St. Kateri Tekakwitha

Born: 1656 Ossernenon, Iroquois Confederacy (New France until 1763, modern Auriesville, New York)

Baptized: April 18, 1676

Died: April 17, 1680 (aged 24) Kahnawake (near Montreal), Quebec, Canada

Venerated: in Roman Catholic Church

Beatified: June 22, 1980, Vatican City by Pope John Paul II

Canonized: October 21, 2012, Vatican City by Pope Benedict XVI

Major shrine: Saint Francis Xavier Church, Kahnawake, Quebec, Canada

Feast: July 14 April 17 (Canada)

Patronage: ecologists, ecology, environment, environmentalism, environmentalists, loss of parents, people in exile, people ridiculed for their piety, Native Americans, Igorots,[citation needed] Cordilleras,[citation needed] Thomasites, Northern Luzon, Diocese of Bangued, Vicariate of Tabuk, Vicariate of Bontoc-Lagawe, Diocese of Baguio, Marikina City, Cainta, Rizal, Antipolo City, Philippines Controversy Pressure to marry against will, shunned for her Roman Catholic beliefs

Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, given the name Tekakwitha, baptized as Catherine and informally known as Lily of the Mohawks (1656 – April 17, 1680), is a Roman Catholic saint who was an Algonquin–Mohawk laywoman. Born in the Mohawk village of Ossernenon, on the south side of the Mohawk River, she contracted smallpox in an epidemic; her family died and her face was scarred. She converted to Roman Catholicism at age nineteen, when she was renamed Kateri, baptized in honor of Saint Catherine of Siena. Refusing to marry, she left her village and moved for the remaining five years of her life to the Jesuit mission village of Kahnawake, south of Montreal in New France, now Canada.

Tekakwitha took a vow of perpetual virginity. Upon her death at the age of 24, witnesses said that minutes later her scars vanished and her face appeared radiant and beautiful. Known for her virtue of chastity and mortification of the flesh, as well as being shunned by some of her tribe for her religious conversion to Catholicism, she is the fourth Native American to be venerated in the Roman Catholic Church and the first to be canonized.

Under the pontificate of Pope John Paul II, she was beatified in 1980 and canonized by Pope Benedict XVI at Saint Peter's Basilica on 21 October 2012. Various miracles and supernatural events are attributed to her intercession.

Early life and education

Tekakwitha is the name the girl was given by her Mohawk people. It translates to "She who bumps into things." She was born around 1656 in the Mohawk village of Ossernenon considerably west of present-day Auriesville, New York. (A nineteenth-century tradition that Auriesville developed at the site of Ossernenon has been disproved by archeological findings, according to Dean R. Snow and other specialists in Native American history in New York.)

She was the daughter of Kenneronkwa, a Mohawk chief, and Tagaskouita, an Algonquin woman, who had been captured in a raid, then adopted and assimilated into the tribe. Tagaskouita had been baptized Roman Catholic and educated by French missionaries in Trois-Rivières, east of Montreal. Mohawk warriors captured her and took her to their homeland.

Tagaskouita eventually married Kenneronkwa. Tekakwitha was the first of their two children. A brother followed.

Tekakwitha's original village was highly diverse, as the Mohawk were absorbing many captured natives of other tribes, particularly their competitors the Huron, to replace people who died from European diseases or warfare. While from different backgrounds, such captives were adopted into the tribe to become full members and were expected to fully assimilate as Mohawk.

The Mohawk suffered a severe smallpox epidemic from 1661 to 1663, causing high fatalities. When Tekakwitha was around four years old, her baby brother and both her parents died of smallpox. She survived, but was left with facial scars and impaired eyesight. She was adopted by her father's sister and her husband, a chief of the Turtle Clan. Before the epidemic, in 1659 some Mohawk had founded a new village on the north side of the river, which they called Caughnawaga ("at the wild water" in the Mohawk language). Survivors of Ossernenon moved to that village.

The Jesuits' account of Tekakwitha said that she was a modest girl who avoided social gatherings; she covered much of her head with a blanket because of the smallpox scars. They said that, as an orphan, the girl was under the care of uninterested relatives. But, according to Mohawk practices, she was probably well taken care of by her clan, her mother and uncle's extended family, with whom she lived in the longhouse. She became skilled at traditional women's arts, which included making clothing and belts from animal skins; weaving mats, baskets and boxes from reeds and grasses; and preparing food from game, crops and gathered produce. She took part in the women's seasonal planting and intermittent weeding. As was the custom, she was pressured to consider marriage around age thirteen, but she refused.

