

# KATERI TEKAKWITHA

## Lily of the Mohawks

■ On June 22, 1980, Pope John Paul II proclaimed five new *beati* for the Church. Among those raised to the honors of the altar as «Blessed» was Kateri Tekakwitha, a young Iroquois Indian girl who lived in the seventeenth century. As is the case with most holy men and women honored by the Church, Kateri accomplished nothing extraordinary in the eyes of the world. However, Christians all over the world can find in her a model of outstanding holiness.

Kateri Tekakwitha was born in the year 1656 in the village of Ossernenon, now called Auriesville, New York, the child of a pagan Mohawk Indian chief and a Christian Algonquin mother. Although Tekakwitha's mother could not display her faith openly because of her husband, she was nevertheless a fervent Christian who greatly desired that Tekakwitha and her little brother be baptized into the Catholic Faith some day.

In 1659, Kateri's village was among those struck by the dreaded disease of smallpox for which the Indians knew no cure. Her parents and little brother died. Although Kateri did not succumb to death, her face was left pock-marked and her eyesight was drastically affected so that she had to shade her eyes from strong sunlight. The disease caused her whole village to move to Caughnawaga, now Fonda, New York, on the other side of the Mohawk River. Kateri, a quiet and kind child, was adopted by her uncle, an Indian chief himself and a staunch anti-Christian. Because of her poor eyesight, Tekakwitha infrequently joined the other children in their games. She was content to remain in the long-house and busy herself with the arts and crafts that her people valued.

As she grew up, her close relatives noticed that she was very industrious and decided that she would be a good wife for some young Indian chief. Kateri had never manifested any desire to marry. In fact, she secretly did not want to marry at all, an attitude considered absurd by the Indians of her time. Her uncle and two aunts arranged a meeting between Kateri and a Mohawk Indian chief which they intended to end with marriage. When she understood their plan, she ran off and hid in the woods to the great dis-

may and anger of her relatives.

**CHRISTIAN WITNESS** — With the arrival of the Jesuit missionaries to the country of the Iroquois in the late 1660's, many Indians accepted the Catholic Faith and were baptized, including several in Kateri's own village of Caughnawaga. As she listened to the priests instruct the catechumens, she was moved by the grace of God to attend the instructions but was prevented from doing so by her uncle.

In 1675, she managed to meet Father James de Lamberville, who had just arrived in her village, and requested to be instructed in the Faith in spite of her uncle. In the months that followed, Tekakwitha's unusual fervor caused the Jesuit Father to allow her to be baptized after only eight short months. She was baptized on Easter Sunday, April 5, 1676, in Saint Peter's Chapel and received the name «Kateri» (Indian equivalent of Catherine). Those who were with her later testified to the inexpressible joy that she manifested on that day. The time that followed was extremely rough for the newly-baptized Christian. Kateri's relatives made it very difficult for her, even to the point of refusing her food because she refused to work on Sundays. She was even confronted with drunken men who encouraged her to violate her chastity. Through all of these trials, she remained firm in her baptismal vows.

In the fall of 1677, Tekakwitha was helped by Christian Indians from La Prairie, Canada, and escaped to the



village that had been established for Indians who had accepted the Gospel and wished to live their faith openly. While there, Kateri was content to perform the most menial tasks and engaged in harsh penances in order to advance in Christian perfection. On March 25, 1679, the Feast of the Annunciation, she pronounced a vow of perpetual virginity. On April 17, 1680, Kateri Tekakwitha died at the age of twenty-four, surrounded by her close friends. It is they who later attested that Kateri's face, which had formerly been pock-marked, suddenly became radiantly beautiful as she lay in death. Her remains are kept at Saint Francis Xavier Church in Caughnawaga, Quebec, Canada.

*The National Shrine of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha in Fonda, New York, was established in 1938 and has been staffed since then by the Conventual Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate Conception Province. The Shrine commemorates the site of Kateri's baptism in 1676. The staked-out Indian village in which she lived almost half of her earthly life is part of the Shrine property and was discovered by Father Thomas Grassmann, the founder and first director of the Shrine. The Shrine staff is currently headed by Father Nicholas Weiss, who is assisted by Father Robert Bogan.*

**A MODEL** — We see in the life of this young Indian a striking example of the marvelous and mysterious workings of God. As Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of Albany, New York, pointed out so well, she is particularly a model for young people who are confronted in today's secularized world by so many anti-Christian values. To the beads worn by Indian girls of her time, Kateri preferred to wear and pray the Rosary, thus showing her love for the Immaculate Mother of God.

Brad A. Milunski