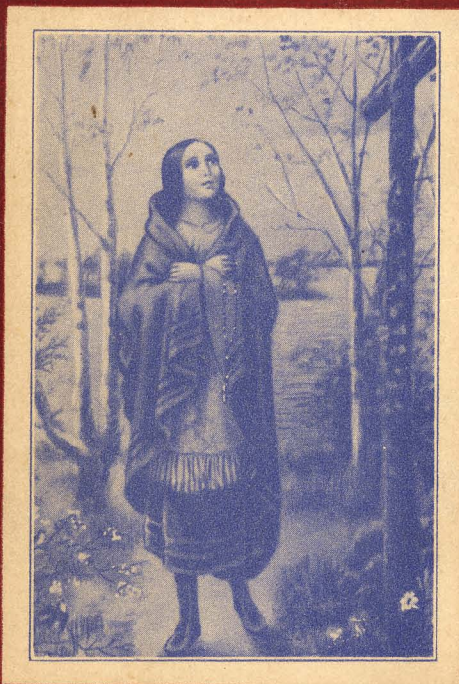


Sanctity in America



by
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CATHERINE TEKAKWITHA (1656-1680)
Iroquois Virgin — "Lily of the Mohawks"



CHAPTER XIII

CATHERINE TEKAKWITHA

"THE LILY OF THE MOHAWKS"



CATHERINE TEKAKWITHA was a North American Indian, born in 1656 at Ossernenon, now Auriesville, New York, the site where Isaac Jogues, René Goupil and John Lalande had been martyred (1642-1646) and where the Society of Jesus now has a shrine, a house for Jesuits in final probation, and for priests making retreats.

Tekakwitha's father was a pagan Indian of the Mohawk tribe, one of the Iroquois nations, her mother a Christian Algonquin whom he had taken captive. As both of her parents died of the plague when Tekakwitha was four years old, her uncle, an Indian chief, adopted her. Partly because the plague had affected her eyes, but chiefly to shun the village scandals, she kept to her cabin and devoted herself to domestic and other duties. The Mohawks were known as an immoral tribe, given to idling, gambling, torturing prisoners and to sorcery and debauchery.

After the plague the tribe moved to another site. Seven years later (1667) the French, to stop their invasions into Canada, destroyed these new villages, and the Mohawks migrated again, this time settling at Caughnawaga, now Fonda, in the State of New York, where the Franciscan Conventuals now have a Tekakwitha Friary.

As a result of a treaty signed with the French, the Mohawks agreed to receive missionaries. Tekakwitha's uncle, as

chieftain, entertained these men of God when they first came, but opposed their mission and later refused a welcome to them in his cabin. Thus, since it was dangerous for a young girl to move about alone, the missionaries could not come to know her nor could she seek them.

Her aunts kept urging Tekakwitha to marry; because she would not consent, she was treated as a slave. Her own people charged her with having an improper regard for the uncle, and denounced her to the missionary Father de Lamberville, but he perceived their evil motive, and believed that the girl they were accusing was innocent. Later Father de Lamberville, encountering Tekakwitha by chance, found her gentle and retiring. She asked to become a Christian, and after inquiry about her character he baptized her within a year (Easter, April 18, 1676), although it was customary for Indians to spend two years or more in preparation for Baptism. She was given the name Catherine.

Pagans and Christians alike admired her, but it was not long before some of her wicked tribesmen began to threaten and persecute her because of her Christian belief. When one entered her cabin and raised his axe to strike her, she said to him, "You may take my life, but not my faith," and he left without harming her.

The missionary helped the young girl escape from her vicious surroundings to LaPrairie, Canada, where the Jesuits had a village for Christian Indians. (It is now known as St. Francis Xavier's, Caughnawaga, where over 2,000 faithful Catholic Indians are devoted to the memory of the "Lily of the Mohawks.") Father de Lamberville recommended her to the missionaries in Canada as "a soul very dear to God." This was in the autumn of 1677. On Christmas Day of that same

year she was privileged to receive Holy Communion (though Indians were usually required to make a long preparation — often two or three years — for that Sacrament also).

Tekakwitha at first joined the other Indians when they went on the winter hunt, the men doing the killing, the women making the cabins, collecting the game and doing the household work. Her free time was spent in the woods praying before a cross cut in the bark of a tree. But this life tried her soul. She missed her chapel, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, daily Holy Mass. Moreover, she had been accused by a jealous wife of familiarity with her husband. She easily convinced the missionary of her innocence, and although the accuser repented for calumniating her, she never went on the hunt again.

Catherine wanted to give her life completely to God. Because of her deep piety and exemplary Christian life, the missionary Fathers admitted her into the Confraternity of the Holy Family established by Bishop Laval of Quebec, for those only whose faith was long and well tried. In this association she became a model even for the more fervent.

Tekakwitha's virtues led great numbers to imitate her. Her faith in God and in the teachings of His Church, her confidence in Him, her charity toward her neighbors, marked her as the highest type of Christian. To her the Blessed Virgin was a mother, and she loved to recite the Rosary. She was prudent and just; bore persecution, calumny and privation with exemplary patience. It required obedience to moderate her penances. She was so chaste that she obtained permission — the first of her race to do so! — to vow virginity.

Catherine Tekakwitha's death, like her life, made a deep impression on all who knew her. She foretold not only the hour of her death but the place of her burial, and declared how

she would obtain favors for friends from heaven. She died April 17, 1680 — the Wednesday of Holy Week — “made perfect in a short space.”

Immediately her promises came true: she appeared to several persons; protected her village in storm and warfare; and created such fervor among her people that it actually had to be restrained. Proofs of her favor with God became so convincing that her directors wrote her life as if to seek her beatification. Remarkable answers to prayer through her intercession, growing in number and importance, have been received.

The bishops of the United States, assembled in Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, 1884, petitioned the Holy See to institute the process for her beatification along with that of the martyrs Jogues, Brébeuf and their companions. The Hierarchy of Canada made a similar petition.

When the martyrs were beatified in 1925, preparations were made for the Cause of Tekakwitha. For good reasons it was instituted in Albany in which territory she lived for twenty years.

Steps toward Beatification

Beginning in June, 1931, the tribunal appointed by the Most Reverend Edmund F. Gibbons, Bishop of Albany, devoted a year to taking the testimony of those familiar with the story of Catherine Tekakwitha's life. In June, 1932, their report was transmitted to Rome. The Historical Section of the Congregation of Rites, after studying the testimony and documents in the case, reported to the Congregation in June, 1938, that the documents were genuine, and that they offered historical proof of her virtue and renown for sanctity.

Meantime, letters petitioning the introduction of the Cause were sent from the Hierarchies of the United States and Canada in 1935, from public officials, pastors and the heads of Religious Orders, universities, schools, Indian Missions, lay organizations — in all 620 petitions, with 96,555 signatures.

On May 9, 1939, the Sacred Congregation discussed the introduction of the Cause, which it is hoped may speedily advance to completion.

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By Most Rev. Amleto Giovanni Cicognani
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