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Kateri Tekakwitha

THE LILY OF THE MOHAWKS

1656-1680



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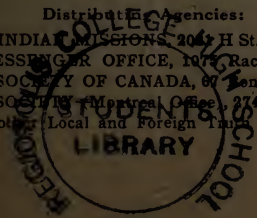
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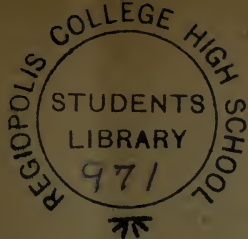


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KATERI TEKAKWITHA



KATERI TEKAKWITHA

THE LILY OF THE MOHAWKS

THE Iroquois were probably the most ferocious and the most warlike group of Indians mentioned in American history. In the seventeenth century they occupied the greater part of the present State of New York, and were banded together, five nations of them, in a strong Confederacy. They were constantly at war with other Indian nations, and were usually the victors, owing to their superior cunning and knowledge of primitive military strategy. The Dutch, who were then

**The Iroquois
Indians**

colonizing the region of the Hudson and the Mohawk, had taught them the use of firearms, and for over a century they pursued the early settlers of Canada with an implacable hatred. So desperate had the situation become that the strong arm of Old France had to be invoked in 1665 to save the Canadian colony from extermination.

And yet, in the seventeenth century, French Jesuits were found brave enough to go to those Iroquois tribes along the Mohawk River and elsewhere, to live among them and preach the Gospel to them. Christian Huron and Algonquin prisoners, who had been adopted into the Confederacy,

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were the means used by the Jesuits to gain a footing; and so effectually did those devoted men do their work that they succeeded in transforming many ferocious Iroquois into models of spiritual perfection worthy of the early ages of the Christian Church: or as one of their missionaries, Father Chauchetière, quaintly puts it, "Thus have those man-eaters become lambs through the grace of Jesus Christ, in such manner as to be examples of virtue and religion."

We are indebted to Chauchetière for the details of the short but edifying career of the Iroquois maiden, Kateri (or Catherine) Tekakwitha, better known as "the Lily of the Mohawks," who distinguished herself for holiness of life in the third quarter of the seventeenth century, and who in truth was all her life a lily of innocence whom God had raised up to show the power and the efficacy of His grace, even amid the superstitions and vices of the aborigines of America.

This predestined child was born in 1656, in the Mohawk valley, at the village of Kendaougue, the exact site of which has never been located, tradition placing it near the present town of Fonda on the Mohawk river. Besides being the birth-place of Kateri, the village had already other reasons to give it an historic interest. It was there that Father Jogues and René Goupil in 1642, and Father Bressani in 1644, underwent torture at the hands of their cruel captors. Kateri's mother was an Algonquin who had been carried a prisoner from

Three Rivers to Kendaougue and there married to an Iroquois. Both parents dying when Kateri was only four years old, she was adopted by an uncle living in the village.

The presence at Kendaougue of three Jesuits, Fathers Frémin, Bruyas, and Pierron, who were sent on a mission to the Confederacy in 1667, deeply impressed the Iroquois child. Their short stay gave them little opportunity of instructing

her in the Christian faith, but a kind Providence was tenderly watching over her and guiding her to higher things. Although unbaptized and unlettered, Kateri was already giving signs of natural virtue, in her delicacy of conscience, her charity toward those around her, her sensitiveness and mental suffering while witnessing the inhuman tortures inflicted by her countrymen on prisoners of war.

When the mission at Kendaougue became permanent and the resident missionary, Father James de Lamberville, began the systematic instruction of the Indians in the Christian doctrine, Kateri was an eager listener, and though she was still a pagan, with the concept of the true God still hazy in her mind, Christian ideals, seemingly too lofty for one of such tender age, began to dawn on her; her soul naturally Christian revealed itself in various ways. Father de Lamberville had occasion to meet her quite often, not merely in his visits to the cabins of the village, but also during his catechism classes, which she followed assiduously, and he was struck

with the candor and courage of this simple child of the forest. The lessons of the Gospel impressed her so deeply that she craved for the grace of baptism; but owing to the well-known inconstancy of the Indian character this sacrament was denied her for nearly a year, the intervening months being taken up by further instruction and closer scrutiny of her life and conduct. Father de Lamberville marvelled at the workings of grace in the soul of Kateri, and he felt that he could not put off any longer the conferring of the favor the young catechumen so eagerly desired.

