

# **BLESSED KATERI TEKAKWITHA**



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PHOTO PAUL HAMEL, S.J.

## “I AM SENDING YOU A TREASURE . . .”

**I**N THE LITTLE CITY OF LA FLECHE, in Anjou, France, M. Jerome Le Royer de la Dauversiere was inspired to found a town on the Island of Montreal for the conversion of the North American Indian. At the cost of heroic efforts, he succeeded.

Montreal, founded in 1642, realized its goal in 1667, when the Mission of St. Francis Xavier was established on the south bank of the St. Lawrence River, facing the French settlement. Many Indians from different groups came to settle there, among them, Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha

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Between Montreal and Quebec, some sixty miles down the St. Lawrence, since 1634, stood the habitation of Trois-Rivieres behind the walls of its fort, a challenge to Iroquois belligerency. Since Champlain had sided with the Algonkians against the Iroquois in 1609 and 1616, not only the little colony of Three Rivers, but, also, all of New France had been forced to resist the guerilla warfare conducted against it and its Indian allies. Many were the times when the French and their friends, behind their none too strong fortifications, resisted the enemy attacks! Any pioneer or, for that matter, any Algonkin who dared to venture outside the palisades could well ask himself if he would ever come back alive.

### A WEDDING

In 1653, however, an unofficial truce was agreed upon, no one knows why. During the winter, the Algonkin and Iroquois hunters went out together in search of small and big game, and despite their totally different languages, got along very well. This spirit of mutual understanding was maintained until spring and it was so strong that the Algonkians allowed several of their guests to take to wife among them. An Iroquois chief, whose name is unknown, a member of the Turtle clan, married a young Algonkin of about fifteen or sixteen years of age. This teenage girl had spent most of her life at the French post and was an out-and-out Christian. When the time came for the young chief to return to his homeland, some three hundred miles to the south, his wife bid farewell to her people and to the missionaries, who had instructed her so well. As she took her place in her husband's canoe, she felt a tug at her heart-strings at the thought that she would probably never again see the country of her birth.

The flotilla made its way up the river as far as the Richelieu, which would carry it southward. The youthful Algonkin let her eyes roam on each bank, edged with tall evergreens, white birches, tender green maples, and proud elms. Every night, the Iroquois halted, took some nourishment, and slept under the stars. Four or five days later, as the river flowed into Lake Champlain, the paddling became dangerous. At a corner of the lake, where many had already perished under the onslaught of wind and waves, they stopped and offered tobacco to the *okis* or supernatural beings inhabiting the depths of the water. In turn, Lake Champlain emptied into the Lake of the Blessed Sacrament, so called by the missionaries of that period. After the con-

quest of the country by the British, it was renamed Lake George. Having reached this place, the travellers were in Iroquois country, even though their towns were some two days' distance away. The trip could have lasted two weeks.

The Iroquois Confederation was made up of five nations of the same origin: to the west of the Hudson River lived the Mohawks, then the Oneida, the Onondaga, the Cayuga, and not far from Niagara Falls, the Seneca. The Algonquin girl's husband and his men belonged to the first of the three Mohawk villages of the period, the easternmost of them all, named Ossernenon. Seven or eight years before, the Holy Martyrs, Isaac Jogues, Rene Goupil, and Jean de la Lande here shed their blood for the Faith. The inhabitants had decided to spare his life, but a few intractable Indians killed him and his companions.

Ossernenon was the smallest village of the nation. It was built on a hill, gently sloping down to the Mohawk River and offering a splendid view of the valley. To each side of the palisade were fields of maize, squash, and green beans, the "three Sisters" of the Iroquois. The Algonkin newcomer realized that she would soon be busy at cultivating the fields. Her own people as well as the nomadic Attikamegues of the St. Maurice River eked out a living by hunting and fishing; the Iroquois cantons, on the other hand, non-migrants for centuries, grew thousands of bushels of vegetables each year.

The Iroquois lodge was a surprise-packet for the new wife, accustomed to the Algonkin wigwam. It was a semi-circular arch under which twenty families could live, divided into groups of four: two persons on each side of the long house, sharing in the hearth in the middle of the corridor; and so on for each group.

Above each fire, a hole in the roof allowed the smoke to disappear and the sunlight to enter. Even so, the long house was dark and close.

As wife of the young chief, the stranger was well received. Has she been badly treated, her warrior husband would have soundly trounced the offenders. The Iroquois generally welcomed newcomers to their ranks when they did not make slaves of them.

