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A Jesuit who ministered at Ste. Marie mission knew Kateri

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Readers' Page
By

To the Editor:

The Vatican last week announced that Kateri Tekakwitha will be canonized Oct. 21 in a ceremony at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, Italy. Perhaps no time is more providential to recognize the storied relationship of the 17th century mission Ste. Marie at Onondaga Lake and the Kateri Tekakwitha saga.

The directionality of Kateri's Christian faith journey was destined before she was born, with the initial seeds of the faith nurtured into the Iroquois League through the adoption of Huron and Algonquin Christians as a result of the Jesuit missionary efforts of that era. Kateri's Christian Algonquin mother exemplifies this circumstance.

Many "Black Robe" missionaries — as the Jesuits were known — distinguished themselves in their life efforts and through martyrdom in this noble cause. The martyrs are celebrated at shrines in Auriesville and in Midland, Ontario.

The Jesuit missionaries who journeyed to Onondaga Lake to establish the Ste. Marie mission authored a sequel to that evangelistic saga. They considered the intercession of their martyred colleagues as having cultivated the peace that invited the establishment of the Onondaga Lake mission.

The Ste. Marie mission was a major hallmark in advancing mission work among the Haudenosaunee (Five Nations Iroquois). Three days after that contingent arrived at Onondaga Lake, like an omen, Kateri was born among the Mohawk. Three days after her birth, ground was broken on the lakeshore for the construction of the mission compound. Seeds of the faith emanated throughout the territories from that mission operation base.

Although the lack of political cohesiveness among the Iroquois caused the eventual abandonment of the mission site, as providence would have it, that episode led to a chain of events that would ultimately lead to an end of hostilities between the French and collective Haudenosaunee. And the mission field among the Iroquois produced a new yield among the Mohawk.

In 1667, the Rev. Jacques Fremin, a French Jesuit formerly of the Onondaga Lake Ste. Marie mission, returned to Iroquois territory. Accompanied by two Jesuit envoys, Father Fremin arrived in the Mohawk country to advance tokens of peace and the mysteries of their Christian faith. During that visit, the missionaries resided in a longhouse of the Turtle Clan.

There they met an 11-year-old girl, partially blinded by disease, daughter of a deceased Christian Algonquin mother. She was tasked with caring for the Jesuit guests. Through this mutual introduction and relationship was revealed in this little girl a fervent interest in the Christian faith. She would become known as Kateri Tekakwitha.

At age 18, Kateri Tekakwitha would later become further instructed in the faith by the Rev. Jacques de Lamberville and would receive the sacrament of baptism on Easter Sunday 1676. Her virtuous saga would continue until and beyond her proclamation of sainthood in December.

A chapter of Kateri's saga was authored through the New World Christian missionary initiative to include a mission post upon the shore of a little lake known to the Haudenosaunee as Gannentaha. We know it today as Onondaga Lake. The historic site Ste. Marie Among the Iroquois stands today as a testament of that noble pilgrimage.

Jon Anderson is a board member of the Onondaga Historical Association. He is the former president of Friends of Historic Onondaga Lake, a former volunteer operations committee chair for Ste. Marie Among the Iroquois and former site manager (1985) at Ste. Marie "French Fort."

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