Upheaval and invasions

Tekakwitha grew up in a period of upheaval, as the Mohawk interacted with French and Dutch colonists, who were competing in the lucrative fur trade. The Mohawk originally traded with the Dutch, who had settled in Albany and Schenectady. The French traded with and were allied with the Huron.

Trying to make inroads in Iroquois territory, the French attacked the Mohawk in present-day central New York in 1666. After driving the people from their homes, the French burned the three Mohawk villages on the south side of the river, destroying the longhouses, wigwams, and the women's corn and squash fields. Tekakwitha, around ten years old, fled with her new family into a cold October forest.

After the defeat by the French forces, the Mohawk were forced into a peace treaty that required them to accept Jesuit missionaries in their villages. The Jesuits established a mission that later developed as Auriesville, New York. While there, the Jesuits studied Mohawk and other native languages in order to reach the people. They spoke of Christianity in terms with which the Mohawk could identify. In his work on Tekakwitha, Darren Bonaparte notes the parallels between some elements of Mohawk and Christian belief. For instance, the Jesuits used the word Karonhià:ke, the Mohawk name for Sky World, as the word for heaven in the Lord's Prayer in Mohawk. "This was not just a linguistic shortcut, but a conceptual bridge from one cosmology to another."

The Mohawk settled Caughnawaga on the north bank, west of the present-day town of Fonda, New York. In 1667, when Tekakwitha was 11 years old, she met the Jesuit missionaries Jacques Frémin, Jacques Bruyas, and Jean Pierron, who had come to the village. Her uncle opposed any contact with them because he did not want her to convert to Christianity. One of his older daughters had already left Caughnawaga to go to Kahnawake, the Catholic mission village across the St. Lawrence River from Montreal.

In the summer of 1669, several hundred Mohican warriors, advancing from the east, launched a dawn attack on Caughnawaga. Rousing quickly to the defense, Mohawk villagers fought off the invaders, who kept Caughnawaga under siege for three days. Tekakwitha, now around 13 years old, joined other girls to help priest Jean Pierron tend to the wounded, bury the dead, and carry food and water to the defending warriors on the palisades.

When reinforcements arrived from other Mohawk villages, the defenders drove the Mohican warriors into retreat. The victorious Mohawk pursued the Mohican warriors, attacking them in the forest, killing over 80 and capturing several others. Returning to Caughnawaga amid widespread celebration, the victors tortured the captive Mohicans—thirteen men and four women—for two afternoons in succession, planning to execute them on the third. Pierron, tending to the captives, implored the torturers to stop, but they ignored him. Pierron instructed the captives in Catholic doctrine as best he could and baptized them before they died under torture.

Feast of the Dead

Later in 1669, the Iroquois Feast of the Dead, held every ten years, was convened at Caughnawaga. Some Oneida people came, along with Onondaga led by their famous sachem Garakontié. The remains of Tekakwitha's parents, along with the many others who had died in the previous decade, were to be carefully exhumed, so that their souls could be released to wander to the spirit land to the west.

According to a 1936 book about Tekakwitha, Father Pierron attacked the beliefs and logic of the Feast of the Dead. The assembled Iroquois, upset over his remarks, ordered him to be silent. But Pierron continued, telling the Iroquois to give up their "superstitious" rites. Under Garakontié's protection, Pierron finished his speech. He demanded that, to secure continued friendship with the French, the Iroquois give up their Feast of the Dead, their faith in dreams as a guide to action, and the worship of their war god. At length, the assembled Iroquois relented. Exchanging gifts with priest Pierron, they promised to give up the customs he had denounced. Garakontié later converted to Christianity.

A chief converts

In 1671, Mohawk chief Ganeagowa, who had led his warriors to victory against the Mohican, returned from a long hunting trip in the north to announce he had become a Christian. He had come upon the Catholic Iroquois village set up by Jesuits at La Prairie, southeast of Montreal. There he made friendly contact with priest Jacques Frémin, who had served as a missionary in Mohawk country. Influenced by the Catholic faith of the Iroquois villagers and of his own wife Satékon, Ganeagowa received instruction for several months from Father Frémin, who accepted him into the Church.

