

Essay on kateri tekakwitha

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



Kateri Tekakwitha is the first ever Native American Saint. She is often referred to as the ‘Lily of the Mohawks’. The life story of Kateri is based on bibliographies prepared after her death by two Catholic fathers Cholenec and Chauchetiere. These priests belonged to the mission of Saint-Francois-Xavier. The Jesuit mission started its activities in French territories in North America particularly in Quebec and Upper State New York in the 1660s. The Jesuit mission though religious in nature was politically motivated because France wanted to expand her influence on other parts of the world. The Jesuit Fathers mainly targeted North American Indians. The mission was funded through public donations by citizens in France. Kateri’s story is perceived by many to be a reflection of the happenings that characterized the relations between French colonialists and North American natives. In this paper, Kateri’s history, conversion to Christianity, death and subsequent saintification will be described.

Kateri’s Life at the Reservation

According to the biographers, Kateri was the daughter of a Mohawk father and an Algonquin mother. She was born in what is now known as Upstate New York. Kateri’s mother had been a Christian convert who had later been captured by raiders from the Iroquois tribe and subsequently married to a chief from the tribe. She had been Christianized by Jesuit missionaries in a place currently known as Trois Riviers, Quebec. Kateri had only one sibling, a younger brother. Her whole family was wiped out when she was 4 years old by a smallpox epidemic that swept through their village. Although she survived, the disease caused severe scars on her face and impaired her vision permanently. Left homeless, Kateri was taken in by her uncle and

aunt. The uncle was an important person in the village. As a child, she showed a strong inclination towards solitude. Unlike her peers, she devoted most of her time to industrious activities.

Her first encounter with the Jesuit missionaries was due to her uncle's position in the tribe in the year 1667. In the fall of 1666, the Iroquois were defeated by French Forces under the leadership of Marquis of Tracy. The Iroquois signed a peace treaty with the French that amongst other conditions required them to allow Jesuit missionaries to minister in their territory. The first missionaries to arrive in her village were Jacques Bruyas, Jacques Fremin, and Jean Pierron. Her uncle was strongly opposed to their presence but he had as a chief of the village to obey the treaty. Kateri, then 11 years old, was given the task of taking care of their well-being during their brief stay. Father Pierron returned to a nearby settlement later where he began his work. He first focused his energy on the Algonquin and Mohawks' Huron captives most of whom had been converted into Christianity prior to being captured. Another Catholic priest, Father Francois Boniface settled in Kateri's village in 1670. This priest was later replaced by Father Jacques de Lamberville (Koppedraye 283; Greer 264).

At this time, Kateri had already reached puberty and her family was eager to see her married. They made arrangements. Kateri, however, refused to get married. Her refusal was met with hostility and violence from her relatives. She suffered a lot from being subjected to harsh treatment although they later relented. Kateri had an intense desire to convert to Christianity but she did not dare to approach the missionaries because of fear of her uncle. The opportunity arose one day when she was nursing a foot injury which

excluded her from fieldwork. She had remained alone at her cabin as others worked in the field. Father Lamberville passed by her cabin as he made his afternoon rounds to visit the sick. When he talked to her about Christianity, she was receptive. He instructed her to visit the chapel regularly which she did frequently once her foot healed. Upon enquiring about her, he learnt that she was a girl of good virtue unlike most girls her age. She started attending catechism classes. According to father Cholenec, Kateri displayed a strong propensity for Christianity. She was baptized during the Easter of 1676. Her baptism was contrary to Jesuit policy for the baptism of natives who only baptized the locals at their point of death or when they were sure that a person would not fall back due to being scorned by others.

After being Christianized, Kateri only remained in her village for a further six months. During this time, she was harassed continuously due to her adoption of Christian customs (Koppedrayner 285; Greer 264). She was accused of sorcery and was accosted repeatedly as she moved to and from the village chapel. Because of her refusal to work on the Sabbath and religious holidays, she was denied food on such days. Her aunt accused her of enticing her uncle. Her life was even threatened at one point. Father Lamberville advised her to leave the village for the sake of her own safety and to go to a Jesuit mission that had been established at Sault in Kanawake, Quebec in 1676. The mission had originally being built at Prairie de la Madeleine in 1667. It offered refuge to natives who had converted to Christianity. The residents of this mission passed through Kateri's village periodically. They encouraged other natives to immigrate to the mission.

