



Faith is expressed in prayer, penance, and purity

St. Kateri Tekakwitha

Each month throughout the remaining "Year of Faith" this column will feature someone, past or present, who is a witness of faith within the Diocese of Duluth. The example of "such a great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) can be an inspiration for growth in one's faith.

By Liz Hoefler
The Northern Cross

It is often difficult to know the impact that one's life will have upon others. Such is the case with a young Indian woman who lived a humble life of prayer, penance and purity out of love for our Lord Jesus Christ.

St. Kateri Tekakwitha was born in 1656 in the Mohawk village of Ossernenon, near what is now Auriesville, N.Y. Her father was a Mohawk chief, and her mother was a Catholic Algonquin.

Kateri endured many sufferings throughout her life. A smallpox epidemic struck her village when she was four years old, taking the lives of her father, mother and younger brother. Kateri was also severely affected, suffering facial scars and impaired vision for the rest of her life.

Being cared for by relatives, she later encountered French Jesuit missionaries. The missionaries were greatly impressed with her piety and virtue and eventually began teaching her catechism lessons. Kateri surprised her village by rejecting the normal custom of marriage. She decided to give her love totally to Jesus Christ.

Shortly after being baptized at the age of 20, Kateri realized that her practice of Christianity was disrupting harmony within her village, so she fled to a nearby village of Christian converts, near the city of Montreal. Here she sought union with Christ through a life of prayer and penance. She died at the young age of 24, during Holy Week of 1680.

Because of her desire to remain pure for Jesus, she has been given the title "Lily of the Mohawks."

A witness to many

St. Kateri was not only a witness to those who knew her, she has also been a witness of faith to people throughout the world for the past three centuries.

"Everyone is affected by this woman," said Sister



A painting of St. Kateri by Father Henry Yzermans, a Crosler priest, originally part of an outdoor shrine at Sts. Mary and Joseph Church in Sawyer.

Marie Rose Messingschlager, C.D.P., director of Indian Ministry for the Diocese of Duluth. The October 2012 canonization of St. Kateri brought this to fruition, as Sister Marie Rose was surrounded by people from throughout the world, representing all nationalities, Indian and non-Indian, lay and religious, young and old. "The devotion was universal."

When asked what most attracts people to St. Kateri, Sister Marie Rose identified two attributes — her penances and her desire for peace.

It has been a custom in Indian culture to offer one's sufferings, through such practices as sweat lodges, piercings and sun dances, accompanied by prayers to the creator for the good of the community. Thus, the concept of Jesus' suffering on the cross for the redemption of the world is readily grasped. And St. Kateri's fasting and penances witness to how our sufferings can be united with those of Christ.

Sister Marie Rose also notes that Kateri's desire

for peace is what led her to leave her village. She willingly left family and community in order to foster peace in her village.

Within our diocese

Although St. Kateri never set foot in the Diocese of Duluth, her impact here has been great. Many shrines, stained glass windows, pictures and statues have been erected in her honor throughout the diocese.

Linda LeGarde Grover, a member of the Bois Forte Band of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, notes, "My introduction to Kateri Tekakwitha was a picture in the St. Lawrence church calendar that my mother hung on the wall in the kitchen, next to the stove and above the step-stool, where the little children could climb up to see better."

She recognizes the effect that this picture had upon her family: "We kids loved the monthly pictures of the saints, and that summer my pre-teen sisters and I were drawn to the story of the Native girl who had been declared venerable by Pope Pius."

Linda is thankful that a delegation from the Diocese of Duluth was able to travel to Rome for St. Kateri's canonization. She hopes that St. Kateri's life will continue to inspire young people to retain Native arts and skills, as well as to imitate her "simple life of service" (Pope Benedict XVI) to others."

She notes, "The foundation of Native childrearing is teaching children to be thankful, generous, respectful and aware of the importance of the spiritual nature of the world around us."

St. Kateri, the first American Indian saint, is a great model in all these regards.

A special celebration of St. Kateri Tekakwitha's feast day will be held at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Rosary in Duluth on Sunday, July 14. Bishop Paul Sirba will celebrate Mass at 3 p.m. A picnic at Holy Rosary School will follow. Everyone is invited to celebrate the life of this inspirational saint.

Also, during the Year of Faith, several churches in our diocese have been declared pilgrimage sites by Bishop Sirba because of their connection to St. Kateri. Please see the diocesan website www.dioceseduluth.org for more information on how to make such a pilgrimage.



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