



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of December 3, 2011,
Saint Francis Xavier

Dear Friends,

ONE day in 1676, with no warning, an Iroquois warrior entered the tent of a young Indian woman who had become Christian, in order to force her to renounce her faith. He raised his tomahawk above her head, as though to strike her. For a response, she fell to her knees, her arms crossed over her chest, praying with all her heart. The warrior was at a loss. The tomahawk fell from his hands. He was shamed by his own weakness before the strength of soul of this young woman named Kateri.

In 1656, a little girl was born in North America, in what is now New York State. The girl's mother, Kahenta, an Algonquin Indian, had been taken as a wife by the Mohawk chief Kenhoronkwa. "Mohawk" comes from the name of the river that flows through all the Iroquois land. The young couple lived in the territory of Agniers, a branch of the Iroquois tribe that was still pagan, in the village of Ossernenon, now called Auriesville. It was there that, several years before, the holy Jesuit missionaries Isaac Jogues, Rene Goupil and Jean de La Lande had been martyred for the faith. Kahenta was Christian, and her greatest desire was to have her daughter baptized. But no Indian woman would dare to baptize her own child—that was the role of the "Black Robes," the Jesuits, who wore long black cassocks. But no missionary had passed through this village for two years. Moreover, her husband was very hostile toward Christians. She had to be satisfied with secretly teaching her daughter the mysteries of the true faith.

"Question the beauty"

Purity shone on the brow of this child who loved her mother to tell her stories of JESUS, MARY, and the saints. "Mama, where do the birds come from?"—"God made them, my little one. God made all the beautiful things in the world—He made the trees, the flowers, the birds, and the lakes. He has made everything."

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: "Starting from ... the world's ... beauty, one can come to a knowledge of God as the origin and the end of the universe" (CCC 32). St. Augustine issues this challenge: "Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea, question the beauty of the air distending and diffusing itself, question the beauty of the sky... question all these realities. All respond: 'See, we are beautiful.' Their beauty is a profession [*confessio*]. These beauties are subject to change. Who made them if not the Beautiful One [*Pulcher*] Who is not subject to change?" (Sermon 241).



Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha

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In 1660, disaster struck the village—a smallpox epidemic wiped out a third of the inhabitants, including the little girl's parents and younger brother. The girl did not die, but her face was scarred by the disease, and her eyes weakened to the point that she could no longer endure bright light. When she would go outside in full day, she had to protect her eyes with her shawl. She made her way more by groping with her hands than by looking with her eyes. Hence the name given her: "Tekakwitha," which means, "she who gropes her way along." Later on, in consideration of her many miracles, she would be called, "she who moves everything before her."

Her parents dead, according to Iroquois custom she was received into the home of her uncle, who entrusted her to her aunt. The arrival of a young girl meant two more helping hands—among the Iroquois, the house-keeping, the heavy labor, drawing water from the river, cutting wood and bringing it back, fell to the women, as did the duties of grinding corn, and making furniture, cloth, and tools. The men contented themselves with going hunting and reporting back where to find the game they had killed. The women then had to go to the kill, drag it home, and butcher it. The aunts were demanding and gave their niece so much to do that she had almost no free time. The girl, who liked her work to be done well, generously complied with everything she was called upon to do. She also proved to be very good with her hands.

She had a great desire to please God. In imitation of Our Lady, she wanted to belong entirely to Him and remain a virgin; thus she refused the offers of marriage that were made to her. This was not an easy thing to do, because Tekakwitha was the daughter of a tribal chief. Her uncle had destined her for a proud warrior whom he thought highly of. But all was in vain. Tekakwitha's unyielding will made her uncle and aunts violently angry. From then on, she was treated practically like a slave, and each refusal of marriage resulted in ever more work and scorn.