Family pressures

By the time Tekakwitha turned 17 around 1673, her adoptive mother (her father's sister) and aunt (uncle's sister) had become concerned over her lack of interest in marriage. They tried to arrange her marriage to a young Mohawk man by instructing him to sit down beside her. They indicated to Tekakwitha that the young man wanted to marry her. Accordingly, they pressured her to offer him a certain dish made with corn. Iroquois custom regarded this as a woman's sign of openness to marriage. Tekakwitha fled the cabin and hid from her family in a nearby field. Tekakwitha was said to have been punished by her aunts with ridicule, threats, and harsh workloads. But Tekakwitha continued to resist marriage. Eventually, her aunts gave up their efforts to get her to marry.

In the spring of 1674 at age eighteen, Tekakwitha met the Jesuit Father Jacques de Lamberville, who was visiting in the village. Most of the women were out harvesting corn, but Tekakwitha had injured her foot and was in the cabin. In the presence of others, Tekakwitha told him her story and her desire to become a Christian. After this she started studying the catechism with him.

Conversion and Kahnawake

Lamberville wrote in his journal in the years after her death about Tekakwitha. This text described her, before she was baptized, as a girl who was mild-mannered and behaved very well. Lamberville also stated that Kateri did everything she could in order to stay holy in a secular society, which often caused minor conflicts with her longhouse residents. These conflicts suggested no violence, which contradicts future texts.

Judging her ready, Lamberville baptized Tekakwitha at the age of 19, on Easter Sunday, April 18, 1676. Tekakwitha was baptized "Catherine" after St. Catherine of Siena (Kateri was the Mohawk form of the name).

After Kateri was baptized, she remained in Caughnawauga for another 6 months. Some Mohawks opposed her conversion and accused her of sorcery. Lamberville suggested

that she go to the Jesuit mission of Kahnawake, located south of Montreal on the St. Lawrence River, where other native converts had gathered. Catherine joined them in 1677.

Tekakwitha was said to have put thorns on her sleeping mat and to have lain on them while praying for the conversion and forgiveness of her kinsmen. Piercing the body to draw blood was a traditional practice of the Mohawk and other Iroquois nations. She lived at Kahnawake the remaining two years of her life. She learned more about Christianity under her mentor Anastasia, who taught her about the practice of repenting for one's sins. When the women learned of nuns, they wanted to form their own convent and created an informal association of devout women.

Father Cholonec wrote that Tekakwitha said,

I have deliberated enough. For a long time my decision on what I will do has been made. I have consecrated myself entirely to Jesus, son of Mary, I have chosen Him for husband and He alone will take me for wife.

The Church considers that in 1679, with her decision on the Feast of the Annunciation, her conversion was truly completed and she became the "first virgin" among the Mohawk.

Mission du Sault St. Louis: Kahnawake

The Jesuits had founded Kahnawake for the religious conversion of the natives. When it began, the natives built their traditional longhouses for residences. They also built a longhouse to be used as a chapel by the Jesuits. As a missionary settlement, Kahnawake was at risk of being attacked by members of the Iroquois Confederacy who had not converted to Catholicism. (While it attracted other Iroquois, it was predominantly Mohawk, the major tribe in eastern New York.)

After Catherine's arrival, she shared the longhouse of her older sister and her husband. She would have known other people in the longhouse who had migrated from their former village of Gandaouagué (also spelled Caughnawaga). Her mother's close friend, Anastasia Tegonhatsiongo, was clan matron of the longhouse. Anastasia and other Mohawk women introduced Tekakwitha to the regular practices of Christianity.

Chauchetière and Cholenec

Claude Chauchetière and Pierre Cholenec were Jesuit priests who played important roles in Tekakwitha's life. Both were based in New France and in Kahnawake. Chauchetière was the first to write a biography of Tekakwitha's life, followed by Cholenec, in 1695 and 1696, respectively. Cholenec arrived in New France in 1672, before Chauchetière. Father Cholenec introduced whips, hair shirts and iron girdles, traditional items of Catholic mortification, to the converts at Kahnawake. He wanted them to adopt these rather than use Mohawk ritual practices. Both Chauchetière and Tekakwitha arrived in Kahnawake the same year, in 1677.

