

St. Teresa's Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha and St. Teresa's Interior Castle.

Second of a series: The First Three Dwelling Places.

New Melleray Abbey.

May 2003

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In the first article of this series we started with the INTERIOR CASTLE of St. Teresa of Jesus (of Avila) because she wrote so much and so well about it. Our difficulty is that Bl. Kateri and her tribe did not have a written language, so we don't have any writing from her. What we know about her comes from oral tradition related her friend Anastasia, who knew her from her birth to her death, and other Indians who lived with her. Another precious source of information are the writings of Jesuit missionary priests who served the Indians of that area.

St. Teresa's INTERIOR CASTLE is in the souls of persons in the state of grace. They are not in mortal sin. Outside the castle is the condition of people living in grave sin and moral disorder. In our own society we see it in acts of violence, abortion, impurity, substance abuse, contraception, AIDS, wars, terrorism, religious indifference and ignorance, and the break-up of families.

In Kateri Tekakwitha's time, they didn't have the bad influence of our mass media's pornography and violence. The violence and immorality she was exposed to was from inter-tribal warfare, torture of captives, slavery, sexual aberrations and alcoholism. We have no indication that Kateri was involved in any of these things.

The first dwelling place of the interior castle is entered by prayer and recollection. Here people are weak and inconstant, yet they pray occasionally, have good desires and do some good works. Their need is for self-knowledge and humility, to recognize spiritual beauty and the evil of sin. To attain this they must consider the beauty and goodness of God. This is necessary to free us from our inordinate attachments, as best described by St. Paul in his Letter to Titus (2,11-14):

"The grace of God has appeared, offering salvation to all men. It trains us to reject godless ways and worldly desires, and live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age as we await our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of the great God and of our Savior Christ Jesus. It was he who sacrificed himself for us, to redeem us from all unrighteousness and to cleanse for himself a people for his own, eager to do what is right."

This is the second reading of the Christmas midnight Mass, when we are most receptive to the baby Jesus. We may recall here the first time Tekakwitha saw a Christmas scene. In 1672, when she was 16 years old, Fr. Francis Boniface, S.J., set up the first Christmas crèche among the Mohawks. Not only the Christians, but even the non-Christians, came to see the little statues of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, and were delighted at what they saw. Fr. Boniface explained Christ's birth to them and told them about Mary and St. Joseph. The adults and children's choirs sang in Iroquois beautiful songs, enjoyed by all, such as:

"Within a lodge of broken bark  
The tender Babe was found;  
A ragged robe of rabbit skin  
Enraptured his beauty round.  
While chiefs from far before Him knelt  
With gifts of fox and beaver pelt...."

These were more seeds of the Gospel being planted in Tekakwitha's soul, mind and heart. The first seeds were sown by her mother, Kahenta, and her mother's friend, Anastasia.

B1. Kateri had an unusual innocence from her childhood. The great Oglala Lakota Indian catechist, Black Elk, said: "The hearts of little children are pure, and therefore, the Great Spirit may show them many things which older people miss." This is an echo of Jesus' words: "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God." (Mt 5, 8 Revised Standard Version). At another time, "Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said: 'I offer you praise, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because what you have hidden from the learned and the clever you have revealed to the merest children'." (Lk, 10, 21)

The second dwelling place of the interior castle is characterized by ambivalence: opposing attraction, one to God and the other to the world. St. Paul describes it. "My inner self agrees with the law of God, but I see in my body's members another law at war with the law of my mind; this makes me the prisoner of the law of sin in my members. What a wretched man I am! Who can free me from this body under the power of death? All praise to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord! So with my mind I serve the law of God but with my flesh the law of sin." (Rom 7, 22-25) "My point is that you should live in accord with the spirit and you will not yield to the cravings of the flesh. The flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh; the two are directly opposed. This is why you do not do what your will intends. If you are guided by the spirit, you are not under the law. It is obvious what proceeds from the flesh: lewd conduct, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hostilities, bickering, jealousy, outbursts of rage, selfish rivalries, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I have warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God! In contrast, the fruit of the spirit is love, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness and chastity. Against such there is no law! Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the spirit, let us follow the spirit's lead." (Gal 5, 16-25)

There is an increase of virtues but the spiritual life becomes more difficult because we hear God calling us, yet we are too weak to respond generously. What Jesus described in the parable about God's word being like seed helps us understand the difference between the first and second dwelling places. (cf. Lk 8, 5-15) We may compare seed on the foot path to those outside the interior castle because the devil takes God's word out of their hearts. Seed on rocky soil resembles the first dwelling place. The big danger here is falling away in time of temptation, and there are very many here. The second dwelling place is like: "The seed fallen among briars are those who hear, but their progress is stifled by the cares and riches and pleasures of life...." (Lk 8, 14)

St. Teresa's advice on how to progress through this stage of the spiritual life may be summed up under five points, corresponding to God's external calls through books, sermons, good friendships and trials. Then there is the interior call during prayer.

