

Tribute to Fr. Béchard, s.j.

FR. HENRI BÉCHARD, S.J.  
(1909-1990)

"The holy man has gone home..."

With these appropriate and heartfelt words, Bishop Bernard Hubert of St-Jean-Longueuil, introduced the solemn funeral Mass of Fr. Henri Béchard, S.J., Friday March 23, 1990, in the mission-church of St. Francis Xavier, Kahnawake.

Although Father Béchard had, for practical reasons, established his residence and office in Montreal, in 1959, it was most befitting that his funeral Mass be celebrated in this historic church, where he spent the first years of his pastoral ministry. In 1945, he had come here and wrote the history of the present church, the centennial of which was celebrated that same year. After thorough research in the old documents preserved in the archives of the parish, he could publish an 80-page booklet in French entitled: "J'ai cent ans!" This was the first of countless writings, books, magazine articles he published on the history of the Mission and mainly on Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha during the 45 last years of his life. Granted that, during the past 30 years, he worked in his Kateri Center, in Montreal, but his heart was always here in Kahnawake, near the relics of Kateri. He had one passion: his tender and yet so strong and contagious devotion to Kateri, the fairest flower that ever bloomed among the Christian Mohawks.

The main celebrant of the Mass, Bishop Hubert, was assisted at the altar by Fr. Léon Lajoie, S.J., pastor of the mission-parish, and by Fr. Maurice Ruest, S.J., the immediate Superior of the deceased.

A crown of more than twenty priests surrounded the principal celebrants during the Eucharist. Among them was Msgr. Lenz, P.D., a prelate who supervises the Catholic Native American Missions and was delegated by the American Conference of Catholic Bishops. He gave a brief and much appreciated eulogy of the deceased priest in the closing minutes of the service.

The renowned Kahnawake Mixed Choir, reinforced by a few guest - singers and ably directed by Fr. Jacques Bruyère, S.J., gave a moving rendition of the hymns of the funeral Mass in Mohawk.

Officers of the local council of the Knights of Columbus, in full regalia, formed a guard of honor.

The church was filled with parishoners, relatives and friends, some from the United States, who had come to pay their last respects to the beloved priest and stayed in silent and reverent awe all through the hour-long service.

After the proclamation of the Gospel of the Beatitudes, Fr. Louis Cyr, S.J., delivered a jewel of a homily, making pertinent applications of the Beatitudes to the life, personality and accomplishments of Father Béchard. He said: "There once roamed, through these wide expanses of ours, a happy, smiling, warm-hearted, noble, meek and peace-loving person. A gentleman to the core... he was basically a blessed and happy maker of peace... His unswerving hunger and thirst for justice was contagious... The freshness and purity of his beaming face, eyes and heart gave him direct access to the innermost impulses of the divine, beating and breathing in our hearts and souls." Father Cyr's whole homily was a masterpiece adorned with a few paragraphs in French and in Mohawk.

I will not attempt to retrace here at length Fr. Béchard's *curriculum vitae*. Suffice it to say that the greatest part of his life after his ordination to the priesthood, in 1944, was consecrated to the promotion of the cause of Kateri Tekakwitha. Named vice-postulator of the cause, in 1949, he edited and published the quarterly KATERI in both English and French versions for 40 years. He was a key-man in the long research and labors preparatory to the beatifica-



Father Béchard and Fr. T. Egan, S.J. in Phoenix, AZ



tion of Kateri Tekakwitha by Pope John Paul II, in 1980, 300 years after her saintly death. He had the joy of being present at the solemn ceremony, in St. Peter's Basilica, Rome.

It will be from above, from "home", that soon, hopefully, he will witness the canonization ceremony of Blessed Kateri, the Lily of the Mohawks.

May I add a few personal observations and memories about Fr. Béchard?...

He was a born gentleman and was acknowledged as such by his peers ever since he entered the Jesuit noviciate in 1931. His excellent family education, his innate courtesy and refined manners gave him the finishing touch of an aristocrat, so much so that his fellow novices, teasingly but not maliciously, nicknamed him "the Count" ("le comte Henri de Béchard").

During his Jesuit training, before his studies preparatory to the priesthood, he had to go through the experiment of teaching to teenagers in one of our colleges, Brébeuf. He was not a stern disciplinarian. Gentle-natured and soft-spoken, he did not find it easy to handle those unruly boys who, taking advantage of his candor and meekness, would once in a while burst in turbulent fits. But one of his former pupils, now a renowned producer with Radio-Canada, was telling me how he was impressed then by his inner, spiritual qualities, by what he called his interiority. Even the light-



Father Béchard at Kateri's tomb

headed boys, in their better moods, admitted that he was a man of God in the making.

"The holy man is gone home." He is now in possession of the reward promised, in the Gospel, to the good and faithful servant. I can picture the reception he received when he came face to face with his Lord and Master. I can picture Jesus opening his arms to him and saying: "Well done, you good and faithful servant... Come on in and share my Happiness! And I can visualize, not far behind Jesus, Kateri Tekakwitha smiling radiantly to her "*chevalier servant*".

In conclusion, I adapt and apply to Father Béchard the wish he wrote to thousands and thousands of correspondents over the years: Kateri's smile upon you, Henri, for all eternity, in glory!

Henri Lacasse, S.J.



❁ **Kateri's smile upon you, Mrs. J. S.!**

I am enclosing a check for five dollars for the Kateri Center. My neighbor's son is having difficulties with his position and Kateri helped him get his job, so we are praying she will help him keep the original job he had. I am sure her prayers for all of us will be granted. I also want to thank Blessed Kateri for the many blessings she has bestowed on us and hope she will be numbered among the saints very soon.

(Eric, PA)

❁ **Kateri's smile upon you, Mrs. L. O'F.!**

I wrote to you on July 16th asking for a special favor, — that I would sell my house. I am pleased to say that on August 7th, my house was sold. I am enclosing a cheque for ten dollars in thanksgiving and I also have another intention. After wanting a child for three years my son and daughter-in-law had their wish last week, but the baby was born two months premature. She is not out of the woods yet. Please pray that this small baby will be all right.

(Pointe Claire, QC)

*(When acknowledging favors to Kateri, be sure to indicate details.)*