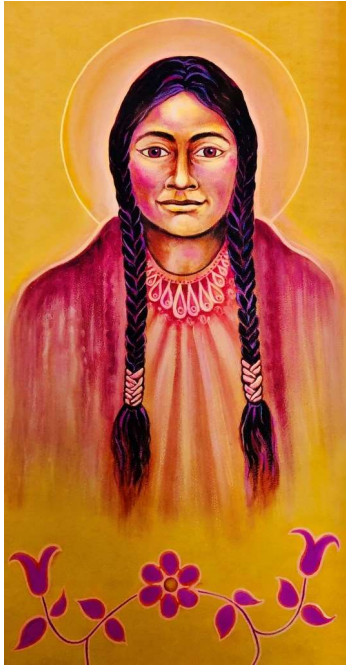


## Celebrating Saint Kateri Tekakwitha



In October 2012 in Rome, I was privileged with many Native Peoples from the USA and Canada to witness the canonization of Kateri Tekakwitha. It brought pride and joy to the Catholics of Canada, particularly our First Nations sisters and brothers.

In canonizing St. Kateri Tekakwitha, a child of Mohawk and Algonquin background, Indigenous Peoples everywhere were honoured. St. Kateri, then is important for us in Hearst-Moosonee, home to indigenous Catholics mainly of Cree and Ojibway origin.

On Saturday, April 17 the Church in Canada recalls the “Lily of the Mohawks” at Mass. I invite our parishes to celebrate her holiness that day and pray for the reconciliation we all long for by inviting local indigenous people to attend.

After he beatified her in 1982, Pope Saint John Paul II told indigenous Catholics, Kateri “stands before us as a symbol of the best of the heritage that is yours as North American Indians.”

Now that she has been added to the canon of the Church’s saints, Kateri also stands before the whole Church to remind us of the call we accepted in baptism to cooperate with God’s grace and to live a holy life.

The earliest hints of God’s grace working in Kateri’s life were given in the name assigned to her by her family: Tekakwitha. This name referred to her poor eyesight and can mean: “she who feels her way ahead”; “one who bumps into things”. But it can also mean “one who places things in order” or “puts everything into place”.

You see, Kateri’s physical sight was seriously affected by the smallpox from which she had suffered. What is equally true and what is of greater significance, is that her inner vision was clear. Deep within her heart she had received the gift of seeing clearly the truth of Christ and his Church.

When the Jesuit missionary priest, Father de Lamberville spoke of Our Lord and the Christian faith, the Gospel message of life and hope found a home within her. No words of hers are recorded that tell us of her experience. But words are not necessary. In Kateri it resulted in the total transformation of her inner life away from the sinful aspects around her to the new life Christ Jesus makes possible.

Kateri shows that faith carries with it the capacity to see clearly the beauty of God — especially in the forest, her favourite place to pray — and God’ plan for us. She spent time in the woods marking trees with a cross and telling Jesus of her love for him. This fits well with the grandeur of the earth that indigenous people respect and model for us.

Kateri’s life and death shows that faith in Jesus Christ brings healing. This accounts for the miraculous transformation of her face soon after her death. From the age of four her face had been terribly scarred by smallpox; only minutes after she died her face was restored to its original beauty. This had been preceded by the last words she spoke, “Jesus I love you.”

The love of Christ for us, and our loving him back can heal. How much do we need this lesson from Kateri today! We may not bear physical scars, but many people today carry deep emotional and psychological scars. These are inflicted, not by smallpox, but by poverty, addiction, loneliness, and betrayal. They are caused by the abuse suffered by some of Kateri’s modern-day sisters and brothers in their time at residential schools.

So much pain, so many emotional scars! Yet Kateri teaches us that no wound, however deep, should leave us without hope. Let us remember her words: “Jesus I love you.” And pray for the healing God wishes to give us.

St. Kateri Tekakwitha, pray for us.

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