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In His Image

Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha (1656-1680) The Lily of the Mohawks



by HENRI BECHARD, SJ

Of the nineteen documents contained in the *Positio on the Introduction of the Cause of the Servant of God Kateri Tekakwitha, the Lily of the Mohawks*, which carry the approval of the Sacred Congregation of Rites and led to the designation of her virtues as heroic, the "Brief life of Kateri Tegaskouita, Iroquois Christian" comes third. This résumé of Blessed Kateri's life is a combination of two texts: a very short one by Father Jacques de Lamberville, SJ, who baptized her, and another by Father Pierre Cholenec, SJ, who served as her confessor. Father de Lamberville touches upon her childhood among the Iroquois. He relates how he prepared her for baptism and finally poured the saving waters of grace upon her on Easter Sunday 1676. He urged her to escape to the Mission of St Francis Xavier on the south shore of the St Lawrence opposite Montreal. She accepted his suggestion and there met Father Cholenec, who became her spiritual director.

Father Cholenec is himself a remarkable figure in the history of the Canadian Church. He was born on 30 June 1641 at Saint-Pol-de-Léon in Brittany. One of his relatives was commander of the ship *La Colette* when it sailed from Brest in 1598, and most of the family found their living from the sea. Pierre's childhood and youth must have been happy, for throughout his life he was known for his extraordinary kindness and his fine manners. On 8 September 1659 he entered the Society of Jesus in Paris. After his first vows, he taught for a few years at the Moulins College in central France. Then from 1664 to 1667 he studied philosophy at the Royal College of La Flèche, from which the founder of Montreal, Jérôme Le Royer de la Dauversière, had graduated. Three more years of teaching followed, this time of *belles lettres* and rhetoric. In 1674 the young Jesuit, having completed four years of theology at the Collège Louis-le-Grand in Paris, sailed for Quebec. He seems to have spent the last part of 1674 at Our Lady of Loretto among the Hurons and Iroquois of this mission. The following spring he was assigned to the Mission of St Francis Xavier near Montreal where he did most of his missionary work.

In the autumn of 1677 Kateri Tekakwitha came to this mission. A few months after her arrival, Father Cholenec suggested that she be allowed to receive her First Holy Communion, which she did on Christmas Day. Over the next two years she progressed rapidly in holiness and in the mystical life, with Father Cholenec as her prudent guide. He supported her when she was wrongly accused of sin and moderated her severe corporal mortifications. He also allowed her to take a vow of perpetual virginity; she was the first Amerindian to do so. In 1679-1680, despite his duties as superior, Father Cholenec kept contact with Kateri. It was he who heard her general confession and gave her Holy Viaticum on Tuesday 16 April 1680, the day before she died.

Kateri's friends had wanted to be present at her death. When Father Cholenec mentioned this to Kateri, she assured him that they would return before she left them. As the last of them filed into the long house the following afternoon, Kateri entered into her agony. The priest heard the last words she uttered: "Jesus, Mary!" She expired quietly during the afternoon.

Less than a quarter of an hour later Father Cholenec noticed an extraordinary change in Kateri's appearance. Her face, which had been pock-marked and blemished, suddenly became beautiful—so beautiful that Father Cholenec cried out and sent for Father Chauchetière and the Indians who were working with him. They felt they were witnessing on her mortal remains a reflection of her entry into heaven.

About 1682, at the Jesuit College in Quebec, Father Cholenec wrote a short life of Kateri Tekakwitha. Not long afterwards he went once again to the missions—at Loretto until 1688, and then to St Francis Xavier where he succeeded Father Jacques de Lamberville as superior in 1695. It was at this time that he probably prepared his full length biography of Kateri Tekakwitha. In 1700 he was named superior of the Jesuit Residence in Montreal, but he passed the last years of his life—1712 to 1722—at his beloved Mission of St Francis.

On 27 September 1715, he sent a rather lengthy biography of Kateri to the Most Reverend Michael Angelo Tamburini, General of the Society of Jesus. The same year he wrote another biography for a popular series known as the *Edifying and Curious Letters*. In 1714, the indefatigable missionary had visited Quebec to plead with Governor de Vaudreuil for new land for his Indian flock. The Governor granted his request. At eighty-three, he retired to the Jesuit College in Quebec. He received Holy Communion as often as it was permitted in those days. In his final illness, when he received Viaticum and Extreme Unction, he was very clear of mind. He died on 30 October 1723, at half past seven in the morning.

