

The Lily of the Mohawks

Paul Weideman ■ The New Mexican

Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, a gentle, benevolent smile on her bronzed face, holds her prayer — represented both by eagle feathers and a rosary — to her heart.

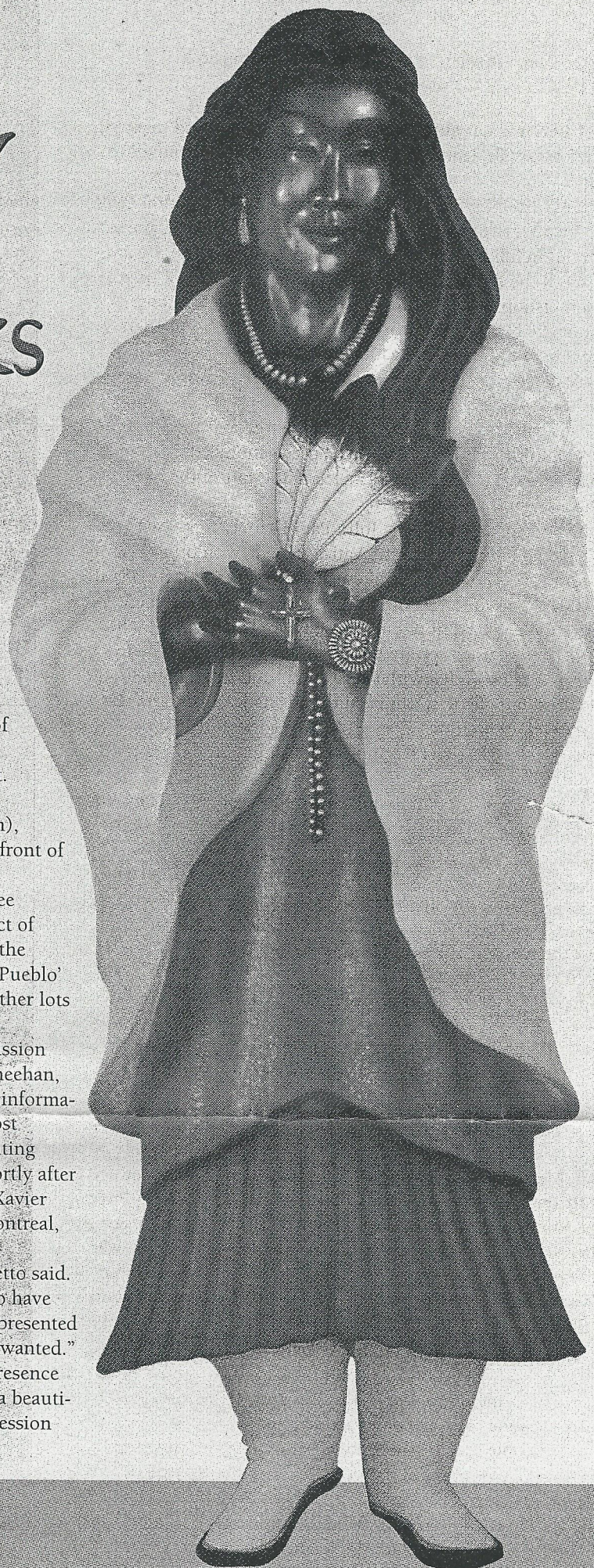
On Saturday afternoon, Aug. 16, Tekakwitha, in the form of a new monumental sculpture by Jémez Pueblo artist Estella Loretto, assumes a new prominence in Santa Fe and the West. The impressive, 7 1/2-foot-tall sculpture of the Lily of the Mohawks, Kateri Tekakwitha (Gah-deh-lee Deh-gah-quee-tah), joins the statue of Bishop Jean Baptiste Lamy on the plaza in front of St. Francis Cathedral.

There are many images of the 17th-century Catholic devotee who was beatified in 1980, but Loretto approached the subject of Tekakwitha's appearance with an open mind. "I made it up," the sculptor said in her Santa Fe studio. "I didn't want her to be 'Pueblo' or 'Mohawk.' I wanted her to be free, because she brings together lots of tribes."

Once word got out that Loretto was working on the commission from Santa Fe Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan, the faithful began sending pictures and information about Tekakwitha's life. Perhaps the most authoritative image of Tekakwitha is an oil painting done by the Rev. Claude Chauchetière shortly after the woman's death. It hangs in St. Francis Xavier Church on the Kanawaké Mohawk Reservation near Montreal, Quebec.

