



"Tekakwitha loved her relatives very much and they loved her, but it was only when she wanted to accept the Christian God that they started to turn against her."

Mary-Eunice

Each year many people visit the

North American Martyrs' Shrine at Auriesville, N.Y. Visitors are interested in the martyrs, St. Isaac Jogues, St. Rene Goupil and St. John Lalonde, but they are also eager to see the land where the native American saint-to-be lived. It was here that Tekakwitha was born in 1656. Her mother was a Christian Algonquin and her father a Mohawk chief. They also had a younger son. Early years were ones of love and family nearness. However, when Tekakwitha was four years of age, small pox spread throughout their area and many died because of it . . . among them her mother, father and brother. She also caught the illness but survived although her eyes were always to remain weak and her face badly scarred. She suffered from severe headaches. She preferred staying in the longhouse during the day to escape the powerful rays of the sun. Yet, she was very skilled in beadwork, mending and sewing. Later, in Canada, she was able to support herself through these accomplishments.

Her uncle, lowerano, claimed her as his daughter and she went to live at his home with two aunts. lowerano hoped in time she would marry a strong Mohawk brave. This meant there would be another man in the house to help with getting food. It would make lowerano's work easier. The Chief and aunts planned for that day knowing it would be an ideal family situation. lowerano knew that Tekakwitha would never be beautiful in the worldly sense, still she was the daughter of a chief! Her people gave many hints of what was expected of her, but she knew marriage was not for her! This gave her the reputation of being as stubborn as a Mohawk!

A treaty was signed by the French and Indians and some missionaries came into their area. Her uncle was not in favor of the

Kateri of the mohawks

coming of the white man. They had broken too many treaties and brought fire water which weakened the native American. Yet, Tekakwitha knew these missionaries were different. She listened to their stories about the kindness of the Christian God. He was not one to fear. He did not demand torture for testing of human strength. She remembered her mother and her friend, Anastasia, singing hymns about the good God as she fell asleep. Anastasia had even taken care of her before she was claimed by her uncle. Tekakwitha loved her relatives very much and they her, but it was only when she wanted to accept the Christian God that they started to turn against her.

She visited St. Peter's, the mission church, and asked Father De Lamberville if she might take instructions. The priest knew that if she became a Christian, life would no longer be easy for her. Tekakwitha's faith was strong. On Easter Sunday, 1676, she willingly took the giant step, she was baptized. Father De Lamberville gave her the name of Kateri (Katherine in English). Her love of God had no bounds! True, her people turned against her. Kateri was persecuted in many ways and the children would throw stones at her when she worked in the cornfields. The Priest knew that arrangements had to be made to send her to Canada's *Land of the Praying Indian*, known as St. Francis Mission, near Montreal.

It was nightfall when she left the longhouse to join her two Christian guides, Hot Ashes and her brother-in-law, Onas. They were well on their way before Kateri's aunts noticed she was missing. Her uncle gave orders to kill her. They almost caught the three Christians, but Raweniio, the good God, was with them. They escaped and after many miles of traveling by canoe and on foot, they reached La Prairie, Canada, and the St. Francis Mis-

sion. Kateri knew she was now safe on Christian territory. She received Holy Communion on Christmas Day. It was the happiest day of her life. Her people noticed the sweetness and radiance about her when she received the Holy Eucharist and many wanted to be near her to share in her holiness.

Perhaps on that special day, she thought of the Mother of God. She knew that Our Lady being the Mother of Jesus was worthy of all honor. She had already told Fr. De Lamberville (in the Mohawk Valley) that she had taken the Blessed Mother as her spiritual Mother.

It is written that when she arrived at the Mission, she had some ornamental beads strung back of her hair. She was asked if she would be willing to give up this simple ornamentation to imitate the Blessed Virgin more closely. Kateri took off her beads never to wear them again. She said she desired even to cut off her hair to prove that she was dedicating herself forever to the service of Our Lady. Kateri understood the virginity of the Mother of God. This was the reason she prayed to her so many times. She regarded Mary as a model to imitate. Many would see her in the fields saying her Rosary. Most Indian girls like beads. It is said that Kateri's beads were her Rosary beads. She also learned by heart the Litany of the Blessed Virgin and never failed to say it in private, after night prayers.

