

## The Blessed Kateri Tékakwitha - 1656-1680

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### The Blackrobes

As late as 1663, the Mohawks had the fur trade monopoly. The men traded their pelts with their neighbors at Oranje, today Albany, the capital of New York State. They were greatly displeased when they learned that the Onondagas had invited the French Jesuit missionaries to sojourn in their Canton, where the capital of the Five Nations was established. The Mohawks were aware that their confederates were not very much interested in Christianity and that they wanted to have dealings with the French merchants. They did their best to have the Jesuits expelled from Onondaga and subsequently succeeded. Peace no longer existed between the Iroquois and the French. For many years, the Iroquois set the French Colony ablaze.

In 1663, in Canada, a new regime was inaugurated on its becoming a province of France. The royal government took over the country from the One Hundred Associates, an association of traders that had administered the country inefficiently. In 1665, the new governor, Monsieur de Courcelles, Intendant Talon, and Marquis de Tracy lieutenant general of the king's armies and commander of the Carignan-Salieres crack regime! made up of twelve to thirteen hundred soldiers, disembark-ed at Quebec. Their first task consisted in checkmating the Iroquois.

In January 1666, Monsieur de Courcelles, who had not experienced the rigors of the Canadian winter, tried to attack the enemy in his own quarters. At that time of year, it was a serious blunder. After long marches in bitter cold weather, he return-ed to Quebec without even having seen the palisades of the Mohawk castles. Dur-ing the autumn of the same year, Marquis de Tracy left for the south at the head of six hundred men of the Carignan regiment. After nearly four weeks of marching, he reached the foremost village of the Iroquois canton. It was no longer Ossernenon, which had been abandoned after the smallpox epidemic and relocated a mile higher on the Mohawk River. The name of the new village was Gandaouague (At-the-rapids). Its inhabitants had fled. To claim the land in the name of the king of France, Tracy had a cross-erected, a Mass offered, and the Te Deum chanted. He then burned the three Iroquois villages and destroyed the provisions of maize and of other vegetables which the Mohawks had harvested for the long winter.

Tekakwitha was then ten years old. She followed her people into the wildwood where they had taken refuge. All the population suffered, especially the elderly, the ill, and particularly the little girl with the damaged eyes.

From the point of view of the French and their Indian allies, the expedition was a success. Even the Iroquois did not take exception to Marquis de Tracy's methods. They had used the same ones, for instance when, ten years before, they beat the Eries in 1656. So they sued for peace, and as proof of their good will, asked for missionaries. They thus wanted, as they said, to bury the war ax. This peace was to last for eighteen years.

During this time, what was happening to Tekakwitha? At the end of the trying winter in the woods, it was decide to rebuild the village on the north shore of the Mohawk River somewhat more to the west, at the junction of the Mohawk and of the Cayadutta Creek. Towards 1933, Father Thomas Grassman, O.F.M. Conv., discovered the foundations of this



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Mohawk village, erected a chapel on the spot, to which he added an Iroquois museum, officially recognized by the Department of Education of the State of New York.

Three Jesuit missionaries, Fathers Pierre Cholenec, Jacques Bruyas and Jean Pierron with the Mohawk delegates who had gone to Quebec to treat for peace, reached the village during the summer of 1667. They were not immediately led to Tionnontonguen the chief town of the Mohawks. Its people had got a good store of gin from the Dutch at Oranje, and nearly all the adults as well as many children were lost in a heavy alcoholic fog. It was deemed prudent to retain the Fathers at Kahnawake for a few days.

They lodged in Tekakwitha's long house, a loving forethought of divine Providence. Better still, the child was entrusted with the care of the Raguennis. Years later Father Cholenec wrote: "The modesty and sweetness with which she acquit-ted herself of this duty touched her new guests, while on her part she was struck with their affable manners, their regularity in prayer, and the other exercises into which they divided the day. God even then disposed her to the grace of Baptism, for which she would have asked, if the missionaries had remained longer in her village."

After three days, when the three Fathers set out for Tionnontonguen, they unknowingly left in the heart of Tekakwitha the desire to become a Christian as her mother had been.

Meanwhile Tekakwitha was growing into a smallish, delicate teenager. Because of her poor eyesight, she spent most of her time apart from the other girls. She busied herself with the family chores, ground the maize between two stones to make sagamite, which was very much appreciated by her tribesmen, prepared soup, and served the only daily meal in the morning. She then placed the leftovers in a kettle near the fire, where the members of the family could serve themselves during the afternoon or evening according to their fancy.

The orphan girl soon drew attention to herself by her skill in beadwork, favored by Iroquois women. She did needlework better than the white ladies of Oranje, knew how to daintily adorn shirts and moccasins with the quills of porcupines or elk's hair, succeeded marvelously in preparing ribbons of eel skin, made tumplines or pack straps and mastered the art of dyeing cloth a deep red with sturgeon glue.

Of course, when the sun was not too bright, Tekakwitha worked outside. She helped her aunts sow corn and was always willing to clean or weed the crops. During September, she took part in gathering acorns, sweet chestnuts, and hazelnuts as well as in harvesting Indian corn.

Her aunts rejoiced as they discovered her many talents. They were sure she would make a very fine wife. Among the Iroquois the mistresses of the long houses chose their daughters' husbands, not Mr. Cupid.

On the other hand, as she labored in silence, the Almighty was at work in the depths of her soul. Like a small number of Iroquois women before her, she felt attracted to celibacy. "If the good Lord truly wanted me to get married," she said several years later, "I would do so." When she was of age, she felt very strongly that she should not marry. Because of her attitude, she violently clashed with her family. For some time, she was even thrown out of her long house, and expelled from the others through fear of her uncle, the chief. The agitation abated, probably when one of her aunts became a Christian.

*(to be continued)*