glory of Jesus is offered to every single human being, and Paul was called to be a “minister by the gift of God’s grace” to preach this good news. This was the same fire that filled the hearts of John, Isaac, and their companions. Why would anyone go on a mission with more rejection than acceptance, more suffering than success, and likely death at any time? No earthly reason would compel any of us to give our lives away like that, but a *call from Jesus* can carry us through any such cross!

I ask all of us here today: where is the Lord calling us to preach His Gospel? Our world surely needs the hope, the peace, the promises, of Christ: how are you and I being called by Jesus to do that for Him?

What does Jesus say in the Gospel today? “Who, then, is the faithful and prudent steward whom the master will put in charge of his servants to distribute the food allowance at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master on arrival finds doing so. Truly, I say to you, he will put him in charge of all his property.” We might ask with Peter, “is this parable meant for us or for everyone?” Of course, Jesus explains, that this parable is for

all of us. Everyone is called to be a faithful steward of Jesus' Love. If all are to be fed by the food that Jesus gives us of Himself, He depends on us telling others about that gift! Today Jesus will give Himself to each of us in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. He feeds us today with "food ... at the proper time," but asks if we will return the favor. Again, how can we pass on His love? How can we be missionaries in our world today? How are we called by Jesus to carry the Gospel to our friends and family? What can we do, starting today? What if we just prayed every day, asking Jesus this question: "What is your call for me, Jesus?"

May God give us this grace. Amen.