









Cruce di avorio | Ivory crucifix  
MUSEO DELLA | MUSEUM OF THE

KATHERINE TEKAKWITHA

Late in the year 1894, in the historic city of Baltimore, there was held the Third Plenary Council of the Catholic hierarchy of the United States. This memorable ecclesiastical meeting, extending over a period of almost a month, was presided over by the renowned Archbishop Gibbons of Baltimore as delegate of the Holy See. Its decrees were signed by 14 Archbishops, 61 Bishops or their representatives, 6 Abbots, and 1 General of a religious congregation.

Toward the close of this most important and most impressive gathering of the rulers of the Church in the United States, they solemnly addressed a formal petition to the Holy Father, urgently requesting the beatification of Father Isaac Jogues and his two companions, all of whom had died as martyrs for the Faith in what is now New York State. In the same communication they highly expressed to Pope Leo XIII their ardent desire that one day there might be raised to the honor of the altar a saintly Indian maiden, born in the very village where Isaac Jogues and his companions had met their brutal and savage death--Katherine Tekakwitha, "the Lily of the Mohawks."

Amid the glittering splendor of the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome, almost a quarter of a century ago, Isaac Jogues and John Lalande and Rene Goupil were canonized as saints. Perhaps in the Providence of Almighty God our generation may also witness the beatification of that noble soul who for twenty years of her life hallowed the Mohawk Valley by such holiness and sanctity that her fellow-tribesmen styled her "the fairest flower that ever bloomed among true men." How fitting it would be that she be the first to be canonized a saint of any born within the confines of what is now the United States--she who lived and grew up in

Indian village and palisade, who experienced adventure by trail and lake and river, who witnessed pagan sorcery and heathen war-dance and savage torture, she who gazed in fascination upon Indian feast and council, she who rejoiced in holy gladness at the ever expanding success of the tireless black-robed missionaries in civilizing and Christianizing and sanctifying the fierceness of the American Red-man.

"O God, Who didst wondrously protect the innocence of Thy servant Katherine Tekakwitha, and bestow upon her the gift of faith and the spirit of penance, grant, we beseech Thee, that all who invoke her intercession may obtain what they desire; so that her favor with Thee may be manifest to all, and she may be exalted to the honor of our altars, as among the Blessed in heaven."

It was in the year 1656 that Katherine Tekakwitha was born in the little Indian village of Ossernenon---now Auriesville---situated on the banks of the Mohawk River in New York State. Her father was a leader among his people; her mother, also an Indian, had been carried in captivity from Canada during a war between two Indian tribes. However, she had earlier been baptized by a black-robed missionary, and legend has it that her life was conspicuous for its sanctity and virtue.

Surely this devout mother must have bewailed the fact that the saving waters of Baptism could not be poured out over the head of her little child. Neither she nor the few other Christians in the little Indian village would dare administer the sacred rite themselves, for they stood in reverential awe of the holiness of the Sacrament. They could only pray that the bitterness of the Mohawks and the Iroquois against the holy missionaries of Christ would soon be dissipated. For bitterness and enmity and hostility there were. Ten years before the birth of Katherine, the brave and intrepid Isaac Jogues and his loyal companion

John Lalande, had suffered a cruel and inhuman martyrdom in that very village of Ossernenon. And three years before their death, Rene Goupil, a gentle young physician who had left the refinements of France to help humbly in the conversion of the wilderness inhabitants of the New World-- into his skull had been buried the tomahawk of an Indian, and then his lifeless body was mockingly dragged through the settlement amid hooting and jeering and rejoicing. Such was the village of Ossernenon.

Katherine Takakwitha was an instinctively gently child, docile and self-restrained. Perhaps these characteristics were due to the early training given her by her mother. Yet in God's Providence, she was not to enjoy her parents' care for long. She was only four when a dreadful scourge fell upon the population, and the little child lost father and mother and brother.

When the entire village was moved from its plague-ridden location to a new site about a mile to the west, the orphan Katherine was adopted into a family of relatives. Here she lived for six years in typical Indian fashion. She powdered and baked or boiled the corn, cooked the meat, drew water from the well, picked wild berries in the forest, tanned the skins of animals caught in the chase, and helped to make and decorate the tribal raiment.

Yet all the while, the growing child pondered deeply upon the mysteries which everywhere confronted her. Impressions were formed that were to remain etched on her mind for life--impressions about the variety and beauty of all she saw about her, impressions of the order of sunrise and sunset, of season fierce and mild--and wonderment about the Power which brought all this about.

Then she would form impressions of another kind--even more mysterious--of the contrast between the cruelties wreaked on the prisoner of war and the kindness of many of the Christian women, captives like

her own mother had been, and who treated her as if she were their own. Naturally her little heart was drawn to them, and she could not fail to realize that they were animated by a spirit wholly different from that of the others in the village. She saw in them a habit altogether distinctive, a habit of communing with God which so marked them out that they were known as Prayer Indians. All this did the little child see; and upon it her little mind reflected day after day, passing beyond the knowledge of the seen to the unseen, from what was below to something altogether above it. Deep down in her soul she heard the gently whispers of the voice of conscience, and gradually she began to realize that it was re-echoing the voice of Him to Whom the Christians prayed.

Katherine was only ten, when once again she witnessed the destruction of her village--this time not by plague, but by cannon ball and flame. For the warlike Indians were subdued by the French in a ferocious and blood-spilling struggle. Saddened though she was at the defeat of her people, for the little Indian girl this was indeed a blessing in disguise. For when peace was restored, missionaries came to preach the word of God. How eagerly she watched the black-robed priest as he labored tirelessly among her people. And deeply impressed upon her too was the awful gulf between the superstition and idolatry and moral degradation of her pagan acquaintances, and the profound faith, the devout worship, the loving charity, and the exemplary conduct of those who had embraced the black robe's way of life.

Holy Scripture tells us that God tests those whom He loves by trial and suffering. So it was in the case of Katherine Takakwitha. As a result of her refusal to marry at the insistence of her guardians, the household became embittered against her. She was subjected to petty persecution for her unwillingness to act in accord with a tribal custom



that was considered sacred. The hardest labors were assigned to her-- tasks far beyond her strength. Yet not a word of complaint escaped her lips. Perhaps she rejoiced in her suffering--for did it not make her in some way like unto the missionaries who selflessly sacrificed rest and comfort and health in their avid quest for souls?

On the feast of the Resurrection in the year 1676, Katherine Takakwitha became a Catholic. From the hands of a young Jesuit missionary she received the Sacrament of Baptism. Then followed a life of heroic sanctity--a life which oftentimes provoked oppression and persecution, because it was a living rebuke to the moral degradation that surrounded her. Indeed on one occasion a young Indian stealthily followed her and angrily threatened her life with his hatchet if she refused to renounce her Faith. But to no avail. Unflinchingly she faced him. "You may take my life," she calmly said, "but not my Faith."

The last four years of the life of this Indian maiden were passed at St. Francis Xavier Mission in Canada. There she had gone, carrying with her a letter of introduction to the Jesuit Superior from the priest who had baptized her in her own village. "You will soon know," the letter read, "what a treasure we have sent you. Guard it well. May it profit in your hands, for the glory of God and the salvation of a soul that is certainly very dear to Him"

In this prayerful environment Katherine Takakwitha practiced heroic virtue. She learned of the heights to which one may rise in the love of God, in devotion to her neighbor, in recollection and self-sacrifice. Here were penances of a rigor and a severity not unlike those read about in the lives of the saints and fathers of the desert. On the feast of the Annunciation in the year 1679 she pronounced a vow of virginity--though long before she had made this resolution in her heart. Day in and

day out she lived her consecration to God---devoutly, whole-heartedly. And finally on the seventeenth day of April in the year 1680---at the youthful age of twenty four---the earthly days of Katherine Tekakwitha came to an end, as she fervently clasped her crucifix and devoutly repeated over and over again: "My Jesus, I Love you."

Wonderful and mysterious are the ways of God. Among the rich and the poor, among men and women, among educated and unlettered, in every clime, in every age, in highly civilized lands and in rudely primitive villages, He has raised up chosen souls to give honor to Him and to point out the way to others. For each and every one of us, this little Indian girl, Katherine Tekakwitha, has a tremendous lesson--the lesson that we are all called to a life of service of God, no matter who we are or where we are, whether we be priests or lay people, whether we be blessed with the goods of the world or blessed with the poverty of Christ, whether we be strong and vigorous and healthy or lie helpless on a bed of pain. We are called to a life of service of God; we are called to point out to others, even as did Katherine Tekakwitha, that only there lie true happiness and true success.

"O Jesus, before the record of my life  
Is chiseled on a rain-worn stone  
In two mute dates,  
Let me be a teacher of Thy Name,  
And light, within ten thousand lamps,  
Thy love's eternal flame."

(McCormican)