Thirst for baptism

In 1667, three Jesuit missionaries arrived in the village. By divine providence, Tekakwitha was given the responsibility of offering them hospitality. Father Cholenec would testify to the modesty and gentleness with which the girl fulfilled her function as hostess. She greedily drank in the Fathers' words, as well as the snatches of conversation that she heard in the privacy of the longhouse, but she could not yet confide to them her desire to be baptized. In the fall of 1675, Father de Lamberville was in the village. He received the girl's confidences and became aware of the spiritual value of this soul, already completely prepared to receive baptism. When asking about Tekakwitha's life, he found no one who did not praise the young catechumen, in spite of the Indians' tendency to speak ill of others, particularly of women. Even those who had persecuted her the most could not resist testifying to her virtue. Knowing the Iroquois mentality, the Father found this absolutely extraordinary. Ready to do anything to receive baptism, Tekakwitha dared to ask permission from her uncle, whom she knew to be hostile toward Christianity. Heaven blessed her determination, for, contrary to all expectations, her uncle did not oppose it. On Easter Sunday, April 18, 1676, Tekakwitha was baptised, receiving the name Kateri, in honor of Saint Catherine of Alexandria.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: "Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission." (CCC 1213). Saint Gregory of Nazianzus explains, "Baptism is God's most beautiful and magnificent gift... We call it gift, grace, anointing, enlightenment, garment of immortality, bath of rebirth, seal, and most precious gift. It is called *gift* because it is conferred on those who bring nothing of their own; *grace* since it is given even to the guilty; *Baptism* because sin is buried in the water; *anointing* for it is priestly and royal ...; *enlightenment* because it radiates light; *clothing* since it veils our shame; *bath* because it washes; and *seal* as it is our guard and the sign of God's Lordship" (*Oratio* 40, 3-4, quoted in CCC 1216).

Baptism was for Kateri the dawn of a new life that was going to have its demands. Indeed, our Lord JESUS CHRIST said, *If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me* (Mk. 8:34). Her uncle and aunt wanted her to work on Sundays "like everyone else," but Kateri resisted, explaining that this day was consecrated to the Lord. For she had learned that love of God and eternal life come from observing the Commandments: *If you would enter life, keep the commandments*, JESUS said to the rich young man (Mt. 19:17). Accused of laziness, Kateri was told that if she would not work, neither would she eat. So for many months, she spent her Sundays in an almost complete fast. While her family ate a hearty meal, she would remain seated by her bed, faint and dizzy from hunger. What is more, the other children of the village were encouraged to throw stones and insult her as she went by. She was scornfully called "the Christian" or "the witch."

The Lord's Day

Blessed Pope John Paul II explained the meaning of the sanctification of Sunday and of Sunday rest: "If the first page of the Book of Genesis presents God's 'work' as an example for man, the same is true of God's 'rest': *On the seventh day God finished His work which He had done* (Gn. 2:2). ... Sunday is the day of rest because it is the day 'blessed' by God and 'made holy' by Him, set apart from the other days to be, among all of them, 'the Lord's Day'. ... All human life, and therefore all human time, must become praise of the Creator and thanksgiving to Him. But man's relationship with God also demands times of explicit prayer ... 'The Lord's Day' is the day of this relationship *par excellence* when men and women raise their song to God and become the voice of all creation. This is precisely why it is also the day of rest. Speaking vividly as it does of 'renewal' and 'detachment,' the interruption of the often oppressive rhythm of work expresses the dependence of man and the cosmos upon God. Everything belongs to God! The Lord's Day returns again and again to declare this principle" (Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, May 31, 1998, 11, 14, 15).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains how Sunday (the first day) has taken the place of the sabbath (the seventh day). "JESUS rose from the dead *on the first day of the week* (Mt. 28:1). Because it is the 'first day,' the day of Christ's Resurrection recalls the first creation. Because it is the 'eighth day' following the sabbath, it symbolizes the new creation ushered in by Christ's Resurrection. For Christians it has become the first of all days, the first of all feasts, the Lord's Day... Sunday" (CCC 2174).

