Kateri Tekakwitha

By WILLIAM L. PHILLIPS

NO native-born North American has ever been canonized. There have been saints who lived and died on this continent, but all were born in various European countries. Therefore, it is most interesting to know that the first person born in North America to be considered for elevation to the altar is an Indian girl of the dreaded Mohawk group of the Iroquois. And it is also interesting to know that this girl, Kateri (Catherine) Tekakwitha* was born in Ossernenon (Auriesville, N. Y.), where, ten years before, the members of her tribe had murdered Fr. Jogues and John Lalande, and where the body of the first Jesuit martyr, René Goupil, had been secretly buried. The life and death of Tekakwitha helps to redeem the reputation of her people. Since Indian stories are apt to be suspect as creations from legendary material, it must be stated at the outset that the account of this Indian girl, like that of the Jesuit Martyrs of North America, is taken from contemporary writings. Her first biographers were Fr. Cholenec and Fr. Chauchetière of the Society of Jesus, her confessors at Sault Saint-Louis. This is not a story of action like that of the Jesuit Martyrs, who were canonized because of the love of God as shown in labors and sufferings for the Name of Jesus. Kateri will be held up for our veneration and imitation simply because of her joy in being a Christian and her life of devotion to her Lord.

* Pronounced Te-gah-kwet-Ha (rough H).

Early Life

Kateri Tekakwitha was born in 1656, the daughter of a Mohawk pagan and his Christian wife, an Algonquin whom he had captured at Three Rivers. A plague of small-pox carried off many of the Indians, including Kateri's father and mother and baby brother, when she was only four years old and she barely escaped with her life. Her face was badly pitted and her sight greatly impaired so that she could not endure bright sunlight and had to spend most of the time in her cabin or walk about with covered head. Because of this affliction she came to love a life of retirement and contemplation. Her very name of Tekakwitha was probably given to her because of her condition—"she who walks and moves all before her"—expressing the hesitant walk of an almost-blind child, with arms outstretched to push things from her path.

Her uncle took her to live in his cabin, not necessarily as an

Bernard Iddings Bell puts this very clearly in his book, *God is Not Dead.**

> It is not going to be an easy thing to persuade the veterans that Christianity has relevancy to life, for the very simple reason that the American armed forces are made up of typical Americans, which means that they share the mistakes and defects as well as the virtues of our people generally. With negligible exceptions these brave contenders have been educated to believe, as most Americans believe, that life's real satisfactions are satisfactions material and of this world, satisfactions in the pursuit and attainment of which the Church is manifestly not needed. The American way of life has become materialistic and secularistic. Such elements in it as have spiritual vitality are nowadays popularly regarded as incidental and against the basic trends; such elements are treated by most of our people as decorative, as luxuries. The . . . veteran is a child of this area, reared in this country. It would be a miracle if he were not secularistic, materialistic, given to judging life and institutions from that point of view.

Social Ethics

One thing the veterans do have in common—their horizons have broadened immeasurably. They have been in far corners of the earth, met strange people and seen strange sights. They have learned the value of working together, under discipline, for the accomplishment of a common goal. They have seen the terribly destructive power of modern war. They know that the scientific knowledge that can destroy a city with one bomb, that can span the continent in four hours, that can establish radar contact with the moon, is capable of annihilating what we ironically term civilization. They do *not* know whether the same knowledge can be used to bring a more abundant life to the peoples of the world.

That is where the Church has fallen down, and that is where it is vitally important for the Church to reassert herself. Our Christian ethics, our moral theology, are still geared to an individualistic age. The Church can tell a man what to do in terms of personal ethics, in the human situations contemplated by the simple form of the Ten Commandments; but not how to apply those same ethical principles to a highly industrialized society. How shall we apply the commandment, "Thou shalt not steal," to a tugboat strike which robs thousands of men, women and children of the fuel that they need to keep them warm? Does the injunction "Thou shalt not covet" have any relevancy to the Anglo-Russian dispute over Greece? Has the law "Thou shalt not commit adultery" been repealed by the discovery of penicillin?

Our Lord had some very definite and far-reaching things to say about social morality, in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere. The statement that "The laborer is worthy of his hire" has a direct bearing on the strikes that are plaguing our nation today. It tells the employer that it is his duty to pay his workers a just wage, and that duty is no less binding upon a corporation than upon an individual. At the same time, it tells the worker that it is his duty to give full value for his wage, to be worthy of his hire. Surely it is the duty of the Church to embody these timeless teachings of Christ in a moral code that is applicable to a world of corporations and stockholders, of unions and co-operatives, as well as of individual relations.