As she familiarized herself with the Mohawk language, which was quite different from the Algonkin, and just as difficult (each noun takes more than one hundred and fifty different forms), she understood better the important role of the Iroquois women. They owned the fields, the cemeteries, the long houses, and the furniture. Their husbands exercised no authority in their homes. The mothers had every right to give orders to their daughters and even to their sons until they reached the age of twelve. In the tribe, the war chiefs were less important than the peace chiefs, and the women of the village received far more consideration than the latter. War could not be declared without the women's consent. No man could free a victim to-be from death at the stake, though any woman could do so by adopting him. Not only were the women guardians of the common land of the village, but also of the ceremonies and ancient customs of the nation. In this matrilineal society, future mothers were so much respected that the assassination of one of them had to be compensated by the death of two men.

## A HAPPY BIRTH

Undoubtedly, the chief's wife must now and then have met with the other Algonkins,

who, like her, had married Iroquois braves. With them, she could speak about their homeland, relatives, and friends, whom they would never see again, and also about their common faith in Jesus Christ. She could also strike up a friendship with the baptized Huron women, who had become members of the Turtle Clan, that of Ossernenon. On the other hand, little by little, helped by her husband, she became an excellent Iroquois.

Less than two years after her arrival, she gave birth to a very pretty Indian girl. A year or two later, a little brother gave joy to the family. It was a happy home. The elder of the two, who was very beautiful with her large black eyes and her jet-black hair, grew rapidly. She could be seen toddling after her mother or playing with her baby brother. She was barely four years old when she began to make herself useful by picking wild strawberries and blueberries.

Every day, since their birth, their mother had prayed for both of them. At times, she would hum the simple hymns she had learned at Trois-Rivieres. Each evening, on the quiet, she blessed them with the Sign of the Cross. Even so, she had not baptized them; no Christian Huron or Algonkin woman in the village would have dared baptize her children. It was, they thought, the responsibility of the missionaries, and no Blackrobe had passed through Ossernenon for two years. All that the mother could bequeath of her faith to her little ones was the merit of her fervent prayers and the vague memories that a young child was able to store in her mind.

In 1660, great misfortune befell the place under the guise of smallpox. The mother, the two children, and, it would seem, the father were stricken. The epidemic continued, and all the family died save the little girl. The tiny tot slowly fought her way back to life. Her face, formerly so beautiful was now pitted by the terrible illness and her eyes were so very much weakened that she was obliged to protect them from the bright sunshine. The dance of the sunbeams on the river or, during the winter, on the white snow was a source of torture for her.

What did the future hold in store for the orphan girl? Would she simply be a Mohawk submissive to the laws and taboos of her nation? Would she ever learn the truths of Christianity? For the time being, her uncle took her into his long house and gave her into the care of her aunts. Such was the Iroquois custom. Among people unthinkingly called barbarians, orphans are often much better treated than in the so-called "civilized" nations. Since smallpox had taken a third of the population of Ossernenon, there were certainly many of these adoptions.

Her foster parents were aware of the damage done to her eyes. They hoped that little by little her eyesight would become normal again. Inside the long house, the little one had no trouble; but as soon as she went out, if the weather was bright and clear, she groped her way along. They finally named her "She-who-feels-her-way-along," in Iroquois, Tekakwitha. Later on, many of her biographers — more than fifty in all — who saw her power of intercession with God, transformed her name into "She-who-moves-all-before-her".

Now Tekakwitha was intelligent, skilled in the household crafts, docile and cheerful. Her aunts thought that some day she would make a good wife for some Mohawk brave. The future husband would then become a member of the family and, besides their brother's, they would all profit by his hunting and fishing.

Although she was still very young, her aunts tried to make a coquette of her. Father Claude Cauchetiere, a missionary who knew Tekakwitha, wrote in a rather stern vein:



André J. de Groot

"The natural inclination which girls have to appear attractive makes them put great value on bodily ornaments. For this reason, Indian girls of seven or eight are foolish, and very fond of beads. Their mothers, who are even more foolish, spend a great deal of time dressing the hair of their daughters. They see to it that their ears are well pierced, and begin from the cradle to pierce them. They paint their faces and cover them with beads when they are going dancing." Tekakwitha's aunts urged their niece to adorn herself, and being a little child, she gave in to them. She was even quite pleased with herself. In years to come, she would bitterly regret these concessions to vanity. She had nothing else to reproach herself with.

