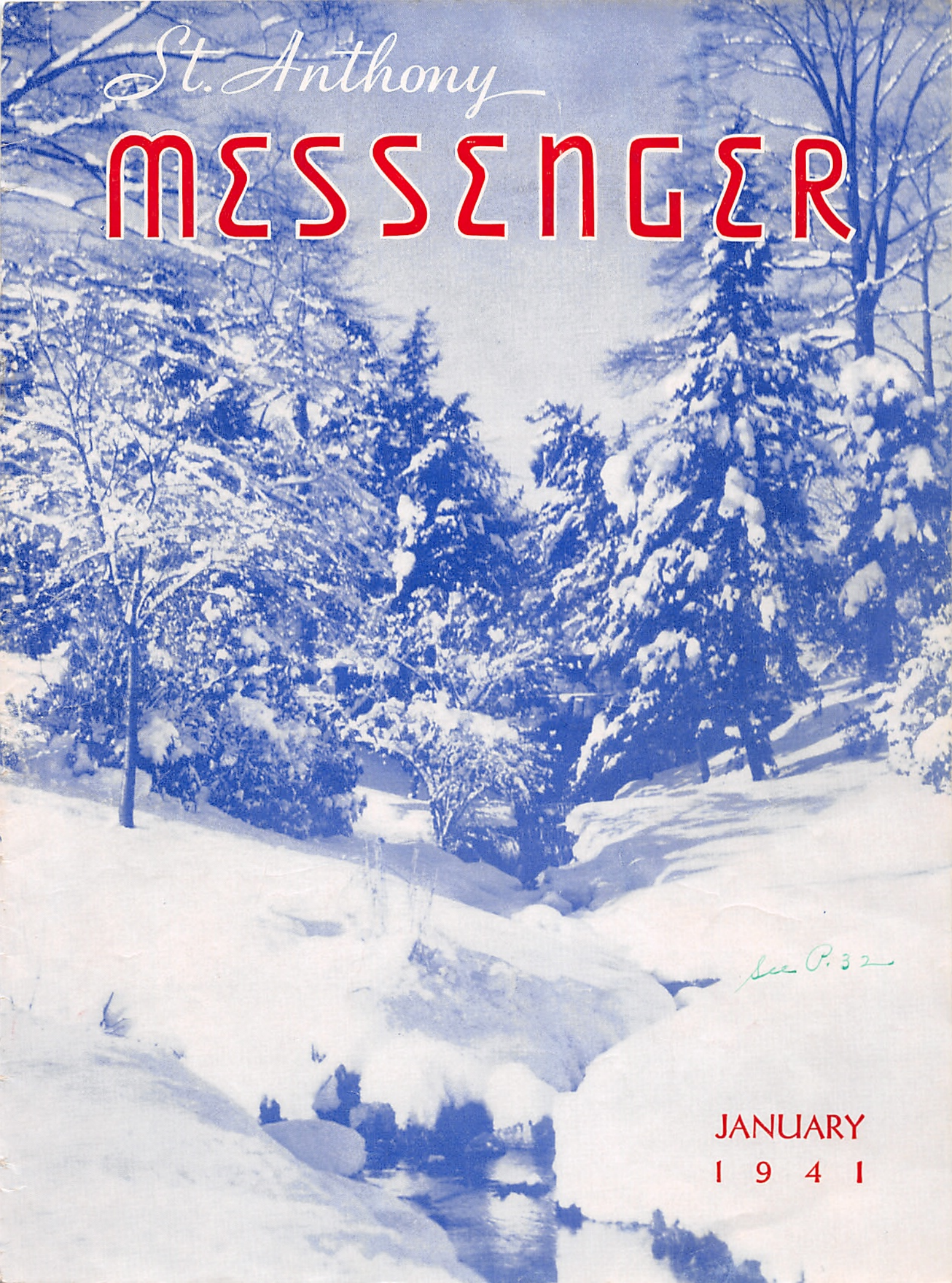
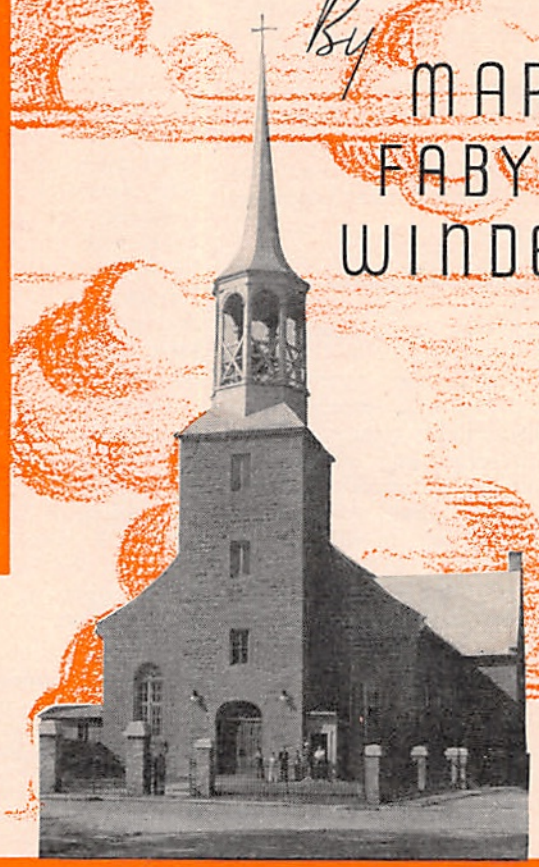

St. Anthony
MESSENGER
See P. 32
JANUARY
1941

Crowds

By MARY FABYAN WINDEATT



This church, rebuilt in 1845, occupies the site of the first Catholic church at Caughnawaga, an Indian settlement on the banks of the St. Lawrence River near Montreal, Canada.

Divine romance in the life of Kateri Tekakwitha, more commonly called the "Lily of the Mohawks"

THE bones of a dead Indian are generally not of much interest, unless perhaps in a medical school or museum. Last year, however, the bones of an Indian, dead for nearly three hundred years, became a first-class attraction for thousands of people.

These dry, brittle bones lured men and women hundreds of miles from their homes. These bones usurped week-ends and affected vacations. They involved visas and passports, customs men and fluctuations of the Canadian dollar.

Briefly, these particular bones were so different and glamorous that scores of Americans made a pilgrimage to their resting place at Caughnawaga, a little Indian settlement on the banks of the St. Lawrence River, near Montreal.

The bones belonged to Kateri Tekakwitha, the saintly "Lily of the Mohawks." They are undoubtedly the most valuable bones in the entire Dominion of Canada. As most people know, Kateri is the Indian girl, dead already at 24, whose Cause for Beatification is now pending at Rome. She was born in 1656 at Ossernenon, near the present city of Albany, N. Y., and is the only Indian ever to have been declared Venerable.

The little Indian maid's early life is highly interesting. When she was only four years old, smallpox swept through her village and caused the death of both her parents and a younger brother, as well as partially destroying her own eyesight. A pagan uncle and two aunts promptly took her into their own family, reasoning that some day she would marry a young brave who would support them in their old age. Because the half-blind youngster groped her way about with the aid of a stick, these relatives began to call her "Tekakwitha," or "she who moves all before her." They fed and clothed the little one, taught her the usual tasks for girls her age, and did not worry too much over her inclination to remain most of the day in the smoke-filled cabin.

"The sun makes her eyes sore," they said, and allowed the child to dress the skins of animals, to make moccasins and mats, in the semi-darkness of their wooden long house.

Tekakwitha grew up, a bit shy because of her affliction, but a good worker. When she was eleven years old, the family presented her as a prospective bride to the rest of Ossernenon. Three years before she had gone through an engagement ceremony with a boy her own age and now the time was at hand for the wedding ceremonies.

