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THE PROPHETIC SPIRIT OF KATERI TEKAKWITHA
WITHIN OUR INDIAN CHURCHES
-by Fr. Edmund Savilla

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within Our Indian Churches

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Your Sons and Daughters shall prophesy
Your young shall see visions
and your Elders shall dream dreams
(Joel 16-21, Acts 1-17)

At the gate called "the beautiful" a crippled man begged for alms from the apostles Peter and John. Peter said: "I have neither silver nor gold, but what I have I give you! In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarean, walk!" (Acts 3:6) Through the intervention of Peter this once crippled man was made whole. Peter's faith was proclaimed through this healing action. The gift of wholeness was accepted and the man danced and praised God in the Temple.

Does our faith in Jesus give us the courage to call upon Jesus name to heal? Have we allowed the power of the name of Jesus to heal us? With confident assurance, can we hope for wholeness in ourselves and our communities? Have we merely accepted the externals of the Catholic Church as a means of not having to face the reality of a commitment with the living Spirit of Jesus? Are the visions of our young the result of mind altering drugs instead of an encounter with the Holy? Do we dream of the material things we can possess, forgetting family and friends?

Questioning our faith life opens the gates of the beautiful. What we find is not gold or silver, but healing and wholeness. We rediscover our beauty, and the power of our faith in Jesus. We do this not just to feel good, though this is part of being beautiful. But as Jesus and Peter we find ourselves filled with more than we can hold. As a result, our faith moves us to intervene in the brokenness and meaninglessness we find in and around us. We have Hope.

Kateri Tekakwitha was a woman of Hope. Hope was her companion in this life. Her beauty was not as modern society would define it. Her body had been a victim of smallpox which left her frail and half blind. Her body marked with tiny pits that the smallpox had dug into it. Kateri's beauty rested in the meaning she gave to her life. A meaning born out of an inward journey, that would lead her along the dream paths of her ancestors. Ending in a personal relationship with the resurrected Jesus. Hope and beauty were not sentimental goals in Kateri's life, but companions through her suffering and sacrifice.

Other companions with Kateri in life were her mother, Kahenta, missionaries and a small Christian community found within her people. As well as her own people with whom she spent most of her life. Each of these relationships would influence her life. As an infant and young child, Kateri would experience the love and power of her mother's own spiritual journey. Kahenta was a Christian and during the four years she and Kateri would be together in this world, she would teach Kateri what has become known as the gentle ways. Smallpox would separate Kateri and Kahenta, death taking Kahenta and leaving Kateri physically handicapped. Before Kahenta's death, she prayed that her daughter would be given a Christian heart and the poison of smallpox would not touch her. Her prayer would be heard, for Kateri was gifted with faith in Jesus. Even though she did suffer from smallpox, she survived, witnessing to long-suffering and inner healing. An experience that would fulfill Kahenta's expectations and infinitely surpass them.

As a member of the Iroquois Nation, Kateri was taken in by her people. She would recover only to grow up intently aware of her limitations. Blindness and a weak body did not allow her to join the other children in what we would call the normal development in her people's ways. Kateri would be faced with learning to adapt to cultural and personal situations. Her understanding would come not from culturally accepted norms, but from her own working out of new meanings for herself. Limitations would become invitations for her to discover new avenues of expression. Other senses becoming enhanced, helping her develop a genuine sensitivity to creation. Her journeys would be inward rather than along the forest paths.

Recalling these situations help us to remember Kateri's faith in Jesus was not the result of a lightening bolt or an angel's appearance. Her faith is rooted in the experience of her family and community. Stories of her people's experience of the Creator and stories of Jesus told by her mother and other Christians, led her into a journey of day to day conversion. A journey of suffering and sacrifice often betrayed today by sweet pictures, statues and sentimental stories.

We need to enter the real journey of Kateri if she is to help us understand our journey today. Part of Kateri's journey was her adult initiation into the church. This points to evangelization and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults as essential points for our reflection.

Before asking to become a member of the catechumenate, Kateri had undergone her own precatechumenate which involved an encounter with the lived faith of her mother, other Christians and the traditional spirituality of her people.

Today we would call this journey into self an intra-religious dialogue. A dialogue not only with the person of Jesus, but with the silent God expressed in her people's self-understanding. Every step a conversion, a breakthrough, a celebration of life. Having encountered the silence of death as a child, her solitude would become a womb within which her silent God would become flesh.

