

Kateri's Life

In 1656, Kateri Tekakwitha known as “Lily of the Mohawks” was born of an Algonquin mother and Mohawk father in Ossernenon in the Mohawk Valley, now known as Auriesville, New York. Kateri was four years old when the horrible European disease of smallpox devastated her village. Many perished along with Kateri's parents and younger brother. She survived the deadly disease but her eyesight was greatly affected and her face ravaged with smallpox scars.

Because of Kateri's near blindness, she held her hands in front of her to feel her way along and protect herself from injury. It was from this characteristic that she was renamed “Tekakwitha” meaning “She who puts things in order”.

In 1667, 11 year old Kateri Tekakwitha meets the Jesuit Missionaries in her uncle's Longhouse. By this time the village had moved to the north side of the Mohawk River to Caughnawaga, now known as Fonda New York. During her adolescence she already had the conviction for a binding choice. As a young girl, she helped with the meals, collected berries from the woods, made baskets, did beadwork and strung the wampums (woven belts of shell beads). With the coming of the missionaries Kateri found comfort and understanding of her situation in Christianity and began her dialogue with Father James de Lamberville and expressed the ardent desire for Baptism in 1666. After a long preparation, she was baptized on Easter 1676 at the age of 20 and given the name Catherine. She continued to participate in her Mohawk life but her ardent desire for the Christian faith meant giving up all she had. Her choice for a life of celibacy and dedication for God meant losing her ties.

In 1677, due to severe persecutions that she had to endure due to her new Christian faith, Kateri Tekakwitha abandoned her village with the help of two Mohawks. They traveled about 150 miles from the Mohawk valley to the North-Eastern part of the Territory to the village of Kahnawake and the Mission of Saint Francis Xavier on the shore of the Saint Lawrence River. This journey lasted several days. Father James de Lamberville, S.J. had given her a letter for the Superior of the Mission. The letter stated: “I ask you to please take charge in directing her; it is a treasure which we are giving you. Guard it well and make it bear fruit for the glory of God and the salvation of a soul which is certainly very dear to Him.” She prepared herself for the sacraments daily with much care and attention to the amazement of the missionaries. Not only did she perform her daily domestic tasks with regularity and excellence but also her prayer life as well. A few months after her arrival, she received her First Holy Communion on Christmas Day at the age of 21. The simplicity of her prayers and her interiority were daily and devout. Without joining religious life she vowed to live her life in chastity. Through her simple life, she radiated Christian virtues. Her motto: “Who would tell me what is most pleasing to God so that I may do it?”

In 1680 with her health failing, she became gravely ill and on Holy Wednesday April 17th, 1680, 24 year old Kateri Tekakwitha died. Soon after her death and because of her faith in Christ, her scared face was restored to its former beauty and softness. She was buried in a wooden coffin next to the wooden cross where she prayed on the banks of the great river. The favors and miracles obtained through her intercession began immediately.

In 1717, the Mohawks of Kahnawake moved to their final and present day location Kateri's remains were housed in a sacred chest of polished wood in the sacristy of the Mission.

On Saturday December 6, 1884 the Bishops and Archbishops of the United States of America of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore addressed the Sovereign Pontiff Leo XIII to institute the process for the beatification of Catherine Tekakwitha. Letters were submitted by various Indian tribes, petitioning the Introduction of the Cause of the Servant of God, Catherine Tekakwitha to the Sovereign Pontiff Leo XIII.

In 1931, after years of preparation the Cause was instituted by the Most Reverend Bishop of Albany, Edmund Francis Gibbons on May 22nd. Sessions for the Informative Process opened June 2 and testimonies had all been taken by February

23rd, 1931. Reports and reviews were concluded on May 1st and the process finished on June 4th, 1932. The process of “non-culta” public veneration was instituted on June 29th, 1932 and the visit to Tekakwitha’s tomb in Canada was made in all solemnity on July 21st, 1932. In June 1938, the Historical Section of the Congregation of Rites at Rome declared that the documents of the Tekakwitha’s Cause were complete, genuine and trustworthy, that they established Tekakwitha’s reputation for holiness, and a solid basis for final judgment that her virtues were heroic.

November 26th, 1940 was set with the Holy Father’s approval as the date for the first discussion of the virtues of the Servant of God, Catherine Tekakwitha and in 1942 Pope Pius XII approved the decision of the Congregation that the venerable Servant of God, Catherine Tekakwitha was heroic.

On January 3rd 1943, His Holiness Pope Pius XII offered the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Then he solemnly proclaimed: “It has been proved in this instance and for the purpose under consideration, that the theological virtues of Faith, Hope, Love of God and Neighbour, and the cardinal virtues, Prudence, Justice, Temperance, Fortitude and subordinate virtues of the Venerable Servant of God, Catherine Tekakwitha, were heroic”. He then signed a Decree stating that Catherine Tekakwitha was “Venerable”.

Two cures were attributed to Catherine’s intercession, an 11-year old young girl who was unable to walk and a young boy suffering from paralysis of the legs due to a degenerative disease of the joints. Both regained use of their legs and enjoyed their formative years.

Bishop Coderre presided at the placing of the sacred chest with her relics into the marble tomb and on December 17th, 1972, he solemnly blessed her tomb. The tomb, located in the right-hand transept in the church of Saint Francis Xavier Mission is inscribed with these words “KAIATANORON KATERI TEKAKWITHA” meaning “Precious Kateri Tekakwitha”.

On June 22nd 1980, Kateri Tekakwitha was beatified by Pope John-Paul II and declared “BLESSED KATERI TEKAKWITHA”.

On December 19th 2011, Pope Benedict XVI announced the canonization of Kateri Tekakwitha. He signed a decree approving a miracle attributed to Kateri for saving the life of a young boy, Jake Finkbonner who suffered from a flesh eating disease.

She was canonized on October 21st, 2012 in Rome Italy.

Many people share their personal miracles with Kateri, how their family members were cured, how a special favour was granted. Their faith in her and their thankfulness for her intercession needs no words, their faces say it all.