

KATERI - PATRONESS OF THE POOR

By NORA ROUTLEDGE

KATHERINE Tekakwitha's help has been invoked under many titles — "The Genevieve of New France", "Lily of the Mohawks", "Wonder-Worker of the new World", "The Holy Indian", and, most beloved of all, "Kateri".

There is still another name to which she may lay claim — "Patroness of the Poor". Kateri's poverty was outstanding, even in an age when it was the order of the day in New France. When she died, her belongings would hardly have covered the bottom of her coffin. But it was voluntary poverty, not inherited.

According to Iroquois standards, Kateri was born rich and secure. Her father was the ruling war chief of the Mohawk Village of Ossernenon and his daughter was a princess, surrounded with power and plenty. The Mohawks were so powerful at the time of Kateri's birth and during the early years of her life that they were always the aggressors, never the attacked. In her father's long-house, Kateri was well fed, her bed was lavishly supplied with beaver skins and she owned and wore on ceremonial occasions, as her birthright, much valuable and beautiful wampum.

Even growing up, an orphan in her uncle's house, Kateri was surrounded with comfort. Her uncle considered her a valuable possession, for it would be easy to find a young brave to marry her and so add his hunting and fighting skill to the cabin. Anyone would be glad to have a wife like Kateri, whose hands were skilled at all the work required of an Iroquois wife.

Great was the wrath of her uncle and aunts when Kateri refused to marry any of the suitors who came to present their suits. She was deprived of all but the bare necessities and made to work like a slave with the hope of breaking her to their will. But it was all in vain.

That was the first time she chose poverty.

Again, when she became a Christian, no food was left in the longhouse for her on Sundays, when she refused to do manual labor on the Lord's Day. Her aunts were sure that she would follow them to the fields when she got hungry enough. Kateri hungered and stayed in the long house.

The third and final time she chose poverty was at the Mission of the Sault when once again she was urged to marry, so that she

would have a husband to provide her with the necessities of life. The matter was referred to Father Cholenec, who pointed out to her the spiritual and worldly reasons why it seemed wise for her to have a husband. But he left the final decision to her — and she said, "The thought of poverty does not frighten me. My work will always supply the food I need, and a few rags are sufficient to cover me."

With these words, Kateri ranged herself beside the poor forever. They who are dear to the heart of God are especially loved by Kateri and she showed this by practical means shortly after her death. The poor country people from around the Mission were the first pilgrims to her grave and her first miracles were performed for them. We have Father Cholenec's word for that. He says in 1682 hardly a week passed that great miracles did not take place through her intercession. And he adds: "It was noticeable, however, that Katharine limited herself to the country and the poor people for several years, without entering into the cities."

Her own people knew her kindness — the wife of Hot Ashes experienced the healing power of her blanket when she lay dying in childbirth. The women who were tending her, went to the Church to pray, and

on their return, found her completely cured. Kateri's blanket had been the visible means of a miracle.

Father LeBrun tells a charming story of a woman who was frantic with worry because her only cow became "vastly swollen" and was of no further use to her. She then called out to Kateri: "O, good Katharine, have pity on me! Save my poor cow!" Her prayer was answered, for God understands the cry of His little ones for their daily bread — and so does Kateri, Patroness of the Poor, who chose to be poor herself.

It Kateri could give the world a message in this year — the tercentenary of her birth — it might well be this:

"Do not let the thought of poverty frighten you; your work will feed you. And as for the security which the twentieth century has raised to the status of a golden goddess, forget her and concentrate on eternal security with your Father in heaven. Put first things first and leave the rest to Him. He who marks the sparrow's fall, will not fail you."

KATERI SYMPATHY CARDS

A GOOD PENANCE ANY TIME OF YEAR: SIT DOWN AND WRITE IN BLOCK LETTERS THE NAMES AND ADDRESSES OF 20 OR MORE OF YOUR FRIENDS: THEN SEND THEM IN TO KATERI.