

FIFTY YEARS AGO



Mother M.M. Nealis, R.S.C.J.

THE PAINTING of Kateri Tekakwitha from the brush of Mother Margaret Mary Nealis, R.S.C.J., was brought to the attention of the public for the first time in the spring of 1927. Mr. F. J. Topp, its publisher and printer, had a great devotion to the "Lily of the Mohawks," and worked hard to spread devotion to her through these pictures.

For fifty years now Mother Nealis' Kateri has been in circulation. It is by far the most popular picture of the Venerable Kateri Tekakwitha. The original is still in the Jesuit rectory at Caughnawaga, P.Q.

When I was a young Jesuit at Sault-au-Récollet, Mother Nealis asked me to bring one of my sisters to the Sacred Heart Convent, where she lived. It was not very far from our noviciate. She wanted to study the features of a young Mohawk girl from the Mission of St. Francis Xavier.

The time came when I was able

Michael K. Jacobs, S.J.

to introduce my sister Caecilia and two other Indian girls to Mother Nealis. She scrutinized her close to and from a distance, sideways and facing her. I believe my sister gave Mother Nealis a good idea of what an Indian girl looked like. Caecilia asked me afterwards why Mother Nealis has examined her so closely.

After I was sent to the Scholasticate of the Immaculate Conception in Montreal to study philosophy, with two other confrères, Alexander Roland and John Hughes, I thought of writing a prayer that would encourage the faithful to turn to her in their needs.

When we had finished it—we thought it was pretty good—we took it for approval to Father Edward Devine, S.J., promoter for the cause of the Jesuit Martyrs. He found that we were truly novices in the art of composing a prayer for the beatification of Kateri Tekakwitha. He was kind enough and patient enough to help us. He did not change the substance, only the form of the prayer, giving it rhythm where it was lacking. We were the winners, for our purpose was to spread devotion to Kateri and obtain miracles for her beatification.

With the second printing of the Kateri picture, we were delighted to find our prayer with the *imprimatur* of Bishop Deschamps, Auxiliary Bishop of Montreal, on the back. Thanks to Fr. Edward Devine, S.J., and three Jesuit scholastics of long ago, the same prayer for the beatification of the Venerable Kateri Tekakwitha is still said far and wide in 1977.



AFTERTHOUGHTS

FROM ALL SIDES requests come to the Kateri Center for the little colored pictures of the Venerable Kateri Tekakwitha, painted by Mother Margaret Nealis, R.S.C.J. Despite certain art critics who do not think the Lily of the Mohawks is sufficiently grim, the general public has always preferred a pleasant portrait of Kateri. Those who want a more fearsome Kateri in full disguise will find her in the new **Sunday Mass Book for Canada**, a publication of the Canadian Catholic Conference.

The picture by Mother Nealis shows Kateri coming from the St. Lawrence River and advancing along a woodland path towards a large cross. The carmine and topaz tints of the leaves indicate that this is an autumn setting, probably that of 1677, shortly after the young Indian woman's arrival at the Mission of St. Francis Xavier. In the distant background can be seen Heron Island, where Kateri hoped to found a community of indigenous nuns. In the foreground, at the foot of the cross, blooms a white lily, the symbol of the Venerable Kateri Tekakwitha's virginity.

The artist, Mother Nealis, painted this picture in 1927—fifty years ago last spring. This humble religious, always smiling, always willing to help, was portress for half a century at the Convent of the religious of the Sacred Heart at Sault-au-Récollet in northern Montreal. Close by the entrance, she had her studio, where she worked when the door bell was quiet. Besides Kateri's picture, she painted more than thirty or forty others, which were very popular, when Canadians as a group were still strong in faith.

At my request, Fr. Michael K. Jacobs, my Iroquois Jesuit confrère, called to mind his memories of the painting of Kateri's picture. His sister Caecilia served as model. Many years ago, I remember having met Sr. Lena Landry, a religious of the Sacred Heart, who was visiting the Caughnawaga Mission. She told me that as a postulant she had also posed as Kateri for Mother Nealis.

Fr. Edward Devine, S.J., whom Fr. Jacobs mentions, was a well known writer in English Catholic circles. Besides promoting the cause of the Canadian Martyrs, he wrote **Historic Caughnawaga**, now out of print, but still an authority for those interested in the history of one of the earliest and largest Christian Indian villages in Canada.

In the 1950's, it was my privilege to meet Mr. F.J. Topp, photographer, printer, and editor of the Kateri picture. He was a man of prayer and deep faith. He spent long hours in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. Mr. Topp was very happy, when his son decided to become a Jesuit. At the time, no better person could have been found to help Kateri's cause. He was a master in his calling and was very particular with regard to his work. He told me he had used eight plates—off-set printing had not then come into its own—to reproduce to his satisfaction Mother Nealis' portrait of Kateri. Sr. Sheila Conroy, archivist for her Congregation, informed me a search was being made for the plates. Should they turn up, it would be once again possible to offer Mother Nealis' holy card of Kateri to her friends everywhere.

H.B.

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<p style="text-align: center;">PRAYER <i>for the beatification of Kateri Tekakwitha</i></p> <p>O GOD, who, among the manifold marvels of Your Grace in the New World, did cause to blossom on the banks of the Mohawk and of the St. Lawrence, the pure and tender Lily, Kateri Tekakwitha, grant, we beseech You, the favor we beg through her intercession - that this Little Lover of Jesus and of His Cross may soon be raised to the honors of the altar by Holy Mother Church, and that our hearts may be enkindled with a stronger desire to imitate her innocence and faith. Through the same Christ Our Lord. <i>Amen.</i></p> <p><i>Our Father and Hail Mary, once, and Glory be to the Father, three times.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Rev. Vice-Postulator Box 70, Caughnawaga, P.Q. Canada J0L 1B0</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">KATERI TEKAKWITHA</p>
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