

The Mission Bell

FROM the outset of the Mission of St. Francis Xavier at La Prairie de la Madeleine, the sound of a little bell rang out over "the multitudinous waters of the St. Lawrence River."

In 1675, the Venerable François de Laval, first Bishop of New France visited the mission on May 25, the Monday after Pentecost, then a legal holiday. It was a beautiful day. His canoe was seen from afar. And the bell of the little church immediately called the faithful to the wharf where Monseigneur de Laval was to disembark.

At the end of the following year, the Indians and their missionaries definitely parted company with the French and established themselves at Cote Ste. Catherine. On January 2, 1677 Father Pierre Cholenec wrote that each Sunday "at three o'clock in the afternoon the bell rings for vespers, for which there are two rows of seats on both sides of the church, from the altar to the lower end of the chapel, whereon the Indians sit, the men on one side and the women on the other." This is the bell that the Venerable Kateri Tekakwitha heard many times a day from the autumn of that same year until her death in April 1680.

The people soon realized that this little bell did not meet the requirements of the Christian community. Many years later, Father Claude Chauchetière, who spent most of his life at the mission wrote: "The

blessing of the first bell of the mission took place in the month of June 1862. The Holy Family alone purchased it for the public convenience, because the one which we had was too small, and the fields were too far from the village. This bell weighs eighty-one livres, and was named 'Marie'."

That same year, in a letter dated October 14, Father Chauchetière also wrote: "We have three bells, with which we produce a very agreeable carillon; and the Indians will soon have another bell, weighing two hundred livres, to complete the harmony. The usual exercises of our mission are as follows: In the early morning the bell is rung at four o'clock, which is the hour at which we rise, as in our houses in France. Many... come at once to the church to adore the Blessed Sacrament; and they remain there until the first Mass, which is said in winter at a quarter to seven, and in mid-summer at five o'clock. While they are saying their prayers I withdraw to my chamber, which is six feet long and five feet wide to meditate; after this, I say the first Mass, at which many are present although the bell is not rung for it... At eleven o'clock the bell is rung for our examination of conscience, and at the same time the Angelus is rung..."

From Quebec on October 21, 1683, the Reverend Father Thierry Beschefer, Superior of the Missions of the Society of Jesus in Canada,



Photo: Armour Landry

An old painting of Kateri Tekakwitha by Father Claude Chauchetière, S.J., who had known her well. Note the little church with its steeple in the background.