In the midst of her trials, Kateri was alone and ceaselessly harassed. Her friend Anastasia and a number of other Christian Indians had left for Canada to live in a village started by the Jesuit Fathers—the Saint Francis

Xavier mission on the south bank of the Saint Lawrence River, across from Montreal. Kateri longed to join them so that she might freely practice her faith, and Father de Lamberville also deemed it prudent for her to leave. Taking advantage of a short absence of Kateri's aging uncle, the missionary had her leave with two Christians, and wrote to Father Fremin, the superior of Saint Francis Xavier mission: "I am sending you a treasure—take good care of it!" On his return to the village, the uncle learned of his niece's flight, and immediately went after her but was unable to catch her. After a long journey, Kateri arrived at her destination. She could finally lead a Christian life, free from all interference. Tears flowed from her eyes at the sight of the chapel—it was the first time she had seen a church.

The most pleasing to God

Father Cholenec did not delay in accepting Kateri among the neophytes who were preparing for their First Communion. Seeing her exceptional zeal and learning with what charity she spent her time caring for the sick, looking after the children, and doing every possible good service, he dispensed her from the rule that required the newly baptized to wait a year before making their First Communion. On Christmas Day 1676, Kateri for the first time received into her chaste heart the One whom she loved above all else. She remained alone in the church for a long time, in thanksgiving with JESUS. Thereafter, her fervor grew from day to day. In his journal, Father Cholenec noted, "From that day on, Kateri seemed different, for she remained entirely filled with God and with love for Him." She asked herself, "Who will teach me what is most pleasing to God, so that I might do it?" But, as the missionaries would testify, her great union with God did not in the least result in her neglecting her work—on the contrary, she did it with an even greater love.

Christmas was also the day before the great departure for the yearly hunt. For the Iroquois, the hunt was part of their life—it was the big event of the year. It was an opportunity for the entire village and for every family to replenish their supplies. Great quantities of meat were brought back, and most of all, rich pelts to trade with the Whites for weapons and commodities. It was also a time for everyone to relax. For the women, it was a holiday. Life in the forest was much more free for them. Of course, they had to butcher the game that had been killed and prepare the pelts, but the rich spoils were the occasion for noisy feasts and parties at which all, men and women alike, indulged with gusto.

For Kateri, this time of the hunt was a trial because it kept her away from the church, the Mass, and the sacraments, and was an occasion for some to behave promiscuously. One day, a very tired man returned to the hut, threw himself onto the first straw mattress he found, and fell asleep—this bed was next to Kateri's. The next day, this man's wife believed that they had slept together; she

had also noticed that Kateri regularly left to go into the forest alone, which aroused her suspicions even more. She spread her suspicions to her friends and, on her return to the village, also confided them to the missionary, who in turn questioned Kateri. The young woman admitted to him that she had gone every day to pray to JESUS in the solitude of the woods, where she had fashioned a little prayer chapel with a wooden cross. It was for her a good way to escape the idleness, games and frivolous conversations of her companions. "I would like for this to remain a secret," she added, "and ask you not to tell the other women. It doesn't matter if they suspect me of having done wrong. My soul is answerable to God alone." These calm words convinced Father Cholenec of her innocence. He told the jealous woman that her suspicions were entirely unfounded. However, for some time, Kateri continued to be watched, a humiliation that she offered to God in union with JESUS CHRIST crowned with thorns.

A profound impression

On Easter Sunday 1678, Kateri was admitted into the Confraternity of the Holy Family, which had been established in New France by the bishop of Quebec, Bishop de Laval, to invite the faithful to reproduce in their individual lives and homes the virtues of JESUS, MARY, and JOSEPH. One day, Kateri visited Montreal, where she met the hospitallers of Saint Joseph at the hospital. She was impressed by these women consecrated to God by the vow of chastity. With two friends, she thought of living in solitude on Huron Island on the Saint Lawrence River, but Father Fremin objected on the grounds of her lack of experience in the Christian life, and the danger to the three women that living alone in this fashion represented. Kateri submitted, and strove to strengthen her interior life while remaining in the world. But she kept the desire to belong to Christ.

