KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS

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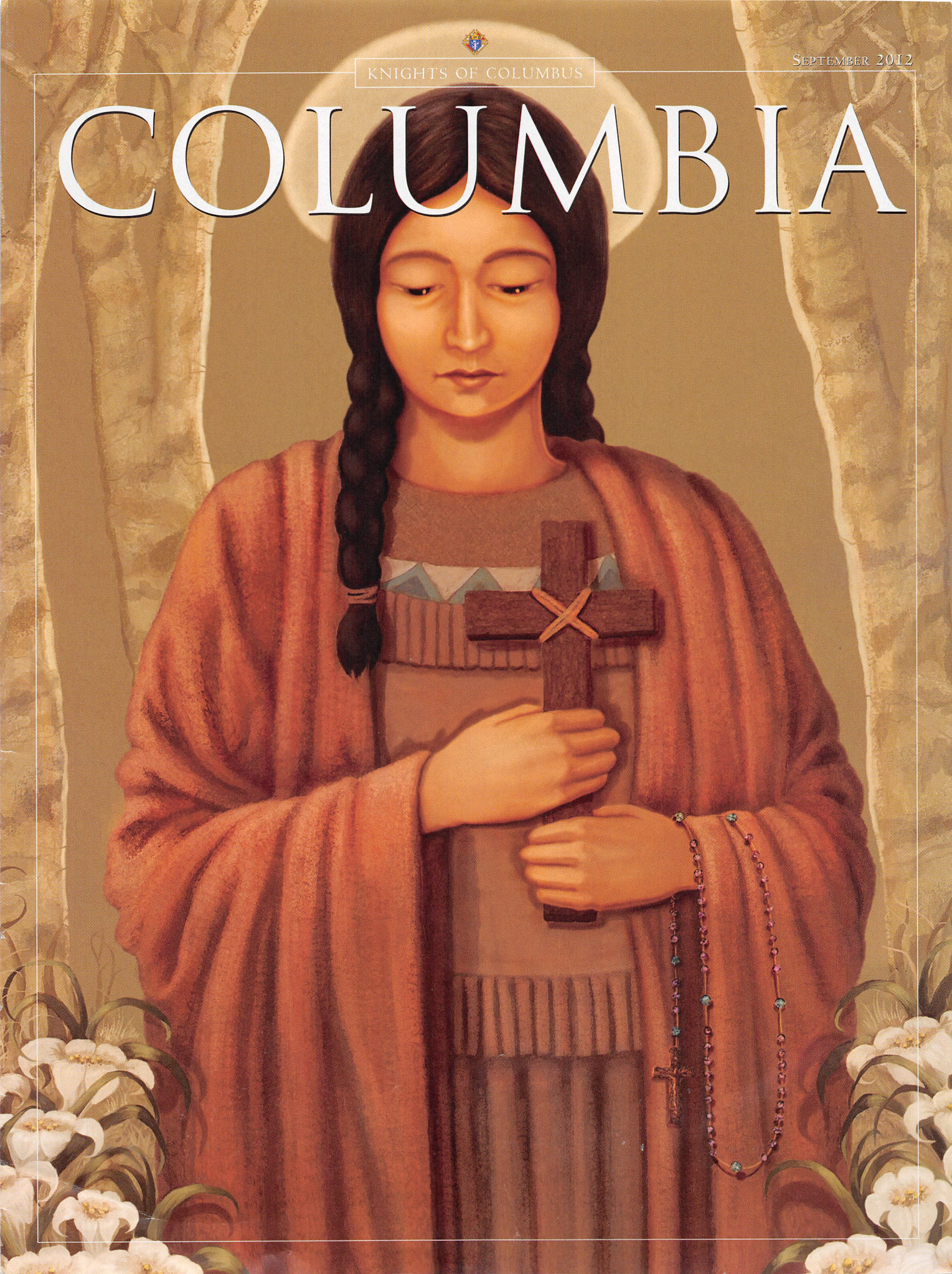
COLUMBIA



A Lily for All Nations

Catholics celebrate Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, who will soon become the first Native American saint

by Angela Cave

Miracles attributed to her intercession abound: A boy was cured of a 65-percent hearing loss. A man defied doctors by walking after a spinal cord injury. An ironworker fell through two floors — losing 16 vertebrae and fracturing his ribs and skull — and lived and walked to tell the tale.

Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, the 17th-century Mohawk maiden who, despite resistance, devoted her life to the Gospel, is credited with answering countless prayers. Recently, one story — that of a child saved from a fatal flesh-eating disease — was deemed a miracle by the Vatican, paving the way for Blessed Kateri's long-awaited canonization next month in Rome.

As the Oct. 21 date of her canonization draws near, Catholics across North America have been celebrating and planning pilgrimages to witness history in the making — the first Native American saint. Perhaps none are more excited and grateful than the approximately 600,000 Native Americans, representing more than 300 tribes and nations, who belong to the Catholic Church.

KATERI'S GIFT OF FAITH

Blessed Kateri, known as the "Lily of the Mohawks," was born to a Christian Algonquin mother and a Mohawk chief father in 1656 in a Mohawk village called Ossernenon (modern-day Auriesville, N.Y.). When she was 4, a smallpox epidemic took her parents' lives and left her with impaired vision, poor health and pockmarks.

Raised by her uncle in Caughnawaga, near present-day Fonda, N.Y., Kateri was inspired by Jesuit missionaries to study Catholicism in private at age 18. She continued her domestic duties, but resisted offers of marriage, reportedly to her uncle's displeasure. After her baptism two years later, her family and village ostracized, ridiculed, slandered and threatened her.

In 1677, Kateri fled to St. Francis Xavier de Sault, a Jesuit mission in Quebec, with a note from the Jesuit priest in her village that read, "I send you a treasure. Guard it well." There, among Christian friends, she led a life of prayer, love for the Eucharist, devotion to chastity and intense penitential practices. She taught prayers to children, made wooden crosses and placed them throughout the woods, worked with the sick and elderly, and attended Mass daily. In 1679, she took a vow of perpetual virginity — the next best thing after starting her own religious order, a request she and her associates had been denied.

After suffering from years of ill health, Kateri died at the age of 24 after uttering her last words, "Jesus, I love you." Her remains are now in Kahnawake, near Montreal.

It is reported that Kateri's smallpox scars vanished after her death and that she appeared to her friend Anastasia, among others, with a message: "The cross was the glory of my life and the glory of my death, and I want you to make it yours."

Kateri's cause for canonization opened in 1932, after more than a century of beseeching from Catholics devoted to her. Pope Pius XII declared her venerable in 1943, and Pope John Paul II beatified her on June 22, 1980.

Finally, Pope Benedict XVI signed the decree necessary for her canonization last December.

"It is a vision that is fulfilled on the part of many Native American Catholics, those who have come to know and love her," said Sister Kateri Mitchell, a Sister of St. Anne and executive director of the Tekakwitha Conference, an organization that promotes evangelization among indigenous Catholics in the United States and Canada. "It's definitely going to reaffirm and reawaken in many of our people the gift of faith. [Kateri's] spirit will live on in the lives of our people in a much deeper and more profound way."

Bringing stories of hope inspired by the canonization, more than 800 people gathered for the 73rd annual Tekakwitha Conference in and around Blessed Kateri's upstate New York birthplace this past July. The five-day event was filled with sounds of traditional Native American instruments and vocal chants, the smells of burning sweet grass, and the sights of dancing, traditional dress and harvest vegetables intertwining with Catholic rituals.

Blessed Kateri's canonization comes as a source of affirmation for a group of faithful that comprises tiny portions of both the Catholic Church and the U.S. population — and,