On Easter Sunday, 1675, she was solemnly baptized, and for several months her neighbors left her alone to follow her religious inspirations and to give herself over to her devotions in peace and quiet. But as gold must be purified by fire, so must souls whom God loves be tried by tribulation. Kateri was no exception to this well-known law in the spiritual life; she became a target for all kinds of petty persecution. Her holy life was a reproach to those around her; even in her own cabin she was treated as a religious hypocrite. What surprised her Indian neighbors most of all, perhaps, was the alacrity with which she spurned several offers of marriage. Her uncle was incensed at these refusals in favor of celibacy, which among the Iroquois was held in opprobrium, and several times physical force was used to make her accept the hand of an Iroquois warrior. She withstood all threats and solicitations, and never yielded an

**The baptism
of Kateri**

inch in her determination to remain single. Evil tongues now began to spread calumnious reports about her; little children were taught **Kateri is** to mock her and to throw stones at **persecuted** her; sorcerers, urged on by her pagan uncle with whom she lived, obsessed her continually with their incantations. Incidents like these did not make her life at Kendaougue an enviable one, but she bore all those crosses with a meekness which gave higher relief to her virtue; her religion taught her to accept persecutions as a gift from the hands of God, and she knew that He would protect her in all her trials. One day a young Iroquois raised a tomahawk over her head and threatened to kill her, but the holy maid gave no sign of fear, while the would-be assassin, terrified at such calmness, suddenly disappeared. This manner of life and the dangers ever present to her having become in the end so unbearable to Kateri that she feared for her perseverance in well-doing, she resolved to leave her native village at the first opportunity and go to Montreal, where she would meet Christian members of her tribe.

An Iroquois mission had, in fact, been organized by Father Raffeix in 1667, at Laprairie de la Madeleine, on the south shore of the St. Lawrence, nearly opposite Montreal. The first recruits gained to this settlement were seven Oneidas; a little later two hundred Mohawk Christians took up their quarters at Laprairie, thus forming the nucleus of a flourishing Christian center. The mingling of French and Indians, however, proved to be an

obstacle to the spiritual welfare of the latter, and nine years later, that is, in 1676, Father Frémin, the missionary in charge, moved his Iroquois wards four miles further up the river bank to the foot of the Lachine rapids. This was the beginning of the mission of St. Francis Xavier du Sault, which, after various migrations, notably in 1690 and 1696, settled definitely, in 1716, in Caughnawaga of the present day, and became one of the most celebrated Indian missions in North America.

Kateri Tekakwitha had some difficulty in escaping from Kendaougue owing to the opposition of her pagan uncle, and she was forced to put off her project for a whole year. At last, however, the opportunity presented itself. A fervent Oneida convert, Okenratarihen, used to make frequent expeditions from the new Canadian mission, and had on one trip led thirty pagans from their homes in the Mohawk valley to Canada to be instructed in the true faith. Kateri revealed her wish to this convert who made little of the obstacles she expected to meet. Encouraged by Okenratarihen and fortified by the blessing of Father de Lamberville, she secretly quitted her uncle's home in the Mohawk valley and set out for St. Francis Xavier's mission on the St. Lawrence where she was convinced she should find greater facilities for leading a Christian life. She reached her destination in the autumn of 1677, carrying with her a note from de Lamberville to Cholenec. "We are sending you a treasure," wrote the missionary, "take good care of her."

Kateri was now twenty-one years of age, and from her arrival proved to be a blessing for the new mission. The Christian neophytes found nothing better to do than to study her life and follow her example, while, on her side, it gave her the greatest consolation to see piety flourishing in her new home. She thanked God for having permitted her to quit a country where His name and His dignity were being continually outraged. As the months went by, she felt herself drawn more closely to God, and she resolved to serve Him all the more fervently.

