KATERI

By

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ON THE BANKS of a stream flowing somewhere in the area that is now the New York-Quebec boundary, there grew a tree in the seventeenth century. The tree is past discovery, but legend says that it bore a cross cut deep into the wood by the hand of an Indian girl named Kateri Tekakwitha.

That tree and its cross have become a symbol for the saintliness of Kateri Tekakwitha, through whose intercession numerous miracles have been performed. She has been credited with countless cures of the sick. Her crucifix, her blanket, the earth from her grave, all were said to be beneficial merely by their touch.

The Third Council of Baltimore petitioned for her sanctification in 1884, and this was renewed in 1922. Recently the diocesan investigation has been reopened. Despite all this, many Catholics today have not heard of her.

Life began for Kateri in 1656 in Indian territory, now the upper part of New York State. Her mother was a Christian, but her father a pagan, of the savage Iroquois tribe, whose members inflicted unspeakable tortures on the Jesuit missionaries.

Her parents died of smallpox when she was only four, and she became the ward of her uncle. The disease had marked her face and weakened her eyesight, for which reasons she preferred the seclusion of her uncle's cabin to mingling with the other villagers. This retirement nurtured her instinctive purity and devotedness to God.

Her rejection of suitors was unusual among a people whose promiscuity was a frequent handicap to their conversion. Once when her aunt brought home a young warrior with the hope of persuading her to marry him, Kateri fled from the cabin and returned only when she was sure she would no longer be annoyed.

Until she was almost nineteen, her shyness and seclusion and the ill-temper of her uncle kept her from being noticed by the Jesuit missionaries who traveled among the Indians seeking converts. By chance, one of them, Father James de Lamberille, visited her cabin one day and was struck by her eagerness for the Catholic faith.

Nevertheless, he hesitated to baptize her for a long time, knowing the inconstancy of the Indians. But her desire to learn about the Church and her modesty and charity soon made him realize that she was not the average Indian he knew. In 1676, when she was twenty, she was baptized.

Her religious fervor brought contempt from the other inhabitants of the village, too pagan to realize that a saint was living among them. Her uncle constantly assailed her for her Christianity, and vicious rumors about her chastity sprang up out of jealous hearts.

A brother-in-law of Kateri's and two Christian Indians arrived in the camp and, recognizing her plight, made plans to aid her escape. Sault St. Louis, a Catholic community near the present site of Montreal, was their destination. In an escape as dramatic as any in motion pictures, they spirited her away over rivers nd lakes with her uncle in hot pursuit.

Making swift progress in his canoe, he overtook them, but the young braves managed to hide Kateri in the bushes. The uncle demanded to know where she was, brandishing his warclub. But the braves, through their apparent nonchalance and lack of interest, convinced him that she had fled the camp in the opposite direction with another convert, and he turned back leaving the girl in safety.

In Sault St. Louis, Kateri found an environment in which she could practice the austerity and Catholic piety she desired. She would sometimes walk barefoot through the midwinter snows, a penance uncalled for by the purity of her life. When the missionary priest found out about these physical mortifications, he could persuade her to give them up only by allowing her to attend Mass before dawn, to receive frequent Communion, and to spend her time in the rude chapel meditating and praying.

It was during this period of