

October 19: Missionary Martyrs Witness to Faith

Today the Church commemorates six French Jesuit priests and two lay brothers who have come to be known as the “North American Martyrs.” This feast reminds us that the growth of the faith in most parts of the world began with the heroic witness of life by early missionaries—even to the point of giving their lives. These eight missionaries, who had come to North America to teach the Iroquois and Huron peoples about God, were martyred between the years 1642 and 1649 in present-day New York and Canada.

These faith-filled Gospel heralds, in general, were not welcomed by the Native Americans; they were viewed, not as men of God, but as French settlers who had often cheated them and invaded their valued hunting grounds. These missionaries first worked among the Huron tribes, achieving some acceptance as they tried to help them, nursing their sick and showing them new farming skills. They were able to begin teaching the Huron people about Jesus. Father de Brebeuf even wrote a simple catechism in the local language to teach the children. A pivotal problem was the hostilities between the Iroquois and Hurons. As the missionaries befriended the Hurons, the Iroquois viewed them as their enemies.

Over a period of eight years, these brave missionaries were brutally martyred. We know many details about their deaths and their mission experiences among the Native Americans because of the letters and journals they wrote. They were canonized by Pope Pius XI on June 29, 1930. Surely they would have meditated deeply on Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel that the Holy Spirit would accompany them in all their challenging missionary endeavors. We accept that, indeed, we are an *ecclesia martyrum*, a Church of martyrs and witnesses, both in past eras as well as in the present. We thank God for all who bravely—even heroically—witness their faith.