

# Kateri Tekawitha

The Lily of the Mohawks



When the Gospel was introduced among the Iroquois nations many greeted it with mistrust. It was considered to be a whiteman's religion and foreign to the native cultures. Those who became Christian were shunned, ridiculed and called dogs and traitors.

Converts had to leave their homes in order to live in peace and keep their faith. Missionaries were tortured and sometimes killed by warring tribes. In this setting appeared a young Mohawk girl of great holiness and prayer.

Kateri, the 'Lily of the Mohawks' is now loved and called "Blessed" by Catholics all over the world.

## **'LITTLE SUNSHINE'**

Kateri was born in what is now New York state in the year 1656. Her father was Great Beaver, Turtle Chief of the Mohawk. Her mother, Kahenta, was an Algonquin Christian who had been captured by a Mohawk war party. Great Beaver fell in love with his captive and asked her to be his wife. He allowed her to remain a Christian but in secret only. Kateri was their first child. She had been born just at sunrise so they named her "Little Sunshine."

Those were happy years for the family till smallpox hit the village. Many died of the disease, including Sunshine's parents and baby brother. At four years old, she was left orphaned, half blind, and her face marked by scars. Her uncle and aunts took her in and raised her. She grew up to be rather shy yet cheerful and kind. Much of her time was spent helping with chores or doing handicrafts. She was eventually given the name Tekakwitha, meaning "one who feels her way before her". This was because of her poor eyesight.

When she came of marriageable age, her aunts encouraged her to go out on dates, but she showed no interest. At dances she ignored the young men who tried to catch her eye. This worried the family. They tried tricking her into marriage but Tekakwitha refused. She was mistreated and punished with additional chores but never once complained.

## **TEKAWITHA'S WORLD**

Life was hard in those days and Tekawitha was surrounded by violence and fear. The five Iroquois nations were often at war with other tribes. Prisoners were tortured horribly at the great victory feasts. The whiskey trade brought misery and shame to the people.

As a teenager she was saddened by the things happening around her, the drunkenness, orgies, fighting, killings, and the torture of captured enemies. She refused to take part in



## **A HOLY DEATH**

When time came for the people to go to the winter camp, Kateri chose to stay behind to help care for the sick. Her relatives were alarmed on their return for she'd lost weight and looked sickly. Gradually she became weaker and had to rest often. Still she never forgot to help others and continued caring for the sick. Finally, her illness confined her to bed. Even then she taught the young ones about the Catholic faith from her bedside. It was what she wanted to do as she felt useless just laying there and not doing something for her Lord.

Her condition continued to deteriorate and friends and relatives realized that the end was near. They wanted to remain with her but she told them not to take time off from the fields, promising not to die until they got back. When they returned she was very weak but had kept her promise. Then, she quietly slipped away to meet, face to face, the God of love. Her last words were, "Jesus, I love you." She was 24 years old.

## **A SIGN FROM HEAVEN**

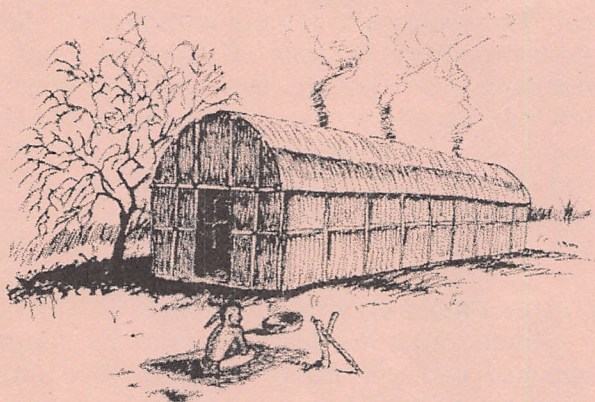
Minutes after her death a mysterious thing happened and a sense of wonder filled the longhouse. Fr. Cholonc gave a cry of surprise. Kateri's face was transformed before the eyes of all present. The old scars of smallpox disappear right then and there. Her face became clear, radiant and beautiful. On her lips a gentle smile appeared. It was a sign from God. Kateri was now in heaven. Before her burial hundreds of people witnessed the remarkable change in her appearance and were deeply moved by it.

