

## The International Conference of Theology and Liberation 2016

### Faith meets culture in Kahnawake



On Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> of August 2016, about 50 participants from the international conference of Theology and Liberation, which took place in Montreal, visited Kahnawake. They were led by Jean-Francois Roussel, Professor of Theology at the University of Montreal with a special interest in colonization, Saint Kateri Tekakwitha and the indigenous peoples of the world.

They first visited the Long House Traditional Religion, where they were received by Kevin Deer – a Spiritual Leader in that religion. Mr. Deer gave them an in-depth understanding of the Long House Traditional Religion in Kahnawake. Next, they made their way to the Mission of Saint Francis Xavier, where they attended a panel discussion in the spacious and air conditioned Kateri Hall, currently under renovation. This was followed by a visit to the Sanctuary of Saint Kateri where they participated in the special ceremony of the Door of Mercy.

## The Panel Discussion

Four panelists participated in the panel discussion; each for a total of ten minutes. Fr. Esprit fmi, Pastor of the Mission, gave a brief summary of the challenges of the



Mission in Kahnawake. He thanked Bishop Gendron and his staff for their heart-warming welcome into the Diocese of Saint Jean Longueuil as well as the first Nations Mohawk people of Kahnawake. He believes the Canonization of Kateri

Tekakwitha, the first indigenous Saint in North America, has cemented an indispensable place for the Church among the hearts of the Mohawk Peoples and other indigenous peoples of North America and the world. According to Fr. Esprit, a church of the future should be grounded in reconciliation and human solidarity founded on the Gospels as pronounced by the Church. Retired Judge and head of the Financial Team at the Mission, Mike Diabo, traced the origins of the Mohawk people from the ice age to the time of discovery of the New World, thence to their present place of residence in Kahnawake. Mr. Diabo also heads the team responsible for the Kateri Resource Center.

Deacon Ron Boyer spoke of his love for Saint Kateri Tekakwitha and his role as the vice postulator of the Kateri Cause leading up to her canonization in 2012. He also briefly presented the past achievements of the Saint Kateri Healing Ministry of which he is one of the founding members. This ministry has lately been revived at the Mission for visiting pilgrims, especially those from Toronto.



One of the Chiefs of the Mohawk Council, Christine Zachary Deom, a lawyer by profession and specialist in the history of the Mohawk Peoples, spoke of the enduring internal strength and courage of the Mohawk People, which was demonstrated by the Mohawk Chiefs as they were put to death during the time of colonization. Saint Kateri did not only have the spiritual gifts of Jesus

Christ and the Catholic Church, but she exemplifies this internal strength called Orenda, said Chief Deom. To end her presentation, Chief Christine Zachary Deom unveiled to the participants a local painting of Saint Kateri, depicting this internal strength or Orenda of the Mohawk people.

### **Door of Mercy**



The second part of the mission's visit took place in the Sanctuary of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha. All the participants gathered at the special "*Space of Mercy*" where the '*Door of Mercy*' is situated at entrance to the Sanctuary. There was a brief explanation of the Door of Mercy by Fr. Esprit fmi. He emphasized four aspects of the door of

mercy, as mentioned by Pope Francis in his letter granting indulgences to the faithful – Passing in and out of the Holy Door, the Sacrament of Confession, the

Eucharist and the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy. All these Sacred and Holy Rites are paths given by the church to enable the pilgrim on his/her journey of internal purification, healing and peace, during this Holy Year of Mercy. The final summit of this journey of Mercy and internal peace and healing is an overflowing of God's mercy through the granting of indulgences in the afterlife. The participants were then invited to silently make their entry into the Sanctuary. They were informed of the importance of the Sanctuary as a holy place/sacred ground to the Mohawk people, since the Sanctuary is actually built upon an ancient Burial Ground of the Mohawk peoples. Before entering the Sanctuary, they were advised to take a few minutes individually to touch the Door of Mercy while silently praying to Jesus, for their intentions and that of their families, through the intercession of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha.

They then entered the Sanctuary in complete silence and meditation with soft “*Gregorian Mohawk*<sup>1</sup>” music in the background. This active silence is very



important to the Mohawk people during the celebration of the weekly Eucharist celebrations of the Mass. Fr. Esprit awaited each one at the front of the Sanctuary with the Blessed Oil of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha. Each one was anointed upon his/her head and

hands. This was followed by a silent procession to the tomb of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, where her relic was placed for veneration. The “*Our Father*” led by Fr. Esprit was then prayed in Kanien'kéha - the Mohawk language, to end the

---

<sup>1</sup> A recording made by the Kahnawake Mohawk Choir of religious music, it is sung in the Mohawk language.

celebration. Professor Roussel said thanks to the Mohawk people, and to the visiting representatives of the conference. The visit ended with a surprise and welcome visit from Mr. Kevin Deer, one of the leaders of the Traditional Longhouse Religion. We were treated by him to a small glass of “*Berry Juice*”. According to the rites of the Traditional religion, this juice purifies the body. In an atmosphere of togetherness, mutual respect, and sharings of cultures, spiritualities and religious beliefs, the pilgrimage came to an end.

Tremendous thanks to Professor Roussel for bringing this international conference to Kahnawake; to the volunteers of the Mission and the panelists who ensured the success of this event and to Mr. George Mack and Mrs. Edith Meszaros for ensuring the Hall was well equipped with a modern PA system and refreshments. We look forward to the hosting of the Saint Kateri Conference in the years to come. Thank you, Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, for taking this event before the throne of Jesus in heaven...