Accordingly, one day in 1667 the

at CAUGHNAWAGA

These graduates of the Catholic school at Caughnawaga are direct descendants of the Mohawk Tribe. The Rev. R. Lalonde, S.J., is pastor of the Caughnawaga Indian settlement.

families of both children assembled for the marriage rites. A meal was prepared and everyone waited for the timid, small breasted and still immature Tekakwitha to offer her prospective husband some food. By such an act, she would at once proclaim herself his bride. The uncle and aunts would gain the son-in-law for whom they had waited so long, and everyone would be happy.

But the usually obedient little girl refused to do her part. She ran crying from the cabin when the time came to meet her husband.

"I don't want to marry anyone!" she sobbed. "I don't want to be anybody's wife!" And to the amazement of all the relations, she rushed outside into the dark woods that stretched for miles about the settlement.

It was as though a bombshell had dropped on Ossernenon. Tekakwitha had refused to marry! Deep anger flushed the faces of the prospective in-laws and presently they stalked out of the cabin in deep rage. None of the excuses, hastily proffered by the girl's dumbfounded uncle and aunts, could pacify them.

"Our boy will find a better wife than a flat-chested, half-blind girl," they said. "You can keep your scrawny Tekakwitha who has such bad manners."

When the little fugitive from matrimony returned home that night, she had to meet a storm of abuse. Her people were furious, for already the news had gone abroad that she had scorned the fine young husband her uncle had selected for her. She had broken her engagement bond, and now there would be no strong young son-in-law to bring home food and skins from the hunt, to care for the uncle and aunts when they were old.

"You are an ungrateful wretch!" stormed the uncle as the slender, trembling child crossed the threshold of his house.

"People are already making fun of us," cried the aunts. "Oh, stupid one, you will pay well for this! Wait and see."

Tekakwitha was just eleven years old, but her childhood was over. From now on she had to do an adult's work and bear the taunts and jibes of the entire community. The very children

Thousands of visitors come annually to the tomb of Kateri Tekakwitha, the young Indian girl whose cause for canonization is now before the authorities in Rome.

mocked her for her failure to marry, covering her with mud and pelting her with stones as she went to and from the fields.

The young braves thought it fine sport to plague her with unwanted attentions, even to take after her with tomahawks when she refused to permit their impetuous, hot-blooded advances. Girls her own age shunned her completely, so that Tekakwitha kept more and more to herself. She scarcely ever spoke, working silently at her beads and skins and always remaining away from the pagan orgies and festivals that were part of life at Ossernenon.

SHE had no friends at all, unless one counted the Christian captives who lived in the village, remote from their pagan overlords. These Christians hailed from Canada, and had been seized long ago by raiding Iroquois who descended upon their village of Three Rivers. Strangely enough, they were well treated by their captors and some of them had even married into the Iroquois tribe. But the majority kept to themselves, practicing their Christian faith as well as they could, and praying that some day a Black Robe would come to see them again.

Tekakwitha knew that her own mother had been a Christian captive, and often she hid herself in the bushes to watch these other Christians at prayer. She liked these "Prayer Indians" who never went to the torture ceremonies or sensually vicious festivals of her own people. Their rosaries, their statues and holy pictures intrigued the lonely little girl, but she never asked questions as to their meaning. It was enough for her that the *Prayer Indians* did not torment her, or make fun of her wish to

remain single, untouched by any brave's caress.

"They are good people," she told herself, often wishing that she could be bold enough to make friends with them.

The same year when Tekakwitha had refused to marry, the Jesuits came to Ossernenon to instruct and baptize among the struggling Christian community. It was a fine opportunity for the small outcast to find out about the Catholic faith, or "Prayer," but she was much too shy to speak to the priests. The pale faces of Fathers Pierron, Boniface and de Lamberville frightened her, and she contented herself with listening to their instructions from a vantage place in the woods. Eight years passed, and she still made no effort to speak to the *Prayer Indians.* She was by now nineteen years old, sturdy hipped and full bosomed, the desire of many a painted brave, and yet a puzzling curiosity in the whole settlement, always with her shawl drawn well over her head to protect her eyes from the sunlight. Hard work was her lot, and abuse at all times.

