THEODORE MAYNARD

## GREAT CATHOLICS IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Stirring portraits of twenty-one notable Catholics and the times in which they lived

## III: Kateri Tekakwitha

(1656 - 1680)

Kateri Tekakwitha was born some time in 1656 in the Indian village of Ossernenon on the south bank of the Mohawk River about thirty miles west of Albany. She remained in this locality until in her teens she managed to make her way to a Christian Indian settlement on the south bank of the St. Lawrence, slightly west of Montreal. There she died and there her remains are carefully preserved in the hope of her eventual canonization.

The Mohawks, the tribe of the Five Nations to which Tekakwitha belonged, were agrarian, in the sense that they depended more on agriculture than on hunting for their food. They built their towns in an irregular triangle, behind a strong double palisade. As Gandawagué, where Kateri lived, had a palisade not much more than 250 feet long, the houses it contained—and the people there—must have been closely packed together. The houses, built of birch bark with a curved roof, were each occupied by four or five families, with a door at either end, and a vent in the roof for the smoke.

Because of the absence of privacy there was a great deal of shameless obscenity. Some of this Kateri must often have witnessed; nor could she close her eyes to the talk. However, as she had been left extremely short-sighted, following a bad case of smallpox while she was hardly more than an infant, this preserved her delicate modesty from being as wounded as it would have been had she possessed normal vision. Her defective eyesight also prevented her from playing with the other children of the village. All this induced in her a feel-

ing of insecurity, and therefore prepared her to turn quite naturally to the comfort of God, even while she was still a pagan.

The ravages of smallpox also left her not at all good looking, a disadvantage which became, from her point of view, an advantage, as few young braves would want such a wife. Nevertheless, some did, because she was so gentle and eager to be of assistance to others; it was with difficulty that she deferred marriage. Early in life she determined to preserve a life-long virginity. While the Jesuits she subsequently met commended this, they could not approve her positive abhorrence for marriage, though here it is possible that they read into what she said more than she really meant. The reason for Kateri's repugnance they probably guessed. The hideous sights and indecent talk all around her, which other Indian girls took for granted, deeply shocked Kateri.

Because of her semi-blindness she was exempted from agricultural work. This was relegated to women not, as some have supposed, because they were despised by their men folk, but because women were considered as embodying the principle of fertility. A man was useful for bringing in game (and now and then a scalp), but the tribal structure was matriarchal. It was for this reason that marriage was so often pressed on Kateri.

An additional reason was that a husband became a member of his wife's family and took up his abode with them the moment that the very simple marriage ceremony had taken place; then he became a provider of meat. As Kateri had been brought up by an uncle and aunt—her father and mother having died while she was still an infant—these adopted parents were even more anxious than natural parents would have been that this source of supply be obtained. It was beyond their comprehension why the girl should object to being married; but, though they had all

the authority of parents, they found their adopted daughter immovable.

She was shy and as removed from the life teeming around her as it was possible to be; as time went on, her shyness grew more marked, so that she came to be looked upon as a complete oddity, and knew herself to be different; which resulted in a further withdrawal into herself. Yet she was always helpful, invariably doing what she was asked to do, if merely a hint came, and often anticipating the small tasks within her power to perform. Actually, there was not much that was within her capacity; the mending of moccasins and wampum belts was something she was very good at, but the supply needed was limited; as for the stirring of a pot, that even a very little girl could do.

The marriage against which she had set her face, began with the simplest arrangements. Usually, the parents of the couple arranged everything; all the girl had to do was to accept a bowl of food from a suitor, and she was married, without further ceremony. Whenever Kateri was offered this symbolic food, she rushed out of the house in what people considered ridiculous alarm. Once a stern method was adopted to bring her to her senses: a young brave threatened to kill her unless she accepted him. This was probably bluff, and quite possibly Kateri's uncle and aunt were parties to the scheme. But, frightened though the girl was, quite expecting the tomahawk to cleave her skull, she would not change her attitude.

Her mother had been an Algonquin captive, spared because one of the braves needed a wife. She had been baptized, though her knowledge of the Christian faith doubtless was very sketchy. It did not extend to her knowing that she—or anybody—was quite capable of administering baptism. She died leaving her baby daughter unchristened. Kateri Tekakwitha reached young womanhood a pagan, in a village completely pagan.

It was worse than that; it was fiercely savage. Every now and then a group of captives were brought in and tortured on a raised platform (so that everybody could have a good view of the proceedings) before being burned at the stake. Kateri was well aware what was going on, for she could not avoid hearing the shouts and songs and jeers of the torturers, and sometimes a wild scream from one of the victims. Even small children were encouraged to take part in what was a ritual performance. On these occasions Kateri would creep into the darkest corner of the cabin and hold her hands over her ears. This was considered further oddity on her part.

