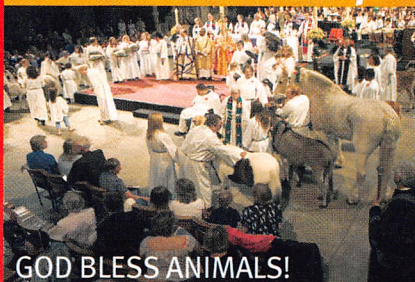


# Catholic Digest

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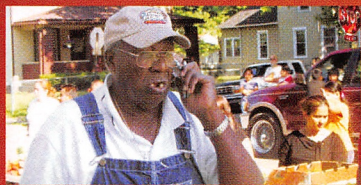
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## MEET 12 CATHOLIC HEROES *for AMERICA and the WORLD*



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# The saint who healed me

*I had given up prayer and nearly given up hope.  
Would my psoriasis ever heal?*

BY JOSEPH A. IZZILLO  
AS TOLD TO THOMAS FLEMING

**T**hirty-five years ago, my wife Noreen and I decided to take a trip to Montreal. As a busy lawyer, I seldom took vacations, but I needed some time off for a reason that had nothing do with overwork. I suffered from a debilitating skin disease, psoriasis, which in its acute phase covered my entire body with scaly, bleeding plaques, and my flesh with throbbing pain.

Sleeping in a bed was almost impossible. I would sit in a chair in my living room and watch old movies until I nodded off from sheer exhaustion. I had to bathe in hot tar twice a day; a single bath

did not prevent the plaques from cracking and bleeding. When numerous doctors told me psoriasis was incurable, my depression deepened. I began to think I might rather die than continue to suffer as I was.

Noreen and I were hoping that a visit to a city like Montreal, full of new sights and sounds, would lift my spirits. A tourist booklet urged us to visit the Mohawk village of Kahnawake, on the south bank of the St. Lawrence River, opposite Montreal. Each Sunday there was a high Mass at St. Francis Xavier Church, sung in the Mohawk language.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOSEPH IZZILLO





Joseph Izzillo works on a portrait of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha

I found the music stunningly beautiful. Afterward, I thanked Father Henri Bechard, the pastor. He assured me I was not the first person who had been stirred by the ceremony. "I attribute a lot of the emotional impact to Kateri," he said.

"Kateri who?" I asked.

"Kateri Tekakwitha. She died near here over 300 years ago.

Someday I hope her holiness will be recognized by the Catholic Church. I'm convinced she was a saint."

**A**s an Italian Catholic growing up in New York City, I was familiar with dozens of saints. But I had never heard of Kateri, who had supposedly found holiness in the American wilderness.



Embittered by my illness, I had not prayed to a saint — or to God — for a long time.

Father Bechard pointed to a crystal box about a foot high, tied by a ribbon and seal. “These are Kateri’s bones,” he said.

I ran my fingers across the gleaming surface of the box. I suddenly had a desire — even a need — to know more about Kateri Tekakwitha. Father Bechard told me her story.

Kateri was born in 1656 in the village of Ossernenon, present-day Auriesville, New York, the daughter of a Mohawk chief and an Algonquian Christian woman who had been captured in a Mohawk raid into Canada. The Mohawks were the sworn enemies of the French rulers of Canada and their Native American allies.

When Kateri was 4, smallpox swept her village, killing her father and mother and a younger

brother. Kateri survived, but her face and body were covered with oozing sores, which became ugly pockmarks.

As I thought of my own ravaged body, I suddenly felt a strange bond with this young woman.

Kateri was not only badly disfigured by smallpox, Father Bechard continued, she was left almost blind and extremely sensitive to sunlight. Adopted by her father’s brother, another Mohawk chief, she was nicknamed Tekakwitha,

which in Mohawk means “she who feels her way before her.”

