



Midland is a settlement dedicated to the Mother of God founded in the lands of Wendatow in 1639 by the French Jesuits. Rev. Jean de Brebeuf entered into Canadian History as a martyred saint. He was born on March 25th, 1593 in Normandy. He was a French aristocrat, meaning that he was highly educated from a Knighted family. He entered the Jesuit order in 1617. Following his ordination in 1625, he pleaded with his superiors to send him to the newly discovered land in North America. He travelled there with two priests and two religious brothers. The trip from France to Quebec took two months.

Fr. Jean spent his first five months among the Algonquin Indian tribe, where he was learning their native language. He even went as far as setting up a dictionary of this tribe for future missionaries. Unfortunately, the natives did not want to accept the Gospel of Christ. They considered the missionaries as colonials that were there to steal their land. This however did not stop the zealous priests from preaching the word of God. As they went on into further regions of the country, they discovered the Huron tribe by the river of St. Lawrence. The residents of this settlement were in fact very friendly; however, they showed no interest in accepting a new religion. After Quebec was conquered by the Englishmen in 1629, Fr. Jean had to go back to

France. In 1632 Quebec once again fell under French jurisdiction, then Fr. Jean full of enthusiasm once again boarded the boat to the “New Land”. When they reached the harbor, Fr. Jean settled with the Huron tribe. This tribe had a population of 20,000.

In 1636, a small pox epidemic broke out in the Huron tribe. This epidemic became providential for the missionaries. The French Jesuits did not abandon the sick and dying during this deadly virus. As Fr. Jean witnessed the pain, panic and fear of those that were dying, he made a promise to God that he would endure all the suffering so the natives could open their hearts to learning about Jesus. Paradoxically, the plague did not affect white people, which the natives took as a sign from God. Not long after, 7,000 natives were baptized and adopted the Catholic faith.

Unfortunately, the work of the French missionaries was destroyed by the wild Iroquois. In March of 1649 they attacked the villages and murdered most of the baptized Hurons. Fr. Jean was captured and put through unimaginable torture. His nails were pulled off, eyes were burned, his nose cut off, lips ripped out, his chest was crushed and finally he was nailed to a pole and scorched with fire. The rage and brutality of the Iroquois was intensified when Fr. Jean refused to give up any of the missionaries. In the end, they ripped out his heart from within his body while he was still alive.

It is also worth mentioning that another martyr whose name was Fr. Izaak Jogues, was a close friend to Jean de Brebeuf. On an urgent request he was sent to the “New Land” (Canada) in 1636 for the purpose of converting people to Catholicism. Six years later he was kidnapped by the Iroquois and held prisoner for 15 months. He was tortured in specific ways that would inflict as much pain as possible without killing him. They demanded ransom for him and he was eventually bought out of mercy by a Dutch pastor.

Fr. Izaak returned to France for convalescence. He was welcomed back as a hero and almost as a saint. To the amazement of the religious order he insisted on returning to North America where he worked as a missionary. After regaining his health, he once again boarded the ship to cross the Atlantic Ocean. His mission on Canadian land bordered as almost a miracle. As a negotiator, he succeeded in bringing peace between the colonials and the Iroquois. In 1646 another epidemic broke out and Fr. Izaak was blamed for this and put to death with an axe. The

liturgical celebration of St. Jean de Brebeuf, the Jesuits and their fellow missionaries is held on September 26th.

Midland is the second national sanctuary in Canada next to Quebec. It is visited by 200,00 pilgrims each year. On top of the hill, two towers are visible that merge into one church. Here you will find the famous grotto of St. Marie Among the Hurons. This area is showered with many chapels, in this way the pilgrims leave their imprint in the place blessed by the blood of the martyrs.

Embedded in the history of Midland are two strong Polish connections. The first being that, in the main entrance one can see the picture of Mary Mother of God of Czestochowa. This was donated by Fr. Jozef Capiga of the Resurrectionists on behalf of the Hamilton Polish community. Secondly, in 1984 Pope John Paul II visited Midland and honored the 70th anniversary of the existence of the sanctuary. In commemoration of this special visit a large sculpture of Pope John Paul II was created using the trunk of a four-hundred-year-old pine.

