

Bl. Kateri Tekakwitha

BORN 1656; DIED 1680

VIRGIN

FEAST DAY: JULY 14

SANCTITY IS A MIRACLE OF GRACE. It is the perfection of the Christian life. In the case of Bl. Kateri Tekakwitha, God's grace was showered in plenitude on a daughter of a nation of Native Americans that had been brutally hostile to the missionaries seeking to evangelize them, to produce the first native North American candidate for canonization.

Kateri, known as the Lily of the Mohawks, was the daughter of Kahenta, a Catholic Algonquin from Quebec who had been kidnapped by Iroquois (specifically, Mohawk) tribesmen and married to a Mohawk chief, Kenhornkwa. Kateri was born at Ossernenon (now Auriesville, New York), the site of the martyrdom of the French Jesuit St. Isaac Jogues and lay volunteer St. Jean de Lalande barely a decade before.

When Kateri was four, a smallpox epidemic swept through the village, killing among others both of her parents and her younger brother Otsikehta, her only sibling. She herself was significantly disfigured and partially blinded by the disease. The orphaned Kateri was taken into the care of her uncle, who succeeded his brother as chief of the village. Her aunts took the responsibility of raising her. The villagers abandoned the site of the village as evil and built nearby a new village, which is where Kateri grew up.

Constant raids between the Mohawks and the French settlers resulted in the destruction of Kateri's village when she was eleven. The



Mohawks sued for peace, even requesting the return of Jesuit missionaries. The Jesuits who eventually came greatly impressed Kateri, then perhaps fourteen, who was responsible for providing meals and other necessities of hospitality. One woman sought Baptism but, soon after her reception into the Church, suffered a series of misfortunes that everyone but she blamed on her new faith. This, too, left a lasting impression on Kateri. Yet her uncle, despite his outward welcome to the Jesuits, hated them and Kateri was denied any opportunity to be instructed in the faith, even though more and more villagers were becoming Catholics. She actively resisted her aunts' efforts to get her married but, for several years, did not defy her uncle's refusal to allow her to follow her heart.

When a new Jesuit missionary, Father Jacques de Lamberville, came to the village, Kateri finally asked for instruction in the faith. By this time, her aunts were themselves Catholics and did not let her uncle know what was happening. Her commitment to her new faith was so powerful and so joyous that Father de Lamberville did not require her to wait the cus-

“Her commitment to her new faith was so powerful and so joyous that Father de Lamberville did not require her to wait the customary two years for Baptism.”

tomary two years for Baptism. Kateri was by then twenty. Almost immediately, she became a model for her village.

However, Kateri’s uncle’s opposition was even stronger to Christianity, for he was losing warriors to the new faith and they were leaving the village. His rage turned on to her. Her aunts, whose faith was not very strong, also began harassing her. She who had experienced admiration became the object of ridicule. Her uncle sent a warrior to threaten her with a tomahawk. Father de Lamberville felt that her life was in danger, and arranged for her to flee to the safety of the mission of Sault-Sainte-Marie, also called by the Indian name Caughnawaga, near Montreal, Canada.

For the next three years, Kateri came under the guidance of a Jesuit spiritual director and a woman named Anastasia, one of her mother’s close friends. For the same reason that she had been baptized ahead of schedule, she made her First Communion much earlier than was then normal for adult converts, a privilege for which she had hungered. Once through a misunderstanding — no one involved intended any malice — she was accused of sleeping with a woman’s

husband. Eventually, her transparent innocence ended any suspicions of her own purity. As Kateri’s spiritual life blossomed, she

lived more and more austerely and devoted ever more of her time to the care of the sick and aged. Motherless most of her life, she developed a great devotion to Mary.

The issue of marriage continued to be a source of contention but, at twenty-three, she made a vow of virginity. In the last year of her life, she became a mystic, experiencing the kind of ecstasies well described in the great literature of Christian mysticism. The toll on her health, however, was significant, especially since she imposed upon herself severe penances for the sake of the conversion of her people. Soon her health failed. Upon

her death, the terrible disfigurement of her childhood smallpox completely disappeared from her face, leaving her radiantly beautiful. Greatly beloved and revered by French and Indian alike, Kateri in death spurred a tremendous increase in the fervor of those who knew her and caused the conversion of many more to the faith. Kateri’s life is a testament to the strength of faith under persecution, a marvel of God’s ways and the power of his grace.



Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, by Lisa E. Brown