

Echon

Apostle and Martyr



The Gospel was planted among the First Nations by men of courage and vision. One of the first was a giant of a man named Father Jean de Brebeuf.

He was a true apostle, a man on fire with love for Christ, a saint and mystic. It was he who sowed the first seeds of faith in this land. The Hurons called him Echon.

In the early 1600's travelling Hurons first encountered French fur traders in Quebec. The Hurons, skilled in both trade and politics, saw at once that a profit could be made in trading French goods.

Quick to seize an opportunity, they soon made treaties with the French that gave them a monopoly over the fur trade. As a sign of good will the Hurons agreed to allow Catholic missionaries to live in their villages.

THE "BLACK ROBES"

The first small band of Jesuit 'Black Robes' arrived in Quebec in 1625. Among them was Jean de Brebeuf. He was a big man, tall and broad shouldered, possessing great physical strength, a rugged appearance and a full black beard. At the time he was thirty two years old.

Brebeuf spent the winter in the forests with a wandering band of Montagnais Indians. He cheerfully endured the cold, hunger and the long treks through the deep snow. He proved to have a striking gift for languages and in a short time learned to speak their Algonquin dialect.

HURONIA

A year later the Jesuits obtained passage with Hurons traders who were returning home from Quebec. Their country was a journey by canoe of some six hundred miles. It took almost three weeks of paddling from morning till night before they finally arrived at the Huron village of Toanche. There for the next three years Brebeuf remained, struggling to master the difficult Huron tongue.

He applied himself to learning the culture of the people. He lived in their lodges, shared their work and ate their food. He believed that, as far as possible, the gospel must be expressed through the traditions of the people. Only in this way could the Hurons understand its teaching and be won for Christ.

In the Huron tradition, Echon invited the elders to his own death feast. There he spoke to them so powerfully of the things of God that the sentence was lifted.

THE FAITH IS PLANTED

Echon prayed constantly and worked tirelessly for the conversion of the Hurons to Christ. In prayer he experienced many visions which strengthened him over the years. Jesus appeared to him, as well as the blessed in heaven.

The number of converts grew, and in spite of great opposition a fervent community of Huron believers soon took shape. Their zeal was like that of the early Christians. All who saw them were struck by their deep sincerity and their vibrant faith. Echon was a good and gentle shepherd to his flock, one who was soon to lay down his life.

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

He wrote of a profound mystical experience:

"I saw Our Lord holding out his loving arms to embrace me. He pardoned me the past and forgot my sins. He restored in my soul both His gifts and His graces. He called me to his love and said to me what he had said before to St Paul: *"This man has been chosen to carry my name to the nations; I shall show him what great things he must suffer for my name's sake."* Hearing these words, I thanked him for them and offered myself for all things."

Later Jesus appeared to him disfigured and crucified, indicating what was to come. Echon willingly accepted the terrible burden he was offered.

For twenty years he preached the Gospel of peace to the people. But it was war that was to provide him with an unfading crown of glory. The Iroquois had long been the enemies of the Hurons. But now they had determined to destroy the entire nation. Many lost their lives to fierce Iroquois attacks. Raiding parties were becoming bolder and striking deep into Huron territory.

In 1635, a drought threatened the crops. For weeks there was no rain and the shamans' most powerful incantations were to no avail. They blamed their failure on the cross that stood at the Jesuit's lodge, and demanded that it be removed.

Others, begged Echon to make it rain. Only God could do this he told them. But the Black Robes would offer a novena asking this favor. For nine days the priests prayed, imploring the blessing of rain. On the last day the Heavens opened and it rained for a month. The crops were saved, and the cross allowed to stand.

A few began to inquire more closely into the new faith. Finally in 1637, the first Huron converts were baptised. But more trials were to come.

EPIDEMIC

Just as the Jesuit mission was beginning to make some headway, an epidemic struck. The deadly disease of smallpox then sweeping the world laid low Hurons and missionaries alike. The Huron healers were helpless before its fury. Many people died.

