

# SIGNPOSTS OF OUR FAITH

CANADIAN WITNESSES TO VOCATION AND MISSION





FIRST THINGS FIRST

# BLESSED KATERI TEKAKWITHA

AND OUR VOCATION TO LOVE

It is hard to find a better example of what holiness might look like than in the life of the Iroquois woman, Kateri Tekakwitha, who saw this vocation with remarkable clarity in her youth, and who surmounted incredible obstacles in reaching her goal. "Her life itself is a miracle," said Pope Pius XI.

Kateri was born in 1656 in the Iroquois village of Ossernenon, in what is now upper New York State. She was the daughter of a captured Algonquin woman and her husband, a Mohawk chief. When she was only four, smallpox claimed the life of her parents, sister and brother. For the rest of her life she would suffer its effects - physical weakness, a pockmarked face, and extreme sensitivity to light - which forced her to wear a blanket over her head whenever she went outside. After the death of her family Kateri was adopted by her uncle.

Kateri's love for God appears to have developed throughout her life. One of her original biographers, the Jesuit priest Father Pierre Cholenec, writes that she "loved Him so much that her only joy was to think of Him and to offer Him all her thoughts, words, and actions." As a young girl, Kateri had a reputation for patience, gentleness and for being a conscientious worker. She was also known to love solitude. When she was eleven years old, some Jesuit priests visited her family and made an impression, attracting Kateri to Christianity. For years she attended the public instruction that these missionaries offered, although due to her shyness and the fact that she was persecuted for her faith by her adopted family and peers, she did not ask to be baptized.

Finally, one of the priests living in the village happened to visit her and began to understand something of the hidden virtues she possessed. Kateri opened her heart to him, expressing her desire to be baptized. After receiving instruction she was baptized on Easter Sunday in 1676. Describing the period that followed this, Father Cholenec writes that "one had reason to believe that the Holy Ghost filled with His grace a soul, so disposed to receive it by an innocence of life which may be called angelic." By now, Kateri was twenty years old and she and several companions had to flee their village to escape from her uncle who was hostile to her faith. They travelled several hundred kilometres through woods and swamps to find refuge in the Christian community of St. Francis Xavier Mission, across the

Copyright Joseph Adolphe



BLESSED KATERI TEKAKWITHA (1656 - 1680)



river from Montreal. Her first Communion took place on her first Christmas Day in Canada. "She found God everywhere, whether she was in church, in the woods or in the fields," writes Father Cholenec. She was known to spend entire days, especially Sundays and feast days, in prayer.

Kateri was uncompromising with regard to purity, both in the sense of having contempt for sin of any kind, and in terms of her chastity. She preserved her virginity in body and soul throughout her life, while surrounded by temptation, pressure and slander, and without having committed, as Father Cholenec writes, "the least thing contrary to this virtue." Over the years she resisted various attempts at arranged marriages and attempts to make her forego her chosen path of virginity, which confused and did not endear her to her relatives. She would later tell a priest-friend that she wanted to preserve her love for Jesus Christ alone. On the feast of the Annunciation in 1679, she made a vow of chastity, consecrating herself at Mass to the Lord and his Blessed Mother.

Kateri's reputation for holiness grew soon after her arrival at the mission and the love she radiated attracted people. She was known never to speak ill of anyone, including those who falsely accused her of unchastity. Her awareness of what pleases and displeases God made her sorrowful for things of which most of us would be unaware. What was she sorry for? She once told a close friend her sins were: "not having resisted those who had brought her to work on feasts and Sundays; that she had not suffered martyrdom; and that she had often feared death more than sin." She also performed extraordinary penances and mortifications. At one point her spiritual directors felt that she was excessive in this regard and so she moderated some of these practices.

Given her spiritual stature, Kateri was sought out for her prayers and, after her death, the Bishop of Quebec credited her intercession with protecting New France from attack. He referred to her as the "Genevieve of Canada," a comparison made to the French girl whose prayers saved Paris twelve centuries earlier. After Kateri's death, numerous miracles - especially physical healings - were recorded. Perhaps the most dramatic event was what happened at her death. Her fellow natives, the Jesuits and French colonists all witnessed how her disfigured face was transformed shortly after death, becoming so beautiful and radiant that everyone had a difficult time refraining from looking at her and actually burying her, realizing that they were about to lose their saint. Father Cholenec writes "I admit openly that the first thought that came to me was that Katherine at that moment might have entered into heaven, reflecting in her chaste body a small ray of the glory of which her soul had taken possession."

## THE UNIVERSAL VOCATION TO HOLINESS

*Holiness, a message that convinces without the need for words, is the living reflection of the face of Christ* (Novo Millennio Ineunte, 7). The Second Vatican Council gave special attention to the universal vocation to holiness in which we all share. The word "holiness" signifies separateness, or being set apart from what is profane, for the service of God. This meaning is derived from the Hebrew equivalent of separateness which dates to Old Testament times. Holiness is often misunderstood as an extraordinary way of life meant only for a few. In Christian understanding, however, it is meant for everyone and is usually lived out in everyday, ordinary life. At the heart of the Christian understanding of holiness is our Lord's call for us to love God with our whole heart, soul, understanding and strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves. This understanding of love refers to a joyful giving of oneself, with an emphasis on actions rather than feelings. A sign of holiness characteristic of the saints is their exceptional awareness of the love God has for each of us, and the extent to which they seek to surrender to this love with all of their powers. While as creatures we can never respond to our Creator in kind, we can strive to put God first before everything else.

*The way of perfection passes by way of the Cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle* (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2015). There are various motivations for making sacrifices, all of which should have to do with growing in the love of God. Among other things, self denial strengthens our interior life, and is a means for us to express our repentance for the ways in which we have failed to respond to the love of God. At the same time, the sacrifices we make are always to be considered in light of the fact that God wishes to shower us in this life with good things.

One of the reasons the Church formally canonizes certain people as saints is to give us examples of holiness. In the lives of the saints we see humble human beings subject to sin, temptation and human weakness like the rest of us. However, by their surrender to the grace of God, reception of the sacraments, life of prayer, and deep sense of repentance, they heroically rise to these challenges and become instruments of God's love.

The growth in union with God and increase in personal charity which characterize holiness are elusive and a work in progress all of our lives. Above all, holiness is a work of the Holy Spirit.

Roman Catholic Diocese of Calgary  
**Office of Vocations**

LISIEUX HOUSE  
830-21 Avenue SE,  
Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2G 1N1  
Phone: 1.403.245.2753  
[www.vocationoffice.com](http://www.vocationoffice.com)