In October 1666, when she was about ten, the French, who had recently received reinforcements in Canada, came down with a force of 600 men. The Mohawks submitted at once, without a fight. One of the conditions of the peace imposed by the French commander was that a priest be received by the tribe. But-Kateri hid herself even from him. She was naturally Christian, but did not ask for the baptism that was, after some instruction, administered to others. It would seem that when she finally escaped to Canada it was, in large part, to evade the increasing insistence that she marry, though she must also have picked up bits of information from the newly baptized among the Indian women. Fragmentary though this information must have been, and Kateri's grasp of it imperfect, she realized that Christianity answered the secret needs of her heart. Her natural spiritual insight may be presumed to have perceived implications that escaped people better instructed than she was at that time.

She had also suffered from the pressures of another device that was used to force her into marriage—calumny. She had several times been threatened, sometimes by groups of drunken braves. She took refuge from such in the chapel, though she knew her persecution would be renewed. The hardest thing to bear was that her aunt sought out the priest and told him that Kateri was committing adultery with her

uncle. It had been hoped that, in order to clear her name, she would marry one of the braves who had asked for her. The "proof" the woman offered was that Kateri once (and inadvertently) did not refer to her uncle as "father," but used his own name. But the priest at once saw through the plot, for he knew to what Kateri was being subjected, and sharply reprimanded the scandal-monger.

The situation became so unbearable in the Mohawk village that Kateri became desperate. It is a wonder how the shy timid girl had endured it so long. So, after her baptism—which was on Easter Sunday, April 18, 1676—she sought refuge in flight. The priest had probably made the necessary arrangements, and certainly a Christian Huron had come to be her escort to Canada, where she found a safe refuge in the Christian Indian village of Caughnawaga near Montreal. There she hoped to be free of molestation.

Yet, even there, she did not escape pressure to marry, or even instances of calumny, although her situation considerably eased. It was now thought that at Caughnawaga, as all its inhabitants were Christians, she would find an acceptable husband. As all Indian girls did marry, it was supposed that now she would drop her former objections to the married state. But Kateri's aversion remained, in spite of the advice of her new friends.

The ideal of virginity was for Kateri the key to her whole life, and was the basis of the spirituality she attained. From the outset the priests at Caughnawaga recognized that Kateri was a girl who, while only recently a pagan, was already far advanced in divine things, rudimentary as may have been her knowledge of many of the elements of faith. This appears in the fact that for her the time of probation demanded between baptism and first Communion was greatly shortened at the advice of Père Cholonec, her spiritual director. This might have resulted in a good deal of criticism had not everybody in the Christian village perceived that Kateri was so

unusual a person that it was only right that she should receive special privileges.

However, it did not prevent a new calumny from occurring, though this time it sprang not from malice but from suspicion and jealousy. It was set in circulation by a new arrival at the village named Nemahbin, who as yet knew little of Kateri. She and her husband shared a cabin with Kateri. The man, coming into the long dark house late at night and very tired, threw himself down at once to sleep. In the morning Nemahbin found him lying too close to Kateri -so she considered-and put the worst construction on matters, this though the man had been an exemplary Christian for twenty years. The explanation apparently did not occur to her that in the darkness he could not see where he was lying, or even that in sleep he might have accidentally rolled a little in her direction. Had this been all, the baleful seed might never have taken root, but Nemahbin fancied that several other subsequent incidents—all quite harmless—confirmed her suspicions.

Even so, the woman did not immediately divulge what she was thinking, but waited for the return of the Blackrobe. The priest, seeing that she was genuinely troubled, listened to all that she had to say, but took the first opportunity of questioning Kateri. Her guileless face alone made him feel that there must have been some mistake; yet, as the accusation was serious, and evidently made in good faith, he told her exactly what was being said, and asked her if it was true. The frank and open way in which she made a complete denial, without showing any indignation about the ugly story, convinced him that it was totally without foundation.

So far was it from doing Kateri any permanent harm that on the following Easter, which was the anniversary of her baptism, Père Cholonec surprised her—and gave everybody in the village a signal proof of his belief in her innocence—by admitting her, on his own initiative, into the Confraternity

of the Holy Family, a select group that Indians ordinarily could join only after years of blameless life. Kateri, in her humility, was overwhelmed and declared herself unworthy of the distinction. But, as the Blackrobe persisted, the girl, who had been deeply wounded in the calumny brought against her, consented. She realized that it would finally crush all suspicions.