"I haven't seen it, but I have seen many other images," Loretto said. "As an artist, I can't copy, so I've really just prayed to Kateri to have her guide me and show me the vision of how she wants to be presented today. I had to go deep in myself and be quiet to feel what she wanted."

"I received the commission on Aug. 3, 2002, and Kateri's presence has been with me all year," the sculptor said. "I just feel it as a beautiful, loving, kind and compassionate spirit, and that's the expression



Kateri Tekakwitha (Gah-deh-lee Deh-gah-quee-tah)

on her face." Loretto's daughter, Fawn, modeled for her and inspired the repetition of certain features, including the mouth and hands, on the sculpture.

Sheehan said installing the sculpture in front of the cathedral "will not only honor Kateri Tekakwitha but also the many Native American Catholics in the archdiocese who have a great devotion to her. I wanted this to be part of the observances of the 150th anniversary of the diocese," the archbishop said. "I've had it in my mind for a number of years to honor the Native Americans and their saint and put [her] right up there next to Lamy. We wanted to have the work done by a Native American artist, and we're delighted it turned out that it's also a woman, like the saint."

Two miracles have been attributed to Tekakwitha and the Church must confirm a third miracle before she can be canonized as a saint. "Kateri is a blessed. Technically she is not a saint, but in the minds of so many, she is," Sheehan explained.

The archbishop spoke with Pope John Paul II about Tekakwitha during his 1998 *ad limina* visit to the Vatican, made with other bishops from the Southwest. "This sounds like name-dropping, but it's just the truth," he said. "I was at lunch and as the senior archbishop there, I had to initiate the conversation, but I wasn't sure what I could talk about. I said, 'Holy Father, we are hopeful that you will be able to canonize Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha very soon,' and he said we should pray for the third miracle that can be authenticated. During the rest of the lunch much of the time was spent talking about the Native American peoples in our dioceses and how strong their devotion is to Blessed Kateri."

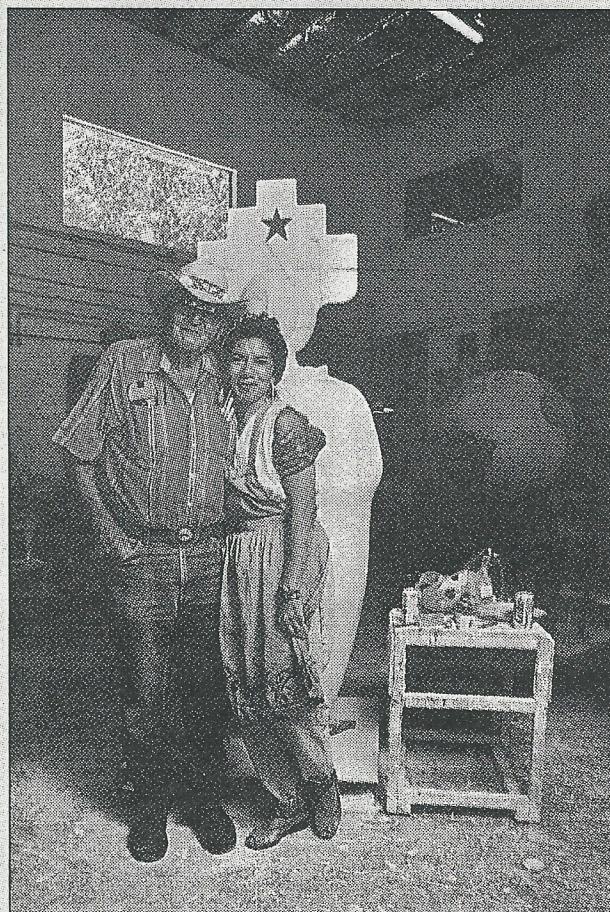
Asked for the reason he commissioned the sculpture of Tekakwitha and not St. Katharine Drexel, who was very active in New Mexico, Sheehan responded, "Because there is that strong devotion to Kateri Tekakwitha. Someone also asked me why not Juan Diego because he was closer to us geographically, but I said with that logic, we wouldn't honor St. Francis, either, because he's from Italy. It's a no-brainer. It's just because there is a healthy devotion to Kateri Tekakwitha here that we wanted to recognize."

