



Saint of the Week

Kateri Tekakwitha

1656–1680

Feast Day—July 14

Kateri Tekakwitha is revered today as the first Native American saint. Only 24 when she died, Kateri is an example of purity, prayer, and most especially endurance in faith. Born in 1656, in a Mohawk village in what is now upstate New York, she was an outsider. Her mother was an Algonquin who was catechized and baptized Roman Catholic by French missionaries in TroisRivières, east of Montreal. Her mother was captured by the Mohawks in a raid and was taken to be the wife of the Mohawk chief Kenneronkwa near present-day Auriesville, New York.

At an early age, Kateri's village suffered a severe smallpox epidemic, which killed her parents and left her scarred and her vision impaired. Her name, "Tekakwitha", means "she who bumps into things." She was adopted by her Mohawk relatives who survived the epidemic, and the survivors of the plague moved to the new village of Caughnawaga.

Like her mother, Tekakwitha sought out instruction from Catholic missionaries that led to her eventual baptism at the age of 19 and her taking the name "Kateri" after St. Catherine of Siena on Easter Sunday 1676.

Kateri faced severe obstacles from the Mohawk tribal leaders, as well as from her adopted family. On Holy Days, Kateri received no food, since she prayed rather than work in the fields.

When she walked to chapel, she was cursed and pelted with stones. Nevertheless, she persevered. She refused to marry despite pressure from her tribe. According to Fr. Pierre Cholenec, a Jesuit priest who was a mentor, Kateri 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 French missionaries encouraged her to leave her hostile environment and travel to Canada to the St. Francois Xavier mission. Her uncle opposed this move, because he was suspicious of the French and feared it was a ruse to depopulate the village. Even so, Kateri prevailed and traveled the 200 miles by foot and canoe to Canada, where she lived a devout and exemplary life. Called the "Lily of the Mohawks," she is a symbol of chastity and purity as she sought to do penance to commit her life to God. When she died due to failing health, witnesses noted that her face was miraculously transformed so that all her smallpox scars disappeared. Over the years, people have asked Kateri for divine intercession when suffering from serious illnesses, and their prayers have been answered. Her legacy of healing continues. St. Kateri Tekakwitha was canonized on October 21, 2012.



A mosaic of St. Kateri Tekakwitha is seen in the Trinity Dome at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington.