

Tekakwitha, Kateri Encyclopedia Article

Tekakwitha, Kateri

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TEKAKWITHA, KATERI (c. 1656–1680), native American convert to Christianity. Tekakwitha was born in the Iroquoian town of Gandahouhague, near present-day Fonda, New York. Her father was Mohawk, and her mother Algonquin, a captive adopted into the Turtle clan after a raid. When she was four years old Tekakwitha survived an attack of smallpox that killed her immediate family. The disease weakened her eyesight, and she afterward exhibited a general tendency to withdraw from social contact. By 1667, when Tekakwitha first encountered Jesuit missionaries, she was already inclined to a way of life that Christianity sanctioned. Indian townspeople exerted strong pressure to make her conform to native ways, but she persisted in her new interest. This determination culminated on Easter Day, 1676, when she was baptized by Jacques de Lamberville, S.J. The following year, local opposition to her Catholicism mounted, and she fled the region to take refuge with other Catholic Indians living along the Saint Lawrence River in Upper Canada.

Tekakwitha settled at Caughnawaga, or La Prairie de la Madeleine, an intertribal village of Christian Indians bound together more by religious allegiance than by tribal heritage. There she quickly established a reputation for austere self-denial and pious virtue. From her First Communion at Christmas 1677, until her death less than three years later, the maiden impressed all about her with her modest fervor and ardent prayers. Beset with a frail constitution, she worked as best she could in village gardens, fasted two days per week, administered flagellations, and kept a private vow of chastity. In 1678 she began a quasi-convent patterned after the Hospital Sisters of Montreal, but such rigors hastened her own end. Her death enhanced local stories about her exemplary conduct, and Indian as well as French neighbors made a shrine of her gravesite. Many were inspired by her extraordinary life, and in 1932 she was nominated for sainthood. On October 22, 1980, John Paul II pronounced her blessed, thus acknowledging her as an example of Catholic piety in colonial New France.

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