

Resource:

Life Story: Kateri Tekakwitha

Kateri Tekakwitha was born in 1656 in the Mohawk village of Ossernenon, just a few miles west of present-day Auriesville, New York. Her Mohawk name, Tekakwitha, means “she who bumps into things.” Kateri was the daughter of Mohawk Chief Kenneronkwa. Her mother, Tagaskouita, was an Algonquian woman who was adopted and assimilated by the Mohawk before her marriage. This was a common practice among the Mohawk in the mid- to late-1600s, when they were trying to overcome population losses caused by European diseases and fur trade wars. Because of this practice, the community Kateri grew up in was very diverse, with new people and beliefs introduced all the time.

When Kateri was about four years old, her parents and younger brother died in a smallpox outbreak. Kateri survived the illness, but she was left with facial scars, damaged eyesight, and poor health. Kateri was adopted by her aunt, and her childhood was typical for a young Mohawk woman. She learned how to process animal pelts and make clothing from them; weave mats, baskets, and boxes from plant fibers; and plant, tend, harvest, and cook the crops that sustained her community.

When Kateri was about 10 years old, her village was attacked by the French. Kateri and her family were forced to flee into the woods. To end the fighting, the Mohawk agreed to allow French Jesuit missionaries into their territory. The missionaries hoped to convert the Mohawk to Catholicism. Many Mohawk were hostile to the missionaries because they wanted the Mohawk to give up their traditions and encouraged converts to move to Catholic villages. Kateri’s older cousin had converted and moved away a few years prior, so her uncle forbade her from speaking to the missionaries who visited their village.

But Kateri's uncle could not keep her away from the missionaries for long. In 1669, the Mohawk were attacked by the Mahican, a neighboring tribe that wanted to take control of the fur trade. Kateri and other young Mohawk women worked alongside Jesuit missionaries to care for the sick and wounded. Her prolonged exposure to their work and teachings made a strong impression on Kateri. At the age of 13, she told her aunt that she never wanted to get married, an unusual declaration for a young Mohawk woman, but a common path for Catholic women who wanted to become nuns.

In the spring of 1674, Kateri told a visiting priest that she wanted to learn more about his religion. The priest was delighted, and began formally instructing her in the prayers and rituals of his faith. Kateri was baptized in 1676, at which time she took the name Kateri in honor of Saint Catherine. After enduring six months of ridicule and accusations of witchcraft from neighbors in her village, Kateri took the advice of her spiritual advisor and moved to the Jesuit settlement of Kahnawake.

Kahnawake, located just outside of Montreal, was a safe haven and spiritual community for Native men and women who had converted to Catholicism. Daily life in the settlement was a blend of Native and European practices. When Kateri arrived, she was welcomed by a warm community of Mohawk women converts just like her. Her mother's best friend became her mentor in the community, and her older cousin let her live in her longhouse. But the most significant development for Kateri was meeting Maria-Thérèse and Claude Chauchetière.

Kateri was officially canonized as the first Native American saint in 2012.

Maria-Thérèse was a young Native convert about the same age as Kateri, and the two quickly became very close friends. They explored their new faith together, and pushed each other to new extremes in their devotion. Claude Chauchetière was a Jesuit priest

who had only just arrived from France. He was very enthusiastic about his mission to convert Native people, and was impressed by Kateri's dedication to her faith. He became Kateri's closest spiritual advisor.

Kateri, Claude, and Maria-Thérèse pushed their community to new spiritual heights. Claude instructed the two young women in every aspect of their faith, and Kateri and Maria-Thérèse lead their peers in the enthusiastic adoption of each new practice. They experimented with ritual fasting (not eating or drinking), self-mortification (deliberately injuring the body to make up for sins), and asceticism (extreme self-denial), all with the intention of bringing themselves closer to God. Kateri was always the most extreme adherent of their new practices, and sometimes Claude had to step in to stop her before she did herself irreversible harm. When the young women learned about nuns, Kateri declared her intention of founding a convent. Claude marveled at her willingness to completely abandon her former life, and held her up as a model for the entire conversion mission in New France.

The extreme punishments Kateri inflicted on herself did not help her already poor health, and within a few years, Kateri's body had been pushed to its limits. On August 17, 1680, Kateri died with the entire community of Kahnawake collected around her. Everyone who witnessed her death later swore that within minutes her smallpox scars disappeared, and her skin became radiant. They interpreted this as a miracle and a sign that Kateri was a saint, and built a chapel in her honor. Kateri's story spread, aided by a book of her life written and published by Claude, and pilgrims began to arrive to pray at her burial site. Some reported miraculous healings, and Kateri's community of followers grew over the time. She was officially canonized as the first Native American saint in 2012.

Today Kateri's legacy is divisive. Catholics laud her as a beacon of their religion's power to transform lives, while members of the Mohawk community see her as a

victim of the forces of colonization. Regardless of the interpretation of her story, her life demonstrates the way life changed for Native women after the arrival of European colonists.

Vocabulary

- **Algonquian:** Term for all of the people who spoke the Algonquian language.
- **baptize:** To be made a member of a Christian Church.
- **canonize:** To officially recognize someone as a saint.
- **Catholicism:** Membership in Catholic Church, which is led by the Pope in Rome and traces its roots back to the Apostle Paul.
- **convent:** The home of a community of nuns.
- **devotion:** Worship.
- **Jesuit:** A Catholic priest who belonged to the Society of Jesus. Jesuits in New France were devoted to the task of converting Native communities to Catholicism.
- **Kahnawake:** A community founded by Jesuits just outside of Montreal as a place for Native Catholics to live and practice their faith.
- **longhouse:** A large dwelling made of wood used to house extended families in Mohawk communities.
- **Mahican:** A tribe of Algonquian-speaking people who lived in the present-day upper Hudson Valley at the time of European contact. Today, descendants of the Mahicans live in Wisconsin as part of the Stockbridge-Munsee community.
- **missionary:** A person who travels to a new country to do religious work.
- **Mohawk:** A tribe of the Haudenosaunee (also called the Iroquois Confederacy) who occupied the present-day Mohawk Valley at the time of European contact. Today the Mohawk occupy settlements in northern New York and southeastern Canada.

- **nun:** A woman who takes vows to dedicate her life to the service of the Catholic Church.
- **Ossernenon:** A Mohawk village in western New York.
- **pilgrim:** A person who travels to a sacred place for religious reasons.
- **saint:** A person recognized for being especially holy or virtuous.
- **smallpox:** A deadly disease that caused fever and pustules in those who caught it, and left scars on survivors.

Pronunciation

- **Iroquois:** IR-ah-koy
- **Haudenosaunee:** Hoe-den-uh-SHOW-nee
- **Kateri Tekakwitha:** Kuh-TER-ee Tekak-WITH-uh
- **Chief Kenneronkwa:** Chief Ke-ner-ON-kwa

Discussion Questions

- What life circumstances made Kateri uniquely open to conversion by the Jesuit missionaries?
- Why were Kateri's actions lauded by Claude Chauchetière and the other missionaries she encountered? Why was she feared and ridiculed by her Mohawk community?
- What does Kateri's life story teach us about the colonization of New France?