Loretto's best-known monumental piece is *Earth Mother*, which stands on the grounds of the state capitol in Santa Fe. Other works are installed at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., the Heard Museum in Phoenix and the Native American Center for the Living Arts in Niagara Falls, N.Y. She earned a bachelor's degree in ethnic art studies at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colo., studied with master artists in Italy, Japan, India, Nepal, Mexico, New Zealand and Australia, and she apprenticed from 1991 through 1994 with Allan Houser. An accomplished potter, Loretto has ceramics in the collection of the Tekisui Museum of Art in Ashiya, Japan. She also has studied printmaking, wood carving, jewelry design and casting, raku pottery, dance and Nepalese ceremonial art.

Ten days before the scheduled unveiling, Loretto was at work with a small paintbrush, adding finishing touches to the bronze Tekakwitha sculpture. Eight feet behind it stood the original piece she crafted using wax clay. Shidoni Foundry cast the work in three pieces, then the smaller parts — including the feathers, rosary with cross, and earrings — were done separately and welded on.

A number of people sent the sculptor rosaries, but she ended up using one from the collection of the Very Rev. Jerome Martinez y Alire, the rector at St. Francis Cathedral. Loretto wanted the cross to be subtle, so the finished image is smaller than the eagle feathers and rests on Tekakwitha's hand beneath the feathers she holds.

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Above, detail of *Earth Mother*, bronze by Estella Loretto

Top left, Loretto with Allan Houser and *Earth Mother* (sculpture in progress)

Bottom left, Loretto with her bronze sculpture *Deer Dancer*, 102 inches tall

Facing page

Kateri Tekakwitha, bronze, 90 x 34 x 33 inches, by Loretto, photo courtesy Larry Phillips

Inset, *Sacred Hummingbird Song*, bronze, 13 inches, by Loretto

DETAILS

▼ Unveiling of bronze sculpture of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha

▼ 5 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 16

▼ St. Francis Cathedral, 213 Cathedral Place, 982-5619

Kateri Tekakwitha

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Unlike many sculptors who are satisfied with a bronze, patina surface, Loretto spends a week or more applying colorful paints for "a warmer feeling." On the afternoon of Aug. 6 she was touching up her subject's feathers and garments. Her clothing is in three layers: a robe of ivory with earth tones, a middle garment of yellow ochre with golden highlights and a lower skirt in what she playfully called "Jémez red."

She had been asked whether she paid tribute to her own pueblo in the work. "We use prayer feathers, but all the tribes do," she answered. "Maybe the moccasins are close, but I didn't use the Jémez manta. I want her to speak to everyone."

When Loretto received the commission to do Tekakwitha, she was close to completion of a stunning 12-foot-tall sculpture, *Peaceful Warrior*, which she had begun after the September 11 terrorist attacks. Her dream

is to see editions of that piece installed at the state capitol, Washington, D.C., and Iraq "to help balance the things that have been happening," she said. "My goal is to use art for positive change and healing."

Martinez y Alire said the Tekakwitha sculpture represents "a statement of solidarity with the Native American people and an acknowledgement of their spirituality. Kateri was a Mohawk from the New York area, but it seems all Indians everywhere, and most especially here in New Mexico, have taken her to themselves. There is an annual Kateri Tekakwitha Conference, and the biggest delegation comes from New Mexico."

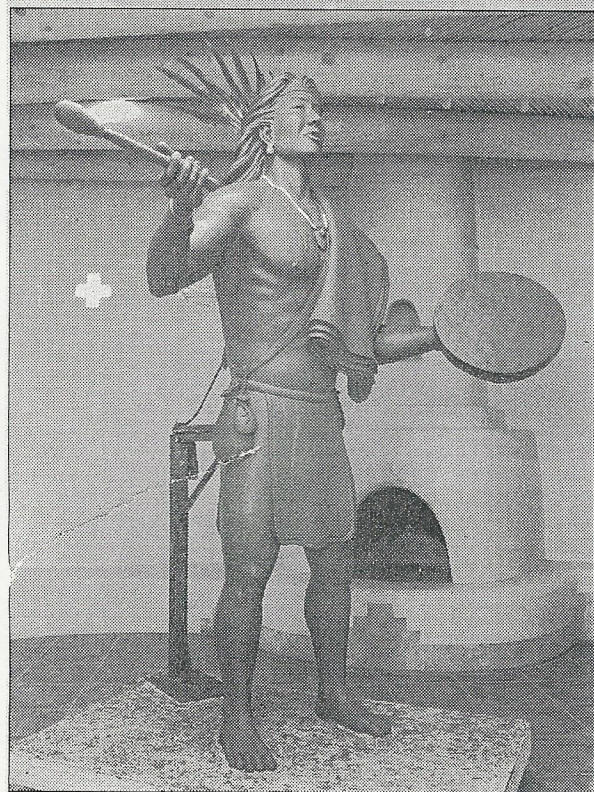
Loretto said she intended to spend nights with her creation. "I will sleep in here and see how it feels

and enjoy her while she's here. When you do a sculpture like this, it's almost like a part of you, like another child."

