

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint John de Brébeuf

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: October 19

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IN BRIEF

Saint John de Brébeuf

Jesuit priest from Normandy, missionary to the Hurons in New France, martyred in 1649, one of the North American Martyrs.

Feast day	October 19, September 26 (Canada)
Born	March 25, 1593, Condé-sur-Vire (Normandy, France)
Died	March 16, 1649, Saint-Ignace, in Huron country (present-day Ontario, Canada)
Canonized	June 29, 1930, by Pope Pius XI
Era	17th century
Patron saint of	Canada

In this booklet

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Martyrs' Shrine in Midland, Ontario

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint John de Brébeuf

Saint John de Brébeuf was a Jesuit priest from Normandy who served as a missionary in New France in the seventeenth century. For nearly fifteen years he shared the life of the Huron (Wendat) people, learned their language and described their society with a precision that historians still rely on. Captured during an Iroquois attack, he died under torture on March 16, 1649, near Georgian Bay, in what is now Ontario. Canonized in 1930 with seven companions, he is celebrated on October 19 with the North American Martyrs, and on September 26 in Canada.

Who was Saint John de Brébeuf?

Jean de Brébeuf was born in 1593 into a family of minor Norman nobility, the son of Gilles II de Brébeuf and Marie Le Dragon. The exact place of his birth was long debated. Some early authors said Bayeux, but the archives of the Society of Jesus give Condé-sur-Vire, on March 25, 1593, and a notarial deed of 1679 mentions a chapel built by one of his nephews "at the birthplace" of the priest, in the hamlet of La Boissaye, at Condé-sur-Vire. He was the uncle of the poet Georges de Brébeuf.

He entered the Society of Jesus in 1617. Poor health kept him from completing the full course of theology, but he was ordained a priest in 1622 and became procurator, that is, bursar, of the Jesuit college in Rouen. It was there that he learned he was being sent to Canada. The Hurons, among whom he would spend most of his life, gave him the name "Echon."

Key dates in the life of Saint John de Brébeuf

- **March 25, 1593**: Born, according to Jesuit archives, at Condé-sur-Vire, in Normandy.

- **1617**: Enters the Society of Jesus.
- **1622**: Ordained a priest.
- **June 19, 1625**: Arrives in New France, having sailed from Dieppe in April with Charles Lalemant and Énemond Massé.
- **July 19, 1629**: Forced to return to France after the colony surrenders to the English.
- **March 23, 1633**: Sets out again for Canada, now restored to France.
- **1636**: Writes the *Relation* describing the customs of the Hurons.
- **1640**: Unsuccessful mission to the Neutral nation, north of Lake Erie.
- **1642**: Stays in Quebec, serving the Indigenous people of Sillery.
- **March 16, 1649**: Captured in an Iroquois attack and dies under torture at the village of Saint-Ignace.
- **June 29, 1930**: Canonized by Pope Pius XI with his fellow martyrs.

Living among the peoples of New France

As soon as he arrived in Quebec in 1625, Brébeuf chose not to stay among the colonists. He spent his first winter with a group of Indigenous people, in their shelters, sharing their food and their travels. In the spring he made the long canoe journey to the land of the Hurons, or Wendat, who lived between Lake Simcoe and Georgian Bay. The capture of Quebec by the English forced him to return to France in 1629.

Back in 1633, he was at first refused passage by the Hurons, but finally reached his mission the following year. Then began long years of patient presence, marked by epidemics and mistrust, since the missionaries were sometimes accused of bringing the diseases. In 1640 he tried without success to evangelize the Neutral nation. In 1642 he was recalled to Quebec, where he cared for the Indigenous people of Sillery, before setting out again for Huron country at the height of the war between the Hurons and the Iroquois.



Sainte-Marie among the Hurons, the reconstructed Jesuit mission near Midland.

A witness to Huron culture

Brébeuf was not only a missionary: he was also a careful observer and a linguist. He composed a dictionary, a grammar and a catechism in the Huron language, as well as letters and a spiritual journal, part of which is lost. His *Relation* of 1636, which describes the social, political and religious life of the Hurons, remains a first-rate source. The historian René Latourelle considers him, along with Champlain and Sagard, the most important witness of this period of contact.

He is also credited with Canada's oldest Christmas carol, *Jesous Ahatonhia*, written in the Wendat language. This hymn, which sets the Nativity in the world of the Hurons, is still sung in Canada today. English speakers know it as the "Huron Carol."

How did Saint John de Brébeuf die?

On March 16, 1649, an Iroquois war party attacked the Huron villages where the missionaries were living. Brébeuf refused to flee and stayed with the faithful. Captured, he was taken to the village of Saint-Ignace with a young fellow Jesuit, Father Gabriel Lalemant. There he suffered tortures of great cruelty: beatings, boiling water poured over his head in mockery of baptism, a collar of red-hot hatchets, burns. He died the same day; Lalemant died the next.

According to the testimonies gathered by the Jesuits, he endured these torments without a complaint. Accounts of the time add that his executioners then tore out his heart and ate it, a gesture by which they meant to take on the courage of an enemy who had not been broken by suffering. In 1954, excavations at the site of Sainte-Marie among the Hurons uncovered a lead plaque bearing the inscription: "Père Jean de Brebeuf bruslé par les Iroquois le 17 de mars l'an 1649" (Father Jean de Brébeuf, burned by the Iroquois, March 17, 1649).

With him the Church honors seven other martyrs, Jesuits or lay assistants, killed between 1642 and 1649: Isaac Jogues, René Goupil, Jean de Lalande, Antoine Daniel, Gabriel Lalemant, Charles Garnier and Noël Chabanel. All were canonized together by Pius XI on June 29, 1930. They are known in English as the North American Martyrs, or the Canadian Martyrs.



The Martyrs' Shrine in Midland, Ontario.

Why is Saint John de Brébeuf a patron saint of Canada?

Brébeuf and his companions gave their lives on what is now Canadian soil, and their witness lies at the origins of the Catholic Church in the country. For this reason the Canadian Martyrs are honored as patrons of Canada. Yet his holiness lies first of all in endurance: fifteen years far from home, learning a difficult language and living by customs that were not his own, with no quick success. He embodies a mission based on closeness and respect for another culture, within the limits of his time. His cult also touched very different souls: Blessed Marie-Catherine de Saint-Augustin, a hospital nun in Quebec who had never met him, considered him her spiritual guide. Catholics pray to him for missionaries, for those who must learn to live within another culture and for faithfulness in times of trial.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint John de Brébeuf and the novena to Saint John de Brébeuf, prayed from October 10 to 18.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint John de Brébeuf in art

- **The black Jesuit cassock**, often with a crucifix in his hand.
- **The palm of martyrdom**, shared with his companions in images of the Canadian Martyrs.
- **The North American setting**: canoes, forests, longhouses, or Indigenous figures beside him.



A statue of Saint John de Brébeuf.

Where to pray to Saint John de Brébeuf

- **Midland** (Ontario): the Martyrs' Shrine, which keeps his relics, across from the site of Sainte-Marie among the Hurons.

- **Quebec City**: the Centre Catherine-de-Saint-Augustin, where a reliquary bust made by Charles de Poilly holds part of his skull, and the Basilica-Cathedral of Notre-Dame, which keeps small relics of the Canadian saints.
- **Quebec City**: the Cartier-Brébeuf National Historic Site, on the Saint-Charles River, where the first Jesuits settled.
- **Condé-sur-Vire** (Normandy, France): his native land.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint John de Brébeuf for Missionaries

There is no ancient prayer to Saint John de Brébeuf in universal use. His spiritual legacy lives above all in his writings, including his journal and letters, and in the Christmas carol in the Wendat language attributed to him, *Jesous Ahatonhia*, still sung in Canada and known in English as the "Huron Carol." Below you will find an original prayer inspired by his life as a missionary and martyr.

A legacy to reflect on

To announce the birth of Christ to the Hurons, Brébeuf did not simply translate words: he looked for images that spoke to his listeners. The carol *Jesous Ahatonhia* ("Jesus, he is born") sets the manger in the world of the peoples of the Great Lakes. To pray with Saint John de Brébeuf is to ask for the same attention to others, the patience that learns their language before speaking to them about God.

Prayer to Saint John de Brébeuf

Saint John de Brébeuf, you left your native Normandy to carry the Gospel across the ocean. Teach me to step out of my habits and my comfort and to go toward those whom God places on my path.

For years you shared the life, the language and the seasons of the Huron people. Give me respect for those who do not think, speak or live as I do. May I learn to listen before I speak.

When danger came, you stayed with your people rather than flee. Obtain for me faithfulness in times of trial, and the courage not to abandon those who count on me.

With Saint Isaac Jogues, Saint Gabriel Lalemant and all the North American Martyrs, pray for today's missionaries, for Indigenous peoples and for the Church in Canada and the United States. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

May Christ, for whom you gave your life, be my strength and my peace. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint John de Brébeuf is celebrated on October 19 with Saint Isaac Jogues and their companions in the Roman calendar, and on September 26 in Canada. The Roman Martyrology also mentions him on March 16, the day of his death. You can turn to him:

- for missionaries and for those preparing to serve abroad;
- when you must learn a new language or settle in a new culture;
- for reconciliation with Indigenous peoples;
- when you are tempted to give up in the face of difficulty.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint John de Brébeuf, and read the life of Saint John de Brébeuf.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint John de Brébeuf

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint John de Brébeuf. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast on October 19, begin on October 10; it then ends on October 18. In Canada, where he is celebrated on September 26, you can begin it on September 17.

This novena is especially fitting for missionaries and their families, for those who are moving to another country or learning a new language, and for anyone who feels that their work bears little visible fruit. It can also be prayed as a pilgrimage preparation before a visit to the Martyrs' Shrine in Midland, Ontario, or to the National Shrine of the North American Martyrs in Auriesville, New York, where Isaac Jogues and two of his companions died.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, then say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father. The small act suggested for each day helps carry the prayer into daily life. You may also pray it together with the companions of Saint John de Brébeuf, the North American Martyrs, asking their intercession for the Church in Canada and the United States.

Day 1: Answering the call

As bursar of the college in Rouen, John de Brébeuf could have led a quiet life. Yet he agreed to be sent to the far end of the known world. God's call often upsets our plans, and it is in saying yes that we discover what he has prepared.

Prayer: Lord, make me available for what you expect of me, even when it surprises me.

Today: Take a moment of silence to ask where God is calling you today.

Day 2: Weakness offered

Because of poor health, Brébeuf could not complete all his studies. Yet God made use of him. Our limits are no obstacle for those who trust, and God's strength is made perfect in weakness.

Prayer: Lord, I offer you my weaknesses. Make them the place of your strength.

Today: Accept peacefully a limitation you would rather hide.

Day 3: Sharing the life of others

From his first winter in Canada, he lived in the shelters of Indigenous people and shared their food. He did not preach from a distance: he drew near, accepting the cold, the smoke of the lodges and the hardships of the journey. This is the way of the Incarnation, God coming to live among us.

Prayer: Jesus, you took on our human condition. Teach me to draw near to those around me.

Today: Spend unhurried time with someone who is alone.

Day 4: Learning the other's language

Brébeuf composed a dictionary and a grammar of the Huron language. To understand a people's language is to begin to love them. Before speaking of God, he listened, and he wanted the faith to be heard in words that his hearers could make their own.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, give me the right words to speak of you to those around me.

Today: Truly listen to someone, without preparing your answer.

Day 5: The patience of the sower

For years conversions were rare, epidemics struck and mistrust grew. Brébeuf persevered without seeing the fruit of his labor. The seed grows in secret, in God's time.

Prayer: Lord, keep me from discouragement when my efforts seem useless.

Today: Faithfully take up again a task you had abandoned.

Day 6: Proclaiming Christmas

In the carol *Jesous Ahatonhia*, the Huron Carol attributed to him, the birth of Christ is sung with the images of the Huron world. The joy of Christmas is for every people, in every language.

Prayer: Child of Bethlehem, make me a joyful messenger of your coming.

Today: Share a word of hope with someone, or listen to the Huron Carol.

Day 7: Staying in the hour of danger

On March 16, 1649, instead of fleeing the Iroquois attack, he stayed with his faithful. The good shepherd does not abandon his flock, even when it costs him everything.

Prayer: Lord, help me not to run from my responsibilities when they become heavy.

Today: Keep a difficult commitment you would be tempted to avoid.

Day 8: Courage in suffering

Tortured at Saint-Ignace, he endured his sufferings, according to witnesses, without a complaint. His strength did not come from himself but from the One he served, who also suffered for us.