The first advice is to avoid bad company and to cultivate good friendships with those who are farther advanced in the spiritual life than we are. Tekakwitha started off very well with her mother, Kahenta and with Anastasia, but that ended with her parents' deaths in 1660, when she was only four years old. She was eleven years old when she first met Jesuit missionaries: Fr. James Fremin, John Pieron and James Bruyas. They were passing through her village of Caughnawaga. Since her step-father uncle, Iowerwano, was the chief, they stayed in her longhouse for a few days. Iowerwano entrusted their care to Tekakwitha. As she served their meals

they got to observe and know each other. The priests were very favorably impressed by her good manners, modesty and pleasant disposition. Tekakwitha was edified by their kindness and devotion to prayer. The seeds of Christianity were being nourished in her.

In 1667 B1. Kateri escaped to Canada because of the persecution directed against her in her own village after she received baptism. She could not have gone to a better place. It was even called The Village or Castle of Prayer: St. Francis Xavier Mission, conducted by the Jesuit Fathers. Immediately she met old friends who were able to help and inspire her, including the Superior of the mission, Fr. Fremin, whom she had met in her longhouse ten years previously. She lodged in the same longhouse with her adopted sister, Ennita. Most of all, the woman in charge of the longhouse was her mother's dear friend, Anastasia, who was like a second mother to Kateri and was a catechist. Also at the mission were The Great Mohawk Chief Joseph, also called Kryn or Ganeagowa, and Chief Louis "Hot Ashes", both of whom assisted the priests in spreading the Catholic faith. They converted more Indians than the Jesuit missionaries did. Saketon, wife of Chief Joseph, Chief Louis' wife, Garhio, who was baptized "Wari" (Mohawk word for Mary) were also exemplary Christians.

In THE THIRD DWELLING PLACES are those who want to avoid even venial sin. They pray much, love recollection and penance, are charitable and manage their lives well. They still have attachment to wealth and honor and are over over discreet about their health. They can still turn away from seeking perfection.

We have this example in the Gospel: "Another time a man came up to him (Jesus) and said, 'Teacher, what good must I do to possess everlasting life?' He answered, 'Why do you question me about what is good? There is One who is good. If you wish to enter life, keep the commandments.' 'Which ones?' he asked. Jesus replied, 'You shall not kill'; 'You shall not commit adultery'; 'You shall not steal'; 'You shall not bear false witness'; 'Honor your father and your mother'; and 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" The young man said to him, 'I have kept all these; what do I need to do further?' Jesus told him, 'If you seek perfection, go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor. You will then have treasure in heaven. Afterward, come back and follow me.' Hearing these words, the young man went away sad, for his possessions were many. Jesus said to his disciples: "I assure you, only with difficulty will a rich man enter into the kingdom of God.'" (Mt 19, 16-23)

In contrast B1. Kateri gave up her wampum bead jewelry at Anastasia's suggestion, even though it was the custom of Indian women to wear it.

There are many lay people in the world like the rich young man, in the third dwelling place. Only a comparatively few pass beyond to the higher states in the spiritual life, like B1. Kateri. Yet God is calling us and will not refuse us further and greater graces if we are generous in cooperating. As Jesus said: In a word, you must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Mt 5, 48) "'Here I stand, knocking at the door. If anyone hears me calling and opens the door, I will enter his house and have supper with him, and he with me.'" (Rev 3, 20) To be continued.

BISHOP EPISCOPOS: "What do you get if you cross a pig and an oyster?" SWEAT BELLICA (his housekeeper): "An oinkster." FATHER SACERDOS: "Why shouldn't you feed dog biscuits to Dachunds?: SISTER MONIALIS: " They eat wiener buns." HECTOR THE RECTOR: "Who has more dough than a baker?" HILARION THE SEMINARIAN: "A banker."



A man went to a doctor and the doctor called him back the next day & told him he had bad news and very bad news. The bad news was that he only had 24 hours to live. The very bad news was that the doctor forgot to tell him that the day before.



The above photos were taken during a mini-Tekakwitha Conference at New Melleray Abbey, May 5-9, 2003. We went to Buffalo Ridge Ranch to see bison (buffalo) and to pray. Bison are symbolic to Indians because they provided food, clothing and shelter to people. It is a symbol of self-sacrifice and reminds us of Jesus, who in a more perfect way, sacrificed himself for us and gives himself to us as food in the Holy Eucharist. The other photos are of our B1. Kateri prayer meeting. There will be a National Tekakwitha Conference this year, July 30 to August 3 in Sioux Falls, SD. Over 2,000 Indians are expected to attend.