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NEWS RELIGION

Pawhuska church builds shrine to first American Indian saint

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The bronze sculpture of Kateri Tekakwitha at the Immaculate Conception Roman Catholic Church in Pawhuska was dedicated in 2008.

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PAWHUSKA - Pope Benedict XVI's announcement Monday that Kateri Tekakwitha will become the Roman Catholic Church's first American Indian saint has been long awaited by parishioners at the Immaculate Conception Roman Catholic Church.

The largely American Indian congregation in the capital of the Osage Nation has for decades venerated the woman they call Blessed Kateri.

Several years ago, the Pawhuska church completed a \$250,000 shrine that includes an 8-foot bronze statue of Kateri, a large metal cross, stone fountains and about 50 ornamental trees.

"We were quite sure Blessed Kateri would be canonized, and we built the shrine in that hope," said the Rev. Chris Daigle, pastor of the church that is also called the Cathedral of the Osage.

He said other churches have images of Kateri, but he knows of none that has such an extensive shrine to her.

How did a shrine to a 17th-century New York and Canadian Indian happen to be built in a small town in northern Oklahoma?

It all began with Opal Delos Rector, an Osage Indian and lapsed Catholic who was raised in Pawhuska but was living in Arizona, said Rector's niece, Carla Powell, an Osage who is still active in the church.

As Powell recalls the story, Rector was suffering from metastasized breast cancer and was not expected to live long.

A friend told her about Kateri, the American Indian who had been beatified by Pope John Paul II and was on the path to sainthood.

One day as Rector was reading the Bible and pondering those things, she looked out the window of her Arizona home and saw an eagle land on a wire.

Eagles have spiritual significance to American Indians, who believe they take prayers to the "other side."

That event deeply touched her. She renewed her relationship with the Catholic Church and deepened her devotion to Kateri.

"She believed that she lived another 24 years with metastasized cancer through her devotion to Kateri," said Mike McCartney, a church member who spearheaded the drive to build to the shrine.

McCartney got involved in the project when Rector called him from Arizona in 1999 and asked him to help her build the shrine.

"She wanted her Osage people to have that connection with Kateri," he said. "She would never tell me how she got my name."

Rector told the Tulsa World in 2001: "I want the people of Pawhuska, and especially the Indian people, to know that God loves them and that he has given them a strong advocate in Blessed Kateri. She prays for us constantly."

McCartney never met Rector, but they talked almost daily by phone and became good friends.

Rector had strong feelings about how the shrine should be built and was outspoken about it, he said.

She died May 26, 2002, having never returned to Pawhuska.

After her death, the project bogged down.

One sticking point was how Kateri should appear in the statue.

In life, she was nearly blind and badly marred by an early bout with smallpox that left her parents and a brother dead.

But one of the miracles of her life, Catholics believe, is that on her deathbed she was miraculously transformed, all signs of the disfiguring disease gone.

Artist John D. Free Jr. first depicted her in her deformed state, but McCartney said that image was rejected.

The Kateri shrine project got new life about seven years ago when Daigle became pastor of the church.

"It would never have gotten off the ground if Father Daigle had not come here," McCartney said.

Daigle got behind the project, and donations started coming in from all over the world.

The shrine was completed, and on Aug. 8, 2008, Bishop Edward J. Slattery of the Diocese of Tulsa came to Pawhuska to dedicate it.

Sainthood, Daigle said, is conferred upon people the church believes are holy. They must be accepted by the Catholic laity and must have verifiable miracles attributed to their intercession.

"Blessed Kateri is very much accepted nationwide in the Native American community," Powell said.

The pope confirmed Monday that a second miracle of healing through Kateri had been documented, clearing the way for canonization, Daigle said.

He stressed that Catholics pray to God and ask departed saints also to pray for them.

"It's the same as asking a living person to pray for us," he said.

He said Kateri will be formally canonized soon in Rome. When it happens, the Cathedral of the Osage will throw a big celebration, he said.

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