**W**hen Kateri was 10, the French and their Native American allies burned Ossernenon to the ground. The survivors moved up the Mohawk River and built another village in what is now Fonda, New York. When the Mohawks agreed to peace with

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## ➡ MEET BLESSED KATERI ONLINE

To learn more about Blessed Kateri’s shrine in Fonda, New York, visit [www.katerishrine.com](http://www.katerishrine.com). For information about the shrine in Auriesville, visit [www.martyrshrine.org](http://www.martyrshrine.org).



the French, Jesuit priests — called “Blackrobes” by the Mohawks — came to Kateri’s village to preach the Gospel. Jesus’ suffering and death, as well as Mary’s sorrow, had deep meaning for Kateri. She was inspired by their acceptance of God’s mysterious love. In 1675, at the age of 19, she asked to be baptized and took the Christian name Catherine — Kateri in Mohawk.

Kateri’s uncle and many other people in her village were infuriated. They regarded Christianity as the French enemy’s religion. Boys flung stones at Kateri. She was abused and insulted by her uncle and the rest of her family. Fearing for Kateri’s life, the Jesuit missionaries arranged for Kateri to be removed to La Prairie, a few miles east of present day Kahnawake. Most of the villagers were Christians, including some Algonquians who had known her mother.

## Get the facts on psoriasis

**WHAT IT IS:** A non-contagious, lifelong skin disease that affects as many as 7.5 million Americans. The condition most commonly appears on the scalp, elbows, knees, and torso.

**WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:** In the most common of the five types of psoriasis, plaque psoriasis, patches of skin called lesions become inflamed and are covered with silvery white scale.

**SEVERITY:** Varies by person, but is mild for most people. Some people also develop psoriatic arthritis.

**CAUSE:** No one knows for sure, but it is believed to have a genetic component. Most researchers agree that the immune system is mistakenly triggered, which speeds up the growth cycle of skin cells, which pile up and form lesions.

**TRIGGERS:** Emotional stress, injury to the skin, some types of infection, and reactions to certain drugs may trigger relapses.

**CURE:** Various treatments may clear psoriasis for periods of time, but there is no cure.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:  
**NATIONAL PSORIASIS FOUNDATION**  
6600 SW 92nd Ave., Suite 300  
Portland, OR 97223-7195  
**PHONE:** 800-723-9166 or 503-244-7404  
**WEB:** [www.psoriasis.org](http://www.psoriasis.org)  
**E-MAIL:** [getinfo@psoriasis.org](mailto:getinfo@psoriasis.org)



There, on Christmas in 1677, Kateri received Holy Communion for the first time — an ecstatic experience for her. In 1679 she took a vow to remain a virgin and devote herself to caring for the sick and needy. During the next four years, her tenderness and generosity touched every heart in the village.

But the ravages of smallpox had left Kateri with a badly weakened body. At the age of 24, she died, whispering as her last words the names of Jesus and Mary. One of the Jesuit priests knelt beside her bed, praying for her soul.

Suddenly the pockmarks on Kateri's face vanished. She had the smooth skin of a beautiful woman! The priest cried out with amazement and dozens of Native Americans rushed into Kateri's hut. They fell to their knees and began praising God.

"That," concluded Father Bechard, "was when people started praying to her."

**W**hen I went home to Greenwich, Connecticut, and

resumed my law practice, my psoriasis continued to torment me. But I no longer reacted to it as I had in the past. I stopped asking *God, why me?* When I thought of Kateri's suffering, I found I could accept my own without my old bitterness.

I began praying to God in Kateri's name. At first my prayers were stumbling, embarrassed. I made a pilgrimage to Auriesville,

her birthplace, and Fonda, where she had been baptized. These places have shrines that are visited by thousands of people each year. I realized I was not alone in my veneration of this young woman. She was a channel of God's grace for countless believers.