Tekakwitha was first to observe the Angelus wherever she was in the forest, at home, on the path. It was the custom for the people in the village to say it, and they used to say of her: "Kateri knows only two paths, the path to the fields and the path home. She knows only two houses, her own home and the Church."

It was at this time she met Marie Therese, her dearest friend, and together they became an example to emulate. They would put into practice a life of penance and charity, helping the sick and the elder-

ly, Kateri's meals were simple. She gave up eating meat partly because she was not fond of going on the yearly hunt and leaving the village and, above all, the church. While on the hunt, many would spend their time gossiping and feasting; but not Tekakwitha, as she longed always for life with Jesus. The Holy Mass sustained her. Her mother's friend, Anastasia, who now lived in the village too, advised her: *"Think seriously of marriage, little one. You are of an age where you must think of your future. Find a good husband who will take care of you."* Even the Priest suggested marriage to her. Kateri would answer: *"Ah, good Father, I am not any longer my own. I have given myself entirely to Jesus Christ and it is not possible to change masters. I have no other spouse but Jesus Christ."*

She was given a little crucifix which she kept on her breast. Her two loves were the *Lord hidden in the Eucharist* and *Lord Jesus nailed to the Cross*.

On her journey to the mission she had met a Nun who seemed to live only for God. She often thought how wonderful it would be to live a life only for Jesus alone. She told Marie Therese how great it would be to become a Religious Sister, at the mission. They asked the Priest about it, but they were told it was too soon for a neophyte like herself to become one. Yet, he allowed the two girls to join the Holy Family Association, which was for dedicated souls wishing to love God more. She became a member, with Marie Therese, and the two influenced others to live holy lives. Kateri truly loved the Lord and asked permission to take a vow of virginity. Jesus would be her Spouse. Permission was granted and she took the vow of chastity before the altar of God and lived only for the Creator. (Many of her friends, knowing about her vow, gave her the title of *Lily of the Mohawks*.)

Tekakwitha kept up with her penances despite her declining health. She knew she was dying and so did the entire village. It was April 17, 1680, when she called her people to her side. She told Marie Therese to remember the penances they had performed together, not to speak against God, to stay close to the Priest and to be faithful to the Sacraments. They say her last words were: *"Be faithful to the Sacraments or I will deny you in heaven . . . but if you do, I will remember you. My Jesus, I love you."* It was the end of her earthly existence!

Since her Beatification in Rome, in 1980, she has become a symbol of all that is good on many reservations throughout the country. It is the prayer not only of the Indians but of many nationalities that she be soon declared a Saint . . . because truly

she will be an international Saint.

Rev. Joseph S. McBride, S.J., Vice-Postulator of the Tekakwitha League, National Kateri Center, Auriesville, N.Y. 12016 and Rev. Henri Bechard, S.J., Vice-Postulator, Kateri Center, Box 70, Kahnawake, P.Q., Canada J0L 1B0, receive countless letters throughout the year of people devoted to and asking help of the Indian Maiden. In 1984, the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, visited Canada. At the Shrine field in Huronia, Ontario, on September 15th, he gave the following testimony, *"A young woman of Algonquin and Mohawk ancestry also deserves special recognition today: Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha. Who has not heard of her outstanding witness of purity and holiness of life? It was my personal joy, several years ago to beatify this woman of great courage and faith, who is known by many as the Lily of the Mohawks. To those that came to Rome for her beatification, I said: 'Blessed Kateri stands before us as a symbol of the heritage that is yours as the North American Indian.'"* ■

Author, Mary Eunice, Founder of Mary Productions, impersonating Tekakwitha in one of her marvelous monologues.

