



Lily of the Mohawk*: Brightness of Heaven

In the United States and Canada, Catholic Native Americans insistently demand Kateri Tekakwitha be canonized. Beatified by late Pope John Paul II on June 22nd, 1980, Kateri is the first Blessed native on the North American Continent. The Pope also proclaimed her to be in the universal Church, the second patron of the missions. Who is this young woman so far from our memory?

By Carole Guévin



In 1656, Kateri Tekakwitha was born in Ossernenon (Modern day Auriesville), New York. Her mother, Kahenta (Flower of the Prairie) was Algonquin and a Catholic, her father was a Mohawk chief, Ken-Ho-Ron-Kuo (Great Chief of the Prairies).

SPIRITUAL BAPTISM

From this marriage two children were born; a boy and 24 moons later, on a beautiful sunny day, a little girl. Flower of the Prairie desired to have her infant baptized. In praise to the Great Spirit, she walked to find a spot in nature; there, she raised the new born toward heaven, then cuddling the child to her heart, she named her: *Brightness of Heaven* meaning *beautiful sunny day*. This spiritual baptism was done in a most discreet way.

At the age of four, Brightness of Heaven lost both her parents and brother who were victims of smallpox that attacked the village. The outbreak did not spare her either, the illness left the girl with unsightly scars and poor eyesight; the brightness of the sun blinded her and she would have to feel her way around as she walked. Her uncle adopted her; noticing how she stumbled along, he extended his arms to help and one day spontaneously called her *Tekakwitha* (The One Who Walks Groping for Her Way).

Still young, she demonstrated extraordinary virtues, she seemed to be naturally Christian. The Jesuits who met her were surprised by her faith-filled life and in-depth understanding. Intelligent, loving, skilful, Tekakwitha actively took part in all the community chores: working in the fields where she tended to the corn, beans, and squash; collecting firewood in the forest and water from a stream; going to the forest to pick the roots needed to prepare medicines and dye. Despite her poor vision, she was also very skilled at beadwork, decorating moccasins and skin garments.

JOYS AND STRUGGLES AT THE AGE OF 20

At 20, Tekakwitha was finally Baptized. It took place in New York and administered by Father Lamberville, S.J. During this ceremony, she received the name Kateri (Mohawk pronunciation for Catherine). What great joy for her to become a child