



KATERI TEKAKWITHA YEAR

THE *Jesuit* U Bulletin

SPRING ISSUE

MARCH, 1980
Vol. LIX, No. 1

Caughnawaga's Treasure: Venerable Kateri Tekakwitha

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TM from St. Louis, Missouri. The Big Mississippi goes right by it—and I don't blame it a bit."

This is the way I introduce myself up at St. Francis Mission, Caughnawaga, Quebec, where Ven. Kateri Tekakwitha's holy relics are enshrined. You see, I go there each summer to work with the Mohawk Indians, and to talk to the thousands of pilgrims who come there to pray and learn about this lovely native American of holy and happy memory. She lived from 1656 to 1680. I'll tell you her story as I tell it to the pilgrims and visitors. You ought to know more about this jewel of our original Americans; so listen to my mid-American English.

The mother of Kateri was Kahontake (*meadow*), an Algonquin Christian girl living along the lower St. Lawrence. Losing her parents while young she was adopted by a near-by French family. But at twelve she was captured by a raiding band of Mohawks and taken by them, about 1650, to present-day Auriesville, N.Y. At this place the Jesuit priest, St. Isaac Jogues and his two companions had been killed in 1646.

Kahontake became a slave girl, but soon a young brave, *Great Beaver*, married her. Good man that he was he hated Christianity. Later he became chief. To them was born little Kateri, known first as *Ioragode* (*Sunshine*); but when she was four both her parents died of small pox. Kateri survived but was badly pocked and her vision impaired severely. An orphan now she became the ward of her uncle, *Iowerano*, and two aunts. He was stern but just; the aunts were cruel and "led her a dog's life," so much did they hate her Catholic faith inherited from her holy mother.

Mild and delicate Kateri bore their tyranny until she was twenty. They tried to root out her faith, but failing, they enslaved her. She was forced to work in the bright sun, hoe the corn, beans, tobacco, water and harvest the same, do all the tepee or long house work; and they constantly badgered her about her faith, and all but starved her. Once they secretly arranged for her marriage to a pagan brave, but she fled and hid for a day or two. Meantime she occasionally made contact with a Christian Indian woman, and a Jesuit missionary. Being now sufficiently instructed, she was baptized at twenty in 1676. God had gifted her with many talents, and a great love for the

Kateri Tekakwitha, by Sr. M. Fides Glass. To proclaim her virtues heroic, Pope Pius XII declared her venerable on Jan. 3, 1943.



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poor, sick, suffering, and dying. Her charity was unlimited, as were her prayers and love of God. Though half blind she worked skillfully in leather, beads, shells, nature's string (hemp); and she made countless dresses and jackets of buckskin for others. Her day's menu was prayer, charity, work, suffering, persecution. She was a saint in the wilderness, an angel among primitives courageous far beyond any of the so-called braves of her people.

Mature now she planned to escape to a Christian Indian village about 200 miles to the north of the St. Lawrence, called Laprairie. This she did in 1676 with two others at great risk, suffering, and sorrow. At last she was free, "born free," and she had but four years to finish her life's work, which she lost no time in doing.

Her Death

St. Francis Xavier Mission was established at Laprairie in 1667, about twenty miles east of its present location, Caughnawaga. It was moved four times westward in the next fifty years. At or near the original location, holy Kateri prayed, worked, fasted, suffered, served others, rejoiced in her faith, grew in holiness of soul, but weak in body until on April 17, 1680, she died holily and went to Rawannio (Mohawk for *the true God*), Whom she saw in everything, praised in everything, and loved above all things. She was buried nearby on the crest of the river bank at a spot three miles east of present Caughnawaga which bears the name Cote Ste-Catherine. Moved to a new site in 1684, a cenotaph and a high cross mark the site of her original grave. In 1972 her re-

The marble tomb of Kateri Tekakwitha in the Church of St. Francis Xavier, Caughnawaga, Quebec. The Cause of her beatification is progressing rapidly at Rome.



St. Francis Xavier Church where the relics of Kateri are enshrined, erected in 1845. The ceilings are frescoed with scenes by the famous Italian artist, Minchieri, 1924-29. The cross on the high altar was a gift of Caughnawaga Indians to honor 33 fellow workmen killed in the collapse of the Quebec Bridge in 1907.

mains were solemnly interred by Bishop Coderre in the beautiful marble tomb of present-day St. Xavier Mission, Caughnawaga. I prayed there every evening.

So our holy Kateri—*Lily of the Mohawks* they call her—is at home in a beautiful and historic home of Our Lord, as she deserves. And now we must say a word or two about her lovely and interesting name before closing. Kateri is of course her baptismal name, the Indian form of Catherine, which she received when she was twenty. She was first, as we said above, called Ioragode or *Sunshine*; and then at five or six she became Tekakwitha, and there is a story to this name. Kateri had difficulty seeing in the dim, smoked-filled tepee, so she felt her way about. One evening she was feeling her way to her stepfather seated near the fire. Pity filled his heart and he said in Mohawk *Te ka kwitha!* (she pushes with her hands). The words pleased him and the aunts, and thereafter they decided it would be her adult name at the age of eight. And thus we have *Tekakwitha* to this day. In addition the name has a special meaning among the Mohawks. It signifies an ideal woman, who works hard, is orderly, prudent, industrious, provident, loving. What could fit this dear, holy, lovable orphan of the north woods better, especially if some day it is preceded by the title "saint"—*Saint Kateri Tekakwitha*? Do visit her at her Shrine some day and take away with you a large portion of her deep faith, ardent love of God, spirit of suffering, holiness of life. It is there for the asking!