The majority of Polish pilgrims visit Midland each year on the second Sunday of August to celebrate the Assumption of Mary, Mother of God, which takes place on August 15th. This is when the various groups of pilgrims enter the national sanctuary of Canadian martyrs carrying their own unique banners. The Conference of Polish Priests in Eastern Canada invites a bishop from our country to preside over the pontifical Mass and deliver the homily. The sacrament of the Holy Eucharist concludes the official celebration. This yearly celebration typically draws about 10,000 or more Poles. In the early morning hours, Polish priests offer confession. For many of the pilgrims who travel from far and wide this serves as their only opportunity to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation in their native language.

There are many ways in which pilgrims travel to Midland:

- a. The most common way in which people travel to Midland is by car.
- b. For the past thirteen years beginning in Melrose (close to London, On) a bicycle pilgrimage has been taking place. This has been organized under the patronage of the Michaelites Fathers. I have participated in the bicycle pilgrimage four times. We travel 300 kms in the span of six days.
- c. During our pilgrimage journey you can also encounter motorcycle groups on their way to Martyr's Shrine.

d. Various bus trips are also organized from different parishes across Ontario. Year after year, a bus has been chartered by Sacred Heart in Kitchener. My hope is that this tradition does not discontinue as more and more people are choosing to use their own vehicles to travel to Midland.

e. The walking pilgrimage begins on the second Monday of August from Toronto. This has been taking place for 37 years. Groups are divided into three sections based on geographical territory and color coded. The pilgrimage from Kitchener and surrounding areas such as Windsor, London, Kitchener, Guelph, Brantford and Hamilton belong to the “blue group” also known as “the rest of the world”. The two largest groups of pilgrims come from Mississauga and Toronto. The pilgrims arrive at the throne of Martyr’s Shrine early Saturday afternoon.

Below are personal accounts from some of our own pilgrims: “Initially we used to travel to Midland by car. My husband had always wanted to venture on the one-week walking trail; however, his health did not allow him to participate in this way. During one of our gatherings our friend Mark reflected about one of his first walking pilgrimages to Midland. In the course of his summer vacation in Kaszuby he carved a cross made from birch and that year (2010) he decided to venture on the pilgrimage. I knew at that moment, God willing that the following year I would venture on this pilgrimage trail also. In 2011, carrying the birch cross I joined the group of pilgrims on their way to Midland. And now for many years, year after year in the calendar of my life the pilgrimage journey to Midland has been enscripted.”

“Dedicated volunteers and there are many of them, under the spiritual guidance of the priests are responsible for the organization of the entire pilgrimage. The participants bring with them a tent, hiking shoes, clothes, non-perishable food, toiletries and most importantly a good attitude! Leading the pilgrimage are wooden crosses and other various banners from different parishes. Fortunately, we do not have to carry heavy backpacks, courtesy vehicles carry our supplies. During rest breaks we receive warm meals and drinks. Along our way we also receive refreshments and snacks.”

“The route we cover is 180kms long. For nightly accommodation we ensure that there is sufficient room for everyone to camp. At dusk we pierce our painful foot blisters. We apply ointments to our sore legs; we swat away the mosquitos along with recharging our own batteries. For the pilgrimage expedition you must bring...? In the procession, an arc holding all the personal intentions is carried. It is important

what the pilgrim brought with them, what is carried in their hearts, what are his desires and what he is requesting from God. These could be personal intentions as well as the intentions of others – those that needed our prayers. All of these are important to me.”

Due to the ongoing COVID -19 epidemic, there will be no walking pilgrimage to Midland this year. However, the organizers have coordinated a one-day pilgrimage from St. Ignatius – the place of the martyrdom of the Jesuit Fathers – to the Midland Sanctuary. In this one-day pilgrimage those who have registered prior may participate. In groups of ten, under the supervision a "Flagman", the pilgrim will walk the route of 12.6 km (i.e. about 3 hours of walking). The pilgrimage will end with the celebration of the Holy Mass at the papal altar.

In the pilgrimage will also travel a Triptych, a set of three altar panels, containing the relics of St. Faustina and St. John Paul II, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of St. John Paul II's birth.

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