



## THE BLESSED KATERI TEKAKWITHA

1656 - 1680

By Pr. Henri Béchard, s.j.

### **A Happy Birth**

**U**ndoubtedly, the chiefs wife must now and then have met with the other Algonkins, who, like her, had married Iroquois braves. With them, she could speak about their homeland, relatives, and friends, whom they would never see again, and also about their common faith in Jesus Christ. She

could also strike up a friendship with the baptized Huron women, who had become members of the Turtle Clan, that of Ossernenon. On the other hand, little by little, helped by her husband, she became an excellent Iroquois.

Less than two years after her arrival, she gave birth to a very pretty Indian girl. A year or two later, a little brother gave joy to the family. It was a happy home. The elder of the two, who was very beautiful with her large black eyes and her jet-black hair, grew rapidly. She could be seen toddling after her mother or playing with her baby brother. She was barely four years old when she began to make herself useful by picking wild strawberries and blueberries.

Every day, since their birth, their mother had prayed for both of them. At times, she would hum the simple hymns she had learned at Trois-Rivieres. Each evening, on the quiet, she blessed them with the Sign of the Cross. Even so, she had not baptized them: no Christian Huron or Algonkin woman in the village would have dared baptize her children. It was, they thought, the responsibility of the missionaries, and no Blackrobe had passed through Ossernenon for two years. All that the mother could bequeath of her faith to her little ones was the merit of her fervent prayers and the vague memories that a young child was able to store in her mind. In 1660, great misfortune befell the place under the guise of smallpox. The mother, the two children, and, it would seem, the father were stricken. The epidemic continued, and all the family died save the little girl. The tiny tot slowly fought her way back to life. Her face, formerly so beautiful was now pitted by the terrible illness and her eyes were so very much weakened that she was obliged to protect them from the bright sunshine. The dance of the sunbeams on the river or, during the winter, on the white snow was a source of torture for her.

What did the future hold in store for the orphan girl? Would she simply be a Mohawk submissive to the laws and taboos of her nation? Would she ever learn the truths of Christianity? For the time being, her uncle took her into his long house and gave her into the care of her aunts. Such was the Iroquois

## *"She-who-moves-all-before-her"*

custom. Among people unthinkingly called barbarians, orphans are often much better treated than in the so-called "civilized" nations. Since smallpox had taken a third of the population of Ossernenon, there were certainly many of these adoptions.

Her foster parents : were aware of the damage done to her eyes. They hoped that little by little her eyesight would become normal again. Inside the long house, the little one had no trouble; but as soon as she went out, if the weather was bright and clear, she groped her way along. They finally named her "She-who-feels-her-way-along," in Iroquois, Tekakwitha. Later on, many of her biographers — more than fifty in all — who saw her power of intercession with God, transformed her name into "She-who-moves-all-before-her".

Now Tekakwitha was intelligent, skilled in the household crafts, docile and cheerful. Her aunts thought that some day she would make a good wife for some Mohawk brave. The future husband would then become a member of the family and, besides their brother's, they would all profit by his hunting and fishing. Although she was still very young, her aunts tried to make a coquette of her. Father Claude Cauchetiere, a missionary who knew Tekakwitha, wrote in a rather stern vein: "The natural inclination which girls have to appear attractive makes them put great value on bodily ornaments. For this reason, Indian girls of seven or eight are foolish, and very fond of beads. Their mothers, who are even more foolish, spend a great deal of time dressing the hair of their daughters. They see to it that their ears are well pierced, and begin from the cradle to pierce them. They paint their faces and cover them with beads when they are going dancing." Tekakwitha's aunts urged their niece to adorn herself, and being a little child, she gave in to them. She was even quite pleased with herself. In years to come, she would bitterly regret these concessions to vanity. She had nothing else to reproach herself with.

A custom that may appear somewhat strange to us was then popular among the Iroquois. Little girls were betrothed to little boys of the same age. It was a means to tighten the bonds of friendship among families, much in the same manner that royal betrothals took place in seventeenth-century Europe. One fine day, when Tekakwitha was only eight years old, she was dressed in her finest clothes and "married" to a little boy. Both families celebrated the betrothal by feasting and rejoicing. The ceremony did not impress either of the two children, who were both blessed with excellent dispositions.

(...to be continued)