Father Béchard, Vice-Postulator of the cause of Blessed Kateri, is the editor of the quarterly Kateri obtainable at \$2 a year from Kateri Centre; Box 70; Kahnawake, Que; JOL 1B0.

Extract from the *Relation* of Father Cholenec who, together with
Father Chauchetière, took care of the Mission St Francis Xavier
of the Sault where Kateri used to worship

She was in church every morning, winter and summer, by four o'clock, often before the bell which rings at that hour every day. There she would remain in prayer for several hours at a time, praying not so much in words as with her eyes and heart. Tears streamed from her eyes, and from the depths of her heart came forth repeated ardent sighs. She seemed to be outside herself whenever she prayed and conversed with our Lord. With no less fervour did she go to confession once a week, sometimes more often, spending a whole hour in church, with tears and sobs, as she made her preparation; and when she once began her confession, the sobbing became so loud that the confessor could scarcely tell what she was saying. He was well aware, however, of her angelic innocence, although she thought she was the greatest sinner in the world. It was always with these sentiments of humility that she made her regular confession.

Whenever she received Holy Communion, she would burst forth in similar expressions of fervour. It is our practice

here to extend the period of probation for those coming over from the Iroquois before granting them the grace of Holy Communion. But not so with Kateri. She was so well disposed and she desired this favour so ardently that we admitted her without delay. She prepared herself for the great occasion with extraordinary devotion, and from that day on she seemed altogether different, filled with the presence of God and of his holy love. It was something one would sense just by being near her, to the point that one wanted to become like her. Her only joy was in thinking about our Lord and conversing familiarly with him. Sundays and feast days she spent almost entirely at the foot of the altar, and on working days she would often come to offer him her work. Sometimes we would ask her, "Kateri, do you love our Lord?" With deep emotion she would reply, "Oh, Father! Oh, Father!" unable to say any more. So great was the love burning in her heart that at the age of twenty she felt moved to consecrate her virginity to our Lord rather than get married. Although she suffered

cruel attacks from her relatives over this decision—without precedent among the Iroquois—she could not be dissuaded; and I have no doubt that many of the savages* admired her unshakeable resolution, since among them even the most virtuous women sought nothing more than to find a husband who would supply them with food regularly from the hunt.

But Kateri was interested only in heavenly things and considered herself fortunate to be lacking in everything and to be abandoned by all in order that she might be consecrated entirely to her divine Spouse. One day she asked one of our older Christian women what great and difficult thing she might offer up to prove her love of our Lord. The woman replied, "I know of no greater suffering than that caused by fire." This was enough for Kateri, who had been searching for some heroic manner in which to give proof of

**The term "savage" was used at this time in its primary sense of "forest dwellers," without its modern pejorative connotations.*

her love. She spent the better part of the following night, when all the others were asleep, inflicting severe, painful burns on her feet; then she walked to the church to offer to her dear Spouse in the Blessed Sacrament on the altar all that she had just suffered out of love.

Nor was that all, for she well knew that God never loved men so much as when he gave himself to them in the mystery of the Eucharist and on the wood of the cross. Furthermore, the saints, who have all excelled in one virtue or another (depending on the graces given them), are all recommended to us for their devotion to this twofold mystery. We can say that Kateri imitated them perfectly in these two loves and that after having consecrated her heart to our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, she sacrificed her body on the cross, from which she was never to be separated. She sought the cross and suffering with such longing that had we allowed her to act to the full measure of her desires, she would soon have overwhelmed her weak, sickly body; she sought only to make it suffer in imitation of Jesus crucified. For nearly a year and a half she and a prayer companion of hers beat themselves on the shoulders several times a week with large willow rods, causing blood to flow; they would have continued longer had we not told them, as soon as we found out about it, that this was excessive. There is scarcely a form of mortification which they did not practise with great fervour. Kateri tormented her own body with hunger, cold, and fire; she often wore a spiked belt about her waist throughout the whole day, and she would administer the discipline to herself as many as twelve hundred strokes at a time, again to the point of drawing blood. Allow me to mention one more example of the many things this young and generous maiden did. About two months before her death, wanting to attach herself more and more closely to the cross of our Saviour, she decided to imitate what she had heard of blessed Louis de Gonzague. She went into the woods and returned with a great bundle of brambles and thorns. These she spread over the mat she was to lie down on that evening. Three whole nights she spent lying naked on these brambles and thorns, suffering indescribable pain. She would have continued had she not been told to stop such alarming mortification. I may say in her praise that

Kateri was always very obedient to her confessor, from whom she hid nothing. In this incident, since she did not believe she was doing anything wrong, she had not seen fit to mention her severe austerity sooner. The great courage she showed in undertaking almost bizarre forms of mortification helped her to practise all the other virtues with generosity. It would take too long to describe her patience, humility, obedience, simplicity, perseverance, her union with God, or that strong devotion she had to the Blessed Virgin and her Guardian Angel. She so excelled in all the virtues, being so exemplary in them all, that she gave us the impression she had made each virtue her particular concern, as though it were the only one to be practised. Such a saintly life could be crowned only by a holy death, and so indeed it was.

