

St. Jean de Brébeuf Tour Message

St. Jean de Brébeuf, Missionary and Martyr

St. Jean de Brébeuf is one of the greatest missionaries in the history of the Catholic Church. Laboring in New France in the seventeenth century, he overcame immense physical and spiritual hardships in preaching the Gospel to the Wendat people, known to the French as the Hurons. The paradox of his life echoes that of Jesus'. For in human terms he achieved very little in this mission, as the Jesuits abandoned it after he was killed, as many abandoned Jesus after his death. In spiritual terms Brébeuf's life stands out as one of the most heroic ones ever lived, as Jesus' was as well. He ended his life like that of his master, in a gruesome martyrdom, in which he won the crown of righteousness (cf. 2Tim. 4:8) and washed his robes clean in the blood of the lamb (cf. Rev. 7:14).

When Jean was born, in 1593, in Normandy, France, raised on a farm. In his early life he was especially noted for his tall stature and physical strength. The teenage Jean enrolled as a lay student at the Jesuit college at the city of Caen, the centre of Norman society. After studying the arts and sciences, he took up the study of theology, probably contemplating the priesthood. But it wasn't until 1617, at the relatively older age of twenty-four, that he applied for admission to the Society of Jesus.

During the novitiate, Jean would have done the thirty-day silent retreat according to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the mystic and founder of the young order. Perhaps it was then that he first began to plumb the deeper waters of union with God. He would have prayed four to five hours a day in meditation. He would have practiced some mortification of the body at certain times of the retreat. He would have pondered deeply the purpose for which he was created, and the nature of sin and its consequences. He would have long contemplated the person of Christ, and the meaning of His incarnation, passion, death and resurrection. He would have also considered the appeal that Christ makes for followers to take up His standard and spread the Gospel to the four corners of the world. At the end of his novitiate, on November 8, 1618, he pronounced his first (but permanent) vows of poverty, chastity and obedience according to the

Constitutions of the Society of Jesus. Since he had already completed his studies in humanities and philosophy, he was sent immediately to be a teacher in the College of Rouen.

Sometime in 1620 he fell sick and was unable to continue teaching. For someone who had been so healthy and strong – he punned about being un vrai boeuf, a real ox – the incapacitation was a blow. But he rallied, continued his studies, and was ordained two years later, in February 1622.

After his ordination at some point Jean had decided he wanted to devote his life to evangelizing the natives of the new world. There was a fire implanted in him. Some powerful grace impressed itself on his heart, and he was filled with a zeal for souls, and he desired to seek and to save the lost (cf. Lk. 19:10). He wrote to the French provincial asking to be sent to Canada. It was a surprise when his request was granted so quickly; he had to bid farewell to relatives, secure supplies for the entire Canadian winter, and depart within the month. With the fleur-de-lis flying from the mast, the ship left Dieppe with Jean and four other Jesuits on board on April 26, 1625; they arrived in Quebec nearly two months later. The conditions in the French settlement were very primitive. But St. Jean did not stay there long. He prepared himself to journey with the Huron to their country at the end of the trading season. In fulfillment of his missionary desire, he and two Franciscans managed to negotiate passage in canoes back to the Huron lands.

The journey was very arduous. St. Jean wrote a letter back to his superiors detailing some of the hardships:

“you must expect to be at least three or four weeks on the road; to have as companions persons you have never seen before; to be cramped into a bark canoe in an uncomfortable position; to be not free to turn yourself to one side or the other; to be in danger of capsizing or of being cast upon the rocks a minimum of fifty times a day. During the day the sun burns you; during the night you are consumed by mosquitoes. Sometimes you must ascend as many as five or six rapids in a single day, and for your evening meal you have only a little corn crushed between two stones and cooked in clear, fresh water. Your only bed is the earth – quite frequently only rough, uneven rocks; usually your only roof is the stars.”

