

This article was originally printed in the December 2011 issue of New Earth, the newspaper for the Diocese of Fargo.

Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha and the 2014 conference

Father John Cavanaugh

In 1656, a girl was born. This new soul, born of the Mohawk Nation located in upstate New York, lived only a short time, and walked with her people, before she surrendered back to God what she had learned about Christ.

The young woman learned about the cross very early in her life when a smallpox epidemic swept through her tribal area and she was marked physically by the disease. She lost many people dear to her in this epidemic, and was orphaned at about the age of 4.

With all the adversities and calamities of living in a world far different from our own, she found Christ. Her mother was a Christian, and she saw the "black robes" journeying through their area on their missionary trips. But, because she was an orphan at such a young age, the directive power of a mother in the faith was lacking. Nonetheless, she found a path that took her to Jesus.

Her story has been documented in a wonderful book compiled and authored with reflections by Father Edward Sherman of the Diocese of Fargo.

This woman was named "Tekakwitha" and later was called Catherine or "Kateri" when she became a Christian. Her legacy, marked by prayer and hardship, has passed through time until 1943 when Pope Pius XII declared her venerable on Jan. 3. With this first major step, support for the sainthood of Kateri Tekakwitha was born.

On July 22, 1980, her name was elevated to the altar as Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha by Pope John Paul II. In 1939 the bishop of Fargo, Bishop Aloysius Muench, instituted a group of clergy working on the reservations within his diocese. It included the Spirit Lake Nation located at Fort Totten and the Turtle Mountains area near Belcourt. This gathering of clergy later developed what we now call the Tekakwitha Conference. From 1939 until 1976, the group continued to function as a support to missionary priests of the northern areas of the Great Plains.

When Kateri was declared venerable in 1943, this group of clergy was placed under the patronage of the "Lily of the Mohawks." Since 1977, the conference has traveled across the United States and even into Canada for its annual gathering. The conference returned to Fargo in 1989 on its 50th anniversary.

Francis Cardinal Arenzi represented the Holy See when the group gathered at the North Dakota State University campus. The history of the conference was well documented by Father Daniel Madalin, OSB, who attended the first and every conference past the 50th anniversary.

Father Dan, who was also known as "Dan Dan the Congressman" and his Indian name "Lean Weasel," was instrumental in bringing the conference back to Fargo for its 50th celebration. It was at this conference that I was ordained as a transitional deacon.

In 2014, the conference will be returning to Fargo for its 75th anniversary. The conference is catechetical in nature and evangelization is a hallmark of its mission to people across the United States, Canada and with KateriCircles that have formed internationally.

In the coming months, more information will be forthcoming about Kateri and the deep hope and prayer of her canonization by the Catholic Church. Information has been received that the miracle required for her elevation as a saint in the church has been reviewed and accepted as valid and has been sent to the Holy See for evaluation. Consequently, that could mean that, in 2012, this wonderful event could occur in Rome.

She would be the first native indigenous woman of North America to be raised by the church to sainthood. The first Native indigenous male saint has already been declared by the church, St. Juan Diego. Many people are unaware of St. Juan Diego's heritage. He was an Aztec Indian of Central America, not of Hispanic or Spanish ancestry.

We have a growing number of people who are being recognized by the church as leading good and holy lives. Yet among that list, the indigenous people have been lacking. The prayer of the conference for many years has been that the Lily of the Mohawks would be recognized as a shining light in the darkness of many of the Native peoples of this country.

As with any endeavor, the process has started to put this conference on stable footing for its return to Fargo for the 75th anniversary. The conference has limited local assets and we are starting to raise funds to help put this event together. A website is under construction and should be up within a couple of weeks. The information will be passed out as soon as it becomes available.

The first venture in fundraising will be a raffle for Native American Star quilts that have already been acquired. Hopefully, more will be coming so that we would be able to have a much larger base for this raffle. If interested in helping or supporting the raffle, or for any other information, please contact me at (701) 847-3096.

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