St. Kateri Tekakwitha

Feast Day: July 14th
Born: 1656
Died: April 17, 1680
Canonized: 10/21/2012 by Pope Benedict XVI
Patron: ecologists, ecology, environment, environmentalists, loss of parents, people in exile, people ridiculed for their piety, Native Americans
Also known as: The Lily of the Mohawks, Baptismal name was Catherine
Symbols: Lily; Turtle; Rosary; Cross

About: When Kateri Tekakwitha was proclaimed St. Kateri Tekakwitha on October 21, she was the first member of a North American tribe to be declared a saint. “The Lily of the Mohawks,” Kateri was born in 1656 in a village along the Mohawk River called Ossernenon, now known as Auriesville, New York. Her father was a Mohawk chief, her mother a Christian Algonquin raised among the French.

When Kateri was 4, a smallpox epidemic claimed her parents and baby brother. She survived, but her face was disfigured and her vision impaired. She was raised by her anti-Christian uncle, who began to plan her marriage. But after meeting with Catholic priests, Kateri decided to be baptized.

Following her Baptism by a Jesuit missionary, Father Jacques de Lamberville, in 1676 at age 20, Kateri’s family and village ostracized and ridiculed her. Kateri refused to work on Sundays, so her family refused her food. She fled the next year to Canada, taking refuge at St. Francis Xavier Mission in the Mohawk Nation at Caughnawaga on the St. Lawrence River, about 10 miles from Montreal, and made her first Communion on Christmas in 1677.

She took a private vow of virginity and devoted herself to teaching prayers to the children and helping the sick and elderly of Caughnawaga. Although unable to read and write, Kateri led a life of prayer and penitential practices. People referred to her as the “Holy Woman.” Kateri spoke words of kindness to everyone she encountered.

Kateri’s motto became, “Who can tell me what is most pleasing to God that I may do it?” Kateri spent much of her time in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, kneeling in the cold chapel for hours. When the winter hunting season took Kateri and many of the villagers away from the village, she made her own little chapel in the woods by making a wooden cross and spending time there in prayer, kneeling in the snow. Kateri loved the Rosary and carried it with her always.

Kateri died on April 17, 1680, at the age of 24. Her last words were, “Jesus, I love You.” According to eyewitnesses, the scars on her face suddenly disappeared after her death. Soon after, Catholics started to claim that favors and miracles had been obtained through her intercession. Native Americans have made appeals to the Catholic Church for her recognition since at least the late 1800s.

Documentation for Kateri’s sainthood cause was sent to the Vatican in 1932. She was declared venerable in 1942 and in 1980 was beatified by Pope John Paul II.

Records for the final miracle needed for her canonization were sent to the Vatican in July 2009. It involved the full recovery of a young boy in Seattle whose face had been disfigured by flesh-eating bacteria and who almost died from the disease. His family, who is part Native American, had prayed for Kateri’s intercession. On December 19, 2011, Pope Benedict XVI signed the decree recognizing the miracle, clearing the way for Kateri’s canonization.