

Native American Saint

St. Kateri Tekakwitha is the first Native American to be recognized as a saint by the Catholic Church. She was born in 1656, in the Mohawk village of Ossernenon (now upstate NY). Her mother was an Algonquin, who was captured by the Mohawks and who took a Mohawk chief for her husband.

She contracted smallpox as a four-year-old child which scarred her skin. The scars were a source of humiliation in her youth. She was commonly seen wearing a blanket to hide her face. Worse, her entire family died during the outbreak. Tekakwitha was subsequently raised by her uncle, who was the chief of a Mohawk clan.

Tekakwitha was known as a skilled worker, who was diligent and patient. However, she refused to marry. When her adoptive parents proposed a suitor to her, she refused to entertain the proposal. They punished her by giving her more work to do, but she did not give in. Instead, she remained quiet and diligent. Eventually they were forced to relent and accept that she had no interest in marriage.

In the spring of 1674 at age eighteen, Tekakwitha met the Jesuit priest Jacques de Lamberville, who was visiting in 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.

At age 19, Kateri Tekakwitha was baptized, and given the Christian name Kateri which is the Mohawk form of Catherine, which she took from St. Catherine of Siena. Kateri also took a vow of chastity and pledging to marry only Jesus Christ. Her decision was very unpopular with her adoptive parents and their neighbors. Some of her neighbors started rumors of sorcery. To avoid persecution, she traveled to a Christian native community south of Montreal.



Kateri was very devout and was known for her steadfast devotion. She was also very sickly. Her practices of self-mortification and denial may not have helped her health. Sadly, just five years after her conversion to Catholicism, she became ill and passed away at age 24, on April 17, 1680.

St. Kateri Tekakwitha was canonized by Pope Benedict XVI on Oct. 21, 2012. She is the patroness of ecology and the environment, people in exile and Native Americans.