

Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha: Mohawk Mystic of North America Model of the First Evangelization and New Evangelization

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In his final words spoken at World Youth Day 2002 in Toronto, ten years ago, Blessed John Paul II addressed the throng of young people present at the Downsview Air Force Base on Sunday July 28, 2002, during the concluding Eucharistic celebration of Canada's blessed event. The Holy Father said during his homily:

“At difficult moments in the Church's life, the pursuit of holiness becomes even more urgent. And holiness is not a question of age; it is a matter of living in the Holy Spirit, just as Kateri Tekakwitha did here in America and so many other young people have done.”

For his last World Youth Day, Blessed John Paul II singled out a young native woman, one of the nine young saints and blessededs he had offered to Canada as patrons of World Youth Day 2002, holding her up as a model of holiness, goodness, humanity for millions of young people who were and remain part of the great adventure of World Youth Days. And yet Kateri's story is a very curious one. We hear little of her own voice in her biographies. What drew Kateri to Baptism? What was the source of her love of Jesus Christ and the Church? How could the life of a 17th century young native woman speak to contemporary society, culture and Church today? What will her faith and Canonization do to heal the First Nations people today, broken because of a history of oppression, abuse, and discord?

Let us consider the facts of the story of soon to be St. Kateri Tekakwitha and see if she indeed has anything to offer us. Her story is told to us in the centuries-old biographies written by two Jesuit priests who knew and prayed with her as they presided over the Kahnawake Mission, Frs. Pierre Cholenec and Claude Chauchetière. Their written accounts emphasize Kateri's virtuous life, devotion to chastity, hatred of sin and self, and extreme practices of penance until her death at the age of 24.

Kateri Tekakwitha, known as the “Lily of the Mohawks”, and the “Genevieve of New France” was born in 1656 at Ossernenon, an Iroquois village on the Mohawk River, in what is now New York State. People know the place today as Aurisville, New York. Her Iroquois name, Tekakwitha,

is often pronounced tek'u-kwith'u. Tekakwitha's father was a Mohawk chief and her mother was a Catholic Algonquin.

At the age of four, smallpox attacked Tekakwitha's village, taking the lives of her parents and baby brother, and leaving Tekakwitha an orphan. Smallpox had marked her face and seriously impaired her eyesight. Although terribly weakened, scarred, and partially blind, Tekakwitha survived. Tekakwitha was adopted by her two aunts and her uncle, also a Mohawk chief. The family abandoned their village and built a new settlement, called Caughnawaga, some five miles away on the north bank of the Mohawk River, which today is in Fonda, New York.

Tekakwitha was not baptized as an infant, yet she had fond memories of her good and prayerful mother and of the stories of Catholic faith that her mother shared with her in childhood. These remained indelibly impressed upon her mind and heart and were to give shape and direction to her life's destiny. She often went to the woods alone to speak to God and listen to Him in her heart and in the voice of nature.

When Tekakwitha was eighteen years old, Father de Lamberville, a Jesuit missionary, came to Caughnawaga and established a chapel. Her uncle disliked the "Blackrobe" and his strange new religion, but tolerated the missionary's presence. Kateri vaguely remembered her mother's whispered prayers, and was fascinated by the new stories she heard about Jesus Christ. She wanted to learn more about Him and to become a Christian. The Jesuit persuaded the young woman's uncle to allow Tekakwitha to attend religious instructions. The following Easter, twenty-year old Tekakwitha was baptized. She was given the name of Kateri, which is Mohawk for Catherine. Tekakwitha's Iroquois name can be translated as, "One who places things in order." or "To put all into place."

The newly baptized young woman became intensely devout, and would deliberately expose herself to the pain of cold and the burn of hot coals, and pierce her skin with thorns to imitate the suffering of Jesus. Kateri's family did not accept her choice to embrace Christ. While the story of her sincere and devout faith is beautiful, the history and environment surrounding her was anything but an idyllic environment. It was a time of colonialism, of war raging between the Algonquin and Iroquois nations, and of the Native Americans' hostile regard of the missionaries accompanying the European fur traders. After her baptism, Kateri became the village outcast. Her

family refused her food on Sundays because she wouldn't work. Children would taunt her and throw stones. She was threatened with torture or death if she did not renounce her religion.