It is strange that Tekakwitha first came to know a Black Robe because she had met with an accident in the woods. Having fallen over a hidden root, she had hurt her leg and was confined to her cabin when Father James de Lamberville came to see her uncle one day in the year 1675.

"My uncle is not at home," said Tekakwitha, as Father de Lamberville came into the dark shadows of the cabin. She was pitifully shy before the missionary and longed eagerly to make her escape. But how could she run away into the woods with an injured leg? There was nothing to do but remain where she was, sitting on her mat, eyes bent upon the beadwork in her hands, heart thumping painfully with excitement.

History is silent on the exact conversation that took place between Tekakwitha and the French Jesuit, but it is enough to learn that at last friendship came to the lonely Indian maiden. She found the missionary kindly and eager to help if he could. Little by little she told him her life story, with all its tragedy, but then courage filled her heart to discourse on other topics. What did it mean to be a *Prayer Indian,* she asked? What did one have to do to become baptized?

Father de Lamberville explained, but he was cautious. Was not the girl's uncle a powerful chief in the Mohawk tribe? He would be very angry if Tekakwitha should join the *Prayer Indians.* Yet his words inspired Tekakwitha to even more questions, and soon the Jesuit saw that he had met one of God's chosen. No doubt this child of a Christian Algonquin mother and a pagan Iroquois father had been one with the spirit of the Church for many years.

The Jesuit priest went back to his own house in a thoughtful frame of mind. But rarely had he met as intelligent a girl as Tekakwitha. And in all his travels among the Indian tribes had he ever found a woman remaining in the single state because something told her it was on a higher plane than wedlock? Presently Father de Lamberville was questioning his little tribe of *Prayer Indians,* who numbered about eighty, and the information he received made him happy. Tekakwitha was a good girl. She was kind and a hard worker. She went in for none of the vicious and often immoral practices of her pagan people. Never once, the Christians told the missionary, had Tekakwitha gone to the torture of captives. She liked to be alone, and she led a very hard life at home because she had refused to marry.

"Tekakwitha would make a good Christian," said the *Prayer Indians.* "We have watched her for years, and we know."

Prospective Indian converts were always a matter of concern to the missionaries. They were frequently made to wait two or three years before they were baptized, since to be a Christian in a pagan community was not easy. But in Tekakwitha's case, the missionary shortened the period of trial. She seemed to have spiritual wisdom beyond her years, and by Easter Sunday of the following year she was received into the Faith. Catherine was her baptismal name, or "Kateri" in her own language. At last the days of loneliness were at an end. The young Indian girl found herself surrounded by scores of fellow Christians.

BUT if the days of loneliness were at an end, the days of persecution were not. Kateri's uncle was furious at the step she had taken. Her aunts nagged at her continuously and Father de Lamberville soon realized that the new convert could not remain in her own village. It would be better for her to go away, as hundreds had done before her, to the Christian settlement at La Prairie, near Montreal. Although it was a seven-day trip, by stream and portage, the inconvenience and risk counted for little in the end. At La Prairie, Kateri would be able to practice her new religion in peace. She would be among congenial people, and she would be happy.

Upper New York State is a vacation Paradise. Saratoga Springs, Lake George, Lake Placid, Cliff Haven are familiar resorts to thousands of New Yorkers, and through this country of stream and mountain the twenty-year-old Kateri was presently wending her way. She had a couple of Christian guides who had come down from Montreal and could tell stories of the Happy Hunting Ground that was waiting for her. Although they knew

For a New Friend

By FRANCES M. MILLER

Measured by passing days, our friendship's span
Has been but brief, yet in this little space,
As though predestined from the dawn of man,
Our lives have met and merged with easy grace.
The secret thoughts I never dreamed revealing
To mortal soul, somehow are yours to know
And I, in turn, have been with prideful feeling
Recipient of your tales of joy and woe.

