

“ My Jesus, I Must Suffer for Thee !... ”

(Seventh Day)



THE scion of a haughty Italian family of the Renaissance, St. Aloysius Gonzaga, and a little girl of the Mohawks, the Venerable Kateri Tekakwitha have much in common. Both are famed for the innocence of their lives, for their penitential role in making up for the sins of their people and for their early deaths.

Their awful penances. Kateri knew and admired the extraordinary austerities of St. Aloysius, but few of us know about Kateri's. Our Twentieth Century sensibilities shudder at the mere listing of them.

Kateri always prepared her confessions by having a devout friend discipline her. The third stroke drew blood, but the blows kept raining down upon her shoulders. A thousand to twelve hundred blows each time.

Once in the middle of winter, Kateri walked for a long time barefoot on the sharp ice of a pond. Off and on, when the temperature was below freezing, she went without fire. She wore a girdle with iron spikes. One evening, her heart pierced with sorrow for her sins, she burned herself from her toes to her knees with firebrands. Until her friends stopped her, she would go without eating each Wednesday and Saturday. After a meditation on the Passion of Our Savior, she lined the bark that served as her mat with sharp thorns. Her confessor, who had not been consulted (Kateri simply wished to imitate St. Aloysius), instantly regulated her devotions when he discovered what she was doing.

To be sure, Kateri's austerities disconcert our modern pagan way of thinking just as the Marquis of Castiglione's macerations had scandalized the good folk of his day. The following words could have been said by St. Aloysius :

“ My Jesus, I must suffer for Thee ; I love Thee, but I have offended Thee. It is to satisfy Thy justice that I am here. Vent on me, O God, Thy anger. ” But it was Kateri who uttered them.

PONDER AWHILE . . .

Tekakwitha did not love the Cross for itself. She loved it because it is the only Way to Jesus. What about my penances ? Penances that fit in with my health, my work, my age. Is my Christianity watered-down ?... (Now turn to page eight and read the Prayer for the Beatification of Kateri.)

☞ Lent ! a time of penance ! The penance stressed the most by Our Savior : almsgiving. . . ☛

“ My Soul Is Ready to Die With Sorrow... ”

(Eighth Day)

IN the Garden of Olives, “ My soul, ” Jesus said, “ is ready to die with sorrow... ” (Mt. XXVI, 38).

Kateri mirrored this phase of our Savior's suffering in her life. Tongues unkind, razor-sharp, slashed away at her reputation and caused her great sorrow. In the spring of the year following her baptism, during the hunting season, Tekakwitha accompanied her people as they went in search of game. One of her aunts, possibly envious of her exemplary life, spied on her in order to be able to accuse her before Father de Lamberville.

It was then the custom among the Iroquois for nieces to call their uncles *father*. Once or twice Tekakwitha forgot to do this and simply addressed her uncle by his name. His wife rushed to the missionary and accused her niece :

“ So Kateri, whom you think is so virtuous, is after all a hypocrite who deceives you. Even in my presence she solicited my husband to sin. ”

After questioning Kateri, the priest completely exonerated her and remained convinced that the Holy Ghost had always preserved this flower of His garden from the slightest taint.

In New France she suffered much in the same fashion, only more so. Her first biographer gives two reasons for this : her belief that among Christians she would no longer suffer from calumny and the nature of the untruth hurled against her.

A good Christian woman, but “ somewhat given to backbiting ” misinterpreting certain occurrences, thought that Kateri was trying to win her husband's affections and denounced her to one of the Fathers.

One evening, this woman's husband, after hunting an elk all day, entered the longhouse at a late hour. He threw himself on the first pallet and soon fell asleep. The next morning his wife noticed that he had slept next to Tekakwitha. Her suspicions were confirmed when she heard him ask Kateri to mend his canoe.

The missionary, informed of these happenings, spoke to Kateri. “ Whatever... she might say then, ” writes significantly Chauchetière, “ she was not entirely believed... and what hurt her most was that the Father... accused her as if she had been guilty. ” I know of no better ending to these lines than the same writer's conclusion : “ The actual thorns of which she made use for penance, were only a symbol of the interior thorns that were meant to try her soul ! ”

PONDER AWHILE . . .

Kateri accepted this suffering with great patience. Does an unkind remark, thoughtlessly uttered, upset me, anger me ?... (Now turn to page eight and read the Prayer for the Beatification of Kateri.)

☞ A steel file is needed for the documents concerning the Cause of the Lily of the Mohawks. ☛