Life at Caughnawaga was quiet and uneventful. Yet it was Indian life in everything except that this was a wholly Catholic community. The homes were long, low, curved-roofed birchbark cabins. While there was a certain amount of hunting and fishing, the Blackrobes did all they could to promote the cultivation of a few easily raised crops, mostly corn and peas and beans. The settlement was far enough away from Montreal to prevent many white visitors from going there. The Blackrobes did not encourage contacts between the Indians and the French, knowing only too well how easily their neophytes could fall under the power of firewater.

Sometimes, however, a small group from Caughnawaga would visit Montreal. Kateri and a few other young women dropped in at the school conducted by Blessed Marguerite Bourgeois, now a flourishing college for girls. At that time its curriculum was elementary, but a number of Indian girls attended on a footing of equality with the whites. It specially interested the visitors, who spent several days at the Villa Maria Convent, that several Indians were already seeking admission into the community. They were being held back only because it was considered advisable that they should first have further training. For the support of the Indian students an annual donation was made by the King of France, the wise French policy being that of assimilating them as soon as possible. It was evident that they were apt pupils, and their piety was equally evident.

Not surprisingly, Kateri and one of her friends, a girl

named Marie Thérèse, were inspired with the idea of building a birch-bark cabin on Heron Island, a dot of land in the middle of the river. There they could find retirement and perhaps eventually be able to build up an Indian sisterhood. But the priests, when they were consulted, smiled gently at so ill-considered, if natural, an idea. While it was true that the group might be able to raise a few crops, possibly all that they needed for their food, it was unlikely that they would find the seclusion they were picturing, as both Indians and whites would come over in droves to gaze with curiosity at this wonder. Besides, they were still too young in the faith for a venture of this sort. Disappointed, but recognizing that the Blackrobes were only talking good sense, Kateri and her friend abandoned the scheme.

The idea, even if it had been approved, was extremely dangerous. When the Iroquois began a new war against the French, they tried to get those in the Christian settlement to join them. When this alliance was refused, the pagan Indians turned in their fury against the Christians of their own blood, carrying off several captives. These they subjected to torture before burning them at the stake. It was obviously unsafe for a few young women to be anywhere except in the village, where they would have some protection.

Later, some of those at Caughnawaga adopted some extreme forms of asceticism, of a physical and quite unauthorized sort, the women going farther than the men. We hear of them wandering along the bank of the St. Lawrence in mid-winter dressed only in their shifts and of saying the rosary in sub-zero temperatures. Not satisfied with that, others chopped holes in the frozen river and stayed there up to their necks in the icy water saying their prayers; one woman even immersed her baby in this fashion, so that it almost died. The pagan Indians went in for somewhat similar austerities, so as to inure their bodies; the motive of these Christians was, of course, quite different, yet the form of their penances bore too close a resemblance to pass unreproved. Besides, these mortifications were often highly injudicious. It had never been part of the Jesuit idea to give approval to self-imposed physical sufferings, but rather to accept, as from God's hand, whatever pain came, and to impose upon one's self only interior mortifications.

Kateri Tekakwitha herself did not avoid such thingswhich, indeed, other Indians expected of her—but she usually went no farther than to sleep upon thorns or to sprinkle ashes upon a sagamité that was already, one would have supposed, sufficiently lacking in flavor. Père Cholonec, when he heard of what was going on, though he admired Kateri's motives, gave her a good scolding for her imprudence, and ordered her to throw the thorns under her mat into the fire. The saying of prayers up to one's neck in icy water—especially such an embroidery upon that penance as putting an infant into that water—he peremptorily forbade.

For Kateri, Père Cholonec decided that there was a penetential road at once safer and more meritorious. He had long been aware that she wished to live and die a virgin, and he recommended that she might add to her merit by doing this bound by a vow. She took a vow of virginity—privately, of course—on the Feast of the Annunciation, March 25, 1679. After that, the question of her marrying was closed in the eyes of the whole community.

Her aversion to the thought of marriage, even while she was a pagan, was due to the shocks her delicate and refined nature had received, but was merely of a natural kind. Since she had come to live at Caughnawaga as a Christian, her love of virginity belonged in the supernatural order. She still was advised to marry, even by the couple with whom she lived. They attempted nothing like the former bullying and trickery, but her foster sister in the kindest and most reasonable way told her that, while she was most welcome to stay with them, she should insure herself against the precariousness of life. They had a large family, but, if anything should happen to the father of the family, what would become of her? Marriage was the normal mode of life, and matrimony was a sacrament: why, then, this strange repugnance?

