

# ACI

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*CUM PERMISSU*

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# THE LILY OF THE MOHAWKS

(Kateri Tekakwitha)

WHEN at last we looked down and around us, after gazing long at the unending rush of the waters of the beautiful Falls of Niagara, and at the rainbow in its spray, our eyes fell upon some tablets of marble and bronze set in the ground among the pines that crown the banks. On these tablets were engraved the names of the heroic French Jesuits who were the first white men to penetrate the forest to carry the Light of Faith to the savage tribes who inhabited it, and who had sealed their daring with their blood.

We realized that we stood upon holy ground enriched with the blood of the brave leaders of Catholicism, and felt like Jacob awaking from his dream, when he could do naught but exclaim with amazement: "Truly, this place is the house of God and the gate of heaven!" (Genesis, XXVIII, 17).

From that moment our imagination took an entirely different course. While we strolled toward the train that waited to carry us across those immense forests of which Longfellow speaks in "Hiawatha" and other poems, it seemed to us that suddenly, behind the trunks of the broad oaks, we were going to discover the fierce faces of redskins ambushing the invader.

Behind us stretched the State of New York, known today to the entire world; in those bygone days, it was inhabited by the warring and indomitable Iroquois, with their five Indian tribes of Mohawks, Oneidas, Senecas, Cayugas, and Onondagas, always disposed to prey upon the Christian Indians of the North.

Before us lay Canada and the City of Three Rivers, reminding us of the heroic undertakings of the missionaries and the heroic deeds of the Algonquin Indians, converts to the Faith in that French Catholic Colony, whose purity of custom and extraordinary fervor emulated the faith of the early Christians.

While the train wound its way amongst ever-green and oak, leaving at our backs the seething waters of the Niagara rapids, we recalled that

not far away, in the City of Auriesville, rose the "Hill of the Martyrs," so called for having received the blood of Fathers Goupil, Lalande, Jogues and their companions.

These were the thoughts which absorbed our minds as we approached the City of Montreal. Not far from this populous Canadian City lies the Town of Caughnawaga—the first Catholic colony refuge of the Algonquin Indians, in whose time it was known as St. Francis Xavier's Mission. Here, in 1667 and the years following, had gathered the first converts to Catholicism among the Iroquois, obliged frequently to flee from their huts in order to preserve their faith.

It was in the Church of Caughnawaga that our attention was drawn to a tomb of granite with urn and cross of the same material. Upon the tombstone there is this Indian inscription;

Kateri Tekakwitha  
April 17, 1680  
Onkweonweke Katsitstio  
Teotsitsianekaron.

which, translated, reads:

Catherine Tekakwitha  
April 17, 1680

The loveliest flower that ever blossomed  
amongst true men.

This tomb has, since 1680, been an object of veneration to the Indians of the North and to many other dwellers in that region; a great number of miracles have been worked there, and soil taken from the grave has wrought cures. This fact has helped to introduce the Cause of this child of the Iroquois forest, a forest sprinkled with the blood of the Canadian Martyrs.

It was in the year 1656 in Ossernenon (today Albany, New York) that in a settlement of fierce Iroquois Mohawks, a family of redskins, was favored with the birth of a baby girl who was to be the pride of their race. It is indeed, mystifying how the birth date of an insignificant papoose has



been preserved when, even in our day, despite complicated statistical systems, many important dates are not forthcoming.

Of this Indian baby, it cannot be said that she saw the light of day at birth, since the tents, or teepees, of the Iroquois, made from skins, were hermetically sealed except for a small slit in the upper part. This was used as an escape for the smoke from the fire which served to heat as well as to cook their food.

The father of the papoose was a fierce Iroquois Chief who, in a warlike expedition against the Algonquins of Canada, had taken captive a Catholic Indian maiden of Three Rivers, and shortly after made her his squaw.

The Christian Algonquin women were noted for being excellent mothers of families; hence, the Iroquois endeavored to obtain them at any cost and did so, generally, by force of arms. The mother of this "Lily of the Mohawks," as she came to be called, was no doubt such a one: her name is thought to have been the Indian for "Meadow Flower." From her, no doubt, Catherine inherited the sweetness, docility, and self-control which always characterized her.

