

KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS

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# COLUMBIA



# ON HOLY GROUND

*Historic Jesuit martyrs' shrine receives support from Order to continue its legacy as a place of pilgrimage and witness*

by Mary DeTurris Poust

As you walk the grounds of the Shrine of Our Lady of Martyrs in Auriesville, N.Y., the saints who lived and died there speak through a holy silence that permeates this sacred place — even when it's bustling with activity. From the hauntingly spiritual experience of hiking the ravine in the footsteps of martyred Jesuit missionaries to the three towering red crosses that mark the entrance to the main grounds in memory of those who died for the faith, the shrine is a living piece of Catholic history in North America.

Established in 1885 on 400 acres of land, what was once the Mohawk village known as Ossernenon, the shrine has long been a favorite pilgrim destination for Catholics in New York and beyond. Not only is it the place where three Jesuit saints — Father Isaac Jogues, surgeon René Goupil and lay missionary John LaLande — were killed by members of the Mohawk Iroquois tribe for preaching the Gospel, but it is also the birthplace of Kateri Tekakwitha, the first Native American to be canonized.

In recognition of the shrine's pivotal role in commemorating the roots of the Church in America and in honor of Pope Francis, the first Jesuit pontiff, the Knights of Columbus recently donated a combined \$600,000 to restore and renovate the shrine so that it can continue to inspire pilgrims for years to come.

On June 13, K of C leaders from the Supreme Council and New York State Council joined other pilgrims for a Mass of Thanksgiving in the shrine's famous Coliseum Church.

"Places like Auriesville are spiritual heritage sites. They are holy places where people changed the spiritual future of our nation," said Supreme Knight Carl A. Anderson in remarks following the Mass, which was celebrated by Jesuit Father George Belgarde, shrine director. "Here, the New World was made truly 'new' because the Gospel message was proclaimed: sometimes by preaching, other times by living, and in the end by dying."

Calling the early Jesuits "champions of the first evangelization," the supreme knight added that the North American martyrs "reach across time" to energize Catholics in the mission of the "new evangelization" today.



## THE JESUIT LEGACY

New France in the 17th century was a land filled with both promise and danger for European missionaries such as the Jesuits and their lay companions. On fire with the love of Christ, these young men gave up everything they knew to share the Gospel with the native people.

While based in Québec, the French Jesuits preached and worked among the Huron tribes throughout the region.

In 1642, members of the Mohawk tribe captured Jesuit Father Isaac Jogues and René Goupil, who accompanied Father Jogues as a surgeon and later took vows as a Jesuit brother. The men were brought to Auriesville, where they were tortured and treated as slaves. Undeterred, Father Jogues and Goupil continued to preach the Gospel and teach the Native Americans about Jesus. When Goupil was seen making the sign of the cross over a young boy, his fate was sealed. Upon



*Above: Crosses representing the martyrdom of three Jesuit missionaries — Sts. René Goupil, Isaac Jogues and John LaLande — mark the entrance to the Shrine of Our Lady of Martyrs in Auriesville, N.Y. • Left: Jesuit Father George Belgarde (center) receives checks totaling \$600,000 from Supreme Knight Carl A. Anderson and Immediate Past State Deputy Carmine V. Musumeci of New York. Also pictured are Father Brian E. McWeeney, Supreme Director Arthur J. Harris and current State Deputy Robert D. Weitzman.*

returning from praying the rosary on Sept. 29, he was clubbed to death with a tomahawk and thrown into a ravine.

Walking the path through the ravine today, pilgrims can learn what happened next by reading a series of signboards posted with excerpts from St. Isaac Jogues' diary: "I could not hold back my tears. I lifted up the body and, with the Algonquin Indian's help, lowered it into the stream. I weighted it down with large stones to hide it from view. I intended to bury René the next day..."

After a storm swelled the creek and carried off his friend's lifeless body, Father Jogues recovered Goupil's skull and a few bones, burying them in an unmarked grave. Today, the entire ravine area of the shrine is considered a reliquary and burial ground.

Father Jogues, who had already lost several fingers during earlier torture, continued to endure unthinkable conditions, all the while carving crosses and the name of Jesus into trees, a practice that is memorialized at the shrine today on trees throughout the grounds.

"How often on the stately trees of Ossernenon did I carve the most sacred name of Jesus so that seeing it the demons might take to flight, and hearing it they might tremble with fear," Father Jogues wrote.

The Jesuit priest eventually escaped and traveled back to France, but he returned to Ossernenon as a peace ambassador in 1646. When negotiations broke-down, he was martyred on Oct.