Kateri's pre-Christian life is filled with many insights into her own life and the life of her people. As an active participant in the traditions of her people, she knew its truth. She would question abuses while affirming the spirit of truth expressed through tradition. Her vision would strengthen her sight, as she looked into the heart of matters.

Because Kateri was raised in the traditional way, she naturally would be exposed to all the social practices of her people. This included an arranged relationship that had the possibility of developing into a monogamous relationship. What is often overlooked is how Kateri's people accepted her as she was. They would not deny her the opportunity to participate fully within their lives, because of her physical handicaps. When the time came for her to make a decision regarding the prearranged relationship, with her creativity and insight she suggested another option. This option would free the young man and her people from their spoken promises. Her vision would call her to risk the security tradition provided and place her on the path of living a single life-style. This decision was the first of much soul-searching and shows selfunderstanding and an understanding of the people in her life. We must be cautious here that we do not try to equate this life decision with Kateri's decision years later to make a vow of perpetual virginity. To do this would betray her vision and meaning she gave to her life as a single person. Perpetuating or imposing a sentimental interpretation on her life such as, "Tekakwitha rejected marriage in order to embrace virginity" blinds us to her real lifelong spiritual journey.

Another life decision Kateri made was to become a Christian. This decision was made at a time in the church when initiation of adults was experiencing a renewal based on the ancient tradition of the catechumenate. Attempts to restore the catechumenate was an evolving experience, adapting to mistakes and accomplishments made by missionaries around the world. By the time these missionaries would encounter Kateri's people, they would have little over a centuries experience in renewal in Latin America, Asia and Africa. Prefabricated structures would include not just the Gospel but a context within which it would be lived out.

In Latin America the Jesuits had set up what were called "reductions" or "mission towns". This structure would have far reaching effects on Kateri and her people.

"One of the earliest expositions of the mission town concept appears in Father Paul LeJeunes, Annual Relation of Events in New France, 1634, printed in The Jesuit Relations (180, pp 6-7). As LeJeune noted, mission towns were designed to do more than give converts new identities and allegiances. Towns would also serve to isolate the converts from their unconverted kinsmen, thus preventing the kind of reversion to traditional belief all missionaries feared. As an added benefit, towns would conserve mission manpower while increasing the influence of the missionaries-in-residence. These benefits and more were anticipated by the missionaries as well as by government officials, who were quick to recognize the town's value as a means of controlling Indian people."
(Ronda & Axtell, Indian Missions a Critical Bibliography, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978, p 33)

Without this historical background it would appear that Kateri abandoned her people. The glamour of seeing Kateri escape to the Christian settlement in Canada only shows that she was a victim of her times. Less glamorous but more important for us today would be to critique these methods of evangelization. Learning the positive and negative effects. This is important because history shows that the idea of "mission towns" was transferred to "mission schools" producing and perpetuating the idea that there was only one acceptable way to embrace the Gospel. Besides the idea of having to go to a "mission town", Kateri was exposed to a theology rooted in apologetics not evangelization. As a result, Kateri probably participated in the rite of exorcism and renunciation of non-Christian worship which was part of the ancient catechumenate. Exclusiveness and inclusiveism characterized this theologies content. In other words if you want to be saved, you have to believe and do what we do. The western church had forgotten what the word Indian actually ment, which is "In God", "in dio". Native peoples had already been acknowledged as being "in God". Unfortunately, many missionaries would ignore this reality and in many cases invent, and set up their own criteria of what it ment to be "in God". Kateri's life not only points to what has been characterized as the glories of the missionary effort, it also highlights its tragedies.

The present historical situation is leading all creation into a new stage. Vatican II guided by the Spirit has breathed new life into the church. "How to evangelize" and the "content of evangelization" have surfaced anew as a result of the church's reflections. People who would like to become Christians no longer have to leave their homes in order to live in a Christian community. More importantly they do not have to reject their past life experiences of the Holy.

With the renewal of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, we have been given the opportunity to enflesh the Gospel within our local traditions. No longer is the mission of proclaiming the Good News the sole responsibility of Father or Sister. The people of God, represented by the local church, should always understand and show that the initiation of adults is its concern and the business of all the baptized (M #14). Therefore, the community must always be ready to fulfill its apostolic vocation by giving help to those who need Christ. (R.C.I.A. #41). This community responsibility also extends to children and infants.