One can say of Kateri what wisdom says of the virtuous man: "Coming to perfection in so short a while, he achieved long life" (Wis 4.13). She left this earth in the prime of life, when she was only twenty-three years old. But she was ready for heaven by that time, having accomplished in the four or five years after her baptism what others can scarcely do in the course of a long life. She died on Wednesday of Holy Week, 17 April 1680, toward four o'clock in the afternoon, after two months of an illness which was partly the result of her great austerity. Seeing that she was sinking on Tuesday afternoon, we gave her Holy Viaticum and Extreme Unction; these she received with angelic devotion. About three o'clock on the afternoon of Wednesday we rang the bell to assemble those savages who ardently desired to be present when the great servant of God expired. It was as though she had been awaiting a signal, for she at once entered into her final agony; it proved to be quite mild and lasted half an hour. With a missionary on either side of her and the savages around, all praying, she spent the last moments of her life reciting fervent acts of love, faith, hope, and others. She lost consciousness a brief moment before dying, and then her blessed soul gently left her virginal body to join her divine Spouse. She left behind an entire village edified by her example of virtue; everyone felt a sense of loss. Certain events happened in connection with her death which led us to believe we had witnessed the death of a saint.

The first thing we noticed was a change in her body following her death. Because of continual ill health, her face had been rather ugly; but it changed suddenly a quarter of an hour after her death. In an instant she became so beautiful and serene that the savages present were struck with admiration; the French who had gone into her cabin not knowing she was already dead, thought she was resting quietly, so sweet and beautiful was her face. They were surprised to learn she was actually dead, and they quickly knelt down at her feet, not so much to pray for her as to ask her to pray for them.

A second remarkable event occurred shortly before she died. There are persons here who, to do penance and to show their love for God, lead a life that is truly extraordinary for the mortifications and great austerities which they inflict on themselves. On the eve of Kateri's death, one of these had withdrawn to a secret place to carry out some unusual penance so that Kateri would have a happy death. Acquainted by God of what was happening, Kateri asked that the fervent penitent woman be brought to her, and clasping her by the arms she whispered in her ear, "Take courage, my dear sister. Oh, how delighted I am with the life you are leading! How pleasing it is to everyone in heaven!" The penitent wanted to hide and excuse herself, but Kateri added, "I know what I am saying; do not ask me to explain further. Not only do I know your life, but I know the exact spot from which you have come, and what you have been doing there. Go, my dear sister, and be of good heart. Continue what you were doing, and I shall not fail to recommend you highly to our Lord in heaven." The penitent, although surprised to hear these things from the invalid, was deeply consoled and wonderfully encouraged to persevere in the same fervour.

The third thing to record is that we gave the deceased a burial worthy of a saint; that is to say, it took place in an atmosphere of universal joy and with sentiments of such tender piety that just by looking at our savages one could see that Kateri had touched them to the very depths of their souls. As they fondly recalled her virtues, they ardently desired to imitate them. Nor had we long to wait to see the effects. The day after—Good Friday—the hearts of all were so touched at the sight of the cross, so loved by Kateri, which

the priest uncovered after preaching the passion to them that I do not believe a greater manifestation of piety, or a scene of more touching devotion, has ever been seen. All at once the whole assembly broke out in cries and sobs so loud that we simply had to let them lament for quite a long time. The priest tried to intone the *Vexilla*, but he could only sing the first two words of the hymn before the people began again to weep and sob throughout the whole church, louder than before. The same thing happened a second time. The effect of all this was that the people talked of nothing else but conversion and giving themselves entirely to God. That same day, the next day, and for eight days thereafter, there were such feats of penance performed in the village that it is difficult to imagine greater ones even among the most austere penitents anywhere in the world.

