She would walk barefoot in the snow, burn herself and perform various forms of self-mutilation to prove her love to God. She declared herself forever a virgin, despised men and was married to Jesus, the priests who knew her best wrote in those 17th century Jesuit chronicles.

Portions of The Jesuit Relations were reprinted in the latest of more than 200 books on her life, titled A Lily Among Thorns, written by Akwesasne Mohawk historian Darren Bonaparte in 2009.

Kateri was a devout Catholic and she sacrificed everything to prove her loyalty to God. She eventually moved to present day Kahnawake in 1677 to become a part of the "Praying Indians" who had already moved north to join the St. Francis Xavier Mission.

Although the Mohawk community of Kahnawake, where most of her remains are buried, has a 300-plus year history with Catholicism, a shift occurred during the last 30 years that has seen more young people turning to the traditions of the Longhouse — which went from being a way of life long ago to a religion today.

The Catholic religion has a contentious and often antagonistic history with the Mohawk people. Catholicism changed their way of life, with mixed results.

The stories of Mohawk children who attended residential Catholic schools are filled with horrific and descriptive tales of abuse, trauma and unspeakable acts by priests and nuns who were put in charge of their education, far away from their families.

The number of Kahnawake Mohawks who attend church regularly is down significantly from the days when church was standing-room-only in the community.

"Certainly, traditional beliefs may have been ridiculed and belittled by other religious and political factions in the community, which may have fostered a climate of privacy or discretion around traditional ceremonies in the earlier days of the Longhouse," Tommy Deer, a member of the 207 Longhouse, said of the relationship between the Longhouse and church factions.

"However, I believe the real enemy of our traditional ways was the government of Canada and its Indian Act, which targeted the traditional lifestyle, beliefs, language, and government of our people in an effort to assimilate indigenous peoples into Canadian society."

Deer, who is the cultural liaison for the Kanien'kehá:ka Onkwawén:na Raotitióhkwa Language and Cultural Centre — established in Kahnawake in 1978 to preserve and enrich the language and culture of Mohawks — turned to the Longhouse after he experienced a renewed sense of Mohawk pride that he credits to the 1990 Oka Crisis.

"For people in our community who believe in the Catholic Church, I can appreciate and respect the good feelings they have at this time. However, as a person who believes in the traditional cosmology of the Haudenosaunee, I suppose I feel indifferent.

"I'm not upset or offended by the canonization, nor am I elated by it — it's simply not my faith."

Deer said the cultural centre has already experienced an increase in visitors because of Kateri's impending canonization.

"From an economic perspective, I think it should bolster Kahnawake's reputation as a historic tourist attraction in the region," he said.

"I think it will certainly attract a significant number of pilgrims and visitors to our community."

But there are still a number of people who follow the Catholic faith and attend mass in Kahnawake. Although the numbers are dwindling, people like lay reader Orville Standup are quick to point out the positives Kateri's sainthood will bring to the community.

"Spiritually, it's a great thing for us. But, as a whole, we're all the same, no matter what you believe in," he said, this week before travelling to Rome.

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"She's one of us. It should be an honour and a privilege."

There are three longhouses in Kahnawake: the 207 Longhouse (named for its location on Route 207), the Mohawk Trail Longhouse and the Up the Hill Longhouse, located near the Karonhianonhnha School. There are also four churches in Kahnawake, representing the Catholic, Pentecostal, Protestant and United faiths.

Brittany McComber, 24, doesn't attend a church or a Longhouse, but she will be part of the historic event at St. Peter's Basilica.

"I like to look at things scientifically, but (religion) gives people something in their life they love and comforts them," she said.

"We, as aboriginals, are lucky we have a saint that is being recognized worldwide. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be sharing this event with other Mohawks."

She is aware of the history of the Catholic Church in native communities, but is looking to a brighter future.

"I think it's horrible, it's a tragedy that some cannot get over it. It happened in the past and it should stay in the past. It doesn't mean forget, but forgive. It's better for the soul to get on with yourself instead of holding on to the past."

McComber is "sharing this day with three generations. My grandmother was in a residential school in the West, so if a lady that was in her circumstances can forgive, then that shows me a whole lot of strength."

McComber said she hopes her Kahnawake convenience store, which she assumes sole ownership of next year from her grandmother, is a beneficiary of the increased traffic Kateri's recognition will bring to the community.

Kateri has certainly left her mark on Kahnawake. Her final resting place, the local hospital, an elementary school and a number of community members bear her name. But her influence doesn't stop there. It is not uncommon to see non-natives named for her or communities outside of Mohawk territory with shrines to honour her legacy.

Kateri grew up during a rough time when life expectancy was low because of disease, when wars or disputes were common and when European incursion into North America had a devastating effect on Mohawk populations, trends and faith.

In Mohawk historian Bonaparte's A Lily Among Thorns, Kateri was referred to as "a lily among thorns" by Jesuit missionary Father Claude Chauchetière, who died in 1709.

He borrowed the moniker from the Old Testament, specifically from the Song of Solomon. Kateri was the lily, in his mind, blooming and bright, while the Mohawks who would not accept the Catholic faith were the thorns.

Bonaparte wrote that although Auriesville, N.Y., is credited as her birthplace, the reality is the place she grew up is overgrown with brush and unkempt. So much money and effort were put into promoting this area as her home that the claim and the Kateri shrine in Auriesville will probably remain.

The irony of a throng of Mohawks descending on the Vatican, unbeknownst to most of the hundreds of thousands of people surrounding them, is somewhat fitting. The Vatican and its relation to Italy as a city-state can be loosely compared with Kahnawake as a stand-alone sovereign community in Canada.

Lay reader Standup is hoping Kateri's sainthood brings another miracle: Unity in politically charged Kahnawake.

"It's not just Catholics that are going to Rome. People know that she's part of all of us and are proud to say she was from Kahnawake," he said.

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