The choice of virginity out of love for God makes the Kingdom of God present here on earth, as Blessed Pope John Paul II explained to religious in the apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, of March 25, 1996: "*Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also* (Mt. 6:21). The unique treasure of the Kingdom gives rise to desire, anticipation, commitment and witness. In the early Church, the expectation of the Lord's coming was lived in a particularly intense way. With the passing of the centuries, the Church has not ceased to foster this attitude of hope: she has continued to invite the faithful to look to the salvation which is waiting to be revealed, '*for the form of this world is passing away*' (1 Cor. 7:31; cf. 1 Pet. 1:3-6) ... In fact it has constantly been taught that the consecrated life is a foreshadowing of the future Kingdom. The Second Vatican Council proposes this teaching anew when it states that consecration better '*foretells the resurrected state and the glory of the heavenly Kingdom*' [*Lumen Gentium*, 44]. It does this above all by means of the vow of virginity, which tradition has always understood as an anticipation of the world to

come, already at work for the total transformation of man" (no. 26).

Kateri was now 23 years old, well past the age when the young Indian women were given in marriage. All her friends urged her to marry because, in these young Christian communities, virginity embraced out of love for Christ was completely unknown. Kateri was not understood and was considered "eccentric." She suffered from this, above all when Anastasia harshly reproached her for it. "It is unheard of for a Mohawk woman not to marry! You must obey your elders. Besides, who is going to support you? You will be a burden to everyone if you do not marry. Several young men would like your hand." But all this only confirmed her in her desire to belong to God alone. She consulted with the missionary, who prudently suggested this was a personal decision "which depends on you alone." Her resolve was unshakable—she would have no Spouse but Christ. The priest was astonished and delighted by this decision, never before seen in the tribe. Kateri asked his permission to make the vow of virginity. Seeing that he was in the presence of a soul chosen by God, he gave his consent. On March 25, 1679, after serious preparation, the one who would be called "the lily of the Mohawks" made the vow of perpetual virginity in her heart.

Consecrated virginity is an important witness to the power of God's love in the fragility of the human condition. It proves that what most consider impossible becomes, with the Lord JESUS' grace, possible and a source of genuine freedom. The virginity chosen by the consecrated reminds all the faithful of the need for the virtue of chastity. "As followers of Christ, the model of all chastity, all the baptized are called to live chastely in keeping with their particular states of life. Some profess

virginity or consecrated celibacy which enables them to give themselves to God alone with an undivided heart in a remarkable manner. Others, if they are married live in conjugal chastity, or if unmarried practice chastity in continence" (*Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 491).

The new star

Kateri devoted herself to the poor, the sick, the elderly. Around her neck she wore her rosary, which she recited walking barefoot in the snow. She increased her penances for the conversion of her people. Father Cholenec tried to restrain her a little in her mortifications of the flesh, but she was soon on the verge of death and, over the course of the winter, began to suffer from a violent cough, headaches, and fever. She spent these days of agony praying and speaking about the "Great Spirit" to all who would listen, and they were many, because everyone had benefited from her charity. On Holy Tuesday, Holy Viaticum was brought to her in her poor hut. The next day, April 17, 1680, surrounded by the entire village, after having whispered, "JESUS, MARY, JOSEPH, I love You!", she went to rejoin the Eternal Spouse of her soul. Immediately, she seemed transfigured, and her face became smooth with an astonishing beauty, in spite of the fact that throughout her life, she had kept the scars from smallpox.

Her cult spread quickly among both the Indian and the French populations, and the stories of miraculous cures performed through her intercession grew in number. Sixty years later, she was universally considered the protectress of Canada and "the new star of the New World." She was beatified by Pope John Paul II on June 22, 1980.

During the World Youth Day in Toronto, Canada, Pope John Paul II addressed these words to the Blessed's fellow countrywomen: "I am happy to meet the young people of the First Nations from the land of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha. You rightly call her *kaiatano* (most noble and worthy person). May she be an example to you of how Christians are to be the salt and light of the earth" (July 28, 2002).

Dom Antoine Marie
o.s.b.

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