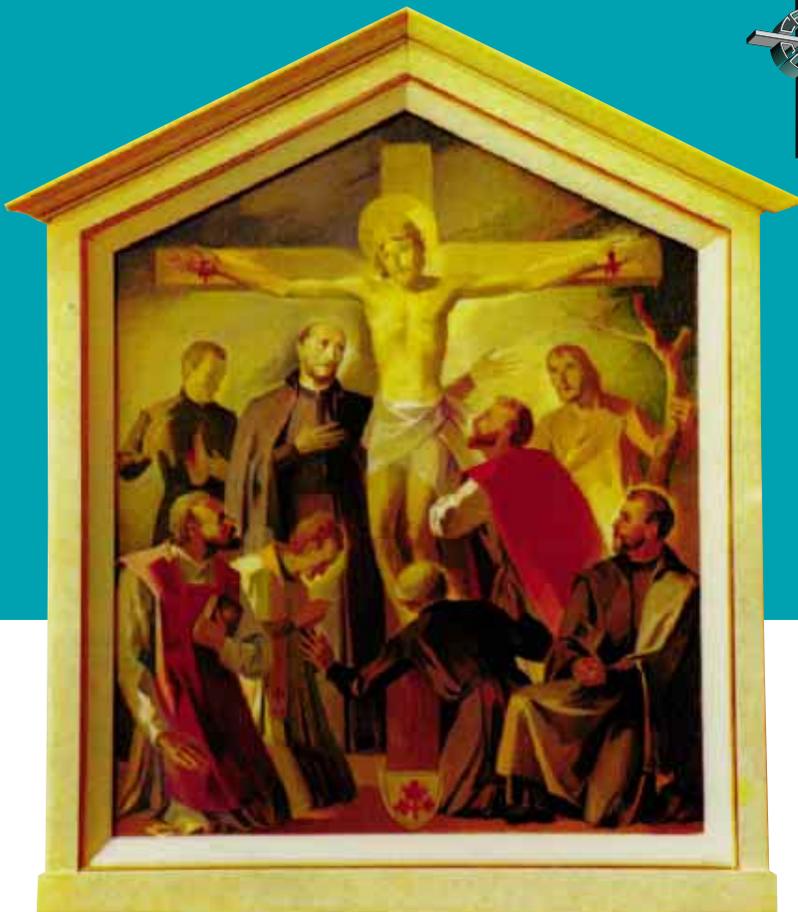




## Pastoral letter by the Permanent Council of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

# Celebrating the 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Canadian Martyrs



Canadian Martyrs. Painting in the Canadian Church in Rome, which is dedicated to the Canadian Martyrs.

**T**he Church this year celebrates the 350th anniversary of the deaths of those whom we refer to today as the Canadian or North American Martyrs (1649-1999). They were Jesuit Fathers Jean de Brébeuf, Antoine Daniel, Gabriel Lalemant, Charles Garnier and Noël Chabanel, who died on what is now Canadian soil in the region of Midland, Ontario; together with Jesuit Father Isaac Jogues and two donnés or lay volunteer workers, René Goupil and Jean de La Lande, who died in what is today the United States, in the region of Auriesville, New York.<sup>1</sup> They are part of that team of “greats” who founded the Church in Canada, which also included Sisters Marie de l’Incarnation, Catherine de Saint-Augustin, Marguerite Bourgeoys and Marguerite d’Youville, Bishop François de Montmorency Laval and the Mohawk ascetic Kateri Tekakwitha.

The 350th anniversary of the Canadian Martyrs draws our attention to an event that inspires and revives Christian fervour. They are for us role models who lived the Gospel ideal to the fullest, leaving a heritage of values that are especially meaningful in our own day.

Beatified in 1925 and then canonized in 1930 by Pius XI, the Canadian Martyrs were proclaimed the secondary patrons of Canada by Pius XII on October 16, 1940 – Saint Joseph remains our country’s primary patron. Commemorated on September 26 in the Canadian liturgical calendar, they are remembered on October 19 in the Church’s universal calendar.

