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A Community of American Indian Nuns?

Claude Chauchetière, S.J.¹

The missionary Fathers, her directors, aided Kateri in the beginnings of her spiritual life, but left much that many of their neophytes (especially Kateri), were capable of, to the Holy Spirit. The Fathers were surprised at the real progress the new Christians made in all the Christian virtues. But they did not as yet know in detail everything that transpired between Kateri and her companion (Marie Thérèse Tégaiaguenta). Their principal director, Father Frémin, had gone to France in the interest of his mission, and Father Choleneq was so busy that he had time only for general

¹ This document of exceptional interest was written by Father Claude Chauchetière, S.J., as early as 1685. It relates Kateri's unsuccessful attempts to found a community of American Indian nuns at Caughnawaga, Canada. Saints, however, have a way about them of achieving whatever they think is for the greater glory of God. Less than a half century later a convent of Poor Clares was founded in Mexico, thanks to the Lily of the Mohawks' influence. In a fascinating study of French Canadian and Mexican relations during the eighteenth century, Professor Paul Bouchard of Laval University then tells us about this little-known but dramatic event.

management. He was certain, however, that they would do nothing, especially concerning the manner of life they wished to lead, without consulting their confessor.

For example, each day Kateri and Thérèse performed some act of devotion which was proper and suitable for their aim. Marie Thérèse Tégaiaguenta thought that it would be better if there were a third, or if they had some other Christian girl with them from whom they could learn all they wished to know. She added that she knew one named Marie Skarichions, who had lived for a long time at Quebec and at the Mission of Our Lady of Lorette, conducted on the same plan as the Mission of the Sault. When Kateri agreed with her companion's suggestion, the three assembled at the foot of the cross, which was planted on the riverside. There the elder companion spoke first, expressed her desire to join them, and proposed that they adopt the rule of life of the Religious she had seen while she was an invalid at Quebec. This meant that they should never separate, that they should dress alike, and if possible, live in the same cabin. Accordingly they chose as their home an island called Heron Island. All this was made part of their deliberations of religious life.

Kateri thanked the speaker with tears of joy in her eyes, and begged her to keep nothing from them which would make them more pleasing to God. Although the others had persisted in their resolution to give themselves entirely to God and never to marry, none of them had profited as much as Kateri in perseveringly following the rule of life which her confessor had given her.

Her custom was to go to church at four o'clock in the morning, winter and summer. In winter, she walked barefoot through the snow. Each day she heard two Masses and frequently visited the Blessed Sacrament. She went to confession weekly, received Holy Communion as often as possible, and made Spiritual Communions frequently during the day. Her great devotion and fervor of spirit qualified her for admission to the Society of the Holy Family almost as soon as she had arrived from the Iroquois. She had been exempted from taking the tests which other arrivals and newly baptized were required to pass before being allowed to receive Holy Communion or before admission into the Society of the Holy Family.

One of the principal signs that what was happening in Kateri's soul was the work of God, was the obedience with which these three persons submitted their resolution to live as Religious. When they arrived at their decision, one of them went at once to Father Frémin and told him that they had formed an association, yet wished to do nothing unadvised.

The priest made light of all these beautiful plans. He told them they were as yet too young in the faith for such a singular project; that Heron Island was so far removed from the village that all the young people who were passing to or from Montreal would be always at their cabin. They themselves saw that what the priest said was reasonable, and forthwith abandoned their idea of a monastery on Heron Island.