

THE MISSIONS MY MISSION

When I was a young lad of eleven or twelve I came across the story of the North American martyrs of the seventeenth century. The 19th of October is their feast day. Their names were: John de Brebeuf, Isaac Jogues, Anthony Daniel, Gabriel Lalemont, Noel Chabanel, Charles Garnier, Rene Goupil, John de la Lande. Six priests. Two lay associates. Rene Goupil was the first to be martyred in 1642, Charles Garnier the last in 1649. All were martyred in the 1640's in Canada and New York. Many of them were tortured before being murdered. All new that they were putting their lives on the line when they set out to bring the name of Jesus and the teachings of the Catholic faith to the New World. One of the stories that captivated me was when Fr. Isaac Jogues was captured and kept for thirteen months undergoing torture and mutilation. Finally he escaped and the Dutch Trading Company got him onto a ship that headed back to France in 1643.

It was Christmas Day when the poorly clad missionary again set foot on his native soil. The inhabitants of the little fishing village in lower Brittany, where he landed, showed him great hospitality. With the assistance of a kind merchant who offered Father Jogues a horse, the blessed Jesuit was soon on the road to Rennes, where the college of the Society of Jesus was located. Before sunrise on January 5th (1644) he knocked at the door of the college, knowing it to be the hour for the community Mass. He was still dressed in peasant's garb, with a sorry hat perched atop his scarred head. It was very cold. The porter eyed him suspiciously. Jogues merely identified himself as a "poor man" from Canada and asked if he might please speak to the rector. Father Rector had been vesting for Mass. However, he was anxious to receive news from the Fathers in Canada, and fearing that the man might leave if he were asked to wait, he took off his alb and came to the door. He invited the "poor man" into the parlor. It was still dark and they spoke by the light of a single candle. "Is it true that you have come from Canada?" the rector asked. "Yes," the unseemly looking visitor answered. "Do you know Father de Brebeuf?" "Extremely well," he said. "And Father Jogues, did you know Father Isaac Jogues?" "I knew him very well indeed," replied the stranger. "Is he still alive?" questioned the rector, his voice stiffening "Have those barbarians not murdered him?" "He is at liberty," the poor man assured him with a hesitant gasp. "Reverend Father," Jogues burst into tears, "it is he who speaks to you."

The Rector who knew Isaac Jogues well did not recognize the man who stood before him. Jogues was only a shadow of the man who had left on mission a few years before. He later returned to Canada and within a year had been martyred. Whenever he was able he had been sending letters back to Europe and those letters were being published in journals to help provide a sense of what was going on in this new mission territory and how the spreading of the gospel was advancing. I trace part of my own priestly vocation to the story of the bravery and zeal of those eight men.

I never felt called to go to a foreign country to be a missionary. I believed the Lord was calling me to be a missionary right here near where I grew up and was educated. And so that has been my life. From an early age the person of Jesus was very real to me. And I wanted others to

know him the way I know him. That still animates me all these years later. That is my mission and that has been my mission all my life. But this mission of helping others come to know Jesus Christ is not simply the task of the professional religious or the priests. It is for each person who believes to bring others to Christ. Others brought you once upon a time. Now it is your turn and my turn to bring yet others and help them come to know Jesus Christ and him crucified but raised from the dead. It is for us to do what Saint Paul charged Timothy to do, “To proclaim the word, persistently, whether convenient or inconvenient.” Don’t stop. Not as parents. Not as adults. Not as children. Not at home and not in the community. Jesus asks your witness. He asks you to live the truths he has revealed. He asks you to give your example whether as a Godparent or a coach or a next-door neighbor or a co-worker or friend.

God has a plan. It is being worked out right now. He does not need us in order for the plan to be successful but He would like us to participate with him and be of assistance to him. In the process God will slowly draw your heart into greater conformity with his own. You will know happiness and genuine peace of mind. Please ask yourselves this question. Does not our world right now, our culture right now stand in need of some brave and zealous people to stand up for another way of doing things, seeing things, acting towards each other. Can we not be as brave in our day as the North American martyrs were in their day? For if we stand tall we will also be attacked and put to the test. But our world—our world will be brought under the reign of Jesus Christ.

One of our newest saints is John Henry Newman canonized three years ago over in Rome. He had been a member of the Anglican Church but came to believe that the Catholic Church held all the truth that he sought. John Henry Newman was wordsmith and he truly had a way of expressing what lies in the heart of many of us. This quote is from him.

“God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good; I shall do His work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it if I do but keep His commandments. Therefore, I will trust Him, whatever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him, in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him. If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. He does nothing in vain. He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me. Still, He knows what He is about.”

I have my mission. Do you believe that—of yourself? That you have your mission on this earth? Do you feel that truth within you? Today is Mission Sunday. It is a reminder for us.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.