The Gospel is intended “for people of all ages, all conditions, all cultures” (Pope John Paul II). Thus it was, faithful to the Lord’s command to “make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28.19), these eight missionaries became exiles in order to bring the Gospel to the family of Georgian Bay Amerindians and lead them to holiness. In fifteen years (1634-1649), they transformed the Huron villages there, and then what were to become the Quebec villages of Notre-Dame-de-Foy and Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, making them centres of religious fervour comparable to those in the early Church.



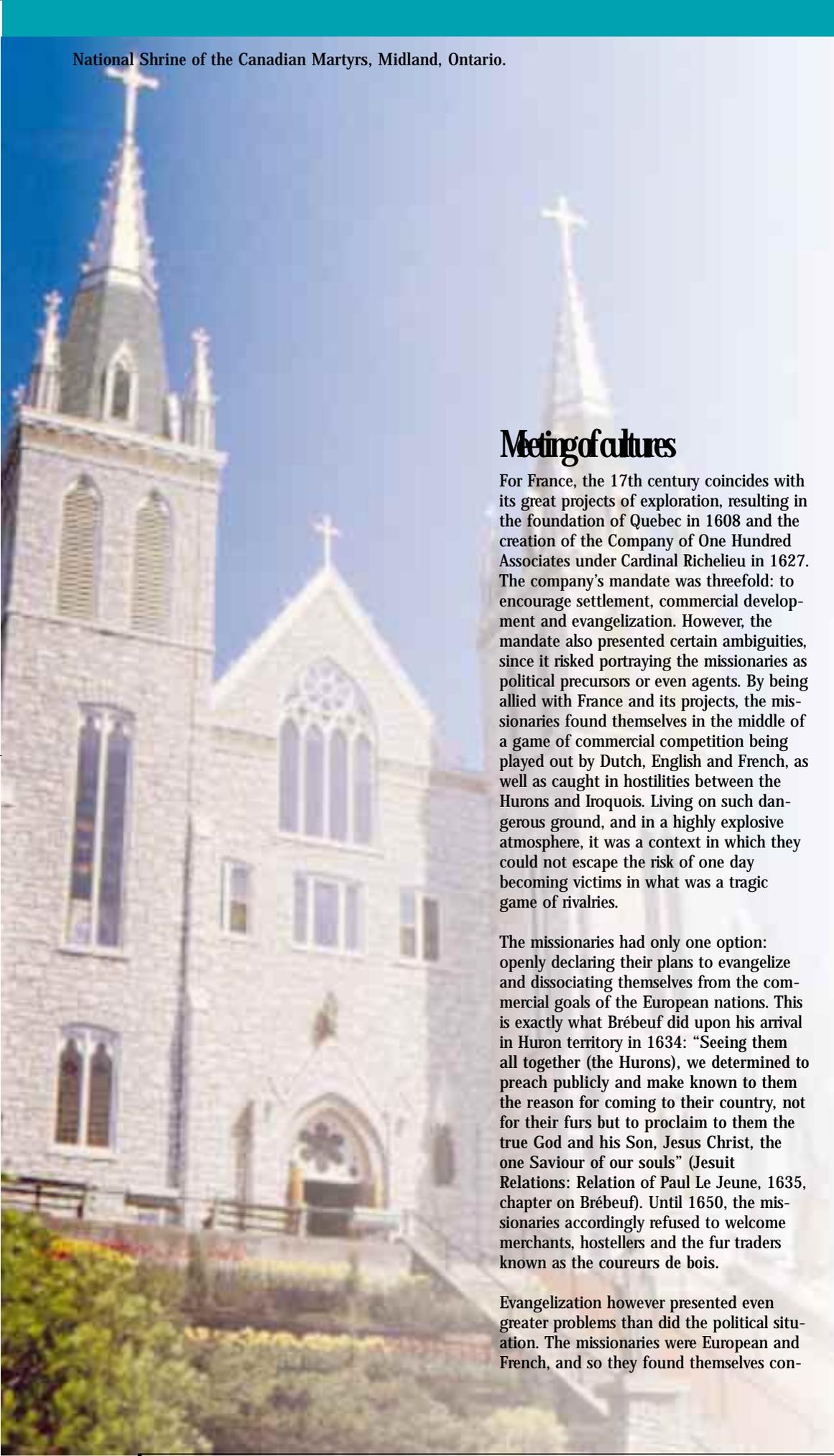
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In preparing for the Year 2000, the individual Churches have their own role to play, as they celebrate with their own Jubilees significant stages in the salvation history of the various peoples. Among these regional or local Jubilees, events of great importance have included . . . the beginning of evangelization in America. . . .

