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Our Visit to Caughnawaga and the Relics of Venerable Kateri

By MARIE LONGPRE

We had been urged by Frances Hand, in Montreal, to visit the historic Indian Mission of St. Francis Xavier at Caughnawaga, treasure-trove of Kateri Tekakwitha. Caughnawaga stretches about eight miles in length and four in width, beside the St. Lawrence River.

It is governed by a Federal Agency and by a Mayor and Councillors elected by the Iroquois. Three thousand Iroquois comprise the population—only 328 of them are not Catholic. They do not care for farming, and rent their farms to their white friends across the river. Excellent mechanics, their reputation as steel workers and bridge builders is unequalled, and they are in great demand all over the continent.

The Tekakwitha school, built in 1949, is equipped with the most up to date facilities. The boys attending the school number 350. The Sisters of St. Ann efficiently teach the girls and little tots. Two Jesuit Fathers and three laymen teach the older boys.

For a few minutes we stood in silence in front of the church and took in the details. Built of gray stone in the form of a Latin Cross, with easy sloping roof and a high, needle-like spire, on top of which spins a French cock—how perfectly it blended into the surrounding countryside.

Mass had just commenced as we entered the church. Worn kneeling-benches and pews ran up to the Altar rail in stiff, rather uncomfortable rows. The High Altar, in white and gold rococo, the life-sized Christ, oil paintings and frescoed ceiling, presented a picture quite unexpected in a mission church.

Many threads run into the fabric of its history. The present church is a hundred years old. It was built to take the place of the old one, which was falling to pieces after nearly 130 years of service.

Church Built in 17th Century

In 1670, Father Claude Dablon, Superior of the French Jesuit Missions of North America, decided that a church should be erected in honour of St. Francis Xavier. That first church is the venerable ancestor of the present building.

Four times the Iroquois moved before they settled in 1719 at Caughnawaga. There they have been ever since.

Joan Zanichelli and I introduced ourselves to the Superior of the Mission and mentioned to him that we were pilgrims from Victoria. Father was kind enough to conduct us around the Mission. "It, as you know," explained Father, "is dedicated to St. Francis Xavier, the patron saint of all missions." That explains his statue on the High Altar as well as the large fresco which occupies the roof of the nave

representing him in Glory. This painting, as well as many others, depicting the Principal Mysteries of the Faith, are due to the brush of Guido Nincheri, an artist of the Florentine school. It took him four years, from 1924 to 1928, to complete this work. Colour, sunshine and clarity of conception are its chief characteristics. Every Indian, young and old, literate and illiterate, can understand its message.

"Just look," said Father, "at those two large statues up in the organ loft, one of St. Ignatius Loyola, the other of his disciple and friend, St. Francis Xavier." St. Ignatius, in particular, is worthy of attention. The sculptor shows him holding in his right hand, extended towards the sky, a Monstrance for the whole world to see. An unusual pose of the great Saint, but perfectly characteristic of his role as initial promoter, after the Renaissance, of the frequent reception of the Holy Eucharist. The two statues are hand-carved and take their place among the first manifestations of French Canadian sculpture.

How the Church Got Its Crucifix

We had been considering the Crucifix, which on account of its size and place, quite liturgically imposed itself upon the mind of anyone who entered the church as the most important object there. Is it of wood? No, but it is not devoid of human interest. It is the gift of the parishioners.

Back in 1907, thirty-five men of Caughnawaga were accidentally killed. While working at the erection of the Quebec Bridge, a huge steel span fell into the St. Lawrence, crushing them to death. In several cases it was impossible to recognize the mangled bodies. The bereaved families, in a touching gesture of Christian resignation, offered the natural sized Christ to their church. Often during the war, when pilgrims came to the Mission to pray, they were related the above details, much to their edification and consolation.

They have many wonderful ceremonies and traditions peculiar to the Mission. All Souls' Day ranks among the most notable. The Indians have always entertained great love and devotion for their departed. At the occasion of the funeral or anniversary Mass, the whole family goes to confession and receives Holy Communion. On All Souls' Eve, they listen attentively to a sermon on Purgatory. They sing the entire Funeral Mass in their language, just as if the Priest were officiating at High Mass.