Some days passed before the newborn child was named, as it was the custom of the redskins that the papoose should earn its name; that is, that the name should be symbolic of some quality or characteristic habit discovered in the child. We do not know what attribute in this infant caused her parents to name her "Tekakwitha", which means "she who removes all that is before her", but one thing is certain: the name applied admirably to all she did during her entire life, for she removed anything placed in her path which might interfere with her straight course to God.

It was useless to think of having the baby baptised. To avoid abuses, the Missionaries had prohibited administration of this Sacrament by the Indians, and since only captured missionaries, awaiting martyrdom, could penetrate those woods, there was nothing but Baptism of Desire for the little ones when their age permitted them to comprehend fully the meaning of being a Christian.

Well wrapped in cedar bark "wool" and attached to a cradle board, Tekakwitha was carried as a bundle on her mother's back when the latter went out to her tasks in the field according to Indian custom. While the mother toiled, Tekakwitha hung suspended in her cradle from the

branch of a tree and, like the Iroquois meadow flowers, was rocked by the brisk, fresh air of the country and lulled by the murmuring cascade of Caughnauriga or "Laughing Waters."

Tekakwitha enjoyed only four years of her mother's love, for a terrible epidemic of smallpox broke out and carried off, one after the other, her mother, father, and little brother. The child, the only survivor of the epidemic, was taken to the hut of an aunt and uncle, who hoped through the advantages of a successful marriage that she might reward them in the future. Soon, Tekakwitha was performing the duties common to her sex, and was outstanding amongst her companions for her singular sweetness and charming modesty.

When the child had been six years in her aunt's house, the Canadian Government, exasperat-



*Kateri Tekakwitha*



ed by the continuous assaults of the Iroquois, decided to end once and for all their lawless outbreaks, amongst which were the repeated assassinations of the saintly French missionaries, today venerated on our altars as martyrs. With fire and sword, united in the same cause, the white men and Christian redskins set out against the Iroquois, and after some days of useless resistance, the latter surrendered to the Canadian Government.

Saved from this new catastrophe, Tekakwitha. inconsolable for the loss of her companions, wept at the misfortune which was oppressing her race, but little did she know that in the inscrutable designs of Divine Providence the hour of her deliverance had come.

With the French, there entered amongst the Mohawks the "Black Robe", (R. P. Pierron, S. J.) of the Christians, and with him, the Light of Heaven. The Missionary lived with the Indians, a practice repugnant to white men and never practised before by any; he taught them the doctrine of Christ, and received them into His Church. Tekakwitha wanted to become a convert, but her uncle, one of the Chiefs of the Iroquois, would not allow it. Thus many years passed by.

In accordance with Indian custom, a marriage was arranged by relatives when a boy and girl reached ten years of age. Tekakwitha's partner was chosen by her uncle and aunt and the time came when she was expected to fulfil the agreement. But, the young girl refused to marry.

Then, her martyrdom began. Her aunt and uncle scorned her. All persecuted her. Saints practise virtue to an heroic degree; Tekakwitha was already commencing.

Secretly, she learned from other Catholic Indians the rudiments of their Faith, and finally decided to request baptism of Fr. Lamberville, S.J. who had substituted Fr. Pierron.

The Missionary, although deeply impressed by the fervor of the neophyte, did not hide from her, the trouble and persecution that such a step must bring with it in the future. She was prepared to accept all, and Fr. Lamberville baptized her on Easter Day, 1676, in the midst of a joyous gathering of the other Christians, and gave her the name of Catherine, Kateri being an Indian corruption. From that time on, her modesty and fervor won for her a respect among the Christian Indians which has continued to this day.

Strengthened by the Sacrament of Baptism,

this child of grace returned to her family to tread the Via Dolorosa. All persecuted, calumniated and tortured her. Even the small boys of the villages considered themselves justified in shouting insulting names after her, and throwing mud at her as she passed by, but her thoughts were always so intent on God that she appeared not to belong to this earth.

All this she suffered with heroic silence in gratitude for belonging to Christ, and never showed the least sign of impatience. Her uncle, one of her persecutors, became daily more bitter and sarcastic, and her heroism reached its highest point when she offered no resistance against a huge man who menaced her with a hatchet unless she would be willing to renounce her Faith. "You may take my life," she said calmly, "but you cannot uproot my Faith". But when she saw that they were plotting schemes against her innocence, then, true to her name of Tekakwitha, "that which removes all obstacles before her", she decided to flee.

