

Mass in Honour of the Canonization of St. Kateri Tekakwitha

Holy Rosary Cathedral

28 October 2012

Dear brother priests, consecrated men and women, dear elders and First Nations peoples of our Archdiocese;

Introduction

Welcome to all of you who are gathered here in our mother church, Holy Rosary Cathedral, to celebrate the canonization of St. Kateri Tekakwitha, the first indigenous saint from our lands. For all of us, this is truly an occasion of joy and of thanksgiving to the Creator, and so we can sing out, “this is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps 118:24).

Some of you here this afternoon were present last Sunday in St. Peter’s Square, under a brilliantly blue Roman sky, when the Holy Father pronounced the solemn words that “for the honour of the Blessed Trinity, the exaltation of the Catholic faith and the increase of the Christian life” Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha was enrolled among the Saints and henceforth is to be “venerated as such by the whole Church.”¹ Now we know with the certainty of faith what we had long intuited in our hearts, that little Kateri is among the “great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and

¹ Benedict XVI, Formula of Canonization (21 October 2012).

languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev7:9). No longer just the “Lily of the Mohawks,” though she will remain always that, she is now the “Lily for All Nations.”²

Biography

Kateri’s life story is as simple and pure as the Gospel itself. She was born in today’s New York State in 1656 to a Mohawk father and a devout Catholic Algonquin mother. Legend tells us that they gave their daughter the name Sunshine.³

When she was four years old, Kateri’s parents and only baby brother died during a smallpox epidemic. She, too, contracted the disease and, for the rest of her life on earth, her face was left horribly pockmarked and her vision seriously impaired. Her uncle took her in, and she was raised among the Mohawk people in Caughnawaga. They gave her the name “Tekakwitha,” which means “she who puts all things in order.”⁴ Why this name? Because, due to her poor eyesight, she had to be so careful wherever she walked or whatever she did.

Living among the Mohawks, she had fond memories of her

² Cf. Angela Cave, “A Lily for All Nations,” *Columbia* (September 2012), 17.

³ Cf. Kateri Mitchell, “Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha: ‘She Who Puts Things in Order.’”

⁴ Peggy Curran, “Aboriginal Saint Becomes a Continental First,” *Vancouver Sun* (20 October 2012), B 1.

prayerful mother and of the Catholic faith about which she heard as a little girl. These memories remained indelibly impressed upon Tekakwitha's heart and gave shape and direction to her destiny. Even before her Baptism, she liked to go into the woods alone to speak to God and listen to him in her heart and in the still voice of his creation. When three French Jesuits arrived in the village, her emerging faith was kindled. She was fascinated by the new stories the Blackrobes told about Jesus and wanted to learn more about him.⁵

Despite her impaired eyesight, her inner vision was growing clearer. Deep within her, she received the gift of seeing clearly the truth of Christ and his Church. True vision comes from the gift of faith which carries with it the capacity to see clearly the beauty of God and his plan for us.⁶

At long last, at the age of twenty, Tekakwitha was baptized on Easter Sunday, and took the name Kateri, the Mohawk translation of "Catherine," in honour of the fourteenth-century Italian mystic and woman of action, Catherine of Siena. Sadly, after her Baptism, harassment, ridicule and threats from her kinfolk followed. When her

⁵ Cf. Thomas Rosica, "Model of the First Evangelization and New Evangelization," *L'Osservatore Romano* (7 March 2012), 6.

⁶ Cf. Richard Smith, Homily, Mass in Honour of the Canonization of St. Kateri Tekakwitha, Rome (22 October 2012).

family urged her to marry, “she replied very serenely and calmly that she had Jesus as her only spouse. This decision, in view of the social conditions of women in the [Native] Indian tribes of that time, exposed Kateri to the risk of living as an outcast and in poverty.”⁷ Consequently, because of her new faith and her determination not to marry, she was advised to leave her village.

Kateri then undertook a long journey, armed only with a note from Father de Lamberville to take to her new home. The note prophetically read: “I send you a treasure. Guard her well.”⁸ Finally, she arrived took at St. Francis Xavier Mission, a Christian Mohawk village in Kahnawake near present-day Montreal, and took refuge there for the rest of her days.

⁷ Blessed John Paul II, Homily, Mass of Beatification (22 June 1980)

⁸ Angela Cave, “A Lily for All Nations,” *Columbia* (September 2012), 17.

In the Mission, her life was, in the eyes of the world, quite ordinary. She worked, faithful to the traditions of her people, but all the while she was growing in holiness. “The closer she came to God, the more she filled her life with work, looking upon each little task as a divine opportunity and a chance to remain united with him.”⁹

Just shy of her twenty-fourth birthday, she died from tuberculosis, on April 17, 1680, the Wednesday of Holy Week, at three o’clock in the afternoon. Her last words on earth, no doubt soon repeated when she met her Lord in paradise, were “Jesos Konoronkwa,” “Jesus, I love you.”

Only minutes after her death, something absolutely astonishing occurred. Her scars disappeared, and her face became very beautiful, “reflecting in her chaste body,” as an eyewitness reported, “a small ray of glory she had gone to possess.”¹⁰ Kateri had received the reward of blessedness belonging to the “pure of heart,” of which we heard proclaimed in the Beatitudes: “they will see God” (Mt 5:8).

Lessons of Kateri’s Spirituality

Kateri left behind no autobiography, no letters, no writings which

⁹ Evelyn M. Brown, *Kateri Tekakwitha: Mohawh Maiden* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 152.

