

St. Isaac Jogues

A brief biography written for use by the Notre Dame Vision summer youth program

Saint Isaac Jogues and his companions were some of the first missionaries to the native peoples of North America. Jogues was known as the Apostle to the Mohawks, and, like the original Apostles, this Jesuit priest witnessed to his love for Christ by laying down his life in service to Jesus and his Gospel.

Isaac's first trip to North America lasted seven years. During the first six years, Isaac lived a harsh life of extreme physical poverty and constant danger of capture and torture by the natives. You might think that he would be tempted to complain to God and to his family back home in France about his wretched state. If so, check out the following letter to his mother that he wrote about a year after he left France, on June 5th, 1637. Instead of writing about the sickness that laid him low on his arrival, about the frequent threats on his life made by the enraged savages, about the filth and stink of the cabins he lived in, or about the wretched food and the cold and the long journeys and the grueling hardships that he had to endure, he wrote the following: "[Providence] has granted me the grace of the greatest happiness and peace, a thousand times over...a greater happiness than if I had in my possession all the riches in the world. Here, God makes himself felt with an abundance of consolation. He protects us among the barbarians with so much love, He consoles us with such great tenderness in the little afflictions that we have to endure, that there is not the slightest regret over that which we have given up for him. Nothing can equal, or even approach, the satisfaction that our hearts feel in revealing the knowledge of the true God to these infidels. We have baptized about two hundred and forty of them this year. Among these are some whom I have washed in the

waters of baptism, and who are assuredly in Paradise, since some of them were small babies of one or two years of age. The life of a man, could it be better employed than in this noble work? What am I saying? All the labors of a million persons, would they not be well compensated for by the conversion of one single soul gained for Jesus Christ? I have always had a great love for this kind of life and for this vocation, so grand and so much like that of the Apostles. So that, if I had only to seek for happiness here below, I would make every effort possible before God and man to obtain the favor that I now possess, and I would buy it at the price of a thousand lives. I beg of you, Madame, if these lines fall into your hands, by the bowels of the charity of Jesus Christ, to give thanks to the Savior for this extraordinary favor that He has conferred on me, a favor that so many of the great servants of God, endowed with qualities more noble than mine, desire and crave so ardently." Amidst the cruelest possible conditions, Isaac Jogues experienced a happiness greater than any riches could afford, and considered himself one of the most blessed people on earth!

In the sixth year of Isaac's missionary work, he was captured by the natives, brutally tortured, and subjected to a nightmarish enslavement for thirteen months. He finally escaped and returned to France, where he was received with great honor, was called a living martyr by the Pope, and was granted the unprecedented privilege of saying Mass with mutilated hands; several of Isaac's fingers had been chewed or burned off by the Iroquois. Even after all of the pain and suffering that he experienced at the hands (and teeth!) of the people that he loved so much, Isaac chose to return to North America for a second encounter with the Iroquois. This time, however, he was accompanied by the French military and functioned as a diplomat to negotiate a peace treaty with the natives. Jogues' former captors received him politely, and his

party was able to negotiate peace. Immediately after this diplomatic mission was completed, however, Jogues begged his superiors to send him back to the Iroquois for a third mission. This time, though, he wouldn't have any military protection; he would arrive in the wilderness as vulnerable as he had been the first time around. When he reached the Iroquois territory, they turned on him; they accused him of being a sorcerer, and blamed him for a recent sickness that had recently swept through their tribe. The Iroquois sent out warriors to capture him. Isaac learned of the danger while he still had time to turn around, but continued into hostile territory out of an unconquerable love for the people who had treated him so horrifically before, and out of an indomitable concern for their eternal salvation. On the way, all of his travelling companions deserted him except for one loyal friend, named Lalande. The Iroquois warriors met Isaac Jogues, stripped him naked, slashed him with knives, beat him, and then led him into their village. When entering a cabin on October 18th, 1646 he was struck with a tomahawk, and then decapitated. His body was thrown in the Mohawk River, and his head was perched on a Palisade cliff.

Jogues was surely prepared for this end, for he wrote the following to one of his Jesuit friends back in France shortly before his violent death: "I shall be happy if our Lord will complete the sacrifice where He has begun it, and make the little blood I have shed in that land the earnest of what I would give from every vein of my body and my heart. In a word, this people is 'a bloody spouse' to me (Exodus 4:25). May our good Master, who has purchased them in His blood, open to them the door of His Gospel." Isaac loved the Iroquois people with every drop of blood in his saintly body, and joined Jesus in sacrificing himself for their eternal glory.

AMDG

Saint Isaac Jogues and all the Jesuit missionaries to North America, pray for us!

Especially, please pray that we can endure hardships for the sake of the Gospel with abundant Love, Joy, and Peace, and that we will never be afraid to love the people who need it the most.

Let us lay our lives down without counting the cost. Let us know that "I am always with you,"

and that you, Jesus, will make us happier and more content than we can possibly hope or

imagine!