Aided by Fr. Lamberville and accompanied by Christian friends and relatives, she escaped to the Catholic mission in Canada, then known as St. Francis Xavier's, and arrived there after an arduous journey through the forest, pursued by her uncle, who nearly ruined her plan.

Father Lamberville presented Tekakwitha to Father Cholenec, thus: "Catherine Tekakwitha is going to live in your mission. Would you do me the favor of placing her under your personal spiritual direction? You will soon realize what a treasure I send you. Take good care of her! Let her develop in your hands and make herself more and more adaptable for the glory of God and the salvation of her soul, which is certainly very much loved by Him."

Once installed in one of the huts of these heroic Canadian Catholics, a new life began for Tekakwitha, one of peace and retirement, one marked by close union with God.

After she had received her First Holy Communion much sooner than was customary for Christian converts, the Sacred Host became for her the only desire of her life. She visited Our Lord in the Tabernacle five times daily on her way to and from her work in the field. On the bitter cold days of winter, when the snow prevented the Indians from working outside their huts, Tekakwitha, on her knees before the little altar, appeared-



insensible to weather and weariness, and used the hours when the others were at rest, to adore her God in the Blessed Sacrament.

"Prayer" is the name by which those Indians referred to the Catholic religion, as though they realized in some marvelous way that prayer is the basis as well as the essence of our Holy Faith. But none amongst them understood better than Tekakwitha what prayer means to the life of the soul.

Midway through the forest, in a clump of trees which hid it from curious eyes, she had placed a cross of wood of her own making in order that she might go there from time to time while at work out of doors, to say a few short prayers to her Crucified Saviour.

Her frequent visits to that rustic oratory awakened the suspicions of one of her companions who, judging her guilty of some fault, accused her to the Missionary. When the truth was discovered, Tekakwitha won admiration while her accuser, with a wisdom greater than that of many a Christian, publicly acknowledged that she had done wrong in too hastily judging her innocent companion.

The time came when, with the best intentions, her guardians, believing they were acting for the girl's good, arranged an advantageous marriage for her. Horrified at the idea, Tekakwitha ran to tell the Missionary what was taking place and, to put an end to such plans, asked and obtained permission to make a vow of perpetual virginity. God has His methods of reaching souls that love Him, and Tekakwitha was one of these.

Necessity required that she should publicly declare her vow, though she would have preferred to keep it secret. It was a new idea to the Indians, that of a life wholly consecrated to God, and from that time on, Tekakwitha was regarded by them with respect. Her example even awakened in other souls the desire for a higher life. Many young boys and girls desired to follow her example, but that way is not for all.

Tekakwitha continued her life of prayer and charity, and grew in sanctity. She had received great graces and she was the model of Christian

virtue among the Indians but, at last, the time came when God called her to Himself. "In caritate perpetua dilexi te; ideo atraxi te, miserans tui". "I have loved thee with an everlasting love, therefore have I drawn thee, taking pity on thee". (Jerem. XXXI).

After a brief illness, she died on April 17th, 1680, at the age of twenty four. Her last words summed up the whole aim of her life: "Jesus, I love Thee".

The Decree declaring the heroicity of her virtues was given by the Holy Father on June 3rd, 1943.

These particulars closely resemble another Little Flower of our own day who perfumed the world with the fragrance of her virtues — St. Theresa of the Child Jesus. How well this modern saint describes Tekakwitha in the beautiful introduction to her Autobiography: "I often asked myself why God has preferences, why all souls do not receive the same measure of grace... why so many poor savages should die without even having heard the name of God.

"Our Lord has deigned to explain to me this mystery. He showed me the book of Nature, and then I understood that all the flowers He created are beautiful... I understood that if all the flowers wished to be roses, Nature would lose her spring-time beauty.

"It is the same in the world of souls, Our Lord's living garden. He has deigned to create great saints who may be compared to the lilies and the roses; but He has also created others, not so great, who must be content with being simple violets or daisies, flowering at His feet, and whose mission is to please His Divine Eyes when He deigns to look down upon them... He has created the little child who can but utter feeble cries, and the poor savage who has only the natural law for his guide, and it is to these hearts that He deigns to confer His love; these are the flowers of the field whose simplicity charms Him, and by lowering Himself to them, Our Lord shows His infinite greatness". (Life of St. Therese of Lisieux, Chap. I).

M. A. VILARET, A. C. I.