

SEPTEMBER 26 2025 FATHER MICHAEL COUTTS

Today, we celebrate the Feast of the Canadian Martyrs. We call them Canadian Martyrs because the martyrs' shrine is here in Canada, in Midland, Ontario. But, strictly speaking, we should call them the North American Martyrs, because three of them—Isaac Jogues, Jean de Lalande, and Rene Goupil—were murdered or killed in Auriesville, New York.

Rene Goupil was a lay person who had some knowledge of medicine. And so, most of our infirmaries, like the one we have here at Pickering itself, are named after Rene Goupil. Unfortunately, we have to close this house down because of the high cost of maintaining this infirmary. But let's get back to our martyrs.

Obviously, I can't tell you of all eight of them, but let me speak about just a few.

The day was the 5th of August. It was Saturday. It was 1634. Young Jean de Brébeuf, 30 years old, came down from Quebec in a canoe manned by the Wendat Indians, whom we more commonly know as Huron Indians. And therefore, we have Huronia and Lake Huron as a result of that.

He came down first through the St. Lawrence River, then the French River, and into Nottawasaga Bay. When he came there, the Wendat simply left him on the shore, because they had been away for months and wanted to be back with their families, with their parents, with their wives, with their children. And here Jean de Brébeuf was left with seven huge pieces of luggage. Most of them had to do with an altar to be erected to celebrate Mass

When I worked at the martyrs' shrine over 10 seasons from 1974 to 1998, I would take groups to the different places where Jean de Brébeuf was killed, or Charles Garnier, Antoine Daniel, and Noel Chabanel. When we went to these places, I would just stand there and allow the pilgrims to soak in the faith of these martyrs.

As I stood at the Nottawasaga Beach and pictured Jean de Brébeuf there, left alone, no food, no shelter, I thought to myself, "If I was there, I'd have just sat down and cried and said, 'Mommy, where are you?'" But Jean de Brébeuf was made of stronger stuff. He knelt down and he thanked God for bringing him to this faraway country from France in order to proclaim the good news of the Gospel.

He would work over a period of 25 years, going back and forth depending on the skirmishes between the British and the French. He'd go back to Quebec, back to France, come back to Quebec, and finally settle down in Midland, at the place where the shrine now stands. He was so good at learning the language that he could speak Wendat. Not only that, he even composed a carol which we know as the Huron Carol which we sing every Christmas. It is such a beautiful, haunting melody that speaks about the child born in Bethlehem.

The Wendat gave him an Indian name—Echon. Echon was a man who was tall and strong and carried a big load. But it also meant a tree, like an oak tree, strong and firm and standing for the faith.

Finally, he and Gabriel Lalemant died in 1649, very close to where the martyrs' shrine is today, not ten miles away. They

suffered great torture. They died, but even in their torture and death, they were revered.

The next person I'd like to speak about—there were two actually, both in their 30s. One was born 2,000 years ago, called Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus came to Galilee to proclaim the good news, just as Charles Garnier proclaimed the good news in Huronia.

The difference was that when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, he said, “Father, let this chalice pass me by, but not my will, but your will be done.” And the Father wanted him to drink of the chalice. Charles Garnier, on the other hand, had the opposite experience.

He came from a well-to-do family in France. His grandfather was a martyr, caught and hanged for treason because of his Catholic faith. Charles Garnier's father was a generous man. In fact, he had three sons who were priests, and he would gladly have allowed Charles to be a priest also—but not in Huronia.

Charles, however, wanted to drink of that cup. So he came here. He was a nondescript type of person, very laid-back, and he was greatly loved.

Jesus moved all over Galilee when he was preaching. Charles Garnier remained in one place for 14 long years. Very much like our parents and grandparents, they do things that will never make the headlines in the **Toronto Star** or **Maclean's** magazine, but they are there to hand down the faith.

Charles Garnier loved his people so much. They were farmers, and he realized they depended on their crops. Whenever there was a lack of rain, he would pray, and surprisingly, enough rain would fall. They gave him a name: Ouracha, which means “Rainmaker.”

Charles Garnier and Jean de Brébeuf, together with the others, all gave up their lives because they believed, as Jesus said in the Gospel: “If you want to be my disciples, you pick up your cross and follow me.”

And so, all these eight men were there because they wanted to carry the cross. They did not impress people by the words they said or even by their actions, but because of their great devotion to Jesus. And that is what they challenge you and me to do.

We are not called to blaze a trail all over the earth. We are just one person in the whole world. But we might be the whole world to just one person—and that is all we are called to.