**Her piety
and fervor**

There was one great favor still in store for Kateri which would fill to overflowing her cup of joy—the saintly maiden had not yet been allowed to make her first Communion, and this privilege was now to be hers. The early missionaries of New France had had long experience of the changeful character of their dusky flocks, and after the conferring of baptism they took reasonable precautions to assure themselves that their neophytes were fully disposed for the reception of the Holy Eucharist. The edifying life led by Kateri since her arrival in the mission made Father Cholenec, her director, feel that he should not oblige her to submit to a longer probation than that usually borne by the Indian converts, and when on Christmas Day, 1677, Kateri knelt at the Holy Table for the first time, her soul was overwhelmed with sentiments of faith and love. From that day onward her spiritual life became more intense. When she grasped fully the consoling dogma of the Real

Presence, and understood that Jesus was present in the tabernacle of the mission church, her assiduity in watching and praying near His altar was admirable to witness. Every morning at daybreak she wended her way from her cabin to the little bark-roofed structure which then served as a temple; she heard all the Masses daily, kneeling and wrapt in prayer; she spent hours in heavenly converse with God. So real indeed had the Divine Presence become to her that she wished always to be near Him, and she begrudged the short time she took for her meals. Her biographer tells us that even when she accompanied her people into the forest she divided up her time as regularly "as if she were a religious". She recited her morning prayers with the hunters whom she accompanied and who had been taught that praiseworthy habit. She tried to make up for the loss of morning Mass by uniting her intention with those who remained behind at the mission.

Her life in the forest

While the hunters were at breakfast, she hid herself to pray. When they started out for the day's hunt or to visit their traps, she began to busy herself with cutting firewood or preparing the meals for their return. At home she took up the ordinary employment of the Indian women, making collars and moccasins and ornamenting them with beads and porcupine quills, an art in which she was very proficient. During her daily work she sang hymns or tried to recall the instructions given by the missionaries. Especially

dear to this Iroquois maiden was devotion to the Passion to our Lord. The sufferings of the Victim of Calvary vividly appealed to her as soon as she

Her love of the Passion realized all that they meant for herself and for the rest of her Iroquois brethren. It was a practice of hers,

while at work with her needle, to have a crucifix near her, which she raised now and then to her eyes to contemplate thereon the image of Him for whose love alone she yearned. She even carved crosses on the bark of the birch-trees to keep her mind from wandering from the Object of her love.

So great was her desire to share in the sufferings of the Passion that, after the example of austerities given us by the saints, she gathered thorns and nettles and strewed them on the mat which served her for a couch. A visit to the Religious Hospitallers of Hotel Dieu in Montreal made her acquainted with the use of disciplines, hair shirts, and iron girdles, instruments of penance which she afterwards not only used herself to satisfy her craving for suffering, but taught other pious women of the mission to use also. "She begged a companion," writes Father Chauchetière, "to do her the charity of severely chastising her with

Her severe penances blows from a whip. This service they rendered each other for nearly a whole year without any one but

themselves being aware of it; for this purpose they withdrew every Sunday into a cabin in the middle of the cemetery, and there taking in their hands willow twigs, they mingled prayers with



KATERI TEKAKWITHA'S SHRINE
AT THE FOOT OF THE LACHINE RAPIDS
NEAR MONTREAL

penance." While not wishing to put obstacles to the action of grace in this predestined soul, her director kept a close watch on her, so that the demon should not have a chance to show his influence. But Father Cholenec's task was an easy one. All his advice and warnings were received with deep humility and consummate obedience—a positive proof that she was being guided by the spirit of God, the Source of all sanctity, the Inspirer of all good deeds.

