

Last week (July 14) was the memorial of St Kateri Tekakwitha. St Kateri, a Native American, was born in 1656 in what is now the northeastern part of the U.S. Biographies of St Kateri can be hard to read without at least a little bit of familiarity with the various names of tribes of that part of the country at that time. The name Iroquois, as I understand, was basically used to refer to a group of tribes in what is now Northeastern U.S.A. Mohawks were one of those tribes. It is sometimes said that Kateri's father (or Kateri herself) was an Iroquois, but other times he is said to have been a Mohawk. Hopefully, that can be understood now. It would be somewhat like saying that you're an American and then saying you're a South Dakotan. Kateri's father was an Iroquois and specifically a Mohawk. Her mother was Algonquin, which was a native tribe in southeast Canada. The Mohawks had captured Kateri's mother and Kateri's father took her as his wife.

Another small piece of history related to St Kateri is that the French had heavy influence in Canada (which is still seen today) as well as the northeastern part of the U.S., or at least Catholicism in northeastern was initially largely from the French. You might recall that most of the North American martyrs were French – like St Isaac Jogues and St John de Brebeuf who were French Jesuit priests.

Both of Kateri's parents died of small pox when she was only 4 years old. Kateri also contracted small pox and although she survived, it left her with scars on her face and affected her eyesight as well. Kateri was taken in by relatives of her father and raised among the Mohawks after the death of her parents. Kateri's mother was Catholic but, to her great regret, she had not gotten Kateri baptized prior to her death. Shortly after the death of her parents, however, Jesuit priests came to Kateri's village and, upon hearing them speak of the faith, she was filled with a great desire for our Lord. To her disappointment, she was not able to receive baptism in this first real encounter with the faith because the priests were there for only 3 days and did not have time to prepare her. It wasn't until she was 18 years old that she was finally able to receive the Sacrament of Baptism.

As a young girl Kateri lived, exteriorly, the life of a fairly normal Mohawk girl insofar as she dressed in the same way as other girls and did the usual chores of a young Mohawk girl – gathering firewood, making clothes, and so on. However, she would not participate in the dances and games of the tribe. Prisoners of war were sometimes tortured or even burned alive. Kateri would have no part of this and in fact she herself suffered much, interiorly, whenever this happened. She considered it an offense against goodness to even watch such things. She also refused all attempts to have her marry. This last point is worth pausing on. Although never having the opportunity to be part of a religious order, Kateri would later on become (basically) a consecrated virgin, consecrating herself entirely to God like a religious sister. However, she would not have known this at the time of her refusal to marry, she wouldn't have known about the Blessed Mother or consecrated virginity. She simply didn't want to get married. From this we should notice that our Lord has a way of interacting with people so as to lead them into their true vocation, if only we listen and respond. This is not unique to St Kateri but it stands out in her case because of her scarce knowledge of the faith at the time.

Kateri's uncle was a leader amongst the people and he had some antipathy towards both the French and Catholicism. Virginity was also seen as a curse among the Mohawks. Eventually, then, Kateri's refusal to marry, her baptism and embrace of the Catholic faith, received through the French nonetheless, her refusal to participate in ungodly practices, her renunciation of jewelry and other self-aggrandizements, her refusal to work on Sundays – in short, her dedication to God – made for many trials in her village (as Scripture says: if you wish to follow God, prepare yourself for trials). She was mocked and ridiculed and given the worst work of the village. She bore it with great patience. In the meantime, there were a number of natives who had not only converted to Catholicism but had done so with great zeal and commitment and they desired to bring other natives, including Mohawks, into the faith. They were very faithful Catholics and they had formed a settlement just north of Montreal Canada (the city of St Andre Bessett) called Caughnawaga, meaning "Indians of Prayer." A Mohawk from this settlement came to Kateri's village and Kateri was filled with desire to live with them, with other Catholics who loved and practiced the faith with great sincerity. By the way, do we have any such desire? Do we desire to be among saints, to have as friends those with a sincere desire for God and to live among His saints? Is our desire for God or for comforts? Kateri eventually did move (was smuggled out) to

Caughnawaga and it was here that she finished out her relatively short life of 24 years. Even amongst these faithful and zealous Catholics, St Kateri's virtue and life of prayer and mortification stood out.

What about her interior life? First, we might notice some similarity to a French saint who would come about 200 years after St Kateri – St Therese of Lisieux. St Kateri received the faith from French priests. St Therese was also very devout and from a young age. St Therese is known as the Little Flower, St Kateri as the Lily of the Mohawks. St Therese also died at the age of 24. St Kateri was a quiet child with a very active interior life; in her childhood, St Therese would find a hiding place to go and “think,” as she put it when she was a child – in fact, she was engaging in prayerful meditation.

St Kateri is known by two monikers: Lily of the Mohawks and The Genevieve of New France. These two “titles” reflect much of the same thing. St Genevieve lived in the 400's in what is today France. At that time there were still many barbaric tribes roaming through Europe, pillaging and burning cities. It was the prayers of St Genevieve that turned back Attila the Hun's planned attack on Paris. Does our Lord not call all Catholics today to be “The Genevieve of New France?” While these titles of St Kateri have obvious fittingness, at the same time, if I was to give her a name I believe it would be: **The Saint of the Inner Room**. Do you remember our Lord saying: when you pray, go to your inner room? By this meant He meant: retreat into the silence of our own interior, where it is you and I alone communing. St Kateri practiced this with scarcely the most basic knowledge of the faith and with no exterior support. Can we not strive to do the same?

What else can be gleaned from St Kateri in regard to this call for all Catholics, especially today in our own country, to be “The St Genevieve of New France?” First, we might consider Kateri's own interior identity. Was she first and foremost Mohawk? Algonquin? A woman? A slave? She was first and foremost Catholic, a disciple of our Lord. Her race, gender, work – none of these exterior things were the *core* of her identity. Without scorning anything else, her core identity was that of a daughter of our Lord. Can we say the same? What is your core identity? Is it your work, your family heritage, your nationality or race or tongue, your political party? Or, is it: son or daughter of Christ? Nothing else can be first.

Suppose you were able to go back in time and walk into Kateri's village – not Caughnawaga where she died but where she grew up. When you enter the village it doesn't take long to see who it is who is mocked, ridiculed, and scorned. Now in the quiet of your own mind and with complete honesty and sincerity, ask yourself: who do I gravitate towards? Do I gravitate towards the rulers of the village? Do I join in on the “fun?” In short, do I seek the first place? How many times and in how many different ways do I seek the first place in everyday life? This is not the way of the saints, not the way of our Lord. This tendency is something that has to be rooted out and trampled upon if I am to be a son or daughter in my Father's Kingdom. I must be friends with His friends, which are the lowly. Now there are some who would sincerely gravitate towards Kateri and might even rebuke those who treat her so harshly. But then I need to go just a little further. Is it simply because I pity her and maybe want to better her circumstances, *or*...is it because I want to be like her? *Of course*, it is right to be compassionate towards those suffering, but the point here is that to get to the Kingdom of Heaven we cannot pity the meek and humble of heart, we have to become one of them.

St Kateri Tekakwitha...Pray for us.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn