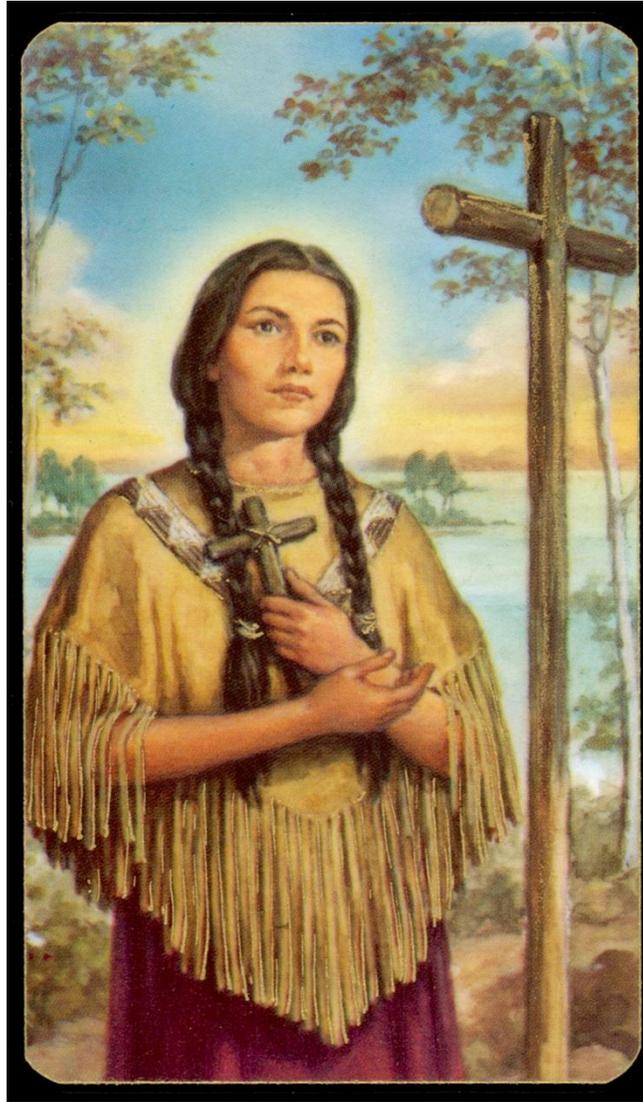


Saint Kateri Tekakwitha (1656-1680):

The Lily of the Mohawks

Feast Day: April 17



Her Life

Kateri Tekakwitha was born in 1656. Her mother was a member of the Algonquin First Nation and her father was an Iroquois chief. Her birth took place in the Mohawk village of Ossernenon (today Auriesville, New York). Her mother had lived with French settlers in Trois-Rivières and was Christian. When Kateri was four, a smallpox epidemic swept through Ossernenon. It killed her mother, father and younger brother and left Kateri with impaired vision and a scarred complexion. An uncle and some aunts took her in and raised her. Her eyes were hyper-sensitive to light, so people named her “Tekakwitha”, meaning “she who gropes her way” or “she who bumps into things.”

In 1666, French troops were sent out to subdue the Mohawks, and with the people of her village Kateri spent a winter hiding out in the forest. They stayed on the north bank of the Mohawk River. At the nearby Saint Pierre de Gandaouagué Mission she met Jesuit missionaries; she was struck by their friendliness and their piety. Back at Ossernenon, she kept active with domestic chores and was good at beadwork, making moccasins and shirts and collars. She also went into the fields to help pick fruit and vegetables.

To the dismay of her aunts and uncle, she refused the normal life path of accepting an offer of marriage from one of the men who sought to form a family with her. When Father Jacques de Lamberville, S.J., visited her area in 1675, she asked to be baptized. He taught her the faith for six months and baptized her on Easter Sunday, 1676, giving her the name "Kateri", a kind of nickname for Catherine, after Saint Catherine of Sienna. For more than a year, her family made her life difficult and sometimes deprived her of food because she refused to work on Sundays. They threw pebbles at her as she made her way to the chapel to pray, and one of her aunts tried to cause trouble by accusing her of having an affair with her uncle. Father Lamberville encouraged her to go to live in a First Nations Christian community, the Saint-François-Xavier Mission, on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River, across from Montreal, in today's Kahnawake.

Here she lived with other Christians, including members of her family and Jesuits. She made her first communion at Christmas in 1677. She would spend hours in prayer in the chapel. During the winter hunt, she continued to pray while she helped with the work. She made a prayer space by hanging a cross in a tree near a creek. She suffered further accusations of having an affair with a local man, and her relatives continued pressuring her to get married, but she dreamt of founding a First Nations community of consecrated life. She took a vow of chastity on March 25, 1679. Though still young, Kateri suffered from migraines, fever and stomach troubles. She died on April 17, 1680, at the age of 24. She was beatified by Pope (now Saint) John Paul II in 1980 and canonized on October 21, 2012 by Pope Benedict XVI.

Her Spirituality

At one point Kateri looked after some visiting Jesuits, who remarked on her self-possession; they were touched by her modesty and her good nature. She, in turn, observed their good manners, their perseverance in prayer and their spiritual practices. From this time, she wanted to become a Christian. She was a hard worker, leading a quiet life because of her limited vision, but helping her community with the harvest, wood-gathering, sewing, hunting, and cooking.

As she was preparing for Baptism, she followed the advice of her instructor, Father de Lamberville, so fervently that the Jesuit gave her instruction in Christian life and baptized her only six months later. Her community was full of praise for the young catechumen. Later, Father de Lamberville would attest that she had never wavered in her religious fervour, even when her people were giving her a hard time. When he sent her to live at the mission of Saint-François-Xavier, he commended her to his fellow Jesuits by saying, "I am sending you a treasure. Look after her well."

Father Pierre Cholenec, S.J., soon admitted her to First Communion. She gave evidence of a true hunger for the Eucharist and sought to experience union with the suffering of Christ. Her biographer, Father Claude Chauchetière, S.J., said that throughout her life, her motto was "Who will teach me the best things about God so I may follow them?" She practically lived in the chapel. She would arrive at four in the morning and attend the Mass at dawn and another at

sunset. She could be found visiting the Blessed Sacrament several times through the day and evening to join in the common prayer.

She prayed with great fervour and developed an inner life in which love surged forth and sought to find expression with others. She prayed that her people would welcome the Good News of the Love that infused her life. She practiced fasts and mortifications, sometimes excessively; she abandoned the extremes on the advice of her spiritual advisor.

At one time, a widow was urging Kateri to marry. She replied, "If it's so high in your esteem, you should fly toward a new marriage. All I want is peace." She visited the Hospital Sisters of Hôtel-Dieu in Montreal; they inspired her to consecrate herself to God. With her friend Marie-Thérèse Tegaiaguenta and a Huron woman named Skarikions, she wanted to found a convent on Heron Island, near Kahnawake. The plans went unfulfilled, but she did make a vow of chastity. "This was such a new thing," wrote Father Cholonec, "something I never expected to see, but after examining her conduct and the great progress she made in the practice of the virtues, and especially how profusely God communicated himself to his servant, it seemed to me that this desire of Kateri could only have come from God."

For further information:

English

http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/tekakwitha_1E.html

<http://conservation.catholic.org/kateri.htm>

<http://www.katerishrine.com/kateri.html>

<http://www.cccb.ca/site/eng/church-in-canada-and-world/catholic-church-in-canada/indigenous-peoples/3263-blessed-kateri-tekakwitha>

<https://vimeo.com/ondemand/kateri>

<http://www.kateritv.com/>

<http://saltandlighttv.org/kateri/>

French

http://officedecatechese.gc.ca/prod/01_intergenerationnel/kateri.html

http://www.biographi.ca/fr/bio/tekakwitha_1E.html

<http://www.cccb.ca/site/frc/eglise-au-canada-et-ailleurs/eglise-catholique-au-canada/les-peuples-autochtones/3263-la-bienheureuse-kateri-tekakwitha>

<http://seletlumieretv.org/kateri/>

Image: Pantheon / Superstock