In the fall of the year 1677, a man by the name Poudre Chaude arrived in

Kateri's village. Kateri attended his welcoming where she heard him talking of the mission. She was inspired by his words to leave for the mission. She requested Father Lamberville to write her a recommendation letter for the priests who run the mission. Father Lamberville in conjunction with Poudre Chaude arranged for her escape. She was accompanied by 2 residents from the mission who had come together with Poudre. She fled the village at a time when her uncle had paid the Dutch a visit. Although her uncle pursued her, they managed to elude him. Upon arrival at the mission, she gave the priests the letter given to her by Father Lamberville to Fathers Cholenec and Fremin. The latter contained details of her conversion as well as the circumstances under which she left her home (Koppedraye 285; Greer 264).

Kateri's life at the Sault Mission

Kateri resided at the mission for 2 years only after which she died. She lived together with her adopted sister, Anastasie Tegenhatsiongo who taught her about Christianity. The teachings emphasized on sin and repentance. Kateri decided after listening to these teachings to take upon herself the penance of Jesus Christ. She together with others who joined her later subjected themselves to extreme forms of mortifications such as branding, flagellations, fasting, and sleeping on thorn-filled beds. Her penances were so severe that her companion, Marie-Theresa Tegaiguenta sought permission for their undertakings from Father Cholenec who advised them to moderate their suffering. At one time, the women at the mission wanted to form a religious order. They were, however, discouraged by Father Fremin who was head of the mission at the time (Koppedraye 285). Kateri though persisted with her desire to consecrate her virginity to Christ. She refused to get

married despite being advised by the women and Father Cholenec to do so. She was allowed to take the vow of perpetual virginity and to declare herself a wife of Christ in 1679 during the Feast of Annunciation. She came to be known as the "first Iroquois Virgin". Kateri's health status weakened due to participating in extreme forms of penance and she died in 1680 during the Holy Week. Her biographers, Cholenec and Chauchetiere, reported that her death was linked with several miracles. During her illness, a huge religious fervor swept through the mission catching everyone in its wake of exercising austerities. It continued after her death. Chauchetiere also reported that she appeared to him 6 days after her death, 3 and 4 years later. She exhorted him to distribute her image throughout the colony. Many more miracles are reported. Many Indians and French citizens are reported to flock to her grave seeking miracles after her death (Koppedraye 286).

Process of Saintification

It was not until after her death that her spiritual mentors at the mission started writing bibliographies about her life. These accounts of her life are what initiated the process of her canonization. During the 1884 Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, Jesuit fathers requested US bishops to petition Pope Leo XIII for the canonization of Kateri Tekakwitha and two other Jesuit martyrs. The cause for the canonization of Kateri was approved by Rome authorities in 1932. She was beatified by Pope Blessed John Paul II in Rome on the 22nd of June, 1980. On Dec. 19 2011, Pope Benedict XVI endorsed a miracle attained via her intercession which involved a small Native American Boy from the State of Washington. She was saintified on the 21st of October 2012. The reasons for the petitions for her canonization are, however,

controversial (Bunson 34). Greer posits that the US Bishops wanted to counter the strong anti-Catholic sentiments that dominated in the late 1880s in the US through the use of a local figure. They thought that this would lead to the Catholic Church being associated with things such as nature and land as opposed to negative elements like immigration and industrialization. Majority of the immigrants to the US at the time were Catholics from different parts of Europe. Koppedraye (286), on the other hand, notes that the two biographers, Fathers Chauchetiere and Cholenec, probably mythified her life so as to gain public sympathy and financial support for the Jesuit mission in France at the time. He argues that their descriptions of her prior and after her death were quite different.

Conclusion

In conclusion, most of the knowledge on Kateri's life is derived from a number of biographies written after her death. Details of her early life are scanty but her story is similar to that of other Natives who had to flee from their communities because they converted to Christianity. However, Kateri proved according to her bibliographers to be strikingly different from the other natives. She engaged in extreme forms of penances and chose to be consecrated to Christ. Her mortifications eventually led to her death. Although the process of her saintification was started in the 1880s, it was not until recently that she was accorded saint status. The reasons for the petitioning for her saintification are controversial.

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