

The North American Martyrs Trek

Have you ever tried to talk to someone about your faith? Maybe even try to get them to go to church with you? This is part of missionary work. Back in the mid- 1600's, Jesuit missionaries traveled to the southern Ontario region in Canada to convert the native people known as the Wendats (Hurons). They had to learn a new language and new customs and travelled from village to village preaching to the Native people. In 1649, the missionaries were captured by the Iroquois and endured much suffering, yet they did not give up their faith, even when faced with death. These Jesuit missionaries, Jean de Brébeuf, Gabriel Lalemant, and their companions were responsible for bringing Christianity to Canada about 400 years ago and are referred to as the North American Martyrs.

This past July, I spent seven days in Algonquin Provincial Park in Canada canoeing and camping with seven Boy Scouts from the Greater Niagara Frontier Council. Our guide was Mr. Pierre de Rosa. Our other leaders were Mr. Overbeck and Mr. Darby. On our first day, we met with two priests, Father Brian and Father Paul, who would be accompanying us. We hiked for about three hours to a chapel where we had Mass. Along the way, we learned about the martyrs and said prayers. The second day we went to the Martyrs' Shrine in Midland, Ontario, Canada where we saw Relics of the Martyrs. We then travelled to Sainte-Marie among the Hurons, a reproduction of the village where the Jesuits lived from 1639 to 1649.

From the third day to the eighth day of our trek, we went to Algonquin Provincial Park. We all became friends real quick on this trip. Although we had fun along the way, this was not an easy trek. Just as the Missionaries probably did some 400 years ago, we had to work as a team, help each other the best we could, and try to keep our spirits up. We started out on Smoke Lake in the southern part of the park. We canoed each day and portaged quite often to get to lakes and rivers that were not connected. Most of the time, these portages went steeply uphill with narrow bridges and mud. We had to carry the canoes and large packs, called Duluth packs, that contained all of our gear and food. Each evening, after setting up camp, Father Brian and Father Paul concelebrated Mass on an altar made of overturned canoes. We saw few other people even though there were some houses in the park. There was an abundance of wildlife in the park like loons, beavers, and the ever-present mosquitoes. The scenery was beautiful and made me think of how wonderful God's work of creation is.

We arrived back to our starting point in Niagara Falls, New York, and were thankful that we were back home, very tired but with a lot of great memories of our North American Martyrs Trek.