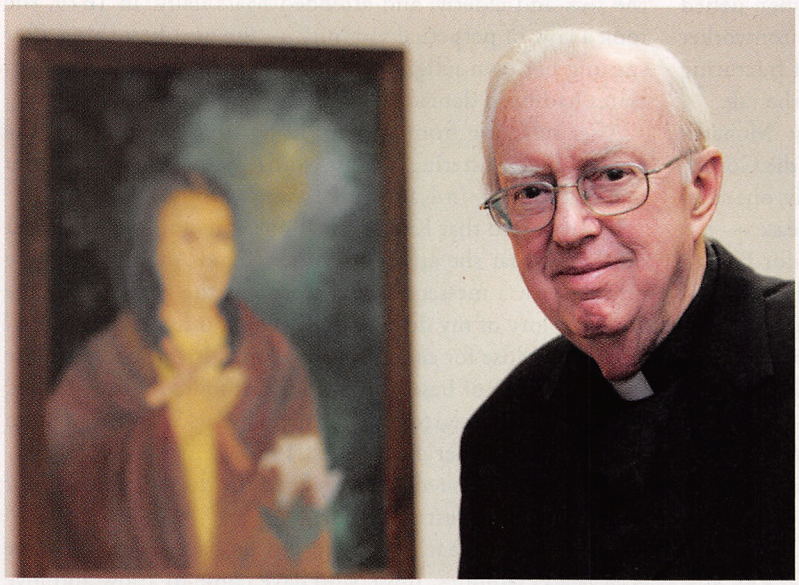
CNS photo/Nancy Phelan Wiechec – LILY: iStock Photo

in many cases, feels isolated by both. Native Americans face high rates of poverty, addiction and depression, as well as generations-long identity struggles rooted in oppression and prejudice that began in the colonial era. Many of the country's more than 500 tribes have gradually lost languages and traditions as a result of government-imposed reservations and boarding schools, while many native religions were suppressed until the late 1970s.

HOPE AND HEALING FOR NATIVE AMERICANS

After Kateri's death in 1680, soil from her grave was used to heal sick people and animals. Modern believers often pray for less tangible causes, like the end to substance abuse on reservations or for native children to finish school and practice the faith.

"She's listening," said Christine Willow, a member of the Northern Arapaho tribe living on the Wind River Indian Reservation in Ethete, Wyo. Willow, who spent years worrying about her three children, now adults, believes Blessed Kateri has been hearing her prayers. "My two daughters are mothers now, and they really devote their lives to their children," she said.



Msgr. Paul Lenz, the vice postulator for Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha's cause for canonization and director emeritus of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, is pictured by a painting of the soon-to-be saint.

Joan Staples-Baum, director of the Tacoma Indian Center in Tacoma, Wash., and a member of the White Earth Chippewa tribe from Minnesota, believes the canonization "may be the start of something bigger. There are not too many people who come to Native American communities and spend time there and don't love the people. It could just be the beginning of greater healing."

Indigenous people in Canada, known as First Nations, are also celebrating the upcoming canonization. About 25 percent of them are Catholic.

Though prejudice persists against indigenous peoples — and some Americans falsely believe that the country's original inhabitants no longer exist — many natives have described the news about Blessed Kateri as a step toward acknowledgement of their presence in the pews and the public square.

"It means that we're finally being recognized by the Church, by the country and probably by the world," said Staples-Baum, who will travel to Rome with 10 others from her parish in October. "It's just confirming us as a people."

The Tekakwitha Conference, which was originally founded as a group of clergy serving native populations, opened to laypeople in 1980. Today, it sponsors about 130 Kateri Circles in American parishes, which report that more natives are turning to the Church for baptisms and burials.

Msgr. Paul Lenz, the vice postulator for Blessed Kateri's cause for canonization and director emeritus of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, said the news of the canonization will motivate renewed faith among native Catholics.

"They're going to realize who she is and what happened to her," Msgr. Lenz said. "She gave such a good example of wanting to love Jesus and wanting to get to heaven."

Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia, a member of the Prairie Band of the Potawatomi Nation and chairman of the U.S. bishops' Subcommittee of Native American Affairs, remembers studying about Kateri in Catholic grade school, when she was still called "venerable."

"I'm deeply grateful to God for giving us a miracle to authenticate to her," said Archbishop Chaput, one of three Native American bishops. He noted that the biggest challenges that native Catholics are battling today involve the same secular forces facing other American Catholics.

"I don't think it's any harder to be an Indian and Catholic than to be an American and Catholic," he said.

Many Native American Catholics recognize they have the extra burden of balancing the Catholic faith with tribal cultures that often espouse their own sets of spiritual beliefs.

