



SPiRIT

KATERI TEKAKWITHA

First Native American Saint

By Joan Mitchell, CSJ

On October 21, 2012, the Catholic Church canonized the first Native American saint. Her own people, the Mohawks, the People of the Longhouse, called the new saint many names. Her family called her *Tekakwitha*, *She Who Moves Slowly*, probably because of her poor vision. Kateri, or Katherine, is the name she received at Baptism.

After her baptism people in her village called her *the Christian*, which also meant *the traitor*. Most people in her Turtle clan hated the French who brought Christianity among them and also fought them and destroyed their villages. Today the Church recognizes Kateri is a saint, the Lily of the Mohawks, the first Native American to make a perpetual vow of virginity.

Kateri's mother was a Christian from the Algonquin tribes. Her father was a Mohawk chief who captured her mother during war and married her. They had two children, a boy and a girl.

The Mohawks or Iroquois are among five Native American nations that formed a confederacy to stop wars among them. The original 13 colonies modeled their first confederacy on the Iroquois plan. Among the Iroquois all votes had to be unanimous. This made persuasion the key to governing. The longhouse with room for many symbolized their value on community and participating in decision making. Land and hunting rights belonged to all the nations.

Spiritually the Iroquois were also known for their fearless courage and contempt for pain and suffering. Composure in battle or torture demonstrated spirit power. They lived in gratitude for the powers of life in the world, for animals they hunted, for the corn, squash, and beans they cultivated.

French fur traders traveled up the rivers and into the woods of Canada and



PRAY Loving God, your creativity expands with the universe, evolves with life, unfolds within us in our hopes and dreams. May we become all we can be and all you intend. With you all things are possible. Amen.

1620 Massachusetts Bay Company lands at Plymouth in the Mayflower.

1642 French Jesuit fathers, the blackrobes, begin a mission to the Iroquois in upstate New York. Eight are martyred.

1656 Kateri is born in the Indian village of Ossernenon, New York, to a Mohawk chief who married a Christian Algonquin woman that he captured in battle.

1660 Smallpox epidemic kills Kateri's parents and brother, scars her face, and leaves her with weak eyes, sensitive to light.

1666 French destroy Ossernenon. Jesuits begin a second mission to the Iroquois.

1667 Blackrobes visit Kateri's new village Caughnawage, near Fonda today.

1674 Father Jacques de Lamberville becomes a resident priest in Kateri's village and instructs her for baptism.

1676 Kateri is baptized at Easter and given the name Kateri (Katherine).

1677 Kateri flees to St. Francis Xavier Mission in Canada. Other Iroquois regard these Christians as traitors.

1677 Kateri makes her first communion Christmas day.

1679 Kateri makes a vow of perpetual virginity.

1680 Kateri dies. She is 24.

New York to do business with the Native Peoples. Soldiers and priests followed. French Jesuit priests began their mission in New France in 1642; eight were promptly killed.

Kateri's mother was a pious and faithful Christian who must have planted a desire for Christian faith in her daughter. Perhaps they prayed together or her mother told Kateri stories about Jesus. We have no record. What we know about Kateri comes from the journals of the Jesuit priests.

Smallpox killed Kateri's parents and brother when she was only four. It scarred Kateri's face and left her with poor eyesight. Her uncle took his niece into his longhouse. Like Kateri's father, this uncle strongly opposed Christian religion.

In her uncle's longhouse Kateri has to learn to work the land, cook, sew, dress meat, keep house, and do decorative bead and quill work. When she was eight, her family bound Tekakwitha to a boy they hoped she would get to know and eventually marry. But she refused. The family stopped treating her as a daughter and treated her as a captured slave.

In 1666 French soldiers destroyed the Iroquois village and forced the tribe to ask for peace and for missionaries. The next year three Jesuits came to the new village of Caughnawaga, where Tekakwitha lived with her uncle. The priests lodged in



their longhouse and Tekakwitha had the work of serving them. Their piety impressed her.

A few years later priests established a Christian mission in the village, and different priests came when they could. Most of the Mohawks stayed very antagonistic toward the priests.

Father James de Lamberville became the resident priest in the village in

1674. About a year later he found Tekakwitha at home alone when he was visiting the sick. Everyone else was harvesting. She spontaneously revealed her desire to be a Christian.