Because of increasing hostility from her people and because she wanted to devote her life to working for God, in July of 1677, Kateri left her village and fled more than 200 miles (322 km) through woods, rivers, and swamps to the Catholic mission of St. Francis Xavier at Sault Saint-Louis, near Montreal. Kateri's journey through the wilderness took more than two months. Because of her determination in proving herself worthy of God and her undying faith she was allowed to receive her First Holy Communion on Christmas Day, 1677. On the banks of the St. Lawrence in Canada, Kateri lived in the cabin of Anastasia Tegonhatsihonga, a Christian Native woman, her extraordinary sanctity impressing not only her own people, but the French and the missionaries. Her mortifications were extreme, and many say that she attained the most perfect union with God in prayer.

Kateri's motto became, "Who can tell me what is most pleasing to God that I may do it?" She spent much of her time in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, kneeling in the cold chapel for hours. Kateri loved the Rosary and carried it around her neck always. Kateri taught the young and helped those in the village who were poor or sick. Her favorite devotion was to fashion crosses out of sticks and place them throughout the woods. These crosses served as stations that reminded her to spend a moment in prayer.

Yet even in the Christian Iroquois Village of Kahnawake, the pressures of cultural expectations, such as marriage and participation in some Native practices remained. On March 25, 1679, Kateri made a vow of perpetual virginity, meaning that she would remain unmarried and totally devoted to Christ for the rest of her life. Kateri hoped to start a convent for Native American sisters in Sault St. Louis but her spiritual director, Father Pierre Cholonec discouraged her. Kateri's health, never good, was deteriorating rapidly due in part to the penances she inflicted on herself. Father Cholonec encouraged Kateri to take better care of herself but she laughed and continued with her "acts of love."

On April 17, 1680, the Wednesday of Holy Week, she died at 3 o'clock in the afternoon at the age of twenty-four. Her last words were: "Jesos Konoronkwa". "Jesus I Love You". Fifteen minutes after her death before the eyes of two Jesuits and all the Native Indians that could fit into the room,

the ugly scars on her face suddenly disappeared. This miracle was witnessed by two Jesuits and all the others able to fit into the room.

The atmosphere and scene of Kateri's death continues to move people even today. We must read the moving narrations of Fathers Claude Chauchetiere and Pierre Cholenec, who was the Superior of the Mission of Saint Francis Xavier when it was displaced to Kahnawake in 1716.

“The bell of the chapel was rung at 3 o'clock to gather the Natives, because they desired to witness her death. After 3 o'clock they returned and Kateri Tekakwitha had waited until everyone entered the cabin. When the last one had arrived, she went into her agony with everyone kneeling around her. A short half-hour after her agony she had pronounced her last words: “Iesos! Wari!” “Jesus! Mary!”

Then she had a slight spasm at the right side of her mouth. She died as if she was falling into a light sleep and we were for a long time not certain of her death. Sometime before four o'clock, her face had suddenly changed and became in a moment so beautiful, smiling and white. Her face had an appearance of a rosy colour, which she never had and her features were not the same. I saw this immediately, because I was praying beside her and cried out for my astonishment. Her face was so scarred with smallpox from the age of four years old, and with her infirmities and mortification contributed to ruin her even more. And before her death she had taken a darkened complexion. Her face appeared more beautiful than when she had been living. I will admit openly of the first thought, which came to me that Kateri might have entered into Heaven at this moment. After reflecting back in her chaste body a small ray of glory she had gone to possess.

The day Kateri died, we passed it with an extraordinary devotion. Immediately, she had left the entire village with a fragrance of her virtue and esteem for sanctity, especially as a few hours later when I eulogized at the evening prayers, which I had made the Natives known of the treasure they possessed and lost before they came to know her. Kateri Tekakwitha died as she had lived that is to say, as a saint. It was to be expected that such a holy life would be followed with a most holy death, because Kateri Tekakwitha was filled with the Holy Spirit. The simplicity of the Natives had made them do on this occasion more than was required, which was kissing of her hands, keeping relics of whatever belonged to her, passing the evening and the rest of the night near her to admire her face. Her face gave devotion even though

her soul was separated from her. It was a new argument of credibility, which God had favoured the Natives to make them taste the Faith.”