Today at the site of her burial, people gather every year to pray to God and also ask Kateri's help for favors. Miracles still happen through her intercession. In her humility and prayer she touched many lives. A young Indian woman who moved mountains and overcame obstacles to remain faithful to her first love, Jesus.

any of these things. Why can't people love each other? If only they could see how wrong this all is. God sees all this. Surely he cares. How we need his love. These must have been Tekawitha's thoughts.

## BAPTISM AND PERSECUTION

Later on, the Black Robes were allowed into the Mohawk villages. Tekawitha was eager to know more about the God who loved all peoples. One day when no one was at home, she called a passing priest over to her longhouse and asked for baptism. This had been her mother's last prayer, and was also her own desire. The priest agreed to instruct her.



In those days baptism was not easily given. Anyone wanting to join the Church had to first acquire a solid knowledge of Christian faith, prayer, and morality. After that there was a long period of probation. Only if a candidate showed that he was sincere in living his faith, was he admitted to baptism. The result was a Christian community that was strong and fervent.

Tekawitha learned quickly, and developed a deep inner life of prayer. Because other Mohawk Christians testified to her good life, she was baptised after only eight months. She took the name "Kateri", which was the Mohawk way of saying Katherine.



Her family was opposed to this new faith and tried to turn her back to the old ways. On Sundays she refused to work and so was denied food. She worked hard but they piled even more on her. Her health began to suffer. Soon everyone was taunting her. Even the children followed her and threw stones.

### THE VILLAGE OF PRAYER.

At this time Catholic natives established a 'village of prayer' at Caughnawauga. Many fled there to escape persecution and live their faith in peace. Here people of many tribes lived together as friends, there was no drinking or quarreling, no wild parties or immorality. These new Christians lived their own way of life, keeping all that was good in their old customs and traditions and yet they believed firmly in the way of Christ. All who came were welcomed.

The villagers learned of Kateri plight and two Christian men, one a Mohawk and the other a Huron, went secretly to her village to help her. Plans were made for her escape. When her uncle was away trading, Kateri left during the night. The uncle found out and tried but failed to catch them. The missionary sent along a letter with Kateri that read in part, "*Kateri now comes to join your community. You will soon realize what a precious jewel we have sent you. She is very close to the Lord. May she progress in virtue and holiness of life from day to day, for the honor and glory of God.*" After a long trip they were warmly welcomed by Kateri's stepsister who had run away before her.

The whole village met every morning for Mass and every evening they sang the prayers of the rosary. Kateri loved this new life. She told Fr. Cholonc, "My soul is like a bird that has found it's nest." In the Mass and in prayer she came to discover ever more deeply the joy and love that are found only in God. She embraced Jesus totally in her heart and never missed Mass.

Not wanting to attract attention to herself she'd sneak away into the forest to pray at a shrine she had constructed out of sticks. This happiness was shattered by a jealous wife who went to the priest and accused Kateri of meeting her husband out there in secret. Gossip spread like fire. The priest questioned her and soon discovered her innocence. Kateri suffered the stares of the women in silence. She wanted her secret of prayer to remain a secret.



While there, she became close friends with another young woman named Teresa, who confided in her about a drinking problem. She wanted to stop but couldn't and asked Kateri to help her. They used to pray together and Kateri made such an impression on Teresa that she never drank again.

#### **KATERI'S VOW**

On one trip to Montreal, they visited a hospital run by nuns. Kateri was greatly impressed. She went home determined to start an order of Native Sisters. The priest however discouraged her, because such a life was so foreign to her upbringing. Then she asked if she could give her virginity to God totally. Time was given her to think this over carefully. At the end she was still determined and it was granted her. On the feast of the Assumption she made a public vow to remain unmarried and dedicate her life entirely to God .