

Feast of Corpus Christi, 1646

By Beth Lynch, Museum Manager/Pilgrimage Coordinator

May 30, 1646. A French surveyor kept his instruments close in the fragile birch bark canoe. One wrong move could topple his livelihood and his responsibility to the bottom of the lake.

From where he precariously sat, this was uncharted territory. He marveled at the expanse of blue water encircled by pines and the new spring leaves of maple and oak. He had carefully charted rivers and lakes from his journey's outset 100 miles and one week north. Now, on this pristine watery body, he continued his scoping and measuring.

His companion's identity was not easily assessed. He wore the blousy shirt and dark breeches of the era, though prematurely worn and soiled from rough travel. But his doe-skin moccasins announced a native influence as did the hides carefully rolled and stashed in the canoe. He was lean and strong, "hard as iron" as a biographer described, from years in the wilderness. His complexion was fair but badly wizened by weather and hardship. His haunted expression spoke of suffering and caution, and his eyes were alert and vigilant. The Mohawks undoubtedly had noted these characteristics when they named him "Ondessonk," *bird of prey*. Perhaps a subsequent translation is better suited: *the indomitable one*.

This was Father Isaac Jogues, S.J. During his terrible months of captivity among the Mohawks four years prior, he described himself as "a savage in manner and dress yet I have ever lived a son of the most holy Church of Rome and of the Society [Society of Jesus, the Jesuit order]." This dichotomy in the village of the Iroquois was now repeated: the indomitable priest was returning to the village of his torture dressed as a French civilian. He had acquiesced to appear the European diplomat, not the Jesuit missionary. Yet every fiber of his being was consecrated to the Jesuit motto: "Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam," *to the greater glory of God*.

But he would forever bear the most convicting sign of his identity as a missionary to the Mohawks: his hands. Healed skin and scars covered the nail beds from where his fingernails had been ripped. An index finger and thumb were missing, and jagged scars and brutal cauterization closed their stories. Other fingers were truncated and twisted. As he paddled the canoe, his hands and fingers grasped and maneuvered with remarkable compensation. Special dispensation from Pope Urban VIII to celebrate Mass without his "canonical fingers" gave him profound joy, and he praised God that he was still able to write.

He considered his tortured body to be on the cross ". . . where my Savior has nailed me beside Himself." He was driven into deep prayer and into union with that Blessed Body. And when he received Holy Communion after his escape from the Valley of the Mohawk, he wrote: "It was at that moment that I tasted the sweetness of my deliverance. It was then that I began to live again." The Eucharist: source and summit of the Catholic faith, lived by this humble priest as "a soul glued to the Blessed Sacrament."

And so it was that Father Jogues arrived with the surveyor at this deep blue lake on May 30 which, in 1646, was the Eve of the Feast of Corpus Christi. The Body of Christ. The Holy Eucharist.

He christened it: "Lac du Saint Sacrement," *Lake of the Blessed Sacrament*.

The name remained for over a century after his martyrdom. We know it today as Lake George, renamed for King George III by a loyalist at the time of the American Revolution. But the moccasined footprints of St. Isaac Jogues on the shores of the lake remain – in history, in the monument of him in Battleground Park, even in the name of a tour boat. But especially he is there in spirit forever beckoning those without the Body of Christ to come and taste and be set free, as was he. (The Feast of Corpus Christi 2017 is celebrated on Sunday June 18)

