

The Blessed Kateri Tékakwitha - 1656-1680

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(...suite)

Her Baptism

In the Spring of 1676, Father Jacques de Lamberville replaced Father Boniface at Ka'hnawake. He soon found out that the doors of certain long houses were not open to him, in particular that of Tekakwitha's uncle, who detested Christianity. That autumn, when most of the Indians were away during the day, busy with harvesting or hunting or fishing, the missionary made the rounds of the aged and the ill, who could not move very far from their dwellings. As he passed before the young woman's long house, he hesitated and, then without knowing why, quickly, pushed aside the bark door and found himself inside. When his eyes became accustomed to the half-light, he saw an Indian girl seated close to the hearth fire, which had nearly died out. It was Tekakwitha, who had hurt her foot at work, and could no longer walk. The priest opened up the conversation. For many months she had been yearning to speak to him. Before he left the long house, she had asked the Blackrobe to baptize her.

The missionaries of New France tested the adults who wanted to become Christians. "No haste is shown in giving baptism to these tribes," wrote Father Etienne de Carheil in 1668, "as it is desired to prove their constancy, for fear of making apostates instead of true believers." Once her foot was healed, during autumn and winter, Tekakwitha attended the Father's instructions for those who intended to become Christians. As the Jesuit soon discovered that the Holy Spirit favored this young woman with special graces, he opened up to her the treasures of Christianity far more than to the others. The uncle, whom Father de Lamberville thought would be unyielding, allowed Tekakwitha to join the "True-men-who-make-the-sign-of-the-Cross" (Christians), on condition that she would not move from the village. The missionary then inquired about Tekakwitha's conduct as he usually did for future converts. As he questioned one person after the other, he went from surprise to surprise. "Notwithstanding the propensity our Indians have for slander," wrote Father Cholenec, "and particularly those of her own sex, the missionary did not find any one but gave a high encomium to the young catechumen. Even those who had persecuted her most severely were not backward in giving their testimony to her virtue."

All the Christians of the village rejoiced at the good news that she was to be baptized. When she was informed of the day set for the great event, her heart overflowed with joy. For fear of seeing the long-desired day retarded, she perfectly memorized her prayers.



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The Father had chosen Easter Sunday, April 5, 1676 more than three centuries ago, to solemnly baptize Tekakwitha in the little chapel of St. Peter's. He gave her the name of Kateri, Catherine in English, in honor of St. Catherine of Alexandria. He also christened two other persons.

In the years to come, Father de Lamberville wrote that the young convert never relaxed in the slightest degree from her initial fervor, even when she underwent the most terrible trials. After a few months of quiet, bitter attacks were launched against her. Since she was a Christian, she abstained from working in the fields on Sundays. She was called idle and denied nourishment on the Lord's Day. Adults and children pointed a finger of scorn at her and derisively taunted her for being a Christian. A young man was bribed to go to her long house and terrify her. He entered abruptly, tomahawk in hand, pretending that he would kill her. Kateri modestly bowed her head. Disconcerted, he gazed at her for a moment and fled. Her family harassed her. Her uncle's wife falsely accused her of having an affair with him. By an oversight, she had called him by name instead of using "father", according to Iroquois etiquette. She suffered immensely from this slander, which, fortunately, nobody believed.

This ill treatment lasted for a year and a half. What made life even more unbearable for Kateri, was the prevalent thirst for gin, bought from the neighboring merchants at Albany. Had it not been for this dreadful calamity, Father de Lamberville would have converted the entire population: "Drunkenness ... holds sway among the Iroquois, as if in its own empire; and which presents, as it were, a picture of hell through the great disorders it occasions."

Because of this tidal wave of pain and evil, the missionary advised Kateri to go and live at the Mission of St. Francis Xavier on the south bank of the St. Lawrence River, facing Montreal. It was some two hundred miles north of Kahnawake. No opportunity presented itself to take flight before the autumn of 1677. During the summer of that year, a young woman of the Canadian mission often thought of Kateri. She had formerly lived in the same long house as the new convert and had been brought up as her sister. This Iroquois Indian urged her husband to return to the Mohawk Canton for her "sister-in-law." So off he went, accompanied by an Oneida named Hot Ashes or Hot Powder, and a Huron, both Christians as he was. On arriving at Kahnawake, they learned that Kateri's old uncle had gone to Fort Oranje to trade. Kateri could hope for no better time to leave, and Father de Lamberville gave her a note for Father Jacques Fremin, superior of the Mission of St. Francis Xavier: "I am sending you a treasure," he wrote, "guard it well!" Hot Ashes, who was going to preach among his Oneida compatriots, gave his place in the canoe to Kateri Tekakwitha. With her "brother-in-law" and the Huron, she made her way northward. On returning to the village, her uncle, informed of her departure, hurried after her, but was unable to reach her.

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