

TERCENTENARY OF A BELT



THREE OR FOUR YEARS have passed since three teenagers, a girl and two boys, on a cold and dark snowy afternoon, entered the Mission Church of St. Francis Xavier, slipped through the sacristy, and reached the adjacent museum. There they borrowed a precious relic belonging to the Catholic Indians of Caughnawaga: the wampum belt that the Lorette Hurons had offered to their ancestors in 1677. Fr. Claude Chauchetière, S.J., a close acquaintance of Kateri Tekakwitha, describes the story of its arrival in 1677:

"This year will be remarkable because of the celebrated present which was sent from Lorette to the Sault. It was a preaching belt which conveyed the voice of Lorette to those of the Sault, encouraging them to accept the faith in good earnest, and to build a chapel as soon as possible; and it also exhorted them to combat the various demons who conspired for the ruin of both missions. This belt was at once attached to one of the beams of the chapel, which is above the top of the altar, so that the people might always behold it and hear that voice."

Exactly when during the year did the Hurons send it to the Mission of St. Francis Xavier? We do not know. Why did they send it to the Sault St. Louis Indians? During the previous year, Fr. Jacques Frémin and the faithful had quit Kentaké, as they called Laprairie, to settle down farther up the river. Nine years before, the Hurons had welcomed the founders of St. Francis

Xavier's to their village near Quebec. As they had very pleasant memories of them, they maintained excellent relations with the Christians of the Indian village. On learning of their moving up-stream, they sent them the wampum belt. Wampum was made of seashells (periwinkles, quahogs or quahaugs, and whelks). The Indian broke these shells into pieces and, by rubbing them against a stone, ground them into an octagonal figure an inch in length and half an inch in width. The next step consisted in boring. When the drill reached halfway through the shell, the shell was reversed and the boring was completed on the opposite side. The beads were then polished and strung on a thin leather thong. In this condition, they were known to the French as **branches de porcelaine**, corresponding, apparently, to the fathom of early New York writers. The belts were made up of many fathoms, generally about two feet in length. Exceptionally, the Huron belt was more than a yard long.

It is interesting to note that the Venerable Kateri Tekakwitha came to the Mission of St. Francis Xavier in the same year as the wampum belt. During the crowning period of her short life, whenever she went to the chapel, she listened to its voice, and better than all the others, accepted the faith in good earnest.

One of these days, perhaps on a dark and snowy afternoon, three teenagers may find their way back to the church with the borrowed wampum belt.