

SAINTS ALIVE! JULY 14: ST. KATERI TEKAKWITHA, PATRON OF THE ENVIRONMENT



Kateri Tekakwitha was born in 1656, the daughter of a Mohawk warrior and an Algonquin Indian. She is the first Native American to be declared a Saint. Kateri is the patroness of the environment.

In *The Columbia River Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good* the Catholic Bishops of the Region explored the “teachings about stewardship; the need to respect nature; and the need to recognize and promote the common good.”

The bishops also stressed the special relationship Native Americans have with the region, singling out their respect for nature:

“Native religions taught respect for the ways of nature, personified as a nurturing mother for all creatures. They saw the salmon as food from this mother, and the river as the source of their life and the life of the fish. They adapted themselves to the river and to the cycles of the seasons.”

In their “considerations” for future stewardship, the bishops included a call to “respect the dignity and traditions of the region’s indigenous peoples: The indigenous peoples have a wealth of spirituality, culture and traditions that call forth a need for appropriate respect and preservation. We are brothers and sisters in God’s creation and we are grateful to ... the Native Americans for the lessons they teach about respect for nature. We apologize for cultural insensitivities and lack of justice, both past and present.”

Though written 11 years before the canonization of Kateri Tekakwitha, the Catholic Bishops offer a descriptive rationale for the first Native American saint to be the patroness of the environment.

Kateri was baptized by a Jesuit missionary at age 20 and incurred the great hostility of her tribe because they were unable to trust that the Catholic values would integrate with their native traditions. Her family and village ostracized her.

Just as Kateri was ostracized by her community because of a difference in values, Native Americans have been excluded by European-Americans because of their differences.

“[N]ative peoples have been targets of racism, and experience economic hardships. The terms of treaties made with them, such as the 1855 treaty with the Yakamas in the United States, often have not been respected. Indigenous peoples in the region seek the freedom to exercise fishing and water rights once thought to be guaranteed by treaties.”

“Europeans and Euro-Americans made their way west beginning in the 16th century. ... Unregulated fishing and cannery industries seriously depleted salmon supplies. The River People were forced to live a modified way of life on severely diminished lands, with less abundant salmon runs. Eventually, dams on the Columbia-Snake river system, and open sea fishing operations in the Pacific Ocean had further impacts on the species. In 1957, the opening up of the Dalles Dam destroyed Celilo Falls, a tremendously important Native American fishing area.”

The exclusion and ruin of Native Americans is not endemic to the Columbia River Watershed, but to all of America. Setting an example for the rest of society, the U.S. Catholic Bishops have intentionally called on the Catholic community to include Native Americans in pastoral life:

“The Catholic community is blessed, enriched and profoundly challenged by the faith of Native Americans in our midst. We ask the Catholic community to join us in seeking new understanding and awareness of their situation and in committing our church to new advocacy and action with our Native American brothers and sisters on issues of social justice and pastoral life which touch their lives.” *Excerpt from the 2003 "Native American Catholics at the Millennium"*

St. Kateri Tekakwitha, pray for us.



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