He later wrote about having been very impressed by her, as he had not expected a native to be so pious. Chauchetière came to believe that Catherine Tekakwitha was a saint. Jesuits generally thought that the natives needed Christian guidance to be set on the right path. Chauchetière acknowledged that close contact with and deeper knowledge of the natives in Kahnawake changed some of his set notions about the people and about

differences among human cultures. In his biography of Kateri, he stressed her "charity, industry, purity, and fortitude." In contrast, Cholenec stressed her virginity, perhaps to counter white stereotypes at the time characterizing Indian women as promiscuous.

Penances

Tekakwitha believed in the value of offered suffering. She did not eat very much and was said to add undesirable tastes to her food. She would lie on a mat with thorns. There was a custom among some Native American peoples of the time of piercing oneself with thorns in thanksgiving for some good or an offering for the needs of one's self or others. Knowing the terrible burns given to prisoners, she burned herself. Her spiritual counselor, Anastasia, seems to have encouraged her penances. With her friend Marie-Thérèse, Tekakwitha readily took up penances. Her health had always been poor and it weakened. Marie-Thérèse sought the help of Father Chauchetière. He scolded the young women, saying that penance must be used in moderation. He told the two that they must have him approve their penances lest they become unreasonable. Tekakwitha listened to the priest. From then on, Tekakwitha practiced whatever penance the priest would allow her, but nothing more.

Friendship with Marie-Thérèse

Upon her arrival in the Christian community, Catherine befriended Marie Thérèse Tegaianguenta. They prayed together often. Marie Skarichions told Catherine and Marie-Thérèse about women religious. Through their mutual quest, the two women had a strong "spiritual friendship," as described by the Jesuits. The two women influenced a circle of associates. When they asked the Jesuits for permission to form a group of native disciples, they were told they were too "young in faith" for such a group. The women continued to practice their faith together.

Death and appearances

Around Holy Week of 1680, friends noted that Tekakwitha's health was failing. When people knew she had but a few hours left, villagers gathered together, accompanied by the priests Chauchetière and Cholenec, the latter providing the last rites. Catherine Tekakwitha died at around 15:00 (3 p.m.) on Holy Wednesday, April 17, 1680, at the age of 23 or 24, in the arms of her friend Marie-Therèse. Chauchetière reports her final words were, "Jesus, Mary, I love you."

After her death, the people noticed a physical change. Cholenec later wrote, "This face, so marked and swarthy, suddenly changed about a quarter of an hour after her death, and became in a moment so beautiful and so white that I observed it immediately." Her smallpox scars were said to disappear.

Tekakwitha purportedly appeared to three individuals in the weeks after her death; her mentor Anastasia Tegonhatsiongo, her friend Marie-Therèse Tegaiaguenta, and Father Chauchetière. Anastasia said that, while crying over the death of her spiritual daughter, she looked up to see Catherine "kneeling at the foot" of her mattress, "holding a wooden cross that shone like the sun." Marie-Thérèse reported that she was awakened at night by a knocking on her wall, and a voice asked if she were awake, adding, "I've come to say good-bye; I'm on my way to heaven." Marie-Thérèse went outside but saw no one; she heard a voice murmur, "Adieu, Adieu, go tell the father that I'm going to heaven." Chauchetière meanwhile said he saw Catherine at her grave; he said she appeared in "baroque splendour; for two hours he gazed upon her" and "her face lifted

toward heaven as if in ecstasy."

Chauchetière had a chapel built near Kateri's gravesite. By 1684, pilgrimages had begun to honour her there. The Jesuits turned her bones to dust and set the ashes within the "newly rebuilt mission chapel." This symbolized her presence on earth, and her remains were sometimes used as relics for healing.

Religious veneration

For some time after her death, Tekakwitha was considered an honorary yet unofficial patroness of Montreal, Canada, and Indigenous peoples of the Americas. Fifty years after her death, a convent for Native American nuns opened in Mexico. They have prayed for her and supported her canonization.

Indian Catholic missions and bishops in the 1880s wrote a petition pushing for the veneration of Tekakwitha. In that petition, they stated that she was pure and holy in addition to being a gift unto the Native Americans. They asked for the venerations of Tekakwitha as well as Jesuit Father Isaac Jogues and Brother René Goupil, two Catholic Missionaries who had been slain by the Mohawks in Osernnenon a few decades before Kateri's birth. They concluded their petition by stating that these venerations will help encourage Catholicism among other Indians.

The process for Tekakwitha's canonization was initiated by United States Catholics at the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884, followed by Canadian Catholics. January 3, 1943, Pope Pius XII declared her venerable. She was beatified as Catherine Tekakwitha on June 22, 1980, by Pope John Paul II.

On December 19, 2011, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints certified a second miracle through her intercession, signed by Pope Benedict XVI, which paved the way for pending canonization. On February 18, 2012, Pope Benedict XVI decreed that Tekakwitha be canonized. Speaking in Latin, he used the form "Catharina Tekakwitha"; the official booklet of the ceremony referred to her in English and Italian, as "Kateri Tekakwitha". She was canonized on October 21, 2012 by Pope Benedict XVI. In the official canonization rite booklet, "Catherine" is used in the English and French biographies and "Kateri" in the translation of the rite itself. She is the first Native American woman of North America to be canonized by the Roman Catholic Church.

Tekakwitha is featured in four national shrines in the United States: the National Shrine of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha in Fonda, New York; the National Shrine of the North American Martyrs in Auriesville, New York; the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C.; and The National Shrine of the Cross in the Woods, an open-air sanctuary in Indian River, Michigan. The design of the latter shrine was inspired by Kateri's habit of placing small wooden crosses throughout the woods. One statue on the grounds shows her cradling a cross in her arms, surrounded by turtles.

A statue of Tekakwitha is installed outside the Basilica of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré in Quebec, Canada. Another is installed at the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Tekakwitha has been featured in recently created religious works. In 2007, the Grand Retablo, a 40-foot-high work by Spanish artisans, was installed behind the main altar of the Mission Basilica San Juan Capistrano in Orange County, California. It features Cathe-

rine Tekakwitha, Junipero Serra, St. Joseph, and Francis of Assisi.

Miracles

Joseph Kellogg was a Protestant child captured by Natives in the eighteenth century and eventually returned to his home. Twelve months later, he caught smallpox. The Jesuits helped treat him, but he was not recovering. They had relics from Tekakwitha's grave, but did not want to use them on a non-Catholic. One Jesuit told Kellogg that, if he would become a Roman Catholic, help would come to him. Joseph did so. The Jesuit gave him a piece of decayed wood from Kateri's coffin, which is said to have made him heal. The historian Allan Greer takes this account to mean that Tekakwitha was known in 18th-century New France, and she was already perceived to have healing abilities.

Other miracles were attributed to Kateri: Father Rémy recovered his hearing and a nun in Montreal was cured by using items formerly belonging to Catherine. Such incidents were evidence that Catherine was possibly a saint. Following the death of a person, sainthood is symbolized by events that show the rejection of death. It is also represented by a duality of pain and a neutralisation of the other's pain (all shown by her reputed miracles in New France). Father Chauchetière told settlers in La Prairie to pray to Catherine for intercession with illnesses. Due to the Jesuits' superior system of publicizing material, his words and Catherine's fame were said to reach Jesuits in China and their converts.

As people believed in her healing powers, some collected earth from her gravesite and wore it in bags as a relic. One woman said she was saved from pneumonia ("grande maladie du rhume"); she gave the pendant to her husband, who was healed from his disease.

On December 19, 2011, Pope Benedict XVI approved the second miracle needed for Kateri's canonization. The authorized miracle dates from 2006, when a young boy in Washington state survived a severe flesh-eating bacterium. Doctors had been unable to stop the progress of the disease by surgery and advised his parents he was likely to die. The boy received the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick from a Catholic priest. As the boy is half Lummi Indian, the parents said they prayed through Tekakwitha for divine intercession, as did their family and friends, and an extended network contacted through their son's classmates. A Catholic nun, Sister Kateri Mitchell, visited the boy's bedside and placed a relic of Tekakwitha, a bone fragment, against his body and prayed together with his parents. The next day, the infection stopped its progression.