

## From Fr. Christopher Ankley

Dear Friends,

St. Isaac Jogues was a French Jesuit who lived in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He was a missionary priest to the Native Americans living in what is now upstate New York and Canada. Isaac ministered mainly to the Algonquin and Huron tribes. He learned their language and their customs, enculturating Catholicism into their way of life. His missionary work and that of all the Jesuits, however, was not well received by the Iroquois tribe, sworn enemy of both the Algonquins and Hurons. Any captured Native American Christians were quickly killed by the Iroquois.

After a number of years of missionary work Isaac was eventually captured by the Iroquois, who knew he was a priest by the way he dressed. He was a black robe as all priests were called, because of the telltale black cassock he wore. Isaac was not treated well, many of the Christians captured with him were quickly martyred. Isaac on the other hand was kept for sport and torture. He was beaten with clubs, burnt with hot irons, had all his fingernails and hair pluck out, beard included, fingers were gnawed off. Index fingers and thumbs of both hands were removed. The Iroquois knew that without these fingers a priest wouldn't be able to celebrate Mass. Isaac was a prisoner for several months; sometimes he'd be severely beaten, and then left alone to heal. Other times he'd be confined without any harsh treatment. He never knew what was going to happen.

Eventually the tribe that kept him prisoner met up with a Dutch trader who helped Isaac escape to New Amsterdam (New York City). They say Isaac was the first Catholic priest to set foot on Manhattan Island. Isaac eventually made his way back to France where he recuperated. Once healed, however, he sought permission to return to North America. Permission was given, the pope even gave permission for him to celebrate Mass even with the missing fingers. So off he went, back to Canada. He was soon captured again this time, however, he was quickly martyred. He died in Auriesville which is about 40 miles north of Albany New York. Isaac Jogues is a saint because he took missionary work seriously he took seriously the words of our Lord in Matthew's gospel. At the end of that gospel Jesus says, **"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."** Isaac Jogues gave his life in order to bring the gift of baptism to the New World.

Even as a prisoner Isaac Jogues continued to evangelize and baptize, although in secret. So when someone was ready for baptism it was done very creatively. During his forced marches if they crossed a river, he'd quickly baptize as they made their way through the water. With the candidate walking next to him he'd quickly pour water over him three times, hoping no one would see. Or if confined he'd use a cup of water that he had been given for drinking. Or sometimes he'd have to wring water out of a rag for baptism.

Isaac knew the great gift that baptism is, to become a child of God, to be unconditionally loved by God, and to be able to call him Father, this is the greatest gift we can ever receive. And hands down the most important day of every person's life is the day of his or her baptism. We are more changed by baptism than by any other experience in our life. Baptism is not just a simple rite of passage, it's not just a chance to get the family

together and have a party. By baptism we are grafted onto Christ. All sin is forgiven, both original and personal. We are enabled to participate in the very life and love of God. Sanctifying grace is infused into our souls and we become temples of the Holy Spirit more beautiful to God than any Cathedral.

Of all that baptism confers upon us, perhaps the most remarkable thing is that it makes us "adoptive sons and daughters of God." The only reason why we can pray the Lord's Prayer, addressing God on such familiar terms as **"Our Father,"** is because of our baptism. Through Christ's death and resurrection, we are made by adoption what Christ is by nature: children of the heavenly Father. In John's gospel we hear Jesus say that he is ascending to **"My father and your father"** (John 20:17), a statement that would have been impossible for anyone to make before Jesus came along. If we really reflect on what it means to be the beloved children of the creator of the universe, we can't help but to be in awe. Spend some time this week thinking about this, thinking about what it means to be the beloved child of the Creator of the universe.

At the end of today's Gospel we hear that after John baptized Jesus, the heavens opened up, and Jesus **"Saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, saying, 'This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.'"** All that Jesus would do and accomplish after this beginning of his public ministry, in particular in his death and resurrection, would make it possible for these very same words to be spoken by God the Father to us. If we are baptized, then God truly looks at us saying, **"You are my beloved child."**

Not long ago Pope Francis spoke of baptism saying that this sacrament is an act that profoundly touches our existence. "With baptism we become immersed in that inexhaustible source of life who is Jesus; and thanks to His life and love we can live a new life, no longer at the mercy of evil, of sin, and death, but in the communion with God and with our brothers." The pope then asked everyone present to search for the date of their Baptism, to know the date of their birth into the life of Christ and his Church. This is not just a date in the past, he said, but a gift that will always affect us. **"We must awaken the memory of our Baptism and all that it means!"** So many missionaries throughout the centuries were willing to die to make this gift available.

We know the date when we were born into time, we should also know the date when the eternal entered into our soul and we began our journey towards Heaven. Do we know the date of our baptism; do we know the most important date of our life?

Let us be great Saints,

Fr. Christopher J. Ankley