18 of that year. His companion, Jesuit lay missionary John LaLande, was killed the next day. Their bodies were never recovered.

Father Jogues, Goupil and LaLande, together with five other Jesuit missionaries martyred in Canada in 1648 and 1649, became known as the eight North American Martyrs. Canonized as a group in 1930, their feast day is celebrated Sept. 26 (Canada) and Oct. 29 (United States).

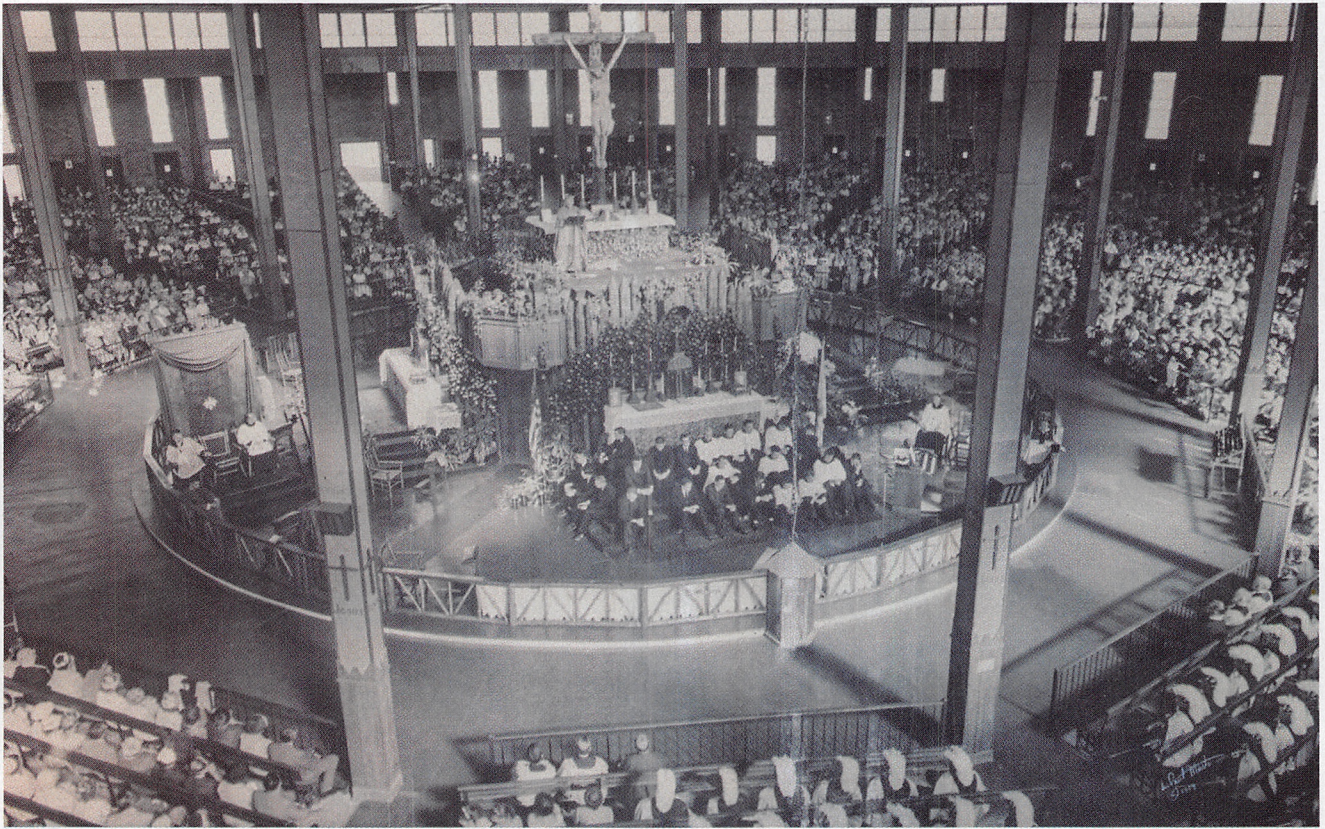
#### SANCTIFYING AMERICAN SOIL

As history has so often shown, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church, to quote Tertullian's famous phrase from the turn of the third century. This is certainly true of the advent of Catholicism in the United States and Canada, which began as a direct result of the martyrs' intrepid witness to the faith given on the land where the Shrine of Our Lady of Martyrs now stands.

"It is a very significant place from the viewpoint of spreading the faith. They shed their blood here and, because of that, this is sacred ground," explained Jesuit Father Belgarde, who served at the shrine in the 1960s and returned in 2011 to become director.