A custom that may appear somewhat strange to us was then popular among the Iroquois. Little girls were betrothed to little boys of the same age. It was a means to tighten the bonds of friendship among families, much in the same manner that royal betrothals took place in seventeenth-century Europe. One fine day, when Tekakwitha was only eight years old, she was dressed in her finest clothes and "married" to a little boy. Both families celebrated the betrothal by feasting and rejoicing. The ceremony did not impress either of the two children, who were both blessed with excellent dispositions.

### THE BLACKROBES

As late as 1663, the Mohawks had the fur trade monopoly. The men traded their pelts with their neighbors at Oranje, today Albany, the capital of New York State. They were greatly displeased when they learned that the Onondagas had invited the French Jesuit missionaries to sojourn in their Canton, where the capital of the Five Nations was established. The Mohawks were aware that their confederates were not very much interested in Christianity and that they wanted to have dealings with the French merchants. They did their best to have the Jesuits expelled from Onondaga and subsequently succeeded. Peace no longer existed between the Iroquois and the French. For many years, the Iroquois set the French Colony ablaze.

In 1663, in Canada, a new regime was inaugurated on its becoming a province of France. The royal government took over the country from the One Hundred Associates, an association of traders, that had administered the country inefficiently. In 1665, the new governor, Monsieur de Courcelles, Intendant Talon, and Marquis de Tracy, lieutenant general of the king's armies and commander of the Carignan-Salieres crack regiment, made up of twelve to thirteen hundred soldiers, disembarked at Quebec. Their first task consisted in checkmating the Iroquois.

In January 1666, Monsieur de Courcelles, who had not experienced the rigors of the Canadian winter, tried to attack the enemy in his own quarters. At that time of year, it was a serious blunder. After long marches in bitter cold weather, he returned to Quebec without even having seen the palisades of the Mohawk castles. During the autumn of the same year, Marquis de Tracy left for the south at the head of six hundred men of the Carignan regiment. After nearly four weeks of marching, he reached the foremost village of the Iroquois canton. It was no longer Ossernenon, which had been abandoned after the smallpox epidemic and relocated a mile higher on the Mohawk River. The name of the new village was Gandaouague (At-the-rapids). Its inhabitants had fled. To claim the land in the name of the king of France, Tracy had a cross erected, a Mass offered, and the *Te Deum* chanted. He then burned

the three Iroquois villages and destroyed the provisions of maize and of other vegetables, which the Mohawks had harvested for the long winter.

Tekakwitha was then ten years old. She followed her people into the wildwood where they had taken refuge. All the population suffered, especially the elderly, the ill, and particularly the little girl with the damaged eyes.

From the point of view of the French and their Indian allies, the expedition was a success. Even the Iroquois did not take exception to Marquis de Tracy's methods. They had used the same ones, for instance when, ten years before, they beat the Eries in 1656. So they sued for peace, and as proof of their good will, asked for missionaries. They thus wanted, as they said, to bury the war ax. This peace was to last for eighteen years.

During this time, what was happening to Tekakwitha? At the end of the trying winter in the woods, it was decided to rebuild the village on the north shore of the Mohawk River, somewhat more to the west, at the junction of the Mohawk and of the Cayadutta Creek. Towards 1933, Father Thomas Grassman, O.F.M. Conv., discovered the foundations of this Mohawk village, erected a chapel on the spot, to which he added an Iroquois museum, officially recognized by the Department of Education of the State of New York.

Three Jesuit missionaries, Fathers Pierre Cholenec, Jacques Bruyas and Jean Pierron, with the Mohawk delegates who had gone to Quebec to treat for peace, reached the village during the summer of 1667. They were not immediately led to Tionnontoguen, the chief town of the Mohawks. Its people had got a good store of gin from the Dutch at Oranje, and nearly all the adults as well as many children were lost in a heavy alcoholic fog. It was deemed prudent to retain the Fathers at Kahnawake for a few days. They lodged in Tekakwitha's long house, a loving forethought of divine Providence. Better still, the child was entrusted with the care of the *Raguennis*. Years later Father Cholenec wrote: "The modesty and sweetness with which she acquitted herself of this duty touched her new guests, while on her part she was struck with their affable manners, their regularity in prayer, and the other exercises into which they divided the day. God even then disposed her to the grace of Baptism, for which she would have asked, if the missionaries had remained longer in her village."

After three days, when the three Fathers set out for Tionnontoguen, they unknowingly left in the heart of Tekakwitha the desire to become a Christian as her mother had been.