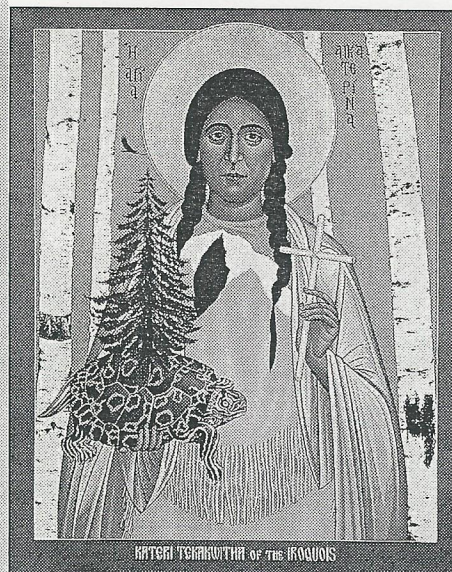
The sculptor has had several calls from people who will make pilgrimages to the unveiling. "It's very beautiful, and I hope they find what they're looking for," she said.

"The Church is looking for a third miracle, but I think this is a miracle, that she is bringing all the tribes in the country together. There will be other archbishops coming, and there will be busloads coming from Acoma, Jémez and other pueblos. What else does that? All the aunties at Jémez are busy making dresses for this occasion. I think Kateri's heart is so big, she can contain everybody."

During the unveiling ceremonies Sheehan will be the celebrant in the Archdiocese of Santa Fe's 18th annual Native American liturgy, with readings given in the Tewa, Keres and Mohawk tongues. Jémez Pueblo's Black Eagle Drum Group, the Acoma/Laguna Mixed Choir and the Laguna Pueblo Drummers and Eagle Dancers will perform. After Mass, St. Francis Cathedral School hosts a reception in the gym. ◀



Peaceful Warrior, sculpture in progress, wax clay, 156 inches tall, by Estella Loretto



Left, Bl. Kateri Tekakwitha of the Iroquois, note card by Robert Lentz

Below, prayer card for the canonization of Kateri Tekakwitha that Loretto purchased at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York

The road to sainthood

The girl who would be known as Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha was born to a Christian Algonquin mother and a Mohawk chief in 1656 and was brought up in the Mohawk community of Ossernenon, now Auriesville, N.Y. A member of the Turtle Clan, Tekakwitha was orphaned at age 4 when both parents and a brother died in a smallpox epidemic. The disease scarred her and affected her eyesight.

Tekakwitha first learned about Christianity from Jesuit missionaries in 1667. After her Catholic baptism nine years later, she was ostracized by members of her community, and she ultimately fled, trekking 200 miles to the Christian Indian village of Sault Sainte Marie near Montreal. She spent what remained of her short life caring for the sick and teaching prayers to children. Also known as Catherine Tegakwitha/Takwita and as the Lily of the Mohawks, Tekakwitha impressed both Indian and French people in the region with her extraordinary sanctity. She had vowed to live a chaste life and was a virgin when she died in 1680.

Father Pierre Cholenec, a witness at Tekakwitha's deathbed, reported that her face, "so disfigured and so swarthy in life, suddenly changed about 15 minutes after her death, and in an instant became so beautiful and so fair that just as soon as I saw it (I was praying by her side) I let out a yell, I was so astonished," according to a 2002 translation of Cholenec's journals by William Lonc of St. Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

"I frankly admit that my first thought at the time was that Catherine could well have entered heaven at that moment and that she had — as a preview — already received in her virginal body a small indication of the glory of which her soul had taken possession in Heaven."

Pilgrims visit Tekakwitha's grave in Caughnawaga, near Montreal, where the Rev. Clarence Walworth erected a memorial monument in 1884. Pope Pius XII declared Tekakwitha venerable in 1943, and she was beatified by Pope John Paul II 23 years ago; she is the first Native American to be declared a Blessed. ◀