There was one other sacrifice Kateri desired to make to God, but before she succeeded in doing so she had to undergo a severe struggle with her friends who thought they had her welfare at heart. A second attempt was made by them to force her into wedlock. The high place that her virtues, so well-known to all the mission, and even beyond, had given her in the public esteem, led interested persons to believe that Kateri could, if she wished, make an advantageous marriage, something which even an Iroquois of the seventeenth century did not disdain. They put before the saintly maiden motives cogent enough to move a less resolute

Her refusal of marriage will; for instance, the loneliness of her life in old age and the risk of poverty and want. These reasons had for a time made an impression on her mind. She consulted her spiritual director Father Cholenec, who explained to her the different states of life. When Kateri heard that God leaves every one the liberty of marrying or remaining single, she was beside herself with joy and no longer hesitated

as to the state of life she would adopt. Unmoved in her determination not to marry, she told her director that she had chosen her part, and that she desired for Spouse none other than Him to whom she had consecrated her life; with Him she should never suffer either loneliness or want. Three days were offered her to reflect on her decision, but she answered that she had already reflected sufficiently; her mind would not change. "I have chosen Jesus Christ," she exclaimed, "and I belong to Him alone". The chance acquaintance she had with the nuns in Montreal made a deep impression on Kateri. When she learned that those religious women had made the sacrifice of worldly wealth and pleasures in order to consecrate themselves wholly to Him whom she herself had also chosen for Spouse, she determined to complete the offering of herself by the vow of virginity. This she did with the consent

Her vow of virginity of her director, on the feast of the Annunciation, 1679, and she sealed her sacrifice by the immediate reception of the Holy Eucharist. Another important and irrevocable step had been taken in the upward mystic path; once Kateri had put her hand to the plow she never looked back. The presence of this angelic young woman in the mission of St. Francis Xavier, and the influence of her example, undoubtedly gave a powerful impetus to the spiritual advancement of the other Christians. The Jesuit *Relations* tell us that the fervor of the primitive ages might be witnessed there in

the practice of austere penances and in the frequentation of the sacraments.

During all these years Kateri's health had not been robust. Smallpox, which seized her when she was only four years of age, had left her with defective eyesight; she suffered also from continual headaches and from stomach trouble which brought on violent vomiting, and as a result physical weakness was gradually overpowering her. These were harbingers of her final dissolution; they made her realize that the end of her life was not far off. The peace of soul, however, which shone in her saintly features, hid from those around her the true state of her health, but her sufferings and her penances could not fail to show their effects in the long run. A heavy fever brought her to death's door, and would have taken her beyond, had not the strength of her will, aided undoubtedly by the grace of God, made her rise above mere physical weakness. Kateri's biographer tells us that while her frame of flesh was wasting away, her soul was plunged in ecstasy. Despising her body and the comforts she might legitimately have granted herself in this extremity, the saintly Iroquois maiden had continually before her eyes the Image of Christ on the cross. "What, after all," reasoned this child of the American forest, "are my sufferings, when compared with the tragedy of Calvary?"

On Palm Sunday, 1680, it was noticed that her weakness had become extreme, and precautions

were taken to strengthen her soul. It was the rule at St. Francis Xavier's mission to carry the sick and infirm to the chapel to receive Holy Communion, but owing to the weak condition of the Kateri, it was decided to suspend this rule and bring the Communion to her. When the missionary entered her cabin with the Blessed Sacrament, the dying maid, prostrate on her couch

End of her heroic life and in the presence of her Lord, found strength enough to renew the offering of herself to Him; she thanked

Him for all the graces she had received from Him since her baptism, and then received into her heart for the last time the precious Manna which she had so often hungered for in life and which was to be her solace at that supreme hour. On Wednesday of Holy Week, the last day of her life, Kateri received the rites of the Church from the hands of Father Cholenec, bade farewell to the Indians kneeling around her, and promised not to forget them when she went in Heaven. While the prayers for the dying were being recited, she expired peacefully, April 17, 1680, at the early age of twenty-four.

The whole mission had witnessed her heroic life during the three years she lived there, and an outburst of veneration was the immediate aftermath of her holy death. "A saint has lived amongst us and has just passed away!" was the spontaneous verdict of her own people before and after Kateri was laid in the grave; it was the only verdict that could be rendered on the

extraordinary career of this lily of the forest. During her life she had served her own people by her virtues and by the influence of her example, she was now to serve them just as efficaciously by the reputation of her holiness. One of the first evidences of her good influence in the mission of St. Francis Xavier was the founding of a sodality of young Indian women, known as the "Catherine Band", whose members undertook to practise the virtues which distinguished their saintly sister. The other neophytes living in the village were, in like manner, so profoundly impressed by her passage among them and by the lesson of her life, that they tried to imitate her as closely as they could

