

# Learning the life of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha

FRANCA G. MIGNACCA  
THE EASTERN DOOR

Residents of Kahnawake and tourists can now walk through the life of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha in 21 stations at the Saint Kateri Interpretive Centre. The project, led by Mike Diabo, is affiliated with the St. Francis Xavier Mission and is housed in the building next door, a building that was once home to the Turtle Island Theatre Company. It marks the last step in the Kateri Shrine development project that began in 2012.

The interpretive centre is different from a museum in that it has more replicas and representations than it does relics.

"We weren't looking for something to preserve antiquities, we were just wanting to tell a story – a historical story – and we used historical materials but were able to, in some cases, even editorialise our own version of it," Diabo explained.

The interpretive centre tells the story of Kateri Tekakwitha, the first Indigenous saint, from just before she was born in 1656, all the way up to the process that led to her sainthood, including her 2012 canonization. She died in 1680 at the age of 24.

Visitors can see replicas of a longhouse, similar to the one she would've lived in, and one of



FRANCA G. MIGNACCA THE EASTERN DOOR

a chapel from the 1600s. Storyboards line the walls and statues of her fill the glass shelves.

"Kateri is a historical figure and she is also a spiritual sign so when people come, whether from Kahnawake or outside of Kahnawake, they can experience both sides of Kateri, her spiritual side and her historical side. I think it's just a wonderful moment for Kahnawake and the church," explained Father Vincent Esprit.

Church volunteer Beverly

Delormier and others reminisced as they found themselves in the photos from Saint Tekakwitha's beatification in 1980 and her canonization in 2012.

"Most of the people that come here already know about Kateri because this is part of a pilgrimage, so they're not total strangers to it, but it's more a visual. Rather than listening to one guy trying to talk about all this stuff, they can come in and spend eight minutes and learn about it," Diabo said.

Visitors wanting to learn more can also visit a media room, in which they can watch a documentary *In Her Footsteps*, and a research room containing dozens of books about her.

"It hasn't changed much for the community. But in terms of tourists, we really get a lot of people," Beverly said. She explained that the church will sometimes get up to six busses of tourists in a day throughout the summer months.

Diabo and Gabriel Berberian did the research for the centre and Warren Lazare helped build it.

Well over one hundred people attended the small opening ceremony last Sunday. The ceremony had been kept quiet out of fear that the project wouldn't be completed in time. Diabo is unsure whether they will hold a grand opening any time soon.

"I figure Kateri was kind of a low-key person maybe it should be just kept low-key," he said.

While they haven't yet set the centre's schedule, people are welcome to drop in at the church and speak to a volunteer. If someone is available to accompany them, they may visit the interpretive centre.

"Kateri was a saint of unity. She had her culture and she had the Christian faith and somehow there was harmony. I would hope that through that for Kahnawake, that it will help to unify the community. For all the people who are not from Kahnawake, when they come they will just discover the beauty of the Mohawk people because first of all Kateri is Mohawk. They will discover the beauty and the strength, the fortitude and courage of the Mohawk people and then they will discover the Christian religion," said Father Esprit.