Along with the renewal of the structures of the church, we are rediscovering the Good News. The innocent power Peter used in healing the crippled man. As a message of liberation the Good News once again exhibits the profound relation between evangelization and human advancement/development/liberation and healing.

"Evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new. Now I am making the whole of creation new."

(Gal. 6:15) The church evangelizes when she seeks to convert (Rom 1:16). Solely through the divine power of the message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete environments which are theirs"

Paul VI (Mission Trends #4 pp 77-78)

As Catholic Native Americans today, we are very aware of the past, but more importantly we are aware of the present situation of our brothers and sisters. We have to ask ourselves, do the Native Peoples have a need for Christ? Have we followed Kateri's example and journeyed along the dream paths of our ancestors, as well as emerging ourselves in the valued Gospel? Without ceasing to be a Christian, can we live out our unique identity found in our individual and tribal Indianness? Or are we content to live on one side of the river, dismissing the Gospel as the "white mans" religion?

The reality of our communities urgently calls us to answer these questions about the meaning of our own lives. Violence, vandalism, corruption, slander and prejudice are a few of the more observable situations to be witnessed in our Indian communities, whether they are reservations, rural or urban communities. Neither Native American Tradition nor Christian Tradition support or suggest this way of life as normal. Rather this type of behavior represents an inner disorder. Peter's faith and vision called him to heal the crippled man. Does our faith and vision call us to actively intervene in our own crippled lives as well as that of our crippled communities?

Family life is where these hurts are most directly experienced by our people. Like Kateri, we are handicapped, our vision dimmed by many factors. Respect for life has given way to child, adult and personal abuse. The disease that kills us today is not smallpox but alcoholism. Effects of this disease destroy the individual, our families, and even whole reservations. With the grace of God, Kateri was able to survive her illness, living to give renewed meaning to her life. This same grace can also have and give renewed meaning to us. As Catholic Indians to accept an abnormal reality as normal or to remain indifferent is a betrayal of our faith in a loving, healing God. It is also a betrayal of the original beauty the Creator gifted us with.

With today's knowledge of the disease of alcoholism, our communities can learn to assist in arresting the disease as well as to prevent it. Our Christian communities have a moral responsibility to use every means necessary to prevent this cultural suicide. Besides actively supporting the traditional structures of A-A, Ala-non, and Ala-teen, we need to address every aspect of prevention, treatment and ongoing recovery. Developing parish workshops and providing programs such as parenting for the recovering alcoholic women and men.

The survival of our peoples and the gifts the Creator shared with our ancestors depends on our commitment. Here we are actively involved in our own conversion and that of our communities. Every conversion suggests a growth and a clearer understanding of the Creator's vision. Broken homes and abandoned children no longer have to be sources of discouragement and despair. These situations place us at the heart of hope.

Kateri is often pictured carrying a cross, symbol of suffering and sacrifice. Besides her physical pain, she must have gone through many interior struggles as she journeyed into the depths of life's meaning. One of the biggest sacrifices she would make would be to leave her people, at the recommendation of the missionary. This decision would prevent her martyrdom. We now welcome her back home, into our hearts and communities.

The martyrdom that was denied her, is to be lived out in our lives. Our commitment becomes our sacrifice for our people. Her vision of hope is made clear in our awareness of those who suffer.

Tekakwitha's life is not a call into a preconceived notion of church, rather it is an invitation into a lifelong journey. A journey that will lead us into the depths of who we are. Affirming all that is holy in us and our communities. At the same time, challenging the evils with courage and hope. A major part of her personal journey consisted of the years before she became a Christian. These years have value for us today, because they point to what we now call the precatechumenate. We see that the Spirit is working long before a formal discovery and commitment with Jesus is made. This stage of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults calls for our special attention. It is here that our intra-religious dialogue enters an inter-religious dialogue. We share the power of Jesus in our life, and the truth of that is witnessed in our daily lives and that of our Christian communities. The other three stages catechumenate, period of purification and enlightenment (Lent) and mystagogia will come easily if we understand all the implications of a strong precatechumenate.

The Creator's intervention in human history is witnessed daily when we act in union with Jesus. Sacrificing our lives to bring reconciliation and healing to our world. Our faith gives us the courage to transform suffering into beauty, death into resurrection. Our prayer is the same as Kateri's mother, faith and healing for our people. We engage in evangelization and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, not so much to see how many people we can get into the church, but to share the Creator's graces in the Spirit of Jesus. Being compassionate as our Creator is compassionate.