¹⁰ This is from the moving narrations of Fathers Claude Chauchetiere and Pierre Cholenec, who was the Superior of the Mission of St. Francis Xavier when it was displaced to Kahnawake in 1716.

we can draw on to give us a detailed spiritual portrait. Her story comes to us in the biographies written by two Jesuit priests who knew and prayed with her at the Kahnawake Mission.

What do they tell us about her spiritual life? Like St. Theresa of the Child Jesus, hers was a “little way,” an uncomplicated and straightforward desire to love the Lord with all her heart and mind and strength, and to love others in the same way, just as Jesus had done.

To a world grown increasingly sophisticated and mesmerized by glamour, Kateri teaches us that “holiness . . . is a matter of living in the Holy Spirit.”¹¹ Holiness of life – friendship with Christ through prayer and works of charity – is not something reserved to a select few. It is the vocation of everyone; indeed, it is the only call to be taken with absolute seriousness.

Kateri was a determined woman. This is clearly shown in her counter-cultural desire to live a life of virginity. Moreover, she practised even harsh penances for the atonement of sins, out of a desire to imitate Christ and for the salvation of souls.

At the Mission, Kateri’s oft-repeated question to the priests was, “Who can tell me what is most pleasing to God that I may do it?” She spent much of her time in prayer before Our Lord present in the Blessed

¹¹ Blessed John Paul II, Homily, World Youth Day, Toronto (28 July 2002).

Sacrament, kneeling in the cold chapel for hours. Kateri loved the Rosary and always carried it around her neck, but her favourite devotion was to fashion crosses out of sticks and place them throughout the woods. These crosses served as markers that reminded her to spend a moment in prayer.¹² Kateri also had a practical side; she taught the young about Jesus and helped those in the village who were poor or sick.

After her death, Father Pierre Cholenec, wrote about Kateri, whom he called “the sainted young woman.” He observed that she “is today so renowned in New France because of the extraordinary marvels that God has performed and continues to perform everywhere through her intercession.” According to him, Kateri was “a model of humility, devotion, sweetness, charity, and all of the other Christian virtues.”¹³

Honour of Her People

But there are two lessons other than her holiness that we can garner from Kateri’s life as a First Nations woman and a saint, which I would like to mention.

First, “in her, faith and culture enrich each other!”¹⁴ She tells us the truth that the Gospel is to be preached and lived by *all* nations, as

¹² Cf. Thomas Rosica, “Model of the First Evangelization and New Evangelization,” *L’Osservatore Romano* (7 March 2012), 6.

¹³ Cited in Gillian Kantor, “Saint Kateri,” *Salt + Light* (Fall-Winter 2012/2013), 6.

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, Homily, Mass of Canonization (21 October 2012).

Our Lord commanded (cf. Mt 28:19-20).

As Blessed John Paul II said in his address to Native North Americans shortly after her beatification, “It is a time to pause and to give thanks to God for the unique culture and rich human tradition which you have inherited, and for the greatest gift anyone can receive, the gift of faith. Indeed, Blessed Kateri stands before us as a symbol of the best of the heritage that is yours.”¹⁵

Kateri tells us that coming to know Christ Jesus is never intended to destroy any indigenous culture but to build on it and enrich it with the Good News that we heard St. John proclaim in today’s second reading: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are” (1 Jn 3:1).

Healing of First Nation Peoples

And second, if we are humble and open to discerning the “signs of the times,” we can learn from Kateri and the Church’s honouring her that the tragedies of the past and its painful memories can, with the help of God, be healed.

Here perhaps we can take a lesson from the scars on Kateri’s face. While we may not bear physical scars, so many people today carry deep

¹⁵ Blessed John Paul II, Address to the First Nation Peoples of North America (24 June 1980).

emotional, psychological and even spiritual ones. They are not inflicted by smallpox, but by poverty, addiction, loneliness, and betrayal. These scars are caused by the cultural and sexual abuse suffered by Kateri's modern-day sisters and brothers in their time at Canada's residential schools, many of which were run by the Church. So much pain, so many wounds, so much trauma, so many scars! Yet Kateri teaches us that no wound, however deep, should leave us without hope of healing, reconciliation – and transformation.¹⁶

What we cannot do by ourselves, we can do with the grace of God; for he can transform us: enabling those who should do so, to offer apology; and enabling the First Nations people, to accept that apology and forgive. This path to truth and transformation, from scars to healing, is surely one of Kateri's greatest gifts to us, perhaps even the greatest miracle that the Lord has given to the Church through her intercession. She stands above us in heaven as a bridge of healing and reconciliation in our broken world, and as a true symbol of the enduring and unbreakable links between the Church and the indigenous people of our land.

Conclusion

¹⁶ Cf. Richard Smith, Homily, Mass in Honour of the Canonization of St. Kateri Tekakwitha, Rome (22 October 2012).

As we continue now to offer the Eucharist, allow me to conclude with the words of Benedict XVI at last Sunday's canonization: "May [St. Kateri's] her example help us to live where we are, loving Jesus without denying who we are. St. Kateri, Protectress of Canada and the first native [North] American saint, we entrust to you the renewal of the faith in the First Nations and in all North America"¹⁷ We entrust to you the renewal of the faith among the First Nation peoples of the Archdiocese of Vancouver. St. Kateri, pray for us. Amen.

✠ J. Michael Miller, CSB
Archbishop of Vancouver

¹⁷ Benedict XVI, Homily, Mass of Canonization (21 October 2012).