The Church . . . was born of the blood of the martyrs: “Sanguis martyrum - semen christianorum” . . . The persecution of believers - priests, religious and laity - has caused a great sowing of martyrdom in different parts of the world. The witness to Christ borne even to the shedding of blood has become a common inheritance. . . . This witness must not be forgotten.

Pope John Paul II,  
Tertio Millennio Adveniente,  
nn. 25 and 37

<sup>1</sup>The actual dates of the individual martyrdoms were September 29, 1642, René Goupil; October 18, 1646, Isaac Jogues; October 19, 1646, Jean de La Lande; July 4, 1648, Antoine Daniel; March 16, 1649, Jean de Brébeuf; March 17, 1649, Gabriel Lalemant; December 7, 1649, Charles Garnier; December 8, 1649, Noël Chabanel. René Goupil served in the missions of New France as a donné or lay volunteer worker; however, immediately before his martyrdom he took religious vows and so died as a member of the Society of Jesus.



## Meeting of cultures

For France, the 17th century coincides with its great projects of exploration, resulting in the foundation of Quebec in 1608 and the creation of the Company of One Hundred Associates under Cardinal Richelieu in 1627. The company's mandate was threefold: to encourage settlement, commercial development and evangelization. However, the mandate also presented certain ambiguities, since it risked portraying the missionaries as political precursors or even agents. By being allied with France and its projects, the missionaries found themselves in the middle of a game of commercial competition being played out by Dutch, English and French, as well as caught in hostilities between the Hurons and Iroquois. Living on such dangerous ground, and in a highly explosive atmosphere, it was a context in which they could not escape the risk of one day becoming victims in what was a tragic game of rivalries.

The missionaries had only one option: openly declaring their plans to evangelize and dissociating themselves from the commercial goals of the European nations. This is exactly what Brébeuf did upon his arrival in Huron territory in 1634: "Seeing them all together (the Hurons), we determined to preach publicly and make known to them the reason for coming to their country, not for their furs but to proclaim to them the true God and his Son, Jesus Christ, the one Saviour of our souls" (Jesuit Relations: Relation of Paul Le Jeune, 1635, chapter on Brébeuf). Until 1650, the missionaries accordingly refused to welcome merchants, hostellers and the fur traders known as the *coureurs de bois*.

Evangelization however presented even greater problems than did the political situation. The missionaries were European and French, and so they found themselves con-



fronted by a completely new culture. They would have only fifteen years to decipher the Huron language and to unlock what were to them the even more impenetrable mysteries presented by the customs of the land. In order to be perceived as Huron in the eyes of Hurons, they adopted Huron ways of living and eating. They never once tried making the Hurons French. Instead, they created a written language for them which had not existed before – a language with no affinity to European languages and which took the Jesuits no less than six to eight years to learn. They became inculturated long before the term existed.

Their most difficult challenge was trying to understand Amerindian customs. On this front, the missionaries struggled blindly, yet admitted their limitations and mistakes while also correcting their judgements. Each day they came to understand those customs a little more. As indicated by Father Paul Ragueneau, third superior of the mission: "One must be very careful before condemning a thousand things among their customs, which greatly offend minds nurtured and set in another world . . . I have no hesitation in saying that we have been too severe on this point . . . We see that such severity is no longer necessary, and that in many things we can be less rigorous than in the past" (Relation of Paul Ragueneau, 1648-49).

Amazingly, these European missionaries came to such discernment after only fifteen years – which is impressive even in our own time. What is surprising is not that they failed to understand, but all that they understood in so short a time.