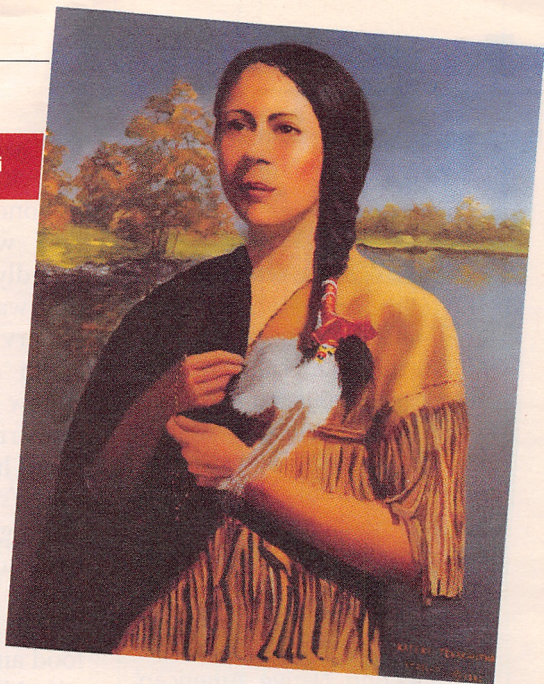
Although I was often depressed, I felt a curious, stubborn hope. That hope urged me to seek medical help again. At Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, I met Dr. Daphne Roe, who was doing research on psoriasis and had created a diet that helped psoriasis sufferers. She was a small, fragile woman who was almost totally blind. Her resemblance to Kateri, I

## KATERI AND ST. FRANCIS

Blessed Kateri, also known as "The Lily of the Mohawks," is a patron of the environment and ecology, along with St. Francis.



Joseph Izzillo's portrait of Kateri



thought, was remarkable.

Over the next several months, I started to improve. Large areas of my lesions disappeared. I was sleeping well and practicing law with new vigor. This improvement continued for a number of years until, with no warning, I had a relapse. I put in a discouraged telephone call to Dr. Roe, who said she would visit me in Connecticut. But she never came. I learned a few days later that she had died.

**B**efore I had “met” Kateri, I would have sunk into self-pity. But instead, I saw this loss as a test of my faith in God’s caring love. I asked Kateri to help me sustain that faith. I joined the campaign to persuade the Catholic Church to designate her as a saint, and was thrilled when, in 1980, Pope John Paul II proclaimed her “Blessed.”

Meanwhile, I stayed on a modified version of Dr. Roe’s mostly vegetarian diet. I still needed frequent treatment in several hospitals, and

was told I would require medical care for the rest of my life.

Then, abruptly, my psoriasis went into remission. As an act of gratitude, I decided to paint a portrait of Kateri. I had been painting as a hobby for many years, but I had never done a portrait. I flew up to Kahnawake and Father Bechard found a Mohawk woman willing to pose for me.

**A**nne Marie Snow wore traditional clothes she herself had made. I took many color photos and returned to my studio to complete the portrait. My friends at Kahnawake liked it so much that



## Celebrate Native American culture and Catholicism

The 69th Annual Tekakwitha Conference will take place in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, July 2 to 6, 2008, to celebrate and honor Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, and to affirm Native American Catholic culture and spiritual heritage. Membership in the conference is open to all with a goal of unifying Native American Catholics while respecting tribal differences; empowering Native American Catholics to live in harmony with their Catholic and Native spirituality; and promoting and maintaining ongoing communication and involvement between tribes and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in America. The conference also urges its members to pray for the canonization of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha and to follow her example of holiness. For information, contact the Tekakwitha Conference National Center, P.O. Box 6768, Great Falls, MT 59406; call 406-727-0147, or visit [www.tekconf.org](http://www.tekconf.org).

■ [WWW.TEKCONF.ORG](http://WWW.TEKCONF.ORG)

they asked me to donate it to their church, where it was given a place of honor near Kateri's tomb.

I was astonished, and profoundly honored, when my portrait was selected by the U.S. Postal Service to honor Kateri on the 350th anniversary of her death. I now believe not one step in my struggle for health and sanity could have been achieved without Kateri's inspiration.

In gratitude, I devote one day a week to working at St. Matthew's House, a homeless shelter in Naples, Florida, where I now live. I prepare food and often help to serve it. My wife, Noreen, joins me on these visits, working in the thrift shop. Now 83, I still travel to many parts of the United States to paint portraits of individuals from other tribes.

Kateri's life has inspired me in so many ways. I pray to God in her name every day to help the sick, especially the terminally ill. Her faith in God's mysterious love is a gift she can enkindle in the hearts of anyone who reaches out to Him, thanks to her tremendous example. **CD**

Thomas Fleming is the author of *Lights Along the Way: Great Stories of American Faith*, and other books about American history.