Five or six years passed with alternate periods of peace and war. Father Jean Pierron came back to Kahnawake, where he remained for three years. He amazed the Mohawks with his skill at painting pictures illustrating the truths of the Gospel. He was followed by Father Francois Boniface who, with untiring energy, organized the religious life of the village: daily Mass, catechism, community singing. He even started a boys' choir. In his instructions for adults, he did not hesitate to make use of Father Pierron's paintings. Important conversions were recorded, for instance, that of Kryn, the Great Mohawk. In 1673, Father Claude Dablon, superior of the Canadian Missions wrote the following about Kahnawake:

"There the faith was embraced with more constancy, and there Christian courage manifests itself more strikingly than in any other place. Therefore we call it the first and principal mission that we have among the Iroquois."

Meanwhile Tekakwitha was growing into a smallish, delicate teenager. Because of

her poor eyesight, she spent most of her time apart from the other girls. She busied herself with the family chores, ground the maize between two stones to make sagamite, which was very much appreciated by her tribesmen, prepared soup, and served the only daily meal in the morning. She then placed the leftovers in a kettle near the fire, where the members of the family could serve themselves during the afternoon or evening according to their fancy.

The orphan girl soon drew attention to herself by her skill in beadwork, favored by Iroquois women. She did needlework better than the white ladies of Oranje, knew how to daintily adorn shirts and moccasins with the quills of porcupines or elk's hair, succeeded marvellously in preparing ribbons of eelskin, made tumplines or pack straps and mastered the art of dyeing cloth a deep red with sturgeon glue.

Of course, when the sun was not too bright, Tekakwitha worked outside. She helped her aunts sow corn and was always willing to clean or weed the crops. During September, she took part in gathering acorns, sweet chestnuts, and hazelnuts as well as in harvesting Indian corn.

Her aunts rejoiced as they discovered her many talents. They were sure she would make a very fine wife. Among the Iroquois the mistresses of the long houses chose their daughters' husbands, not Mr. Cupid.

On the other hand, as she labored in silence, the Almighty was at work in the depths of her soul. Like a small number of Iroquois women before her, she felt attracted to celibacy. "If the good Lord truly wanted me to get married," she said several years later, "I would do so." When she was of age, she felt very strongly that she should not marry. Because of her attitude, she violently clashed with her family. For some time, she was even thrown out of her long house, and expelled from the others through fear of her uncle, the chief. The agitation abated, probably when one of her aunts became a Christian.

## HER BAPTISM

In the Spring of 1676, Father Jacques de Lamberville replaced Father Boniface at Kahnawake. He soon found out that the doors of certain long houses were not open to him, in particular that of Tekakwitha's uncle, who detested Christianity. That autumn, when most of the Indians were away during the day, busy with harvesting or hunting or fishing, the missionary made the rounds of the aged and the ill, who could not move very far from their dwellings. As he passed before the young woman's long house, he hesitated and, then without knowing why, quickly, pushed aside the bark door and found himself inside. When his eyes became accustomed to the half-light, he saw an Indian girl seated close to the hearth fire, which had nearly died out. It was Tekakwitha, who had hurt her foot at work, and could no longer walk. The priest opened up the conversation. For many months she had been yearning to speak to him. Before he left the long house, she had asked the Blackrobe to baptize her.

The missionaries of New France tested the adults who wanted to become Christians. "No haste is shown in giving baptism to these tribes," wrote Father Etienne de Carheil in 1668, "as it is desired to prove their constancy, for fear of making apostates instead of true believers." Once her foot was healed, during autumn and winter, Tekakwitha attended the Father's instructions for those who intended to become Christians. As the Jesuit soon discovered that the Holy Spirit favored this young woman

with special graces, he opened up to her the treasures of Christianity far more than to the others. The uncle, whom Father de Lamberville thought would be unyielding, allowed Tekakwitha to join the "True-men-who-make-the-sign-of-the-Cross" (Christians), on condition that she would not move from the village. The missionary then inquired about Tekakwitha's conduct as he usually did for future converts. As he questioned one person after the other, he went from surprise to surprise. "Notwithstanding the propensity our Indians have for slander," wrote Father Cholenec, "and particularly those of her own sex, the missionary did not find any one but gave a high encomium to the young catechumen. Even those who had persecuted her most severely were not backward in giving their testimony to her virtue."

All the Christians of the village rejoiced at the good news that she was to be baptized. When she was informed of the day set for the great event, her heart overflowed with joy. For fear of seeing the long-desired day retarded, she perfectly memorized her prayers.