We are no longer children; I have learned
That friendship, born so brightly, often dies
Upon the altar where it clearly burned,
Snuffed by Life's onslaughts and its subtle lies,
And pray that we may fashion through the years
In mutual trust, unbound by any vow,
A shield of all our laughter and our tears
To guard the flame that glows so bravely now.

themselves pursued by Kateri's irate uncle, the little group pressed steadily onward, plunging through forests and crossing majestic Lake Champlain in their canoe. Finally their efforts were rewarded and they arrived at St. Francis Xavier Mission, which had been founded by the Jesuits expressly as a Catholic Indian colony, devoted to peaceful living and brotherhood in Christ.

KATERI was delighted with her new surroundings and the kindly Indians who gave her a home in their cabin. For the first time in her life she had women friends, and when she was given permission to make her First Communion at Christmas, her happiness knew no limits. From this day on, the Eucharist was her sole desire. So attractive was her devotion that other Indians strove to kneel near her in the chapel.

One writer has described Kateri's life in her new home in these words:

"The chapel became her rendezvous whenever she left her cabin, from four in the morning until all the Masses were over, often during the day, especially in winter and the rainy season when she could not work in the fields, and always for night prayer."

A few months after her arrival at the Mission, Kateri went on the hunt with her companions. Groups of men and women spread out over the snow-bound St. Lawrence to search for food and skins. Elk, beaver, bear, fox, otter and seal were the chief quarry, the men doing the hunting and the women setting up cabins and cooking the meals. Everyone worked hard. The missionaries had cautioned their charges to be faithful to their prayers and to refrain from drinking, for well the priests knew that the hunting season was often the occasion for vice and license. The Indians from St. Francis Xavier's accordingly set aside a time each day for prayer in common. They touched no liquor and all seemed peaceful. Then suddenly Kateri found herself the center of a scandal, found herself accused of having improper relations with another woman's husband.

"I have seen you stealing off into the woods," announced the jealous wife one day. "Do not think that you have been fooling me, you stranger from another land!"

Kateri was dumbfounded. She often slipped away into the woods. With no chapel, no Mass or Sacraments in the wilderness, she had felt the urge to pray in some place far from the eyes of her companions. On a large tree she had cut the symbol of the cross, and often stayed many hours before it on her knees in the snow. But that anyone should think she went into the woods for an evil purpose wounded her deeply. She declared her innocence as best she could, but it was many weeks before the calumny was settled and her reputation restored.

Kateri lived four years at the Mission, or until her death, edifying all by her Christian virtue. So great was her influence upon others that the whole community found itself imitating her zeal for prayer and penance. Remembering the cruelty of her own people to their prisoners of war, the long hours of torture inflicted on captives by fire and knife, Kateri seems to have dedicated herself to reparation for such excesses. Unknown to her confessor, she engaged in the severest of penances, seeking out remote corners of the forest where she could pray and suffer for her tribesmen. In this she was joined by a few women friends, with the result that the Indian village on the banks of the St. Lawrence soon became a model of piety. Mortification entered into everyone's life. The primitive Church scarcely knew any greater devotion than that which reigned at Kateri's new home.

IT WAS the year 1680 which saw the death of the pious Indian girl, at the early age of twenty-four. She was buried at the Mission where she had spent such happy days, being openly venerated as a saint by everyone. In later years when the Jesuits removed the settlement to meet increasing agricultural needs, Kateri's relics went, too. Today the St. Francis Xavier Mission stands at Caughnawaga, Quebec, the final site chosen in 1719. The reservation extends about the church, reaching eight miles along the wind-swept St. Lawrence and four miles inland. Approximately 2,500 Indians live at Caughnawaga, and there are six schools taught by the Sisters of St. Anne. The Iroquois language lives on in the little settlement, being used in liturgical prayers and hymns.

The visitor to the St. Francis Xavier Mission need not look for the grave of the Indian girl who made it famous. The bones of Kateri are kept in a small casket in the Church and may be seen through the glass top. Here are also priceless gifts presented to the Mission by the French court of Louis XIV, such as a hand-carved altar, bronze candlesticks, a silver crucifix and a silver monstrance.

Such is Caughnawaga, in view of the city of Montreal, where countless pilgrims came last summer, and will continue to come throughout the years. History is here, and holiness, and the spirit of a little Indian girl who will soon be called Blessed.