## Huron mission

At the beginning of the 17th century, the

# Celebrating the 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Canadian Martyrs



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Jean de Brébeuf

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Noël Chabanel

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Antoine Daniel

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Charles Garnier

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Isaac Jogues

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Gabriel Lalemant

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Jean de La Lande and  
René Goupil

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Society of Jesus was expanding throughout France. The canonization in 1622 of Francis Xavier, the Apostle of the Indies, captured the imagination of young Jesuits and their students. A great missionary frenzy swept through the country. Permeating colleges, filling both souls and sails, it transported hearts and minds to faraway lands and other populations waiting to be evangelized – especially to New France where colonization had just begun. Like a fire so whipped by the wind it was able to jump across the waters, the zeal of young French religious could not be contained.

Thus it was, from 1634 to 1649, about 30 Jesuits, 20 of whom were priests, exiled themselves to preach the Gospel on the shores of Lake Huron. This mission, the largest of all the Jesuit missions in North America, was also one of the most difficult in the history of the Society of Jesus. The missionaries encountered what to them were appalling conditions, including climate, food and shelter. Finding themselves in a country of enormous proportions, they covered distances of many hundred kilometres in fragile bark canoes, through waterfalls and rapids, afflicted by the scourge of mosquitoes, the difficulties of getting fresh supplies and the fatigue of trekking through the wilderness.

At first they experienced the comforting friendship of those they had come to evangelize. Then the missionaries began to encounter growing resistance. Part of the explanation was a series of epidemics for which they were blamed, but there was also the disparity between the Gospel and certain customs of the land. From 1636 to 1641, the mission lived in an atmosphere of distrust, persecution and even death threats. As of 1641, there were only sixty Christians. Brébeuf waited six years before he was able

to baptize one healthy adult. However, with several influential leaders eventually accepting the Gospel, the missionary work was able to move forward, step by step. By 1649, at the time of the last Iroquois offensive against the Hurons, the majority of the Huron nation had become Christian. It should also be noted here that conversion meant a transition to a heroic Christian life. The missionaries were convinced that the Hurons, like any other people, were capable of reaching the heights of humanity attained by saints.

## Supreme expression of love

The missionaries of Huronia could not accept mediocrity. Their sole option was to be heroic or quit – which some did. But the majority of them were driven by a burning zeal. When Jérôme Lalemant, the second superior of Huronia, had just arrived from France, he said the reason there were still so few Christians in Huronia at that time was there had not yet been any martyrs. He was obliged to change his opinion. The truth is the missionaries were full-time martyrs. As he was later to say, most people would have preferred to “be hit suddenly over the head by a hatchet blow than live through years of the life which we must lead here every day” (Relation of Paul Le Jeune, 1639, chapter on Jérôme Lalemant). Living only for Christ, continuously contemplating him, in the end they resembled the Lord.

Their consuming martyrdom involved no less than completely surrendering their lives in the ultimate offering. For too long now Christian martyrdom has been talked about in terms of torture, execution and hatred of the faith, which completely misrepresents what is most profound about it. The Second Vatican Council made an important distinction in this regard.

It taught that martyrs follow in the footsteps of Jesus to the point of making even their death a gift to Christ, thereby attesting that salvation comes from the Lord and the Gospel. As the Constitution on the Church states: Since Jesus, the Son of God, manifested his love by laying down his life for us, no one has greater love than they who lay down their lives for Christ and for their sisters and brothers (see 1 Jn 3.16; Jn 15.13) . . . Martyrdom makes the disciples like their master, who willingly accepted death for the salvation of the world, and through it they are made like him by the shedding of blood. Therefore, the Church considers it the highest gift and the supreme test of love (Lumen Gentium 42).

The Second Vatican Council did not refer to hatred of the faith. Instead, the determining criteria for martyrdom are positive: giving one’s life for Christ and for one’s brothers and sisters out of overwhelming love. It is not the executioner, the persecutor or the historian who declares someone a martyr. It is a decision that the Church makes on the basis of what motivated the martyred person. Thus, we cannot separate the death of the missionaries in Huronia from the meaning it had for them. In dying for us, Jesus is not put to death but chooses to lay down his life for us.

In this light, we see that the missionaries of Huronia are martyrs for two reasons: because of their faith, and above all because they witnessed to the love they had for the Native Peoples for whose sake they gave up their lives, following in the footsteps of Jesus. In proclaiming Christ and the Gospel, they were fully aware they risked death, as they clearly stated on a number of occasions.