The Father had chosen Easter Sunday, April 5, 1676 more than three centuries ago, to solemnly baptize Tekakwitha in the little chapel of St. Peter's. He gave her the name of Kateri, Catherine in English, in honor of St. Catherine of Alexandria. He also christened two other persons.

In the years to come, Father de Lamberville wrote that the young convert never relaxed in the slightest degree from her initial fervor, even when she underwent the most terrible trials. After a few months of quiet, bitter attacks were launched against her. Since she was a Christian, she abstained from working in the fields on Sundays. She was called idle and denied nourishment on the Lord's Day. Adults and children pointed a finger of scorn at her and derisively taunted her for being a Christian. A young man was bribed to go to her long house and terrify her. He entered abruptly, tomahawk in hand, pretending that he would kill her. Kateri modestly bowed her head. Disconcerted, he gazed at her for a moment and fled. Her family harassed her. Her uncle's wife falsely accused her of having an affair with him. By an oversight, she had called him by name instead of using "father", according to Iroquois etiquette. She suffered immensely from this slander, which, fortunately, nobody believed.

This ill treatment lasted for a year and a half. What made life even more unbearable for Kateri, was the prevalent thirst for gin, bought from the neighboring merchants at Albany. Had it not been for this dreadful calamity, Father de Lamberville would have converted the entire population: "Drunkenness ... holds sway among the Iroquois, as if in its own empire; and which presents, as it were, a picture of hell through the great disorders it occasions."

Because of this tidal wave of pain and evil, the missionary advised Kateri to go and live at the Mission of St. Francis Xavier on the south bank of the St. Lawrence River, facing Montreal. It was some two hundred miles north of Kahnawake. No opportunity presented itself to take flight before the autumn of 1677. During the summer of that year, a young woman of the Canadian mission often thought of Kateri. She had formerly lived in the same long house as the new convert and had been brought up as her sister. This Iroquois Indian urged her husband to return to the Mohawk Canton for her "sister-in-law." So off he went, accompanied by an Oneida named Hot Ashes or Hot Powder, and a Huron, both Christians as he was. On arriving at Kahnawake, they learned that Kateri's old uncle had gone to Fort Oranje to trade. Kateri could hope for no better time to leave, and Father de Lamberville gave

her a note for Father Jacques Fremin, superior of the Mission of St. Francis Xavier: "I am sending you a treasure," he wrote, "guard it well!" Hot Ashes, who was going to preach among his Oneida compatriots, gave his place in the canoe to Kateri Tekakwitha. With her "brother-in-law" and the Huron, she made her way northward. On returning to the village, her uncle, informed of her departure, hurried after her, but was unable to reach her.

## THE PRAYING VILLAGE

It is difficult to portray Kateri's joy on entering the village of the praying Indians. The deep fervor of these converts delighted the heart of the young woman. Her sister's welcome and that of Anastasia Tegonhatsiongo, mistress of her long house and former friend of her mother, made her feel that she was not a stranger, but that she was truly at home. For their part, the missionaries did not forget that they had a "treasure" to care for. She already knew two of the three Jesuits, Fathers Jacques Fremin and Pierre Cholenec, whom she had taken care of during their brief stay at Gandaouague in 1666. Father Claude Chauchetiere, her first biographer, was the third priest stationed at the mission. The superior charged Father Cholenec with the spiritual direction of Kateri. After baptizing an adult, it was the custom of the missionaries to have wait several years before giving him Holy Communion. Her director, as soon as he became better acquainted with the newcomer, decided that she should receive her First Communion on Christmas Day, 1677.

An American writer, Daniel Sargent, gave us the profound signification of this communion:

"Yet even then it must be acknowledged that the Iroquois had been longing very particularly for Holy Communion. The very mirages they had followed showed them famished for it. They had always tried to raise themselves higher than they were by joining themselves somehow to sufferings. And here were the sufferings of Christ with which they could unite themselves. Also the Iroquois had been tormented with the desire of girding themselves into a single body, which was greater than the sum of them all as individuals. In all their wars they had, like most imperialists, fought for an ultimate peace to be enjoyed in the unity of a longhouse which was the Long-House.

"The union with God, with the splendor of the saints, and with the heroism and weaknesses of the Church Militant, made possible by the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, was the very thing for which all their wars had been fought, and all their dreams had been dreamed."

Now Kateri, without clearly grasping all these implications, felt them sufficiently to prepare herself as well as possible for this encounter with Christ. According to Father Cauchetiere, her motto was, "Who will teach me what is most agreeable to God so that I may do it?" She lived up to this motto not only for a few months after her First Communion, but until the moment of her death.