Prayer: Christ crucified, sustain all who suffer in body or in heart.

Today: Pray for Christians who are persecuted today.

Day 9: The communion of martyrs

Brébeuf was not alone: Isaac Jogues, Gabriel Lalemant, Antoine Daniel and their companions gave their lives for the same mission. The Church honors them together, in Canada and in the United States.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint John de Brébeuf and the North American Martyrs, grant me what is good for my salvation. Amen.

Today: Pray for the Indigenous peoples of North America and for reconciliation.

Closing prayer

Saint John de Brébeuf, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have presented. You loved a people to the point of giving your life. Teach me to love without holding back and to remain faithful in trial. Pray for missionaries and for the Church in North America. Amen.

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be.

To go further: the life of Saint John de Brébeuf and the prayer to Saint John de Brébeuf.

PILGRIMAGE

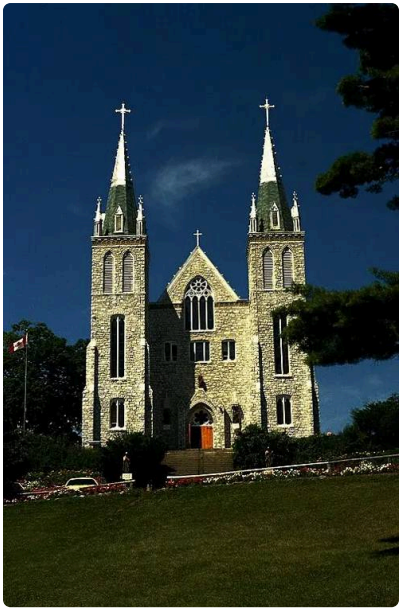
Martyrs' Shrine in Midland, Ontario

The Martyrs' Shrine in Midland, Ontario, is the main pilgrimage site dedicated to Saint John de Brébeuf and his companions. Built on a hill overlooking Georgian Bay, it holds relics of the saint and faces Sainte-Marie among the Hurons, the Jesuit mission where he lived and where his remains were first gathered.

In the heart of old Huronia

In the 17th century, the region between Lake Simcoe and Georgian Bay was the country of the Hurons, or Wendat. The Jesuits had established a central mission there, Sainte-Marie, from which the missionaries set out for the villages. It was in this territory that Jean de Brébeuf and Gabriel Lalemant were martyred in March 1649, at the village of Saint-Ignace. In 1954, excavations at the Sainte-Marie site uncovered a lead plate engraved with the name of Father de Brébeuf, direct evidence of his burial in this place.

The shrine, dedicated to the eight Canadian Martyrs canonized in 1930, was built in the 20th century very near this site. It has become a national pilgrimage destination, visited among others by Pope John Paul II in 1984.



The Martyrs' Shrine in Midland.

Visiting the shrine

The church houses a reliquary containing relics of Saint John de Brébeuf. Outside, a statue of the saint and a vast property make it possible to pray while walking. Below, across the road, the mission of Sainte-Marie among the Hurons has been reconstructed and can be visited as a historic site: you see the wooden buildings, the chapel, and the setting in which the missionaries and their Wendat hosts lived. The two visits complement each other well.

Praying on site

Before you come, you may read the life of Saint John de Brébeuf. Before his relics, you can entrust an intention for missionaries, for Indigenous peoples, and for reconciliation, then say the prayer to Saint John de Brébeuf. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint John de Brébeuf

- **Quebec City**: the Catherine-de-Saint-Augustin Center, where a reliquary bust made by Charles de Poilly holds part of his skull.
- **Quebec City**: the Notre-Dame Basilica-Cathedral, whose reliquary gathers small relics of the Canadian saints and blesseds.
- **Quebec City**: the Cartier-Brébeuf National Historic Site, on the banks of the Saint-Charles River, where in 1625 he chose the site of the first Jesuit residence.
- **Condé-sur-Vire** (Normandy): his native land, where a nephew had a chapel built in his honor in the 17th century.

Practical information

The shrine is in Midland, in Simcoe County, about a two-hour drive north of Toronto. It is mostly open in the warmer months, and Mass and visiting times vary by month: consult the shrine's official website before traveling. The Sainte-Marie among the Hurons site has its own hours and admission conditions, to be checked separately.

CREDITS

Credits and sources

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