

On March 25, 1679, Father Frémin allowed Kateri to pronounce a private vow of virginity and to consecrate herself to Our Blessed Mother, whom she dearly loved.

Kateri's Holy Death.

At the beginning of 1680 her health, which was never very good, took a bad turn after she accompanied a companion to Laprairie, several miles downstream from the Mission on a bitter cold winter day. On Tuesday of Holy Week, she received Holy Viaticum, dressed in borrowed attire, having none which she thought appropriate to receive her Beloved with. On the following day, she told her friends they could gather firewood, for she would not die until they returned. And so it was. Shortly after the three o'clock, as she whispered, "Jesus, Mary," her Lord came to get her. She was not quite twenty-four years old.

Favours and miracles obtained through her intercession began almost immediately. No wonder then that biographies of Kateri Tekakwitha have appeared in fourteen different languages and that she is known throughout the world. On January 3, 1943, Pope Pius XII solemnly approved the decree declaring her "Venerable," thus proclaiming that she had practised all Christian virtues to a heroic degree. Interest in the young maiden continued to spread in the intervening decades until 1980, the tercentenary of her death, when Pope John Paul II decided the time had come to advance her to the ranks of the "Blessed."

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BLESSED KATERI TEKAKWITHA

Who Was She? — What Did She Do?

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BLESSED KATERI TEKAKWITHA was born of a Christian Algonquin mother and of a Mohawk father in 1656 at Auriesville, N.Y. Her importance is significant as she, an Indian, was baptized a Christian and devoted her life to the Faith.

In 1660, an epidemic of smallpox deprived Tekakwitha of her parents, but spared her, although she had been stricken. Even after her recovery, the usual disfigurement and weakening of the eyes remained.

Together with the other survivors, she moved to a new settlement a little to the west and eventually to still another village just west of present-day Fonda, N.Y. When she reached the age for Indian maidens to think of matrimony, Tekakwitha's uncle, now a great chief, along with her aunts began to select a brave for her.

To their dismay, she announced that she had no intentions of becoming the wife of any man. That decision brought the wrath of the family upon her, but their attempts to deceive and force her into the state for which she had no desire were futile. She was only interested in a Christian baptism.

Tekakwitha's Baptism

In 1675, Father James de Lamberville, S.J., took charge of St. Peter's Mission at Caughnawaga. It was to him that Tekakwitha opened her heart and expressed the ardent desire for baptism. However, while Father de Lamberville admired her simplicity and faith, he made her follow the rigid rule established for catechumens.

Six months later, on Easter Sunday, 1676, Father Lamberville gave Tekakwitha baptism. It was a great day for Caughnawaga.¹ The whole village crowded in and around the church when Tekakwitha was baptized. For they all loved her, she was so quiet, gentle, and kind.

Her New Name

When she entered the chapel she was simply Tekakwitha, but when the solemn ceremony had been completed she became known as Kateri or Catherine Tekakwitha. Born a non-Christian at Ossernenon (Auriesville), Tekakwitha was destined to be reborn in Christ at Caughnawaga (Fonda).

Kateri's Flight to Canada.

It was during the autumn of 1677 that she fled from the Mohawk countryside to the Mission of St. Francis Xavier on the St. Lawrence. Father James de Lamberville, who had baptized her in her homeland when she was 20, gave her a note for Father James Frémin, superior of the Mission: "I'm sending you a treasure," he wrote. "Guard it well!" The latter soon found out she was a treasure. Her unfailing gentleness, her wholesome humility, her innate kindness, her good humour and wit soon won the hearts of the population. Every morning she attended Mass at four o'clock and again at seven. In all things she was as faithful as the stars in the sky. Out of ignorance, though, she practised excessive penance until her confessor toned it down. He well understood that she was motivated by an intense personal love of Jesus, of His Blessed Mother and of her neighbour, whoever that might be. The great delight of her life was prayer, especially before the Blessed Sacrament: in those days, it was safe to leave churches unlocked. However, she never indulged in contemplation when it was her duty to work, either in her longhouse or in the cornfields.

A few months after her arrival, on Christmas Day 1677, Kateri Tekakwitha was allowed to receive her first communion. From that time onwards, her spiritual progress came by leaps and bounds. This young unlettered Indian woman even achieved here below what theologians call "union with God." With a few friends, she thought of founding a community of Indian nuns, but was dissuaded from doing so by her spiritual director, who judged she was too new a Christian for such an undertaking. Forty years or so later, the story of her life helped to organize the first Convent of Indian Poor Clares in Mexico City, among them a descendant of Montezuma.

¹Caughnawaga on the Mohawk.