**The Indians
try to imitate
her virtues**

in her works of penance. Iroquois men and women began to wear iron girdles and hair shirts and to afflict their flesh in other ways. Some beat themselves with thorns and nettles; others walked barefooted in the snow or plunged into the ice-cold river; others fasted rigorously or mingled ashes with their food. As usual, the arch-enemy of souls, transfiguring himself into an angel of light, urged many of those poor untutored but well-meaning Indians to commit excesses in these penitential exercises, and it required the prudent intervention of the missionaries to enlighten them and regulate their conduct without diminishing their fervor.

The influence of Kateri's life and her reputation for sanctity had other interesting developments. In 1681, the year after her death, a sick man who had been given up as incurable, regained health

after he had invoked her intercession. Three years later, August 20, 1683, when the village church was destroyed by a violent wind, the three missionaries who were in the building at the time barely escaped with their lives. They went to her tomb to thank her for their deliverance from danger. "I have always believed," wrote Father Chauchetière several years later. "that it was she who saved me when our chapel was blown down in a storm." This Jesuit Father was convinced that she had him under her special protection, owing to the services he had rendered her in her last illness, and he held her in such veneration that he sought to make her known in France. Writing to a member of his Order in Bordeaux, in 1694, he asked him to have the entire community say the *Our Father*, the *Hail Mary*, and three times the *Glory be to the Father*, for him. "This is the devotion," he added, "that is practised among our Indians and our French, who, when they wish to obtain some favor from God, go to the tomb of Kateri at the Sault."

Her precious remains were not allowed to stay long in the grave near the river front where they had been buried. When the village of St. Francis Xavier was transferred a couple of miles further west in 1690, the bones of Kateri were exhumed and placed in the church which had just been completed. "So many persons", wrote Chauchetière, "were seen to commend themselves to the deceased Kateri Tekakwitha... that we believed it was but

paying a just tribute to her memory to remove her body to the new church from the cemetery, where a little monument had already been erected to her." Honors were rendered to her so ungrudgingly that the name of Kateri Tekakwitha soon became venerable throughout the entire French colony. Monseigneur de Laval, Bishop of Quebec, visited her tomb, and the Marquis de Denonville, Governor of New France, during a visit to Montreal, crossed over the St. Lawrence river to the little Iroquois village, at the foot of Lachine rapids, to pray near the relics of her whom he styled "the Geneviève of Canada".

Pilgrimages to her tomb became popular and frequent, and many spiritual and temporal favors were imputed to her intercession. It was this wonder-working power, so lavishly exercised, that gave a prestige to her memory and excited veneration for her not merely among her own people, but among the French population as well. Whole parishes made solemn pilgrimages to her tomb on the anniversary of her death, April 17, to acknowledge the benefits of her intercession. Monsieur Remi, parish priest of Lachine, on the north side of the St. Lawrence, publicly urged his flock to recommend themselves to her prayers. The parish priest of Laprairie, Monsieur Geoffroy, asserted that he had been a witness of the marvels which she wrought, and that he was ready to proclaim them everywhere. In 1695 many cures were reported at Montreal and elsewhere. Writing in 1696, six-

teen years after her death, Father James de Lamberville, her first director, who was then living at the mission, tells us that God continued to honor the holy Kateri by granting many graces to those who implored her assistance. Both ecclesiastics and lay people made pilgrimages to her tomb, and in token of their gratitude to God for favors received through her intercession, sent presents to the church where her body lay. Monsieur de

**Her clients
proclaim
her power**

Champigny, the Intendant of Canada, who had lost his voice for a year, completely recovered it as a result of a novena made in honor of Kateri, and in order to show how he appreciated this favor, he had portraits of her printed and distributed throughout the colony. Daniel Greysolon du Luth, the well-known French navy officer and explorer, whose name is identified with the prosperous city in Minnesota, acknowledged that after having suffered greatly from gout for many years, he had made a novena in her honor. On the ninth day he was completely cured. The Abbé Joseph Seré de la Colombière, a distinguished French priest and missionary who lived in Canada in those years, proclaimed that in 1695 through the great merit of Kateri he was snatched from the gates of death during a very dangerous illness. He made a pilgrimage from Quebec to her tomb to show his gratitude.