As a matter of fact, the Church has done a remarkable amount of just such interpretation of her age-old teachings to modern conditions. There is a surprising amount of moral theology for an industrial age embodied in pronouncements from such diverse religious authorities as the Pope, the Federal Council of Churches and our own House of Bishops. But somehow those pronouncements remain on the levels of what in military life we called "the higher echelons," and don't percolate through to the people. And when our clergy do preach about questions of social and industrial morality, they are likely to preach to white collar congregations about the sins of labor rather than about their own shortcomings. Perhaps the parable of the mote and the beam has some application here.

Demand for Reality

But to return to the veteran. There has been a great deal of nonsense written about "fox-hole religion." It may be true that there are "no atheists in fox-holes." Certainly when a man is lying in a little scooped out place in the ground with mortar and artillery bursts all around him and a sniper's bullet whistling by every time he lifts his head, there is a powerful urge to call upon God to help him, not only to accomplish his mission but to survive. But if that religious impulse finds no previously prepared soil in which to take root, or if it is not nourished after the immediate danger has passed, it is likely to be like the seed in the parable that fell upon hard ground, or that was choked out by the tares when it began to grow.

If the veteran has gained anything through his experience, it is a sense of reality. There is something terribly real about a German bomb or a Japanese mortar shell, when it bursts so close that it seems to be personally addressed to you. The veteran has a right to expect that, if the Church wants to claim his allegiance, it will have something of the same reality—it will be relevant to the current situation, his situation, and will be of first-rate importance. If his fox-hole glimpse of religion is to grow into something permanent, it must develop roots in the Church and come to a flowering in his personal life.

There is where the Church has

* Harpers, 1945.

act of kindness, but because the orphan girl could be of great service to him; not merely could she do the household chores, but when she married, her husband would live with them and support them all in their old age.

After the small-pox plague the whole village moved to a new site on the same bank of the Mohawk River and they named their new home Caughnawaga (laughing water) because of a small waterfall. One more move had to be made later but the same name was given to their final home, overlooking what is now Fonda, New York.

When she was eight years old, Tekakwitha had been betrothed to an Indian boy, and now her aunts wanted the marriage to take place. She objected, and, quite contrary to Indian customs, refused to marry. The loose morals and coquetry of the other girls disgusted her. This is remarkable because contemporary writers point out there was no such thing as virginity among Indian girls. They lived in cabins with many other families: morals were practically unknown and obscenities were common. Feasts of adultery were sometimes held in their villages. The aunts finally tried trickery. All that was needed to effect a marriage was to have a young brave come into a cabin, sit by a girl, and have her hand him food. One day a young Indian of the village was brought to Kateri. He sat beside her and it was suggested that she pass him some sagamite, but the girl saw through the plot, left the cabin, and refused to return until the brave left. Because she refused to follow the sacred customs, she was scolded, threatened, and punished by being given all the hard work to do. Worst of all, she was not allowed to see her Christian friends in the village. Finally the women gave up their persecutions but Kateri was no longer a favorite. As she grew stronger she was forced to do harder tasks such as felling trees and going on the hunting and fishing trips.

Conversion

In 1666 the Iroquois were forced to seek peace with the French and Jesuit priests were sent to convert the Indians. At Caughnawaga the fathers were assigned to the cabin of Tekakwitha's uncle and she was given charge of their welfare. She watched them at their prayers and listened to their conversations and teachings, but even now she did not ask for baptism, either because of her timidity or for fear of her pagan uncle. After a visit of three months the missionaries moved on.

A permanent mission was soon set up at Caughnawaga and Kateri attended the services in the chapel, longing for the day when she too could become a child of God and share in the blessings of the converts.

Just as sickness and weak eyes had led her to retirement, the first stage of her advance in holiness, so now a "fortunate" accident proved to be a blessing. She had stumbled against a tree and injured her leg so that she had to stay in her cabin. Fr. de Lamberville, S.J., the priest in charge of the mission, had passed this cabin many times without stopping, but suddenly he felt called upon to enter. Kateri opened her heart to him and told him of her great longing for baptism. Usually this sacrament was not given to the Indians without a long period of instruction and watching, because they too often lapsed back to their old customs and especially in regard to marriage and concubinage. However everyone testified to Tekakwitha's purity of life and character. Months of instruction passed by and at last the uncle and aunts consented to allow her to become a Christian, providing she stayed in the village.

On Easter Day, April 18, 1676, Tekakwitha was baptized with great solemnity and given the name of Kateri. The little chapel was decorated with furs and the walls strung with beaded necklaces and trinkets. An avenue of trees was planted by her tribesmen under which she walked to the mission. Crowds of Christian and pagan Indians flocked to watch the service, and all were struck by the peace and joy of soul which was reflected in her face as she entered the chapel. Kateri was then twenty years old.

