

Iesos konoronkwa. Jesus I love you

Catholics appreciate and honor the inspiring examples of heroic virtue in the lives of the saints who love God, and through the communion of the Holy Spirit we can ask for their prayers in heaven to join with ours, because the church is the same one Body of Christ in heaven and on earth. We do not worship saints and their images are not idols; they are like the cherished pictures you may keep of your loved ones.

Today we remember and honor on her memorial day among the saints a holy Native American woman who lived with the devout humility which affirms our God-given human dignity essential to the gospel message of Jesus Christ, for St. Kateri Tekakwitha was truly one of those humble children of the earth thought of as of little importance to the world, yet who are first in the eyes of the heaven, living in the Spirit of Christ, who humbled himself to become the servant of all. Kateri is one of those poor in spirit so beloved of God.

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Kateri was born in 1656 in the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) nation, the people of the longhouse, and died at the age of 24 in 1680. She was the daughter of a traditional Mohawk (Kanienkehaka—the people of the place of flint) leader and a Christian Algonquin woman. When she was 4 years old, a smallpox epidemic struck her ancient village on the Mohawk River in what is now New York, and the majority of her band was wiped out by this terrible plague brought from Europe, a new disease for which the Native people had no built up immunity and no ready medicine. Her mother, father, and infant brother all died in the epidemic in a matter of days. Kateri herself barely survived, with her eyesight impaired and her face badly scarred. She was adopted by her father's brother, a Mohawk leader, and, because of her poor eyesight, she was given the name Tekakwitha, which, as I was told many years ago by a Seneca Franciscan nun translates *she bumps into things* or *she feels her way*, because as a child she was for a time nearly blinded by smallpox, and for the remaining 20 years of her brief life, Kateri endured frail health and eyes pained by the bright sunlight. Suffering was her daily experience.

Kateri's Mohawk people were Iroquois, whose sophisticated form of united confederated government inspired Benjamin Franklin to call for a similar unity in the colonies that would become the United States. But Kateri grew up in a historical time of great change, disorder, and bitter conflict. The imperial advance of European nations into ancient Native America ultimately vitiated the tribal nations and the Indigenous peoples through disease and war, loss of tribal lands, violated treaties, and cultural disinheritance. Kateri grew up in an era of atrocity and confusion, a time when the temptation of bitter hatred and self-perpetuating cycles of violence, misunderstanding, and revenge could infect even people of good will. Yet in the midst of this historical nightmare, Kateri discovered a better way, a clear path of love

and forgiveness in the holy path of her beloved Savior Jesus, not as a rejection of her Native identity and culture, but as an acceptance of Christ's sacrificial love. Kateri could see Jesus shining in the darkness, above and beyond the miasma which afflicted the world around her.

For Kateri eagerly heard the gospel teachings of the Jesuits who came among her people, and she gave her heart to Jesus and persistently sought baptism, until at the age of 19, like her mother before her, she was baptized into the Catholic faith. In baptism, she was given the name Kateri (Gah Dah Ree) after St. Catherine of Sienna. In the remaining years of her life, Kateri lived her faith with quiet devotion and heroic virtue, a living example of love and piety for all who knew her. During this time, Kateri, whose traditional culture was based on honor and respect for relationship, was shamed for the practice of her faith, which her uncle and many of her people could not help but associate with the invaders of their lands who also called themselves "Christians". To understand how loyal she was to her faith, you should realize that, though no one of her people would ever threaten her with physical harm, in an ancient culture so strongly based on honor that no police were necessary in a traditional village, to be shamed was indeed a sort of martyrdom. Kateri left her home and walked in a long and arduous journey through the forest to a Catholic Mohawk village called Kanawake, near present-day Montreal on the St. Lawrence River, where she worked in the fields of the Three Sisters, Corn, Squash, and Beans, looked after the elderly with gentle compassion, chanted the rosary while walking in the snow, practiced penitential devotion, and attended mass to receive the Eucharist with great joy. The year before she died she took a vow of consecrated virginity, saying, "I have consecrated myself entirely to Jesus, son of Mary."

Her tomb is located today on a Mohawk reserve in an old Jesuit church. I first met Kateri in 1980 when she was beatified, and along with the Blessed Virgin, Kateri was directly instrumental in Christ's call to my conversion to the Catholic Church, now more than half a lifetime ago, and I have relied on the intercessory prayers of Mary and Kateri in every day of my life since, and in my vocation to serve Christ's people as a humble deacon these past 25 years. Perhaps, then, you can begin to see how much she means to me.

Though the tensions of her historical era made the practice of her faith very unpopular in her uncle's village, understandably so in a time of bitter conflict, yet Kateri persevered with absolute dedication because she simply loved Jesus with all her heart and soul. Kateri's love transcended the injustices and sorrows of history with a deep and abiding passion for Jesus that hallowed every moment of her suffering life and filled everything she did with a love that breathed goodness in all her relations. Kateri's holy life on earth came to a close in 1680, when after suffering severely for some time in her final illness, surrounded by her people, Kateri breathed her last breath, and with that last, painful breath, she said: Iesos konoronkwa. Jesus I love you.

And then, as the people and the priests prayed by her side, an astonishing thing happened. Though Kateri lay lifeless before her grieving friends, her face was suddenly bathed in a wondrous light, and the old smallpox scars which had so disfigured her face since she was four faded away and disappeared, leaving her face effused with an uncanny spiritual beauty. A single, white lily inexplicably grew from her grave.

We rejoice in God's gift of St. Kateri, Indigenous American saint, the Lily of the Mohawks, who lives in the beatific vision with the saints of heaven and is praying for us all, a saint for her Native people, a saint for all people of good will toward others, a saint for all who love God. Kateri is a model for us in all times of Christian faith and heroic virtue in cooperation with the grace of God, and we are inspired and comforted by the example of her immeasurable love for Jesus Christ, our Savior. For in her great and abiding love for our Lord, the consecrated virgin Kateri called Tekakwitha, "she feels her way," felt her way into the eternal heart of God.

Pray for us, dear Kateri, in the Body of Christ,
for the people, pray,
pray for God's creation, Mother Earth, injured by our thoughtless abuse,
pray for the gift of understanding and forgiveness among all people,
lest we internalize our own oppression
keep us always close in the prayers of your beautiful heart
pray for us to your Lord and our Lord, Jesus Christ

Keeping close a sacred love stronger than death
a Song of Songs reaching through all suffering, injustice, and death
to join with Christ's suffering in solidarity with us on the cross
to rise with him in his Resurrection

She Feels Her Way opened her arms to embrace this gift of love
to bring Jesus into the lodge of her mortal life
to feed her beloved from the basketry of her soul's desire
to live forever joyous in the longhouse of the Lord
singing and dancing with the saints of God
in the beatific round dance of forever

So we celebrate the sacred path of St. Kateri
and the song of her humble life of love
the sound of a something beyond,
a something above,
as close as the dust of the earth
as faraway as the sky's beginning
in the unfathomable mystery of our Lord's divine charity,
in her openness to the love of God,
a sacred woman
Kateri, child of heaven chanting,

whispering her immortal love beyond the stars to her beloved

Listen! Do you hear her voice?

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