Jansenist Arnauld spoke of the Real Absence of Christians before the real Presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. Such was not the case at the Mission of St. Francis Xavier. The humble bark church nearly became her home. She came to pray at four o'clock in the morning, attended the first Mass at the break of dawn, and another at sunrise. Several times during the day she could be found in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. She never missed evening prayer with the other faithful, and remain-

ed in church long after everyone had left. The weight of her love carried her to the tabernacle.

Her prayer was far more interior than vocal — an unceasing flow of love. Even so, the missionaries asserted that she did not use her praying as an excuse not to work. She was not one of those sanctimonious persons, more common in her day than in ours, who were at church when they should have been doing their housework.

At the end of the week, she examined her conscience with great care, did penance for her failings and went to confession.

When the moment came for her to receive our Lord for the first time, on Christmas Day 1677, Kateri was not simply a young Iroquois of exquisite purity; that day she realized the destiny of her race. Good though she was until then, from that morning on, she advanced with giant steps on the road to holiness, thinking herself all the while a very ordinary Christian.

## NEW TRIALS

The Cross has always been the prerogative of those who truly want to follow Christ. So was it Kateri's. And it was all the heavier because it resulted from her efforts to be charitable to her neighbor. After Christmas, the village was practically deserted. It was the time of the great annual hunting. In small groups, the Indians of St. Francis Xavier's scattered through the neighboring forest. On their snowshoes they went in search of caribou, elk, deer, and racoon. To be agreeable to her adoptive sister and to her "brother-in-law", Kateri accompanied them. During the long weeks she spent far from the village and its little church, she was faithful to her customary devotions. She even made herself a small shrine, which consisted only in a cross that she had cut out in the bark of a tree growing on the bank of a frozen brook. In union with Christ the Worker, she did not spare herself at work. She used to go to the forest for firewood; she followed the trails to cut up the wild animals the men had killed, often enough quite far from her wigwam, and with the other women made belts of wampum when the weather kept them inside. As discreetly as possible, she fasted in the heart of abundance.

During this hunting season something happened that was to make Kateri suffer as never before. One evening, one of the men, who had been hunting elk all day long, entered the hut very late. He was tired out and without eating or drinking threw himself on the nearest mat and quickly went to sleep. The next morning, his wife, was surprised not to find him next to her, but asleep next to Kateri. She thought that he had sinned with the young woman, and not aware that the latter generally went to pray at her little shrine, imagined that they were meeting secretly. As if to confirm her suspicions, that same day her husband spoke about a canoe that he had constructed for the return trip to the mission and added that he needed the assistance of one of the women of the band to help him pull it out of the woods. "Kateri will come," he said, for he knew how charitable she was. The Indian's wife, who was prudent and virtuous did not mention her doubts to anyone, but resolved to speak about them to Father Fremin at the mission.

On Palm Sunday, the hunters were back in the village and Kateri was with them. She was allowed to receive Holy Communion a second time on Easter Sunday and, not much later, was admitted into the Confraternity of the Holy Family, made up only

of the most fervent and the most missionary-minded of the faithful. Some time after, Father Fremin had her come to his home. He informed her about the suspicions of the hunter's wife and asked her what the truth of the matter was. Very calmly, Kateri simply denied the accusation, for she felt in no way guilty. The Father was satisfied with her answer. However, the Indian woman who had complained and a few other who had learned about the accusation, no one knows how, persisted in the conviction of her guilt. Never had Kateri suffered as much as on this occasion, not even in the midst of her penances and macerations, which she practised to obtain the conversion of her people and her own identification with Christ.

A trial of another sort awaited her. Her adopted sister, who was very fond of her, worried about her. Why did she not marry a good hunter, who would take care of her, providing her with food and clothes? The one time Kateri had gone to Montreal, she visited the Hotel-Dieu, conducted by the Daughters of St. Joseph, a community founded by Jerome Le Royer de la Dauversiere for the care of the ill and wounded. For the first time, she had seen women like herself, who had consecrated themselves to God by the vow of chastity. She felt strongly drawn to a similar calling. Her "sister", who did not succeed in changing her mind, was more successful with regard to old Anastasia Tegonhatsiohgo in convincing her that Kateri was taking the wrong direction. In turn the mistress of the long house tried to impose her point of view on the young woman, who was generally very submissive. Rather sharply, she answered Anastasia, who was a widow, "If you wish to remarry, do so! For me, all I want is peace!" The old woman was annoyed and she decided to speak to Father Cholenec. Kateri forestalled her and convinced the priest that she must not marry.