At her beatification on June 22, 1980 in St. Peter’s Basilica, Pope John Paul II described Kateri with these words:

“When her family urged her to marry, she replied very serenely and calmly that she had Jesus as her only spouse. This decision, in view of the social conditions of women in the Indian tribes of that time, exposed Kateri to the risk of living as an outcast and in poverty. It is a bold, unusual and prophetic gesture: on 25 March, 1679, at the age of twenty-three, with the consent of her spiritual director, Kateri took a vow of perpetual virginity, as far as we know the first time that this was done among the North American Indians.

The last months of her life were an ever clearer manifestation of her solid faith, straightforward humility, calm resignation, and radiant joy, even in the midst of terrible sufferings. Her last words, simple and sublime, whispered at the moment of death, sum up, like a noble hymn, a life of purest charity: "Jesus, I love you."”

Addressing the Indians of North America shortly after her Beatification on June 24, 1980, Pope John Paul II said:

“Indeed, Blessed Kateri stands before us as a symbol of the best of the heritage that is yours as North American Indians.

The Church has declared to the world that Kateri Tekakwitha is blessed, that she lived a life on earth of exemplary holiness and that she is now a member in heaven of the Communion of Saints who continually intercede with the merciful Father on our behalf.

Her beatification should remind us that we are all called to a life of holiness, for in Baptism God has chosen each one of us "to be holy and spotless and to live through love in his presence". Holiness of life - union with Christ through prayer and works of charity - is not something reserved to a select few among the members of the Church. It is the vocation of everyone.”

And most recently, Pope Benedict XVI referred to this great model of holiness as he addressed young people and seminarians at St. Joseph’s

Seminary in Yonkers, New York during his historic visit to the United States on April 19, 2008

“Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini, Saint John Neumann, Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, Venerable Pierre Toussaint, and Padre Felix Varela: any one of us could be among them, for there is no stereotype to this group, no single mold. Yet a closer look reveals that there are common elements. Inflamed with the love of Jesus, their lives became remarkable journeys of hope. For some, that meant leaving home and embarking on a pilgrim journey of thousands of miles. For each there was an act of abandonment to God, in the confidence that he is the final destination of every pilgrim. And all offered an outstretched hand of hope to those they encountered along the way, often awakening in them a life of faith. Through orphanages, schools and hospitals, by befriending the poor, the sick and the marginalized, and through the compelling witness that comes from walking humbly in the footsteps of Jesus, these six people laid open the way of faith, hope and charity to countless individuals, including perhaps your own ancestors.”

Kateri speaks to our generation

On June 22, 1980, Kateri Tekaawitha was beatified as the first Native American by Pope John Paul II. Her feast is celebrated on July 14th in the United States and April 17th in Canada. On October 21, 2012, she will be canonized as the first native North American saint. She speaks to the suffering, the persecuted, and the afflicted. Her roots stretch from the United States to Canada, to both the French and the English communities. Kateri represents best “Ecclesia in America.” She is a wonderful bridge of healing and reconciliation for our contemporary world and Church- a true symbol of the enduring links between Catholicism and our native brothers and sisters, the indigenous people of our lands.

As a model of chastity and purity, Kateri is a sure guide, teaching us how to live our sexuality with delight and respect for God’s loving plan. Kateri’s example teaches us that the body is our doorway to salvation, and so how we treat it matters. If we cannot say “no,” then our “yes” will mean nothing. The more we accept chastity and make it our way of life, the more people around us will sense that the Holy Spirit dwells within us. When we live our sexuality in the proper way, according to our state in life, others will be able to find God through us.

Finally, as patron of ecology and the environment, Kateri teaches us how to love and respect the created world and care for it. Her earthly life was hidden in the seventeenth century, yet her message continues to resound through time, reminding us of all that is good, beautiful, holy and enduring about the Christian life and message. Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha was an instrument in her own lifetime of the First Evangelization. Through her death and membership in the Communion of Saints, she is an enduring model of the New Evangelization for the Church.

**Prayer for the Canonization of
Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha**

O God who, among the many marvels of Your Grace in the New World,
did cause to blossom on the banks of the Mohawk and of the St. Lawrence,
the pure and tender Lily, Kateri Tekakwitha,
grant we beseech You, the favor we beg through her intercession;
that this Young Lover of Jesus and of His Cross
may soon be counted among her Saints by Holy Mother Church,
and that our hearts may be enkindled with a stronger desire
to imitate her innocence and faith.
Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

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