After several such discussions by her foster sister, Kateri took the question to Père Cholonec. While he perfectly understood that the intentions of Kateri's foster sister were excellent, and that there was much to be said in favor of her arguments, he was not so sure that they bore on Kateri's very special case. Even so, he would not presume to pronounce definitely, but told Kateri that this was a question that she had to decide for herself. All he suggested was that she give the matter further careful thought; when he saw that her mind was quite made up, he consented to her taking a vow of virginity.

Except that we know that she spent much of every day praying in the woods, we have little knowledge of her interior life. Kateri was not very articulate, and whatever she confided to Père Cholonec he, as her confessor, was not free to divulge. In the life he wrote of her he was obliged to use only such generalities as everybody knew. But one small point speaks volumes; though everybody in the village was a Christian, everybody spoke of Kateri as the Christian. The other Indians liked to kneel near her in the chapel, because they felt that this made them pray more fervently. She seemed to bear a special sort of effulgence.

The following year Kateri died. That year we may be sure was the happiest of her life, for not only did she become closer to God than ever, but her vow had released her from the importunities that had so often distressed her. Cholonec observed that her natural gaiety, which had so often been smothered under her worries, was now allowed free vent. It was not that she suddenly turned from a rather unhappy to a merry maiden, but she wore a look of serenity and content.

Even the fact that life at Caughnawaga was quiet and uneventful exactly suited her disposition.

In spite of a somewhat sickly childhood she had grown up to be rather notably vigorous. Yet during the winter hunt early in 1680 she fell sick, and, as the other members of the Confraternity of the Holy Family had accompanied the hunting party, there was nobody to nurse her. The only people left in the village were a few elderly and infirm women, and it was about as much as they could do to look after their own wants. A bowl of gruel and a cup of water were brought to her from time to time, but that was about all. As the Blackrobe was himself absent for much of that time, there was nobody to prepare her for the death she knew to be approaching.

When the Jesuit did return, he saw at a glance that he would have to hasten. The custom there was that the dying were carried in a litter to the chapel to receive Viaticum. Partly because there were not enough able-bodied persons in Caughnawaga to carry her (though this could have been managed), but more because Kateri's was an exceptional case, Père Cholonec brought Viaticum to her in her own cabin. This was on April 16, 1680. By this time some of the members of the hunting party had returned, for we hear of Kateri's friend Marie Thérèse lending her a tunic for the great occasion, a tunic better than any that Kateri possessed. She felt that she should receive her Lord in the finest clothes obtainable. A few days later she was dead.

Where they buried her beside the St. Lawrence became, though, of course, quite unofficially, a kind of shrine. As the Indians were convinced that she was a saint, they used to go there to pray for her intercession. Some of the French who knew about her did the same. Indeed, the first written testimonial about one of Kateri's miracles came from Captain Du Luth, commandant at Fort Frontenac, after whom the city of Duluth, Minnesota, has been named. On August 15,

1696, he made a statement that most explicitly declares that Kateri cured him of his long-standing gout at the end of a novena he had made in her honor and had promised to visit her grave if his health was restored.

Perhaps it was in order to avoid even the appearance of a public cultus, as this might prove detrimental to her cause for beatification, that her bones have been removed from her grave and are now kept in the sacristy of the Jesuit church in Caughnawaga.

## THE TWENTY-ONE OUTSTANDING CATHOLICS PORTRAYED IN THIS FASCINATING BOOK . . .

Martyred French missionary. St. Isaac Jogues Iesuit who explored upper Père Marquette Mississippi. Saintly Indian girl. Kateri Tekakwitha Franciscan missionary and Junipero Serra outstanding explorer of California. John Carroll First American bishop. Ex-slave famed for works of Pierre Toussaint charity. Pioneer bishop of Northwest. Benedict Joseph Flaget Founder of Sisters of Charity. Mother Seton Dynamic bishop of John England Charleston. Russian nobleman who Prince Gallitzin became a famous missionary. Archbishop of New York John Hughes during anti-Catholic riots. Famous missionary to Father De Smet Northwest Indians. Foremost Catholic convert Orestes Brownson and author of the 19th century. "Builder of the West." Father Mazzuchelli Founder of Paulist Fathers. Father Hecker First American Negro Bishop Healy bishop. Outstanding ecclesiastic in Cardinal Gibbons American history. First American saint. Mother Cabrini Convert daughter of Rose Hawthorne Lathrop Nathaniel Hawthorne. Nun and mystic who may be Miriam Teresa Demjanovich canonized. Only Catholic candidate for Alfred E. Smith

President.