The most touching of these ceremonies occurs on the feast of the Epiphany. The little tots gather in the Sacristy, where each is given a flag. Then, in Magi style, they file out into the nave for the procession. Dark almond eyes are modestly cast down. The childish lips sing sweet hymns to their Child King. The procession is closed by four Iroquois boys who carry a statue of the Infant Jesus, crowned and

robed in regal splendor. The priest receives the statue at the Altar railing and each child pays homage to his Sovereign by kissing the Foot of the Divine Infant.

Father showed us the two-century old rectory, with its wealth of historical documents. In a glass case hung three lovely ivory crucifixes. The largest one, in the centre, measures about three feet in height, the other two, a foot less. "The Gift of Louis XIV" reads a small, hand-printed sign. The centre Corpus is just about flawless. The delicately veined ivory, yellowed with age, seems alive. The Crown of Thorns has fallen off, the Hair of the Saviour is awry, and the Eyes are shut. Perfect technique—yes, but the unknown artist who carved the crucifix carved into it extreme suffering, profound serenity and incom- mensurable Love.

The Mission's Famous Choir

Long before, other missionaries of the Society of Jesus had sensed the important role music could play in the Indian Missions of Canada, and particularly at Caughnawaga because of the natural aptitude of the Iroquois to understnd, to appreciate and to execute in masterly fashion, the most difficult of compositions. Their voices are as sweet as they are rich, and their ear is so good that they never miss a half- tone in all the Church melodies, which they know by heart.

A privilege as old as the Mission concedes to the Indians the use of the vernacular at liturgical func- tions, even at Solemn Mass.

Would you like to examine some of the music? A bookcase crowded with brown vellum folders awaited our inspection. Masterpieces of Palestrina, Vittoria, Beethoven, Mozart, Franck and Noyon. The mimeo- graphed copies of Palestrina's Adoremus te, Christe, done into Indian—years and years of work!

In 1939 Father Real Lalonde, S.J., saw his Iroquois mixed choir singing at the three Sunday Masses at the Church of the Gesu in Montreal. Today the choir is invited all over the country. They have appeared on television in New York. Beautiful music has be- come a distinctive mark at the St. Francis Xavier Mission. Every Sunday afternoon at three o'clock, they sing Benediction.

The most prized possessions of the Mission are the relics of the Venerable Kateri Tekakwitha. They are contained in a small chest tastefully upholstered in cream colored watered silk.

Kateri's Life Story

We were very eager to hear something of the life of this little Indian maiden. Kateri was born in 1656 at pagan Ossernenon, the nearest village to what is today Albany, N.Y., of a Mohawk father and an Algonquin mother, the latter a Christian. When she was only four years old smallpox ravaged the place. It carried off her mother, father and small brother. She herself had been left with marked features, poor eyesight and weakened health.

Her wretched eyesight obliged her to live in retire- ment, as the glare of the sun was more than she could stand. Her laborious and solitary life brought here at once two great benefits: it kept her from sin, and disposed her to receive with a holy ardor the first seeds of Christianity. She was baptized at the age of twenty, on Easter Sunday, 1676. The priceless gift of Baptism she was to pay for with suffering.

In 1677, life having become unbearable, she escaped to Catholic Caughnawaga. She was to live for four more years.

Her life story speaks of her great purity, the ter-



The Kateri Monument, pictured above, was blessed and dedicated at Caughnawaga on August 8th of this year by the Apostolic Delegate to Canada, the Most Rev. Giovanni Panico, D.D.

rible penances she inflicted upon herself, her great love of Our Lord and His Cross.

On Holy Wednesday afternoon, April 17, 1680, Kateri died. Immediately the miracles began.

Her countenance, extremely attenuated by austeriy and by her last illness, suddenly changed as soon as she ceased to live—it was seen assuming a rosy tint that she never had before; nor were her features the same. Nothing could have been more beautiful. As a distinction her body was placed in a coffin, and her tomb soon became celebrated by the concourse of the faithful who flocked from all parts of Canada, and by the miracles wrought there.

French and Indian alike benefited through her favours. Father Cholinic, S.J., wrote at the end of his biography of the Lily of the Mohawks, that so many miracles were wrought by Katherine, that he and his companion had ceased to write them down.

By the time Father opened the Tabernacle door from which Kateri had received her First Communion, we were quite speechless.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Anyone wishing holy cards, booklets and other literature concerning Venerable Kateri Tekakwitha, should write to the St. Francis Xavier Mission, Caughnawaga, P.Q.

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