

Homily for April 17, 2018

Tertullian wrote in 197 AD:

The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church.

We see how this dictum played out in the life of today's Saint.

Nine years after the Jesuits Isaac Jogues and Jean de Lelande were tomahawked by Iroquois warriors, a baby girl was born near the place of their martyrdom, Auriesville, New York.

Her mother was a Christian Algonquin, taken captive by the Iroquois and given as wife to the chief of the Mohawk clan, the boldest and fiercest of the Five Nations. When she was four, Tekakwitha lost her parents and little brother in a smallpox epidemic that left her disfigured and half blind. She was adopted by an uncle, who succeeded her father as chief. He hated the coming of the Blackrobes—Jesuit missionaries—but could do nothing to them because a peace treaty with the French required their presence in villages with Christian captives. She was moved by the words of three Blackrobes who lodged with her uncle, but fear of him kept her from seeking instruction. Tekakwitha refused to marry a Mohawk brave, and at 19 finally got the courage to take the step of converting. She was baptized with the name Kateri—Catherine—on Easter Sunday.

Now she would be treated as a slave. Because she would not work on Sunday, Kateri received no food that day. Her life in grace grew rapidly. She told a missionary that she often meditated on the great dignity of being baptized. She was powerfully moved by God's love for human beings and saw the dignity of each of her people.

She was always in danger, for her conversion and holy life created great opposition. On the advice of a priest, Kateri stole away one night and began a 200-mile walking journey to a Christian Indian village at Sault St. Louis, near Montreal.

For three years she grew in holiness under the direction of a priest and an older Iroquois woman, giving herself totally to God in long hours of prayer, in charity, and in strenuous penance. At 23, Kateri took a vow of virginity, an unprecedented act for an Indian woman whose future depended on being married. She found a place in the woods where she could pray an hour a day—and was accused of meeting a man there!

Her dedication to virginity was instinctive: Kateri did not know about religious life for women until she visited Montreal. Inspired by this, she and two friends wanted to start a community, but the local priest dissuaded her. She humbly accepted an "ordinary" life. She practiced extremely severe fasting as penance for the conversion of her nation. Kateri Tekakwitha died the afternoon before Holy Thursday. Witnesses said that her emaciated face changed color and became like that of a healthy child. The lines of suffering, even the pockmarks, disappeared and the touch of a smile came upon her lips. She was beatified in 1980 and canonized in 2012.

We like to think that our proposed holiness is thwarted by our situation. If only we could have more solitude, less opposition, better health. Kateri Tekakwitha repeats the example of the saints: Holiness thrives on the cross, anywhere. Yet she did have what Christians—all people—need: the support of a community. She had a good mother, helpful priests, and Christian friends. These

were present in what we call primitive conditions, and blossomed in the age-old Christian triad of prayer, fasting and almsgiving: union with God in Jesus and the Spirit, self-discipline and often suffering, and charity for her brothers and sisters.¹

St Kateri came to know Jesus as the one who truly sustained her with his life-giving bread so that she was able to live with such spiritual focus and trust. For, like St. Stephen, she understood the God whom so many of her community could not see, she saw with such clarity. And as is often the case, people who see “the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God”, do face opposition and persecution in this world.

May we be inspired by the life and witness of Saints Stephen and Kateri to hear Jesus say to us:

Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”²

¹ This biography is taken from: <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/saint-kateri-tekakwitha/>

² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. (1993). (Jn 6:32–33). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.