Father de Lamberville accepted her as a catechumen and began teaching her. He found her to be "a natural Christian," so he taught her during the winter of 1675-76 and baptized Tekakwitha at Easter, giving her the name Katharine (Kateri). She was 20.

Kateri did her household duties diligently, always willing to

do her share of work. Once while she was making a wampum belt, a brave ran at her, yelling, "Christian, prepare to die." She stayed composed and kept on working.

Father de Lamberville taught her ways to pray. Those in the village who opposed Christianity made fun of her prayer and her rest from work on Sundays and holy days. They threatened her and deprived her of food. They jeered her when she went to church; children sometimes threw stones.

Father de Lamberville suggested Kateri move to a Christian village. Her adopted sister and husband went, but her uncle refused to let Kateri go.

Later her sister's husband came back when her uncle was away. Father de Lamberville wrote letters for Kateri to take to the mission. With her brother-in-law and another companion, Kateri trekked 200 miles through swamps and woods to the Mission of St. Francis Xavier at the Sault near Montreal.



Kateri loved the mission, worked at home and in the fields, and prayed constantly. An older Christian named Anastasia supervised the house, the work, the prayer. Anastasia knew Kateri's mother and was related to her. They became friends. Kateri also made friends with a woman her age named Mary Theresa, who also valued prayer.

On Christmas in 1677, Kateri received Holy Eucharist for the first time. She centered her life around the Eucharist and Jesus' cross. She

Native American Catholics integrate traditional ways—burning sage, drumming, praying the directions—with Catholic worship as they celebrate Eucharist and their new saint.



Native Americans honor St. Kateri and integrate their traditions in the Liturgy of the Eucharist.



SUNDAY GOSPEL

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

What does Jesus teach about riches?

NARRATOR: As Jesus was setting out on the road, a man ran up, knelt down in front of him, and questioned him.

MAN: Good Teacher, what must I do to receive eternal life?

JESUS: Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You must know the commandments: "You shall not kill; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not cheat; Respect your father and mother."

MAN: Teacher, I have kept all these commandments since my youth.

NARRATOR: Jesus looked at him and loved him.

JESUS: You can do one thing more. Go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor. You will have treasure in heaven. Then, come, follow me.

NARRATOR: When the man heard this, he felt sad and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Jesus looked around at his disciples.

JESUS: How hard it will be for those with riches to enter the kingdom of God!

NARRATOR: These words shocked the disciples.

JESUS: How hard for those trusting riches to enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

NARRATOR: At this the disciples were completely overwhelmed.

DISCIPLES: Who, then, can be saved?

JESUS: For humans this is impossible but not for God. All things are possible with God.

Mark 10.17-27

wore a cross around her neck. Her faith in Jesus transformed the spirit power her tribe valued in battle and torture; Jesus' passion and death redeemed others. Kateri identified with Jesus' sufferings and imitated them. The priests often found her waiting when they opened the door to the mission church, sometimes barefoot in the snow, wanting to share Jesus' sufferings. On Sundays she often spent the day in the mission church.



On her journey to the Christian mission Kateri had visited a convent of sisters in Montreal. Their life appealed to her. People said about Kateri, "She knows only two paths—the path to the fields and the path home and only two houses, her own and the church." She wanted to lead a life of oneness with God through prayer and always do what was most pleasing to God.

If she made a vow to stay a virgin, she would always be poor with no one to hunt for her. On Mary's Feast of the Annunciation, March 25, 1679,

Kateri made a vow of perpetual virginity and consecrated herself to Christ.

The priest in the village, Father Tamburini, says, "At about eight in the morning while the priest was saying Mass at which the neophytes received communion,

Katharine gave herself to Jesus Christ as a spouse and dedicated her virginity with a vow."

Kateri lived in the Christian village for three years, often sick, growing weaker. When Holy Week arrived in 1680, the priest came to her house, anointed her, and gave her Communion. People swarmed to her bedside to say goodbye.

Kateri told the women they should go to work in the fields, that she wouldn't die before they returned. Her friend Mary Theresa said farewell. When the women returned, Kateri

died. It was April 17, 1680, on Wednesday of Holy Week, 3 p.m.. Her last words were, "Jesus, I love you."