As it turned out, St. Jean was more than equal to the hardships of the journey. Although he was very tall and broad shouldered, not ideal for a small canoe, he managed to make up for it by becoming a strong paddler. On the portages he was able to carry a large weight of baggage, much to the admiration and gratitude of the Indians. He was patient with their habits, and humble in receiving their reproaches. He made a good impression on the Huron men during the voyage, and this paid off when he arrived in their country, for his reputation spread around the villages. They called him, 'He who carries the heavy load.' Later on, other Jesuit missionaries had a more difficult time on the canoe journey, unable to keep up with the physical rigors of paddling and were impatient with the discomforts, and thus made an unfavorable impression on the Indians. This led them to have a poor reputation upon arrival in the villages, thus hindering their missionary efforts.

When St. Jean arrived in Huron territory, a new set of struggles awaited him. He was invited to stay in the long house of a Huron chief. The conditions were far removed from the comforts of France. Again, in a letter he explained to other Jesuits what to expect:

"we shall be able to give you nothing but a poor mat, or at most a skin, to serve you as a bed. Besides, you will arrive at a season when those annoying little insects that we call here taouhac, [fleas], will prevent you from closing an eye all night long, for in these regions they are incomparably more irksome than in France. The dust in the cabin nourishes them; the savages transfer them to us; we even go to their houses to get these pests! This petty martyrdom, not to speak of the stings of mosquitoes, sandflies, and other like vermin, usually lasts the three or four months of the summer season. You may have been a famous professor or an outstanding theologian in France, but here you will be merely a student and – God be praised! – with what teachers! – women, little children, all the savages. You will be constantly be exposed to their ridicule. The Huron language will be your Saint Thomas and your Aristotle, and – clever man that you are, speaking glibly among learned and capable persons – you must make up your mind to be for quite some time mute in the company of these barbarians. It will be quite an achievement if, at the end of a considerable time, you begin to stammer even a little..... I am not exaggerating when I say that the five or six months of the winter season are spent in almost continuous discomforts – excessive cold, smoke, the annoying habits of the savages. Our cabin is

built of bark.....The smoke is very often so thick, so annoying, and so persistent that for five or six days at a time, if you are not completely immune to it, about all you can do is recognize a few words in your breviary.”

Brebeuf's first sojourn in Huronia was a time of sowing rather than reaping. Its main fruit was Brebeuf's advancement in the complexities of the Huron language and culture. Over several painstaking months, with no teacher Brébeuf learned the language from scratch, composing his own dictionary and grammar. This was a remarkable achievement. With this fluency translated a simple catechism into Huron, as well as the basic prayers. However, he had to invent new words in Huron for such basic realities such as God the Creator, 'He-who-made-all', and the Savior, 'He-who-brings-blessings'. Yet, Huron culture was more difficult to surmount. Many of its elements, including an intense faith in the power of dreams, many different superstitions, a lack of knowledge of the God, and a high degree of sexual promiscuity, constituted powerful barriers to conversion.

Brébeuf made no conversions during his first three years with the Huron. The work was called to an abrupt end when the English took Quebec from the French. Brebeuf was summoned back to Quebec and then to France in 1629, to his great disappointment. There he waited for three years until the French regained control of Quebec and the Jesuits sent a new wave of missionaries. During this time in France St. Jean's spiritual life deepened, and he in passing through the Spiritual Exercises for a second time, he made a more complete donation of himself to God and to embrace the cross of Jesus Christ.

Brebeuf returned to Quebec in 1633 and to Huronia in 1634. His task this time was to be the mission superior, to organize the Jesuits sent there and establish a base for lasting evangelization among the Huron people. Again, the journey north was arduous, but Brébeuf found spiritual fruit in the sufferings, as he recounts with these words: *“To be sure, I was at times so weary that my body could do no more. But at the same time my soul was filled with great happiness as I realized that I was suffering this for God. No one can know this feeling unless he has*

experienced it."¹ And, though five years had elapsed, the Hurons remembered Brebeuf — and welcomed him with great joy, visiting him in droves upon his arrival.

The new mission of St. Joseph met with eventual success. They did not see their first convert to Christianity for four years, as it was policy to ensure that converts were well-instructed and of sincere belief before baptism. A breakthrough came when one well-respected leader, Pierre Tsiouendaentaha and his family, were baptized and served as remarkable models of conversion. The first Wendat to make the Spiritual Exercises was Joseph Chiwatenhwa, who impressed the Jesuits with his virtue and piety. A small trickle of adult conversions followed, while a growing number of children and elders began to accept baptism.

Evangelization flagged, however, as the Jesuits contended with traditional Huron standards of morality and in particular with the devastating effects of viral epidemics which ravaged the Huron nation. An especially painful blow fell upon Pierre's family as his niece, brother-in-law, wife, and daughter died of the epidemic, confirming in the Huron minds that baptism, and Echon himself, brought with them death.

Local witch doctors mounted increasingly bitter campaigns against the Jesuits. On multiple occasions Brebeuf wrote to his superiors anticipating that a full-scale assault on the mission was imminent and that his own life stood in grave peril. In the matrix of Brébeuf's faith, however, these dangers were once again transmuted into the matter of his own continued growth in prayer.

His spiritual life entered into mystical contemplation. He was visited regularly by consoling images of Christ and the Virgin Mary, and even more frequently he was assaulted by visions of demons attempting to frighten him from his work and to lure him into sexual sin and despair.

During this period of trial, Brébeuf made a not to seek to avoid the grace of martyrdom, should it be offered to him. The combination of physical hardship, a lack of spiritual fruit, and the constant fear of death made this mission a veritable martyrdom. Yet all the while St. Jean grew

¹ From "Relation of What Occurred Among the Hurons in the Year 1635", sent to Quebec to Fr. Le Jeune, by Fr. Brébeuf, and incorporated with the Relation of 1635. See *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*. Edited by Edna Kenton. New York: Vanguard Press, 1954, 103.

in holiness through these struggles, and found in them His Savior on the Cross, as he writes in one of his letters: *“Jesus Christ is our true greatness; it is he alone and his crosses that should be sought in ministering to these people. If we seek for anything else, we will find nothing but bodily and spiritual afflictions. But if we have found Jesus Christ in his Cross, we have found the roses among the thorns, sweetness in bitterness, all in nothing.”* (Instructions for the Fathers of our Society who will be sent to the Hurons)

Despite the mission’s deprivations and the Hurons’ sometimes inconclusive conversions, Brebeuf also provided a model of cultural engagement which built on the example of St. Paul and the great Jesuit missionaries. Having become the most adept of the French missionaries in Wendat, the difficult Huron language, Brebeuf composed his “Huron Carol,” a Christmas hymn which remains in use in Canada today.

After a three year hiatus in which Brebeuf served as procurator of the Huron mission in Quebec, he returned to the embattled Huron mission in 1644. In the years that followed, the Jesuit missionaries saw their slow and patient efforts crowned with success. By 1647 the numbers of baptized numbered in the thousands.

In 1648, there were a wave of attacks from the Iroquois, a tribe from the south at war with the Hurons. Then, on March 16, 1649, an Iroquois war party attacked a village, captured Brebeuf and his companion, Gabriel Lalemant, and brought them to the defeated village of St. Ignace. Stones rained upon them as they were led to the stakes of their martyrdom. Boiling water was poured over their heads in mockery of Baptism. Necklaces of axe heads were heated and draped about their necks, and hot blades were forced into their thighs and underarms. During the torture St. Jean prayed continually and encouraged those with him to focus on the rewards awaiting them in heaven. His prayers infuriated his torturers, so they chopped off his tongue and smashed his jaw. Finally Brebeuf was burned, and his heart was cut from his chest and eaten, in order to gain some of his strength. He died around sundown, while St. Gabriel Lalemant’s martyrdom continued until dawn.

Message

What do we learn from this man's life and death? What message does it communicate to us today?

I will offer you three lessons from St. Jean de Brébeuf's life and martyrdom. The first is that of missionary love.