Persecution

It was not easy for an Indian to become a Christian because it meant comparative isolation from tribal customs and meetings where adultery and drunkenness were rife. Kateri did not mind this separation but made her life a steady prayer—in the chapel as much as possible or at home or in the fields as she went about her work. At first her comrades admired her but finally her example enraged them. She was reproached for the time spent in prayer and especially in the chapel on Sundays and feast days. She was deprived of food on days when she did not work. Because she said her rosary she was condemned, for the Dutch at Fort Orange had warned the Iroquois against devotions to the Blessed Virgin and especially the use of the rosary. Children began to stone her and she had to go to the chapel by secret ways. The worst attacks came from her uncle who even had a young brave attempt to kill her unless she renounced her faith. The final attack was against her chastity: an aunt insisted Kateri had sacrificed her honor while on a hunt. Fortunately Fr. de Lamberville was able to trace the

source of the lie and free Tekakwitha from the slander. He felt now that the only thing she could do was to flee to the Christian community of Indians on the St. Lawrence River.

This community of both French and Indian Christians was then at Laprairie, across from Montreal. Later it moved to another town, also called Caughnawaga, with its Chapel of Saint Francis Xavier by the Lachine Rapids where today two thousand Catholic Indians are living. Some Iroquois of the Oneida Nation had been to Montreal, decided to remain under instruction and receive baptism, and had founded Laprairie. Their new venture attracted the curiosity of other Indians and many who visited them stayed or left to urge their friends to go to the new mission. One of these men whose name means "Hot Ashes" became the means of Kateri's escape. The aunts had consented to her going while her uncle was away and Fr. de Lamberville counseled immediate flight. Blessed by her priest she started out with her brother-in-law and a Huron. When the uncle learned of her escape, he pursued them with three bullets in his gun, but in vain. After four days the fugitives reached Lake George where they found the canoe which "Hot Ashes" had left for them. A week later Tekakwitha and her companions reached the mission and she handed to Fr. Cholenec a letter from Fr. de Lamberville. It read, "Kateri Tekakwitha is going to live at the Sault. Will you kindly undertake to direct her? You will soon know what a treasure we have sent you. Guard it well! May it profit in your hands, for the glory of God and the salvation of a soul that is certainly very dear to Him."

Kateri was given a home with an elderly woman who became her adopted sister. Persecution now seemed to be over and she could give her time to developing her soul. Every morning she went to the chapel at four o'clock and assisted at two masses and in the evening she came back to the night prayers. During the rainy season and on Sundays she was in church all day. The missionaries watched her carefully and felt she was ready for her first communion on Christmas Day without the usual year of preparation. On Easter Day she was allowed to become a member of the Confraternity of the Holy Family, an honor usually reserved for older and well trained converts.

Austerities

After reading the lives of the saints Kateri decided to imitate their penances and with true Indian courage she tried to outdo them. She scourged her weak body, fasted a great deal, abstained from sleep, wore an iron girdle around her body, and even placed hot coals between her toes. Other Indians heard of her austerities and began to imitate them. There was such a wave of self-inflicted tortures that Fr. Cholenec had to compel them all to stop and Tekakwitha was warned to use prudence in her penances.

Her adopted sister decided to raise the question of marriage and chose a husband for Kateri. It was then that she revealed to the missionaries her desire to take a vow of virginity and give herself entirely to God. Fr. Cholenec advised her to deliberate for three days and she agreed. But in less than an hour she was back again and said there was nothing to deliberate about because her mind had been made up for years. On the Feast of the Annunciation, 1679, this girl did the unheard thing for an Indian —she took a solemn vow of virginity. Immediately other Indian girls followed her example.

During the hunting season of 1680 while most of the Indians were away, Kateri became ill. For two months she lay in her cabin suffering violent stomach pains, but her hours of loneliness were filled with prayer. On Tuesday in Holy Week the Blessed Sacrament was brought in procession to her cabin, although usually the sick were carried to the chapel for last rites. On the following afternoon, Wednesday in Holy Week, Kateri Tekakwitha died, clasping her crucifix and repeating over and over the words, "Jesus, I love Thee." She was buried by the banks of the St. Lawrence in a spot chosen by herself, where she used to pray beside a huge cross. Another cross was placed on her grave and soon Indians and Frenchmen alike were praying at her tomb and miracles were being reported. After an attack of Iroquois had been repulsed, the second bishop of Quebec, de la Croix St. Valier, gave the credit to Kateri's prayers and remarked as he rose from his knees at her tomb, "Canada has also her Genevieve."

The bones of Kateri are now in the Sacristy of the mission chapel at Caughnawaga by the St. Lawrence, but over the spot where she was buried there is now a granite tomb surmounted by a cross. On the stone are the words, "Kateri Tekakwitha" with the date of her death and, in the Iroquois language, the words, "Fairest flower that ever bloomed among true men."

On January 3, 1943, the Lily of the Mohawks, as she is called, was declared by the Pope to be Venerable for her heroic virtues. The cause of her beatification is now well advanced.

Lord Jesus, glorify Thy
Servant
Catherine Tekakwitha:
We beg of Thee by Thy
Holy Cross.