Forty years after her death her memory was still in bloom. Father Luke Nau, the priest who had charge of the mission of St. Francis Xavier,

asserted that he was kept busy attending to the French population who continued to flock to her tomb to fulfil vows made in time of sickness. In 1755, when the Indian mission of St. Francis Regis



PILGRIM ROUTES FROM MONTREAL TO KATERI'S SHRINE

was founded, a portion of her relics was transferred thither so that her constant presence might be a spur to the fervor of her tribe, and that supplication to her might be kept up uninterruptedly by them.

The wars waged between the French and the English in the middle of the eighteenth century and the political changes which followed gave the people of Canada other things to think about, and might have

resulted in dimming the memory of Kateri Tekakwitha among the French and Indians had not writers been inspired to leave us the precious record of her life and virtues. Besides what appeared in the Jesuit *Relations*, there was the rather complete sketch of her career

Her memory is revered written by Father Cholenec who knew her well and who was a good judge of her credit with God. This sketch was published in the *Lettres Édifiantes* whose wide circulation spread her name and fame throughout the Catholic world in the eighteenth century. There was a longer biography of her written by Father Chautetière who informs us that he was moved to write by an impulse received from herself. The historian Charlevoix devoted a whole chapter to her in the second volume of his *Histoire de la Nouvelle-France*, published in 1744. Chateaubriand, in *Les Natchez*, written in 1794, paid a magnificent tribute to this angel of the forest, and implored her protection for his nation in America. "It is no powerful spirit", he wrote, "no famous conqueror who protects the double empire of the French. It is a shepherdess in Europe, an Indian maid in America: Geneviève of the hamlet of Nanterre and Kateri of the Canadian forests." Chateaubriand's eloquent pages, published only in 1826, but penned shortly after his visit to America, merely echoed the impressions he took back with him to France. They prove at least that during the hundred and fifty years which followed her saintly death, the fame of the Lily of the Mohawks had not diminished. A lofty cross always stood over the spot where she had been

buried, and was renewed from time to time. In 1843 the raising of a new cross on the site of her grave was made the occasion of a demonstration in her honor, when a vast gathering of Indians and French sounded once again the praises of her who, a hundred and sixty years before, had left the sweet odor of her virtues attached to the spot. In 1884 a similar demonstration was held, when another cross was raised to replace its predecessor which had decayed and fallen. In the same year, the Bishops present at the Plenary Council of Baltimore linked the name of Kateri Tekakwitha with those of the two Jesuits, Isaac Jogues and René Goupil, in a formal petition which was afterwards sent to Rome pleading for the Beatification of all three servants of God. A casket containing all that remained of the relics of the saintly Kateri was sealed by ecclesiastical authority. This precious treasure is now honorably preserved in the church of St. Francis Xavier at Caughnawaga, awaiting the final verdict of the Infallible Church on the heroism of the virtues of the Lily of the Mohawks.

More recent
tributes
to Kateri

In 1890 a massive cenotaph, due to the generosity of the Reverend Clarence Walworth of Albany, was placed over the historic grave where it may still be seen, with an inscription in the Iroquois tongue recording in imperishable granite the name of Kateri Tekakwitha and the date of her departure from this world. Modern sketches of her life written by various authors — notably by Miss

Walworth, who has given us an extended biography—and articles in various publications, keep a wondering world informed about her; and it is not surprising that a renewal of devotion to the holy Iroquois maiden has been remarked in recent years. Every summer many pilgrims cross over the river from Montreal, gather around her shrine, listen to the story her life, and recite in her honor the prayers, Father Chauchetière tells us, it was usual to recite in his time, two hundred years ago. All these sympathetic tributes of pen and tongue are simply echoes which have come down to us from the seventeenth century. They are growing more frequent in recent years. They give us the assurance that the memory of one of the most interesting figures of this continent, now being auspiciously revived, will not be allowed to fade away.