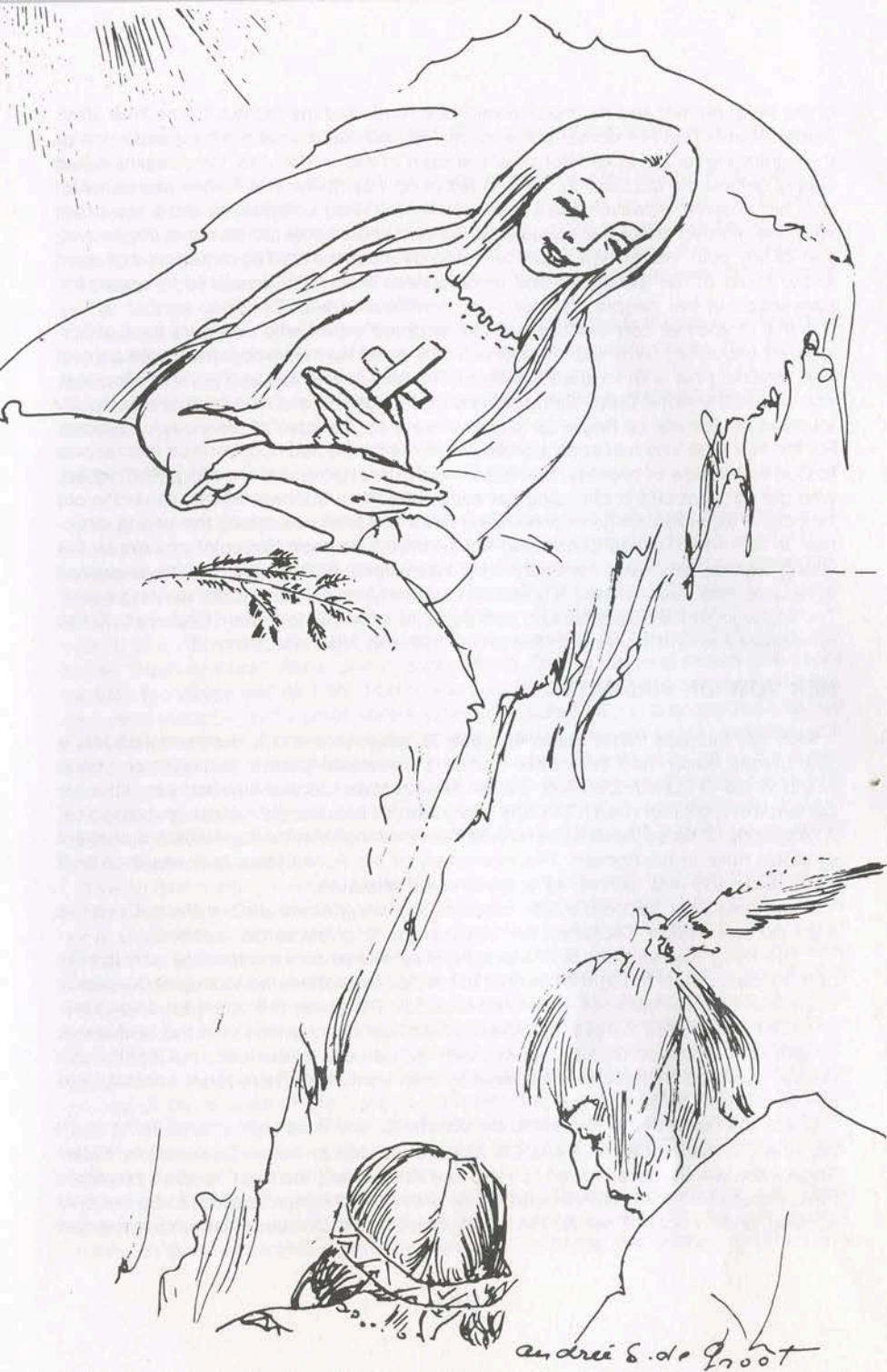
## HER VOW OF VIRGINITY

With her intimate friend Marie Therese Tegaiaguenta and a Huron named Marie Skarichions, Kateri had thought of founding a monastery for Indian nuns on Heron Island in the St. Lawrence River. Father Fremin objected that she had very little experience in Christian living. Only fifty years later, in Mexico, did her dream come true. A biography of Kateri Tekakwitha helped the viceroy of Mexico to establish a convent of Indian nuns in his domain. The monastery of the Poor Clares that was then built still stands and now serves as a government museum.