Both French settlers and Christian Indians saw Kateri as a saint. Many more Indians became Christians after her death. People made pilgrimages to her grave. She became known as the Lily of the Mohawks, the lily a symbol of virginity.

Today 20 generations later Native Americans celebrate the first saint of the universal Church from among them.

QUESTIONS

- 1 How does Kateri's conversion to Christianity differ from your own becoming a Christian?
- 2 How does her Mohawk spirituality influence Kateri's spirituality as a Christian?
- 3 What makes Kateri a saint? What makes anyone a saint?
- 4 How is Kateri important to Native Peoples today?
- 5 Why do you think the rich young man refuses to sell his belongings and follow Jesus?
- 6 What do you have to give?
- 7 How much of what you have do you give?

How do you answer Jesus' call to follow him?

The rich young man in the gospel and St. Kateri Tekakwitha both encounter Jesus Christ. Their stories can help us recognize and reflect on encounters with Jesus in our lives.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem with his disciples when the rich, young man runs up, kneels in front of him, and questions, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life." Jesus gives a usual Jewish answer. Keep the ten commandments. The young man does; he leads a good life. But he is looking for more.

When Jesus calls the young man to give his wealth to the poor and follow him, Jesus goes one too far. The young man can't take that radical step and leaves grieving. He cannot imagine himself

Both St. Damian, a Sacred Heart father, and St. Marianne, a Franciscan sister, answer Jesus' call. They give their lives to working with people who are poor and outcast because of their illness.

Kateri Tekakwitha encounters Jesus through the early missionaries to North America. Priests follow explorers and fur traders to the new continent to spread the gospel. Kateri's uncle has good reason to oppose the blackrobes. For Native Peoples, history holds trails of tears and losses of language and culture.

For Kateri Jesus' suffering and death on the cross and his presence in the Eucharist make sense of her life. Faith in Jesus transforms the strength and

Many young Catholics today encounter Jesus in hearing a call to solidarity with the poor of our world. Many have become global citizens, aware we live in an interdependent world. Driving our cars in the United States contributes to raising the sea levels on islands in the Pacific. Clothing bought in the U.S. may be made by 16 years olds in sweatshops in Nicaragua. Coffee mocha at the corner coffee shop benefits families in Guatemala if it is fair trade.

Solidarity is a principle of Catholic social teaching. The word derives from the Latin word *sol*, which means *whole*. Solidarity assumes the human race is one human family, whatever our national, ethnic, racial, economic, or political differences. The work of solidarity is making sure that our neighbors have food, clothing, shelter, education, and health care. It means working for just and fair public policies.



Teens help build homes in Tijuana, Mexico.

Catholic social teaching proclaims that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. We are one human family.

Catechism of the Catholic Church #1939-1942

without his wealth and lifestyle. He cannot imagine living an itinerant life on the road with Jesus and his disciples, nor can he imagine the positive power of faith and friendship with Jesus.

In the history of the Church many people have responded to the call the young man refuses. They have sold their possessions, given the money to the poor, and often worked with the poor. Typically Christians who choose to become voluntarily poor belong to religious communities of sisters, brothers, and priests and help sustain one another.

suffering that her life already requires. She finds transformation in Jesus' suffering because he suffers for others. She finds more in the life of prayer she discovers when she visits the Ursuline Sisters in Montreal.

Unlike the rich young man who turns away, St. Kateri follows and imitates Jesus. She integrates her Mohawk composure and courage with her new Christian life. Her vow of virginity means she will be poor with no husband to hunt for her.

October 16 is World Food Day. Consider doing a hunger project this year. **FOOD FAST** is a 24-hour fasting retreat available from Catholic Relief Services, www.foodfast.org. Consider an Empty Bowls fund raiser for food shelves or Heifer International; see *SPIRIT* next week. Contact Bread for the World and participate in their lobbying work to end hunger, bread.org.

FAITH in ACTION

- 1 How do you respond to Jesus' invitation to follow him?
- 2 What wealth are you willing to give to people who are poor?
- 3 What people who are poor do you feel a call to help? What are their needs?
- 4 What possessions or privileges keep you from seeing or knowing people who are poor?