The missionary is an extension of the incarnation. God sent his Son into the world out of love for fallen humanity (Jn. 3:16). The Good Shepherd went out in search of the lost sheep (Lk. 15:1-9; Matt. 23:37), loving them to the end (Jn. 13:1). Jesus has called and sent missionaries to the far regions of the world as an extension of his mission of salvation. Every true missionary is enflamed with the same love that Jesus had for sinful human beings. St. Jean de Brébeuf received that grace of love in abundance. His life was a rousing flame, an unquenchable fire.

We must pray for that same love today if we wish to participate in the 'New Evangelization'. We must go out to our wayward brother and sisters. There is so much darkness in our world, so much suffering, so much superstition and lies circulating in the minds of people today. The only way to get to them is through love, genuine Christ-like love. That is why the Huron began to listen to St. Jean. That is why they became his friends, that is why they received his message, because he loved them. If we do not love those that we encounter every day, if we do not love our enemies, we have no hope of a New Evangelization.

The second lesson is that of generous sacrifice, which includes an embrace of suffering.

We often miss this point, but the incarnation itself is an act of suffering on the part of the Second Person of the Trinity. When God the Son *emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave* (Philip. 2:5-6), *he did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at* (Philip. 2:5-6), he deprived Himself of the glory and power due to Him as Son. This deprivation is, in the human nature, a suffering, a lack that the Son endures. Another way of saying it, echoing the Fathers of the Church, is that the passion began when the Word became flesh. The crucifixion is the final

conclusion of a movement of abasement and suffering that began in Nazareth with the Annunciation and conception of Jesus.

The missionary also embraces this self-emptying sacrifice of the cross. As it was with Jesus, so it is with those who continue his mission in the world. St. Jean embodied this reality as well. The immense difficulties of his evangelization of the Huron people allowed him to pour out his life *like a libation* (2Cor.). His martyrdom began the day he stepped on the ship for Canada. And every time he was tempted to pull back and retreat within himself for his own comfort and self-preservation, he chose to go deeper into the suffering.

I am so tired of hearing in the Church these days the phrase about ‘becoming missionary disciples’ when it is framed as this easy, triumphant hobby that we can periodically indulge at our leisure. That has very little to do with the missionary tradition of the Church. If you want to be a missionary, you start by denying yourself, picking up your cross and following him. A missionary does not complain of suffering, he embraces it. A missionary does not seek to build up his own selfish ego in his ministry successes, he forgets himself completely. A missionary does not dabble his foot into the water only to walk away at his own convenience. A true missionary gives his whole life to Jesus Christ and the Gospel. St. Jean lived poverty, chastity, and obedience. He left his country and never returned. He did not fundraise his salary. He did not just go on a weeklong mission trip to the Huron country and then return to the comforts of his life in France. What can Jesus do with so little generosity on our part? And we claim that we are missionary disciples?

Without total self-gift and suffering there is no missionary, because a missionary continues the incarnation of Jesus.

The third lesson that we take from the witness of St. Jean de Brébeuf is the need to be ready for spiritual combat. Jesus faced Satan’s temptations in the desert, and then in the garden of Gethsemane. He faced opposition from many different groups, including the religious leaders in Jerusalem. St. Jean encountered much opposition to his evangelizing efforts, because of the sinful structures in Huron culture and from powerful groups within the tribe. In his mystical

visions St. Jean saw that this opposition was spiritual in nature, that demons were lurking behind the scenes to undermine his ministry.

We too will face opposition in our struggle to live the Gospel, and certainly to evangelize today, for many of the same reasons. The Huron were quite permissive in sexual matters. So is our culture today. The Huron were superstitious, believing many false notions. So are many in our country trapped in false ideas. There are powerful interest groups that do not want to see Christianity grow. And behind those factors we can intuit spiritual forces at work. We are engaged in a spiritual battle for the souls of the living. We must confront these challenges in the same way that St. Jean de Brébeuf did. He was courageous, never backing down in the face of opposition and never giving in to fear. We must have courage, and pray for courage every day. St. Jean had deep faith and confidence in Christ. He did not doubt, he believed in the power of the Gospel. Finally, St. Jean was humble, not relying on his own strength and natural abilities. He placed all of his hope in God. Humility must be our strength, as we rely not on ourselves but on Him who conquered all evils.