I must mention a fourth incident which happened to a woman of our village four days after Kateri's death. One of our most fervent Christians, this woman had been like a mother to Kateri, receiving her into her cabin when Kateri came here from Iroquois country. This woman said, "One evening after the family prayers, when everyone was in bed, I continued to pray alone for some time and then I too went to bed. But no sooner had I begun to doze off than I was awakened by a voice which called out to me saying, 'Mother, get up and look.' I recognized it to be the voice of Kateri. I sat up at once, and turning toward the place the voice came from I saw her standing beside me. Her body was enveloped in such light that I could see only her face, and it was of an extraordinary beauty. 'Mother,' she went on, 'look carefully at the cross I am carrying, see how beautiful it is. Oh, I loved it so while on earth, and how I love it still in paradise! If only everyone in our cabin loved and cherished it as much as I have.' That's what she said to me, and then she disappeared, leaving me filled with joy and sweet consolation which I continue to feel even now. Indeed, the cross she held was so beautiful and so brilliant that I have never seen anything more pleasing to look at or more striking." That is what this woman told us, and we know that she possesses great wisdom and common sense. It is our belief that Kateri, by her gracious visitation, wanted to recompense this woman who had shown her

such care and whom she regarded as her mother. One could add a number of other marvellous happenings—about the earth taken from her grave, for example, or the crucifix she was wearing about her neck when she died, or the numerous novenas. I shall relate two incidents only, one having to do with the French settlers and the other with the savages.

A habitant named Claude Caron of Prairie de la Madelaine (about a league from the St Francis Xavier of the Sault Mission), had been suffering for a long time from congestion in the chest, high fever, and extreme exhaustion. The man had had several relapses, and the surgeon had given him up for lost. Death was only a matter of time. Father Chauchetière went to see him as he made his round of the mission, bringing spiritual assistance to the French settlers of the area. He found Caron so ill that he heard his confession, although the man could scarcely speak because of his difficult breathing. The patient had spent a very bad night and, truly, did not expect to survive another. Before leaving him, the priest had him recite the Our Father and the Hail Mary once, and the Glory be to the Father three times; he also made him promise he would have three Masses said in thanksgiving to God for the graces given to Kateri, although the priest did not mention her name to the sick man. Soon after, when they lifted him up to straighten out the bed, he slumped into a coma, so they set him down at once. But this happened merely to show the better how powerful the prayers of God's Servant were, because no sooner had they laid him back than he fell into a peaceful sleep and after two hours began to breathe easily, as though a great weight had been lifted from his stomach. He then got up, sat down by the fire, and spoke with such ease and for so long a time that one would have thought he never had been sick at all. Some time later, to the astonishment of everyone, he made his way over to the church. Something still more marvellous took place within that man and within the missionary, but it is not necessary here to recount what it was.

The other example, which concerns the savages, is no less wonderful. An Iroquois man, a Christian of the Sault mission, was

suffering from an illness which everyone judged to be fatal. Upon the advice of the Fathers of the mission, he had recourse to Kateri. He took some earth from her grave and in an instant his health returned; he even regained the weight he had lost. But he still complained of a sharp pain in his side, no doubt so that the power of Kateri's intercession could be better displayed, because when they had him wash the spot with a mixture of water and the earth from the grave the pain disappeared within a day, and he was completely cured. This sudden healing was followed soon after by a similar case, equally surprising. A savage woman named Kateri, who was a close friend of our Kateri during her life, had been afflicted from the age of eight or nine with an infirmity that left her unable to move either feet or hands. When Father Chauchetière saw what extraordinary graces God has given to people through the intercession of our Kateri, he thought that her friend might be able to obtain an equal favour. So he went to her and spoke of what God had done through the merits of her friend for the Iroquois man of whom we have just spoken. He exhorted her to have recourse to Kateri by making a novena of one *Pater*, one *Ave*, and three *Gloria Patri* recited each day. He also gave her the crucifix which Kateri had worn around her neck. Lo and behold, on the evening of the last day of the novena, the woman was cured.

All these cures can be considered miraculous. They have greatly increased the devotion to this good girl, and now we see many people going to pray at her grave. When it is a matter of sick children, Kateri's intercession does not operate the same way. Experience has shown that the earth from her grave may heal people advanced in age; but, as for children, it seems to draw them to heaven. Since Kateri's body was buried, a number of children have died and been buried about her. It is as though this Iroquois virgin, whom we believe to be in glory, was pleased to see her chaste body surrounded by these little innocent ones, as by so many lilies.

Translated by Kevin J. Kirley, CSB