The Jesuit priest noted that the first chapel built on the shrine property in 1884 is still in use today.

"You can tell when you walk onto the grounds that there's something unique about it," he said. "The Holy Spirit guides the shrine, not the Jesuits. We cooperate with the Holy Spirit."



*Clockwise, from top: Pilgrims are pictured in the 10,000-seat Coliseum Church during a Mass celebrated by Cardinal Richard J. Cushing, then-archbishop of Boston, in 1959. • Knights gather for Mass in the Coliseum Church June 13, 2015. • Supreme Knight Anderson and his wife, Dorian, pause while visiting the ravine where Jesuit missionaries were martyred. • The Coliseum Church is seen from overhead.*



The feeling of gratitude and awe for the sacrifices made by the saints of Auriesville has spread far beyond the confines of the shrine itself. Albany Bishop Edward B. Scharfenberger, whose diocese encompasses Our Lady of Martyrs Shrine, calls the North American martyrs “transcultural and countercultural heroes.”

“Their journeys, rather than of conquest or commerce, were repeated pilgrimages of self-sacrifice, in which they emptied themselves of all the comforts and securities one ordinarily associates with home and the good life,” said the bishop.

The same can be said of St. Kateri Tekakwitha, who was baptized in nearby Fonda, N.Y. (see sidebar). Kateri, Bishop Scharfenberger explained, recognized that the missionaries stood out from others in the culture — both the Europeans’ and her own.

“In a stunning way, the Blackrobes, as they were called, and Kateri magnify the courage and purity of each other’s Christian witness,” he said, noting that Kateri was drawn to Christ through the martyrs’ witness. In turn, through her own courage in the face of persecution, St. Kateri drew others to Christ as well.

“In this encounter of two diverse cultures in need of purification and redemption, the personal presence of souls open to the power of the Cross bridged what oceans of fear and cultural pride separated, and forged a holy union which sanctified our American soil,” said Bishop Scharfenberger. “We are all blessed for their sacrifice.”

In the 130 years since the Shrine of Our Lady of Martyrs was established, its spiritual and natural beauty has remained constant, but its physical structures have gradually fallen into disrepair. Faced with the prospect of closing the shrine due to lack of funding, the shrine leadership launched a capital campaign in 2014 toward major repairs and renovations.

The first projects have included electrical work in the Coliseum Church, repairs to the two-ton rooftop cross and the replacement of 200 windows dating back to the 19th century. Additional renovations will include repairs to the St. Kateri Chapel, the Coliseum’s cracked walls and structures in the ravine.

The Supreme Council’s donation of \$500,000 and the New York State Council’s donation of \$100,000 have helped to secure the immediate future of the shrine — allowing a new generation of visitors to commemorate the missionary spirit of the North American martyrs.

“Pope Francis reminds us that ‘every Christian is a missionary’ and that all of us are called to be ‘missionary disciples,’” Supreme Knight Anderson said. “If we answer this call, then the most enduring shrine to the martyrs of this place will not be made of bricks and timber. It will be those pilgrims who leave this place renewed with a spirit of missionary discipleship.” ♦

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## LILY OF THE MOHAWKS

Less than a decade after Father Isaac Jogues, René Goupil and John LaLande were martyred, Kateri Tekakwitha was born in Auriesville, N.Y., in 1656. The daughter of a Mohawk chief and a Catholic-Algonquin captive, Kateri lost her parents and brother to smallpox and suffered lasting scars and vision problems from the disease. Her name even bears witness to her afflictions: Tekakwitha means “she who bumps into things.”

Although Kateri’s uncle, who adopted her after the death of her parents, was opposed to Christianity, Kateri secretly started learning about the Catholic faith. She was later baptized five miles away in the town of Fonda and eventually fled to St. Francis Xavier Mission near Montreal to escape persecution. She died at age 24 on April 17, 1680.

Canonized Oct. 21, 2012, St. Kateri Tekakwitha is the first Native American saint and is known as the patron of ecology and the environment. At her canonization, Pope Benedict XVI said, “Her greatest wish was to know and to do what pleased God. She lived a life radiant with faith and purity.”

Since 1938, a shrine in Fonda has paid tribute to the site where Kateri was baptized. And although she lived only the early part of her life on the grounds of what is now the Auriesville shrine, Kateri’s presence there is palpable. On the day of her canonization in Rome, 8,000 pilgrims packed the Coliseum Church for a simultaneous liturgical celebration. ♦

Above: A statue of St. Kateri Tekakwitha stands amid trees on the grounds of the shrine dedicated to her in Fonda, N.Y.