These three lessons: Love, self-sacrifice, and courage-confidence-humility in the spiritual battle. That is what St. Jean de Brébeuf teaches us today. Let us imitate him, as he imitated Christ.

When you come up to venerate this relic, keep in your mind that this is the skull that bore the heavy load on the long canoe journeys. This is the skull that bowed in prayer next to the fire so many nights. This is the skull that was beaten many times by mallets and fists. This is the skull that had scolding water poured over it three times, in mock of baptism. This is the skull that prayed during all of the tortures. This is the skull whose jaw was chopped off and was tied to a post to burn.

Stories of St. Jean de Brébeuf

Therefore, from the very beginning, the Love of God manifested in the saving action of the incarnation was a love that embraced sacrifice and suffering. There is no love, in the Christian sense, without sacrifice and suffering. Union only comes through self-gift, self-emptying.

Turning St. Jean de Brébeuf, his missionary love was also one that embraced sacrifice and suffering from the very beginning. His martyrdom, in imitation of Christ's cross, was the conclusion of the movement of loving sacrifice that began when he stepped on the boat in France. "He loved them to the end." Jn. 13

Message

Poured out his life even before his martyrdom, love of the cross.
Missionary love for the people

Short talk about how to go about veneration, followed by veneration

1. Quote on card: honor of suffering for Christ; what a gift to be able to carry our Cross "to help Christ bear his Cross"
2. Spiritual Warfare: risk of intense reaction, possibly an antagonism to the created world
3. Connections between his mission and ours: Hostile culture, people not receptive, suffering and steadfast fidelity; patience in the face of opposition and conflict
4. Moniere: Many Christians complicit or acquiesce in the face of Nazi Germany; am I willing to sacrifice to remain faithful to Christ; cutting against Bourgeois Christianity
5. Brebeuf speaking Huron better than the Hurons themselves did
6. Inculturation; seeing what is good and worth suffering for in the culture to which Brebeuf is sent as a missionary; love the culture in order to see it as worth saving
7. Some were hostile because they didn't understand; superstition
8. Brebeuf and a hostile reception; six years before they baptized their first adult Christian who was not already dying
9. Desire to be on mission because the blood of Christ that was shed for me has also been shed for these people as well
10. Missionaries really did believe that Jesus Christ is the savior
11. We need to be bold and not retreat in the face of opposition or scandal (pushing back the darkness of a diminishment mentality)
12. Society of Jesus is fundamentally about the growth of the Church and the propagation of the faith
13. Ministry of consolation

Who will show up?

What are they looking for?

What we want them to walk away with?

Why are we doing this now? What are we responding to?

COME BLEED WITH US!

Brébeuf Quotes

“It is true that ‘love is strong as death’ (Song 8:6), that the love of God has power to do what death does – that is, to detach us entirely from creatures and even from ourselves! These impulses we feel to work for the salvation of infidels, however, are not always a sure sign of that pure love. There may be sometimes a little self-esteem and self-seeking in them if we look only to the blessing and satisfaction to be reaped from putting souls in Heaven and do not maturely consider the pains, labors, and difficulties inseparable from all evangelical activities.” *Important Advice for those whom it shall please God to call to New France, especially to the country of the Hurons*