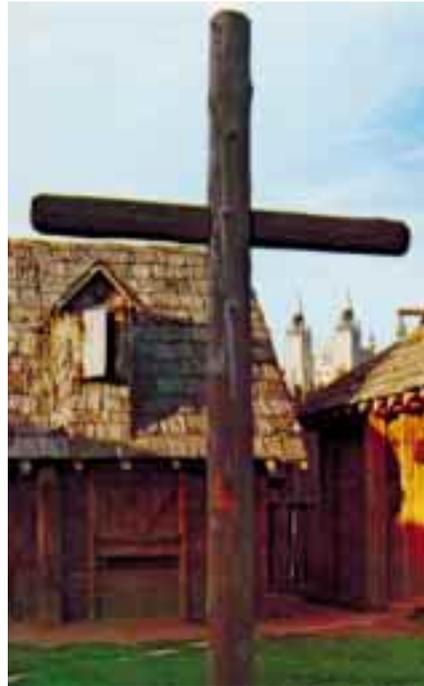
# Celebrating the 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Canadian Martyrs

## Heritage of values

At a time when many Christian values are at odds with our society, the heritage of the Canadian Martyrs is even more evident. Their values can help us all in repairing the spiritual fabric of our Church and society, just as their spirit of self-sacrifice and openness to others challenges each of us. Let us recall a few of the traits at work in their lives. Most importantly, they had an intense devotion to Christ. This was the principle on which they based their entire existence. For them, Christ was a living presence who was always with them – in their travels, ministry, suffering and martyrdom. Like Saint Paul, they had been captured by Christ (Philippians 3.12). For the Hurons, the missionaries were a visible expression of Christ, loving them even to the point of dying for them.

This devotion to Christ explains the zeal that burned more intensely than the fires that eventually consumed them. It was this zeal that inspired Brébeuf to make the following astounding statement: “My God, would that you were better known! Would that this whole Native People have converted itself completely to you! How you are loved! Yes, my God, if all of the torment endured by the captives of this land . . . should fall upon me, I would offer myself to them with all my heart and I alone would suffer them!” (Relation of Paul Ragueneau, 1648-49). It took twenty such missionaries to bring the Gospel to an entire nation and raise its people to the heights of holiness. Do we today have just a little of this same zeal for what is needed in a new evangelization?

It was this zeal that made the Huron missionaries so perceptive in understanding all that inculturation must involve – adopting



The Martyrs' Shrine as seen from the reconstructed mission, Sainte-Marie among the Hurons.

Amerindian ways of living and eating, and using Huron language and symbols in paintings and images for teaching and catechizing.

As well, they were wonderfully generous in their daily relationships with one another. Each would praise other co-workers while refusing any kind of special favour for himself.

Finally, they had an astonishing spirit of prayer. Here we see evidence of a mysterious

inner life filled with divine power and grace. Brébeuf said, “God gave us the day for dealing with our neighbour, and nighttime for conversing with the Lord” (Relation of Paul Ragueneau, 1648-49). Contemplative even in their actions, they saw God present everywhere.

Although the Jesuit mission in Huronia disappeared with the martyrdom of its founders, the dispersal of the Hurons after 1650 resulted in the spreading of the Gospel throughout the region of the Great Lakes and along the Hudson River. Those who had been converted became the core of a Christian presence both among the Iroquois and among aboriginal nations more to the west. Thus through the Huron Christians and the blood of the Jesuit martyrs, the faith was kindled throughout North America.

We thank God for giving the Church in Canada such impressive founders and models. As we begin the new millennium and find ourselves challenged to undertake a new evangelization, we are encouraged by the witness of the Canadian Martyrs and their devotion to Christ, as well as by their courageous zeal and spirit of prayer. Fortunately, their memory is also kept alive in a special way at the Martyrs' Shrine in Midland, Ontario – the scene for a significant part of their mission work and which is located in the general region where five of them actually died. For those of us who can, a pilgrimage there will be an important way of marking this 350th anniversary and rediscovering our spiritual heritage.

Feast of the Triumph of the Cross  
September 14, 1999

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