

**BLESSED KATERI TEKAKWITHA**

**Next Saturday is the feast of the Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha. Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha** (1656-1680), also known as Blessed Catherine Tekakwitha, is honored by the Catholic Church as the patroness of ecology, nature, and the environment.

Tekakwitha's baptismal name is Catherine, which in the Iroquois languages is Kateri. Tekakwitha's Iroquois name can be translated as, "One who places things in order." or "To put all into place."

Tekakwitha was born at Ossernenon, which today is near Auriesville, New York, USA. Tekakwitha's father was a Kanienkehaka (Kanien'kehá:ka or Mohawk) chief and her mother was a Catholic Algonquin.

At the age of four, smallpox attacked Tekakwitha's village, taking the lives of her parents and baby brother, and leaving Tekakwitha an orphan. Although forever weakened, scarred, and partially blind, Tekakwitha survived. The brightness of the sun blinded her and she would feel her way around as she walked.

Tekakwitha was adopted by her two aunts and her uncle, also a Kanienkehaka chief. After the smallpox outbreak subsided, Tekakwitha and her people abandoned their village and built a new settlement, called Caughnawaga, some five miles away on the north bank of the Mohawk River, which today is in Fonda, New York.

Although Tekakwitha was not baptized as an infant, she had fond memories of her good and prayerful mother and of the stories of Catholic faith that her mother shared with her in childhood. When Tekakwitha was eighteen, Father de Lamberville, a Jesuit missionary, came to Caughnawaga and established a chapel. Her uncle disliked the "Blackrobe" and his strange new religion, but tolerated the missionary's presence. Kateri vaguely remembered her mother's whispered prayers, and was fascinated by the new stories she heard about Jesus Christ. She wanted to learn more about Him and to become a Christian.

Father de Lamberville persuaded her uncle to allow Tekakwitha to attend religious instructions. The following Easter, twenty-year old Tekakwitha was baptized. Radiant with joy, she was given the name of Kateri, which is Mohawk for Catherine.

Kateri's family did not accept her choice to embrace Christ. After her baptism, Kateri became the village outcast. Her family refused her food on Sundays because she wouldn't work. Children would taunt her and throw stones. She was threatened with torture or death if she did not renounce her religion.

Because of increasing hostility from her people and because she wanted to devote her life to working for God, in July of 1677, Kateri left her village and fled more than 200 miles through to the Catholic mission of St. Francis Xavier at Sault Saint-Louis, near Montreal. Kateri's journey through the wilderness took

more than two months. Because of her determination in proving herself worthy of God and her undying faith she was allowed to receive her First Holy Communion on Christmas Day, 1677.

Although not formally educated and unable to read and write, Kateri led a life of prayer and penitential practices. She taught the young and helped those in the village who were poor or sick. Kateri spoke words of kindness to everyone she encountered.

Kateri's motto became, "Who can tell me what is most pleasing to God that I may do it?" She spent much of her time in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, kneeling in the cold chapel for hours. When the winter hunting season took Kateri and many of the villagers away from the village, she made her own little chapel in the woods by carving a Cross on a tree and spent time in prayer there, kneeling in the snow.

Often people would ask, "Kateri, tell us a story." Kateri remembered everything she was told about the life of Jesus and his followers. People would listen for a long time. They enjoyed being with her because they felt the presence of God. One time a priest asked the people why they gathered around Kateri in church. They told him that they felt close to God when Kateri prayed. They said that her face changed when she was praying. It became full of beauty and peace, as if she were looking at God's face.

On March 25, 1679, Kateri made a vow of perpetual virginity, meaning that she would remain unmarried and totally devoted to Christ for the rest of her life. Kateri hoped to start a convent for Native American sisters in Sault St. Louis but her spiritual director, Father Pierre Cholonec discouraged her. Kateri's health, never good, was deteriorating rapidly due in part to the penances she inflicted on herself. Father Cholonec encouraged Kateri to take better care of herself but she laughed and continued with her "acts of love."

The poor health which plagued her throughout her life led to her death in 1680 at the age of 24. Her last words were, "Jesus, I love You." Like the flower she was named for, the lily, her life was short and beautiful. Moments after dying, her scarred and disfigured face miraculously cleared and was made beautiful by God. This miracle was witnessed by two Jesuits and all the others able to fit into the room.

Kateri is known as "Lily of the Mohawks" or "Beautiful Flower Among True Men." The Catholic Church declared Kateri venerable in 1943. She was beatified in 1980 by Pope John Paul II. Kateri is the first Native American to be declared Blessed. Her feast is celebrated on July 14th in the United States. Pope John Paul II designated Blessed Kateri as a patroness for World Youth Day 2002.

On December 19, 2011, Pope Benedict XVI signed the decree necessary for the canonization of Blessed Kateri. Blessed Kateri will be canonized as a saint on October 21, 2012.