

Saint Kateri Tekakwitha is honored by the Catholic Church as the patroness of ecology and the environment with a Memorial on her Feast Day, the 14th of July. Tekakwitha was born in the mid 17th century. Her father was a Mohawk chief and her mother was from the Algonquin tribe. Death came to her parents when she was only 4. Smallpox attacked her village, taking the lives of her parents, and forever weakening her health. Her face was scarred. She was left partially blind, but Tekakwitha survived.

With her poor eyesight, she often needed to walk with the aid of her hands to avoid stumbling. Tekakwitha means “The One Who Walks Groping for Her Way.”ⁱ Although her eyesight was poor, she saw much through the eyes of faith.

She lived a traditional native life tending to the corn, beans, and squash that fed her people. “She went to the neighboring forest to pick the roots needed to prepare medicines ... She collected firewood in the forest and water from a stream. Despite her poor vision, she also became very skilled at beadwork.”ⁱⁱ

Tekakwitha’s mother was Catholic and helped teach her how to pray. Stories of the Catholic faith that her mother shared with her at a very young age “remained indelibly impressed upon her mind and heart and were to give shape and direction to her life’s destiny. She often went to the woods alone to speak to God and listen to Him in her heart and in the voice of nature.”ⁱⁱⁱ

When Tekakwitha was eighteen, a Jesuit missionary came to her village and established a chapel. Kateri wanted to learn more about Jesus Christ and studied to become a Christian. At the age of 20 she was baptized and took the name Kateri after Saint Catherine. Kateri’s deep love of her Catholic faith was in sharp contrast to her family that did not understand how she could embrace Christ. “After her baptism, Kateri became the village outcast. Her family refused her food on Sundays because she wouldn’t work. Children would taunt her and throw stones. She was threatened with torture or death if she did not renounce her religion.”^{iv}

Kateri responded with forgiveness but the hostility did not subside. In July of 1677, at the advice of sympathetic family members, Kateri left her village and moved to a Christian mission 200 miles north in Canada. She received her First Communion on Christmas Day, 1677. “Kateri led a life of prayer and penitential practices. She taught the young and helped those in the village who were poor or sick. Her favorite devotion was to fashion crosses out of sticks and place them throughout the woods.”^v

Kateri’s prayerful demeanor radiated through her face. “In her presence, others felt close to God. Her face changed when she was praying. It became full of beauty and peace, as if she were looking at God’s face.”^{vi}

Kateri’s health was always fragile and at the age of 24, she died an early death. Her last words were, “Jesus, I love You.” Immediately after death, the childhood scars from smallpox disappeared. This miracle helped many of the indigenous people to recognize the beauty of Christianity.

October 21, 2012, Kateri was declared a saint with a special Mass at the Vatican. Among those in attendance was a young Indian boy from Washington state who had suffered a debilitating disease that ate away at the flesh on his face and threatened his life. Through the intercession of Blessed Kateri and the healing power of Christ, Jake Finkbonner received a miraculous cure that spared his life. “Blessed are you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth; you have revealed to little ones the mysteries of the Kingdom” (Mt 11:25).

ⁱ aktalakota.stjo.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=11959

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.