"It's a question we all face," Archbishop Chaput said. But Blessed Kateri prioritized her Catholic faith, he added, and "it didn't make her any less an Indian."

Blessed Kateri's canonization, the archbishop said, has the potential to reignite the faith of Native Americans. "But at the same time, it's much easier to talk about the saints than to become one."

Archbishop Chaput said that whether or not there will be a renewal of faith among Native Americans is yet to be seen, but he remains optimistic: "To be a Christian means to be a person of hope." He is sure of one thing: He will be in Rome Oct. 21. "I wouldn't miss it for anything in the world," he said.♦

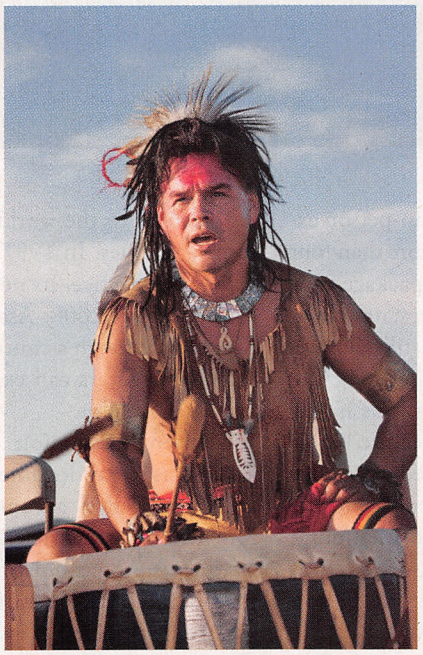
ANGELA CAVE is a staff writer for *The Evangelist*, the newspaper for the Diocese of Albany.

CNS photo/Bob Roller

Top: An Akwesasne Mohawk youth dances during a powwow at the 73rd annual Tekakwitha Conference in Auriesville, N.Y., Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha's birthplace.

Above: Jake Finkbonner, whose recovery from a rare disease was attributed to the intercession of Blessed Kateri and provided the final miracle needed to canonize her, hands off a relic of the future saint to an organizer of next year's conference, which will be held in El Paso, Texas. Sister Kateri Mitchell, director of the Tekakwitha Conference, and Bishop Robert J. Cunningham of Syracuse look on.

Bottom: Jerry McDonald, an Akwesasne Mohawk, beats a drum during a round dance at the conference.



TOP: CNS photo/Angela Cave, *The Evangelist* — OTHER: Photos by Glenn Davenport

Knights Welcome Native American Brothers

When Michael Witek of Cardinal Stritch Council 616 in Memphis, Tenn., passed away last fall, his fellow council members were quick to offer condolences and support to Michael's widow, a Catholic Cherokee named Paula. The Knights even volunteered to lead the funeral procession.

"They were so supportive," Paula Witek said. "I didn't even have to ask."

Paula and Michael had prayed for Blessed Kateri's canonization daily for almost two decades. "To me, it's like full circle," Witek said. "It's the answer to so many prayers."

When Native American men are hesitant to join the Knights, Witek encourages them to keep an open mind. "Both sides have to get over their prejudices," she said. "I think [Blessed Kateri is] part of the answer, because she appeals to so many people. She can really be a bridge, just like she's done with the native tribes."

At least seven Knights of Columbus councils are named after Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, but not all are connected to Native American culture. The stigma sometimes associated with Columbus has, in fact, discouraged many natives from joining the Order.

But Deacon Alfred "Bud" Jetty, past state deputy of South Dakota, believes the Knights' reputation and good works should supersede any negative associations. A member of Spirit Lake Sioux Tribe, Deacon Jetty has worked for years to bring about a reconciliation between mainstream U.S. society and Native Americans.

In Deacon Jetty's experience, Knights have great respect for natives. "I can see that from the way they act and the way they treat people," he said, adding that the Order donated more than $400,000 to a cultural-exchange program with South Dakota reservations and public schools.

When he became state deputy in 1991, Deacon Jetty saw it as a sign that "the K of C is an organization for everybody. It doesn't matter what race you are or where you came from." — *Angela Cave*