If she could not become a nun, perhaps she could dedicate her life to Christ as a lay person. Father Cholenec, her spiritual guide gives us his reaction:

"...The thing was so unusual, however, and appeared so incompatible with the life of the Indians, that I thought it best not to precipitate matters, so as to give her plenty of time to weigh a matter of such consequence. I tried her therefore, for some time, and after I had noted the great progress she made in every kind of virtue, and above all with what profusion God communed with His Servant, It seemed to me that Kateri's design could come from no other source than from Him. Thereupon, I at last gave her permission to carry it out...

"It was the Feast of the Annunciation March 25, 1679, at eight o'clock in the morning when, a moment after Jesus Christ gave Himself to her in Communion, Kateri Tekakwitha wholly gave herself to Him, and renouncing marriage forever, promised Him perpetual virginity. With a heart aglow with love she implored Him to be her only spouse, and to accept her as His bride. She prayed Our Lady, for whom she had



a tender devotion, to present her to her Divine Son; then, wishing to make a double consecration in one single act, she offered herself entirely to Mary at the same time that she dedicated herself to Jesus Christ, earnestly begging her to be her mother and to accept her as her daughter.”

## HER LAST YEAR

The twelve last months of her life were for Kateri filled with suffering. Her headaches, perhaps the result of the smallpox she had contracted as a child, increased. During her last summer she suffered from a serious illness from which she never fully recovered. It was followed by a slow fever, painful stomachaches, and frequent vomiting.

In February or March, 1680, with the best of intentions, she acted rashly. She had heard about St. Aloysius Gonzaga's penances, and in spite of her bad health, asked herself why she could not do as much. And then, St. Benedict, founder of the Benedictines, whose rule recommends moderation, had mortified himself by rolling in thorns. So she strewed her mat with big, pointed thorns, and slept on them for three nights in a row. Her friend Marie Therese Tegaiguenta saw that she looked wan and drawn, and after questioning her, told her that if she did this without her confessor's permission she was offending God. When Father Cholenec learned what Kateri had done, he blamed her and obliged her to throw the thorns into the fire. She instantly obeyed, but never recovered her strength.

On Tuesday of Holy Week, the missionary judged that it was time to give her the Holy Viaticum and offered to administer the Sacrament of Extreme Unction at the same time. She replied that there was no hurry and the priest delayed administering her until the next day.

Most of Kateri's friend had come back from the winter hunt. That night two members of the Holy Family Association, Marie the Penitent and Maguerite Gagouithon, kept watch at her bedside. The latter had practised penance to obtain a beautiful death for Kateri, who told her what she had done in her behalf, and encouraged her always to live as a fervent Christian. On Wednesday morning, the dying woman received Extreme Unction. Her friends and companions wanted to be present at the end. As it was Holy Week, they had to provide enough firewood for the last days of Lent, during which they did not intend to work. Marie Therese Tegaiguenta mentioned the problem to the missionary, who in turn spoke about it to Kateri: They were advised to see to their provisions for the last days of Holy week and to have no fear of not returning to the long house in time. At three o'clock in the afternoon, on April 17, 1680, her friends gathered together around Kateri's mat. There was no death struggle. She went to her beloved Lord smiling peacefully. She was not quite twenty-four years old.

A few minutes later, her pock-pitted face was radiant with light. Her people were convinced that a ray of the glory that was hers was reflected on her features.<sup>1</sup>

1. In 1941, Pope Pius XII officially proclaimed that Kateri Tekakwitha had practised all Christian virtues to a heroic degree, thereby granting the title of Venerable to the Lily of the Mohawks.  
On June 22, 1980 Pope John Paul II beatified her.



IT IS NOT ONLY by the title of example that we cherish the memory of those in heaven. We do so still more in order that the union of the whole Church may be strengthened in the Spirit by the practice of fraternal charity. For just as Christian communion among wayfarers brings us closer to Christ, so our companionship with the saints joins us to Christ, from whom as from their fountain and head issue every grace and the life of God's People itself.

It is supremely fitting, therefore, that we love those heirs of Jesus Christ, who are also our brothers and extraordinary benefactors, that we render due thanks to God for them and "suppliantly invoke them in obtaining benefits from God through His Son, Jesus Christ." For by its very nature every genuine testimony of love which we show to those in Heaven tends toward and terminates in God, who is wonderful in His saints and is magnified in them.

Vatican II  
Dogmatic Constitution Lumen  
Gentium, Chap. VII, par. 50