“What satisfaction to pass these rapids and to climb these rocks for him who has before his eyes our loving Savior, harassed by his tormentors and ascending Calvary laden with his Cross. For him who thus considers the Crucified One constantly, the discomfort of the canoe is very easy to bear. What consolation! (I must use such terms, since that is the only way I can give you pleasure.) What consolation it is to see yourself abandoned on the road by the savages, languishing with sickness and untended by anyone, even dying from hunger in the woods, and so being able to say to God: ‘My God it is to do your holy will that I am reduced to the state in which you see me.’ Above all, you then consider yourself like that God-man who, as he was expiring on the Cross, cried to his Father: ‘My God, my God, why do you abandon me?’ (Matt. 27:46). And if, in the midst of all these hardships, God should preserve you in health, no doubt you will arrive happily in the Huron country with these holy thoughts. ‘He whom the grace of God carries, travels sweetly.’” *Important Advice for those whom it shall please God to call to New France, especially to the country of the Hurons*

“I find unparalleled opportunities for acquiring perfection. Is it not a great deal to have no other attraction in your food, clothing, and sleep than that of satisfying your simplest needs? Is it not a glorious opportunity to unite your soul with God there, where no creature whatsoever gives you reason to spend your affection upon it, and when your exercises of devotion lead you gently to interior contemplation?” *Important Advice for those whom it shall please God to call to New France, especially to the country of the Hurons*

“I may be deceiving myself, but I imagine that here we have a powerful means for increasing faith, hope, and charity in our souls. Can we plant the seeds of the Faith in others without profiting by them ourselves? Can we put our confidence anywhere but in God in a region where, from a purely natural point of view, everything is lacking to us? Can we wish for a more fruitful opportunity to practice charity than the one we have here, with all its roughness and discomfort?” *Important Advice for those whom it shall please God to call to New France, especially to the country of the Hurons*

“I believe that it is God and no one else who puts to rout the attacks of the flesh and the devil in his deadly encounters. His divine strength and providence are especially effective for those who,

fearing nothing so much as these temptations, with bowed heads and hearts full of confidence in his goodness, go where his glory calls them.” *Important Advice for those whom it shall please God to call to New France, especially to the country of the Hurons*

“We must have a sincere affection for the savages, looking upon them as ransomed by the Blood of the Son of God and as our brothers, with whom we are to spend the rest of our lives.” *Instructions for the Fathers of our Society who will be sent to the Hurons*

“Jesus Christ is our true greatness; it is he alone and his crosses that should be sought in ministering to these people. If we seek for anything else, we will find nothing but bodily and spiritual afflictions. But if we have found Jesus Christ in his Cross, we have found the roses among the thorns, sweetness in bitterness, all in nothing.” *Instructions for the Fathers of our Society who will be sent to the Hurons*

“We are, perhaps, on the point of shedding our blood and sacrificing our lives in the service of our good Master, Jesus Christ. It seems that he in his goodness consents to accept this sacrifice from me for the expiation of my great and innumerable sins, and in this hour to crown any past services as well as the sincere, ardent desires of all of our Fathers here.” *Letter to Fr. Le Juene, Oct/28, 1637*

“It is indeed an eminent favor that his goodness extends to us in letting us endure something for his love. It is only now that we consider ourselves truly members of his Society. May he be forever blessed for having appointed us to this country, for having chosen us from so many others much more deserving than we to aid him in bearing his Cross. In all things, may his holy will be done! If it is his holy will that at this hour we should die – oh, fortunate hour for us! And still, if it is his will to reserve us for other labors – may he also be blessed! If you should hear that God has crowned our insignificant labors, rather, our desires, help us to bless him, for it is only for his sake that we desire to live and to die. It is only he who can give us the grace to accomplish this.” *Letter to Fr. Le Juene, Oct/28, 1637*

“Lord Jesus Christ, my Redeemer, you have redeemed me by your blood and most precious death; I, in turn, promise that I will serve you all my life in the Society of Jesus and will serve no one else unless for you and because of you. This promise I have signed with my own hand and my blood, being ready to pour out my whole life as willingly as this one drop of blood.” *Spiritual Journal*

“O my God, may you be known! May this barbarous country be completely converted to you! May its sins be abolished! May you be loved! Yes, my God, if all the torments that the captives endure in these regions, if all their cruel afflictions shall fall upon me, I offer myself with all my heart to suffer them alone!” *Spiritual Journal*