Rumors flew everywhere that the priests had come to destroy the nation using bad medicine. A Council of the Clans was called. Echon was told to produce the evil charm he had used to bring the sickness. If he did they would let him live. In the end they decided that the missionaries should die.

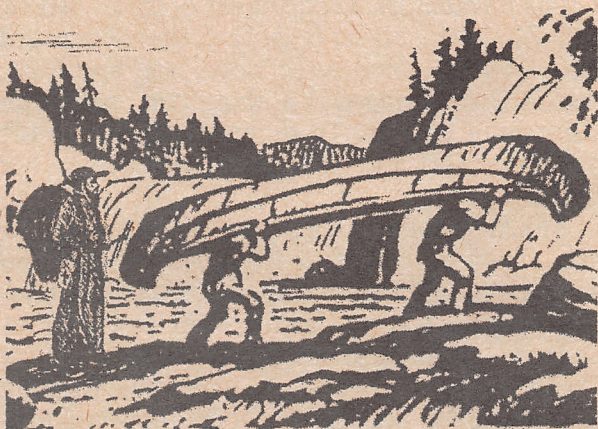
SPIRITUAL WARFARE

Echon saw clearly that he was involved in a giant spiritual struggle. He describes a vision he had a few day later while in prayer:

"I saw a vast host of demons coming to devour or at least wound me. But not one of them was able to hurt me. The creatures attacking me resembled horses of monstrous size, covered with long curly hair like on a goat. Their shapes were so diverse and terrifying that I never saw the like. I was not afraid, but confident in God I said: Do whatever God permits, but you cannot harm a hair on my head without his permission."

Brebeuf was not at all like the other French who were greedy for furs and chased their women. At first the Hurons feared him as a powerful French sorcerer. But soon his patience and gentleness won him the friendship of many in the village. Because of his great size the Hurons named him Echon.

In 1629 the English captured Quebec and forced Brebeuf to return to France. There he wrote a small Huron catechism. The first ever written in a Native language. On his return four years later, the Bear Clan gave the Jesuits permission to establish a mission among them.



THE MISSION

Brebeuf began teaching the basic truths of the Christian faith. He wrote: "We began by teaching the memorable truth that the soul is immortal, and all go after death to either paradise or hell. ... I explained that it rested with them during life to decide what their future lot was to be."

Many came to hear him. Some thought the Christian teaching was good but impossible to follow. They explained to him that while this might be good for white people, such a life could not be lived among them. They were content to live in the traditional ways of their ancestors. Most felt the old ways were better.

A CROWN OF GLORY

On March 16 of 1649, the Iroquois launched a surprise attack on the Huron villages. Echon and a host of Huron Christians were captured, stripped naked and forced to run the gauntlet. A hail storm of blows was struck all over their bodies.

The Iroquois hated the Black Robes even more than the Hurons. Informed that this was the great Echon, they hurled abuse upon him. Kneeling, he kissed the post where he was to die. Red hot hatchets were hung around his neck and pressed to the most sensitive parts of his body. He set his face like a rock.

His tormentors wrapped his body in belt of resinous bark and set it on fire. He encouraged others telling them to be brave and steadfast, that their suffering was nothing compared with the joys of heaven. To quiet him they tore off his lips, and cut off his nose. He never flinched.

Mocking baptism they pour boiling water on him. They cut strips of flesh off his legs and arms and broiled them and ate them before him. Finally after hours of torture they scalped him and tore out his heart. Echon's desire to die for Christ had been granted. His enemies, wanting to share in his courageous spirit, honored him by drinking his blood. But the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church.

The Oneida warrior, Hot Ashes, who had struck his deathblow, later became not only a Christian, but himself a zealous apostle. To the end of his life he was devoted to his heroic victim. Now in heaven they rejoice together. Thus was faith in Christ planted in this land.

Jean de Brebeuf, was canonised a Saint
of the Church, July 29th, 1930.

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