



Kateri Tekakwitha

Tekakwitha is the name the girl was given by her Mohawk people. It translates to "She who bumps into things." She was born around 1656 in the Mohawk village in Northeastern New York state. She was the daughter of Kenneronkwa, a Mohawk chief, and Kahenta, an Algonquin woman, who had been captured in a raid, then adopted and assimilated into the tribe. Kahenta had been baptized Catholic and educated by French missionaries in Trois-Rivières, east of Montreal. Mohawk warriors captured her and took her to their homeland.^[9] Kahenta eventually married Kenneronkwa. Tekakwitha was the first of their two children. A brother followed.

The Mohawk suffered a severe smallpox epidemic from 1661 to 1663, causing high fatalities. When Tekakwitha was around four years old, her baby brother and both her parents died of smallpox. She survived but was left with facial scars and impaired eyesight. She was adopted by her father's sister and her husband, a chief of the Turtle Clan. Tekakwitha grew up in a period of upheaval, as the Mohawk interacted with French and Dutch colonists, who were competing in the lucrative fur trade.

After the defeat by the French forces, the Mohawk were forced into a peace treaty that required them to accept Jesuit missionaries in their villages. The Jesuits established a mission near Auriesville, New York. While there, the Jesuits studied Mohawk and other native languages to reach the people. They spoke of Christianity in terms with which the Mohawk could identify. In his work on Tekakwitha, The Jesuits used the word *Karonhià:ke*, the Mohawk name for Sky World, as the word for heaven in the [Lord's Prayer](#) in Mohawk. "This was not just a linguistic shortcut, but a conceptual bridge from one cosmology to another."

When Tekakwitha was 11 years old, she met the Jesuit missionaries Jacques Frémin, Jacques Bruyas, and [Jean Pierron](#), who had come to the village. Her uncle opposed any contact with them because he did not want her to convert to Christianity. In the summer of 1669, several hundred [Mohican](#) warriors launched a dawn attack. Tekakwitha, now around 13 years old, joined other girls to help priest Jean Pierron tend to the wounded, bury the dead, and carry food and water to the defending warriors on the palisades. Pierron instructed the captives in Catholic doctrine as best he could and baptized them before they died under torture.

By the time Tekakwitha turned 17, around 1673, her adoptive mother (her father's sister) and aunt had become concerned over her lack of interest in marriage. They tried to arrange her marriage to a young Mohawk man by instructing him to sit beside her. They indicated to Tekakwitha that the young man wanted to marry her. Accordingly, they pressured her to offer him a certain dish made with corn. Iroquois custom regarded this as a woman's sign of openness to marriage. Tekakwitha fled the cabin and hid from her family in a nearby field. Tekakwitha was said to have been punished by her aunts with ridicule, threats, and harsh workloads. But Tekakwitha continued to resist marriage. Eventually, her aunts gave up their efforts to get her to marry.

In the spring of 1674, at age eighteen, Tekakwitha met the Jesuit priest Jacques de Lamberville, who was visiting the village. Most of the women were out harvesting corn, but Tekakwitha had injured her foot and was in the cabin. In the presence of others, Tekakwitha told him her story and her desire to become a Christian. After this, she started studying the catechism with him.

Lamberville wrote in his journal in the years after her death about Tekakwitha. This text described her before she was baptized as a mild-mannered girl and behaved very well. Lamberville also stated that Kateri did everything she could to stay holy in a secular society, which often caused minor conflicts with her longhouse residents. Judging her ready, Lamberville baptized Tekakwitha at the age of 19, on [Easter Sunday](#), April 18, 1676. Tekakwitha was baptized "Catherine" after St. Catherine of Siena (*Kateri* was the Mohawk form of the name).

After Kateri was baptized, she remained in Caughnawaga for another six months. Some Mohawks opposed her conversion and accused her of sorcery. Lamberville suggested that she go to the Jesuit mission of Kahnawake, located south of Montreal on the St. Lawrence River, where other native converts had gathered. Catherine joined them in 1677.

Tekakwitha was said to have put thorns on her sleeping mat and lain on them while praying for her relatives' conversion and forgiveness. Piercing the body to draw blood was a traditional practice of the Mohawk and other Iroquois nations. She lived at Kahnawake the remaining two years of her life. She learned more about Christianity under her mentor Anastasia, who taught her about the practice of repenting for one's sins.

Father Cholonc wrote that Tekakwitha said:

I have deliberated enough. For a long time, my decision on what I will do has been made. I have consecrated myself entirely to Jesus, son of Mary, I have chosen Him for husband, and He alone will take me for wife.

The Church considers that in 1679, with her decision on the [Feast of the Annunciation](#), her conversion was truly completed, and she became the "first virgin" among the Mohawk.

The Jesuits had founded Kahnawake for the religious conversion of the natives. When it began, the natives built their traditional longhouses for residences. They also built a longhouse to be used as a chapel by the Jesuits. As a missionary settlement, Kahnawake was at risk of being attacked by the Iroquois Confederacy members who had not converted to Catholicism.

After Catherine's arrival, she shared the longhouse of her older relative and her husband. She would have known other people in the longhouse who had migrated from their former village of Gandaouagué (also spelled [Caughnawaga](#)). Her mother's close friend, Anastasia Tegonhatsiongo, was clan matron of the longhouse. Anastasia and other Mohawk women introduced Tekakwitha to the regular practices of Christianity.

Around Holy Week of 1680, friends noted that Tekakwitha's health was failing. When people knew she had but a few hours left, villagers gathered together, accompanied by the priests providing the last rites. Catherine Tekakwitha died at around 15:00 (3 p.m.) on Holy Wednesday, April 17, 1680, at the age of 23 or 24, in the arms of her friend Marie-Thérèse. Chauchetière reports her final words were, "Jesus, Mary, I love you."

After her death, the people noticed a physical change. Cholenec later wrote, "This face, so marked and swarthy, suddenly changed about a quarter of an hour after her death and became in a moment so beautiful and so white that I observed it immediately." Her smallpox scars were said to disappear.

This biographic account of Kateri Tekakwitha is adapted from Wikipedia's story.

<https://educationforjustice.org/resource/prayer-feast-st-kateri-tekakwitha-july-14/>