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Homily, Feast of the North American Martyrs, Oct/19, 2023

“We hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us.”

I want to tell you the story of this great man, St. Isaac Jogues, whose shrine hangs to your left. We Catholics and Christians need not worry be so affected by such trends because we have a litany of heroes that span the course of history and stand out as giants in our midst. Today we celebrate a group of such giants, Sts. Jean de Brébeuf, Isaac Jogues, and companions, the North American martyrs. In the whole history of Christianity you will be hard pressed to find greater examples of missionary zeal, courage, and self-sacrifice. Burning within them was a rare fire of love.

Isaac Jogues was born in the famous French city of Orleans, to parents of the merchant class. His father died when he was young. He went to the Jesuit school in Orleans, and became friends with several of the Jesuit priests there. At a young age he showed himself to be drawn very much to the things of God, and this spiritual inclination crystallized into a desire to become a priest. He entered the Jesuits at the age of eighteen. He progressed through formation and was ordained a priest. After hearing stories of the early missionaries such as St. Jean de Brébeuf, he volunteered for the mission in New France and sailed to Canada. He was prepared for the mission with an intensive study of the Huron language and then sent to the mission in northern Ontario, a 30-day canoe journey from Montreal. He was made a companion of the veteran St. Jean de Brébeuf and began visiting the Huron villages and conversing with the people about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In such a context there was no room for mediocrity. The missionary could only opt for heroism or leave the mission.

Things took a turn for the worse when he was on a journey back to Montreal to collect supplies for the mission. The mixed group of French and Huron Indians was attacked by an Iroquois War Party. St. Isaac Jogues and his lay assistant, St. Rene Goupil. In an account of the capture, Jogues wrote, “The enemies Fell upon us like mad dogs, with sharp teeth -tearing out our nails, crushing our fingers.” They were taken prisoner and led back to an Iroquois village far to the south, in what is now upstate New York. Then began the heroic suffering that made St. Isaac

Jogues famous. When they arrived at the village they were beaten severely with clubs and irons, and they cut off his thumb and forefinger. They were tied up outside and left exposed to the elements and to anyone who wished to mistreat them. Hot coals were thrown onto them, and random beatings continued. St. Isaac had a true love for Christ crucified. His vocation was to the cross, and he lived it in the same way as Jesus: suffering out of love for his torturers.

Eventually they were loosed and made to stay in the village as slaves. The Iroquois called him, *Ondessonk*, bird of prey, because he had sharp eyes and keen attention. Many Iroquois wanted to kill Jogues and his French companion, but there was a division among them the chiefs about what was best. So they lived day to day under the threat of death. Many times young braves in the heat of rage came to kill them, but they were protected by some chiefs because of their value in negotiations with the French. Eventually, after many weeks in captivity, two young warriors lured Jogues and Goupil out of the village into a field and tomahawked Goupil to death. St. Isaac prayed over him in his last moments and gave him sacramental absolution. He himself was spared death again, by, as he puts it in his account, “Indeed, I passed several days on which they came to kill me; but Our Lord did not permit this.” In one of the most moving accounts of brotherly love, St. Isaac Jogues sought to give a Christian burial to Rene Goupil after his body was dragged to the river and left to be eaten by dogs. Yet, he failed to find the body when he went in search of it, as he explains, “when I drew near the place, I could no longer find the Blessed body. I went into the water, which was already very cold; I went in and out – I felt with my foot, to see whether the water had not raised and carried away the body. I found nothing. How many tears did I shed, which fell into the torrent of the river, while I sang, as well as I could, the psalms which the Church is accustomed to recite for the dead.”

Many more weeks St. Isaac stayed in the village waiting for his death, which miraculously never came. Then one day some Dutch traders came to the village from the south, from New York city, and saw the Jesuit in captivity. They found a way to smuggle him out of the village in their caravan and brought him to New York. From there he was put on a ship back to France, showing up at the Jesuit house the surprise of all, since he was taken for dead. After recovering from his wounds and the trauma of his captivity, he received special permission to celebrate Mass even without the proper fingers needed. He begged to be sent back to New France, arguing that his

unique knowledge of the language and customs of the Iroquois made him a valuable missionary. Not without reservation, the Jesuit superior sent him. On his return to Montreal he came with the idea of negotiating a peace between the French, the Huron, and the Iroquois. He saw that the ongoing war between them threatened not only the tribes but also the success of the mission. St. Isaac led a peace delegation to the leaders of the Iroquois. They were amazed to see him alive and back in the territory. However, that was his undoing. For the pride of the Iroquois could not stand seeing a former prisoner standing in their midst. So they conspired to kill him.

After the negotiations, which proved inconclusive, the French delegation headed back to Montreal. The Iroquois set an ambush for them on the way, and tomahawked St. Isaac to death, on October 18th, 1646.

Why did he endure such torments? It is very simple: Love. Love for Christ, Love for the souls of the Iroquois. The greatest commandment, lived out in extraordinary circumstances. If we could have one tenth of the zeal and courage of St. Isaac Jogues, we would be outstanding.