

# KATERI TEKAKWITHA

Bryan O'Reilly, S.J.

Some thirty years ago, as a scholastic in Philosophy, I tried to write an article for the Jesuit Mission Magazine on the North American Martyrs—Frenchmen who had come to convert the Indian tribes in the 1600 or something era. But I really wasn't much good at writing. I had left school at fourteen and worked in a war factory in London. As the war '39-'45 ended I was called up into military service for three years. Over two of those years were spent in the Occupation Force in Germany.

I was twenty-three years old when I entered the Jesuit Novitiate. And at twenty-five was completely lost in the jungle of Philosophy. I was only too glad to escape into the woodland lives of the Mohawk Indians. It was there I came across a young Indian girl with a strange name that I could never remember but could recognise when I heard it—Tekakwitha. I remembered something about her travelling a long distance in an Indian canoe. She couldn't read or write but was very holy. I rather liked her. As I stared at the strange books on Philosophy with their infuriating terminology I reckoned I couldn't read either and when I tried to write my article on those French Jesuits in North America I realised that though I had a thousand thoughts in my mind, I just couldn't write them down. But worse still, I was *not* holy.

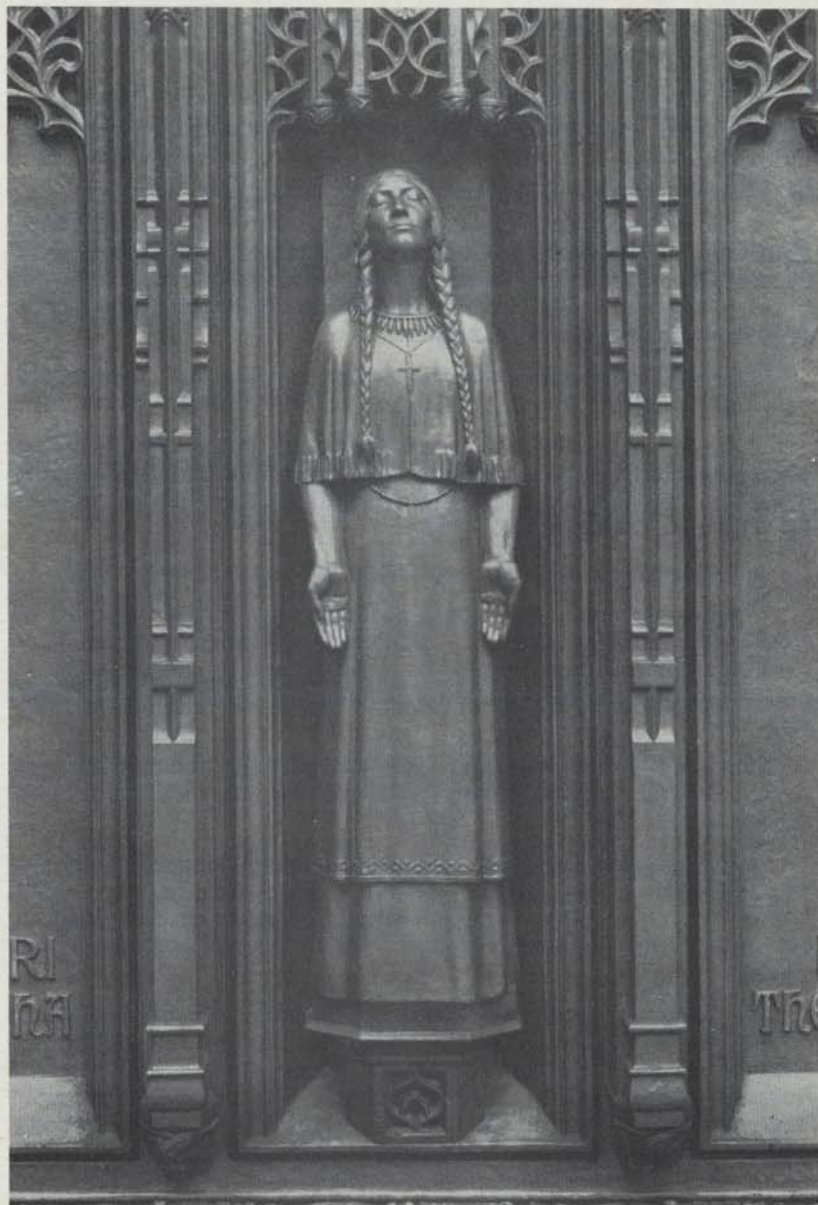
I nearly left the Society of Jesus.

But the good Lord has His own ways. Little did I realise that ten years later I would be travelling the rivers of South America in an Indian canoe.

On the borders of Venezuela I worked with the Amerindians. Along the Barima River in Guyana I had to visit a little wooden hut school on the riverside. Its name "Tekakwitha". And the daughter of the Arawak Indian teacher was called "Tekakwitha".

"Do you know who Tekakwitha was?" I asked Tekakwitha.

"She was an Indian like me. She had brown skin like me. She was very, very, very holy. And she died when she was young and went to Heaven and that's enough for me", said Tekakwitha.



*Copyrighted by the Trustees of St. Patrick's Cathedral, N.Y.*

Statue of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha  
on the Great Bronze Doors  
of St. Patrick's Cathedral  
New York City