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# Kateri Tekakwitha: A Premier Symbol for Native American Evangelization

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## National Council for Catholic Evangelization

### MANY GIFTS, ONE LORD

Evangelization in America's Minority Communities



Dedicated, native catechists played an important role in spreading the Good News throughout native North America. Above, William Eagle Thunder evangelizes Black Thunder and the people of the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota at the beginning of this century, prior to 1912. See inside for more articles on native evangelization. (Courtesy of Marquette University Archives.)

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# KATERI TEKAKWITHA

## A Premier Symbol for Native American Evangelization

by Mark Thiel

Kateri Tekakwitha was one of the first saints in North America. Her life and cultural background are very different from most saints and so, too, has been her recognition by the Church. Her life and the lives of other native Americans show that people from non-European backgrounds can develop a deep love for Christ and that all people need our mutual love and support if that love of Christ is to grow.

The attention we have bestowed on Kateri Tekakwitha mirrors the kind of attention we have given to her fellow native Americans.

Initially, Indian evangelization was one of the principal justifications for non-Indian entry into this hemisphere, but it received little attention as the native population dwindled and was swept aside in the tide of European invasion.

Kateri was a 17th century native American convert of the Mohawk tribe known for her extreme devotion to Jesus Christ. Missionaries denied her request to organize a native religious order because they felt that Indian converts would be unable to sustain a



Pipe ceremony at liturgy, Tekakwitha Conference in Norman, Oklahoma, 1991.

*Courtesy of Marquette Archives and Anne Scheuerman*

commitment to celibate religious life. Nonetheless, she maintained an extraordinary singular devotion to Jesus through the remainder of her short life. Her constant fasting, praying, and practicing various acts of self mortification were native based devotional customs that inspired many others to a deeper, more prayer-filled life.

As yet, Kateri's sainthood has received little attention. Her cause for canonization gained momentum only a decade ago, and so far, her recognition has been largely confined to American Indian circles. Few dioceses have taken the initiative to name a parish in her honor, despite the fact that Kateri is one of the premier saints of this continent and that native American Catholics are now found in virtually all dioceses in the U.S. (half of the two million native Americans now live in cities, especially in the midwest and west).

The surviving Indians were consigned to remnants of their former homelands and were eventually forced to survive on the margins of an industrializing American society. In addition to evangelization, missionaries to the Indians worked to

acculturate and assimilate them first into the various European colonial cultures, and later into American culture, as they saw little future value for Indian culture.

For many native survivors, then and now, baptism was welcomed. It provided a renewed hope, purpose, and salvation for tribal lifestyles that remained fundamentally Indian but radically altered by the alien world around them. As with Blessed Kateri, Jesus came into their lives as part of an ancient native spirituality. That spirituality emphasizes giving thanks for the creation and living in harmony with the earth, its many creatures, and all humankind, as well as the Great Spirit and the many helping spirits.

Today, like ripples on a pond, native spiritual gifts are also enriching the whole Church. In parishes and dioceses with an Indian presence, native song, dance, and ritual enrich liturgical celebrations. Native

Americans, too, are to be found among lay and ordained Church leaders sharing their insights and views on spirituality, justice, and stewardship of the earth. It is time for us to accept the gifts and listen to the views of those who have sacrificed so much and who have long been ignored. We who are their brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ can do no less. ■

*Mark Thiel serves as Assistant Archivist at Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI. Since 1986, he has administered Marquette's historical record collections relating to native Americans and the Catholic Church. These collections total over 500 linear feet of materials and represent the largest body of records of this type in the United States. From 1983 to 1986, Mark was archivist at Oglala Lakota College on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. While there, he established the first professionally staffed archives to be located on an American Indian reservation and administered the historical records of the college and the Oglala Sioux Tribe. Mark can be reached at Marquette University Archives, Milwaukee, WI 53233.*

For more information about native American evangelization or the cause of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, here are two organizations which Mark recommends:

**Tekakwitha Conference National Center**  
**P.O. Box 6759**  
**Great Falls, MT 59406-6759**  
**Phone: 406-727-0147**

The Tekakwitha Conference promotes Native American evangelization and religious education under the protection of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha. The Conference's newsletter is available to members; membership dues is \$10 per year.

**Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions**  
**2021 H. St. NW**  
**Washington, DC 20006**  
**Phone: 202-331-8542**

The Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions provides financial support to Catholic Indian parishes, schools and the Tekakwitha Conference. The Bureau also provides advocacy for Indian rights and justice issues. A free newsletter is available to those interested in the work of the Bureau.

*Editor's note: the movie **Thunderheart** provides scenery from contemporary reservation life in South Dakota and a glimpse of native spirituality.*

## GENEVIEVE CUNY, O.S.F. ON "TEACHING NATIVE AMERICANS"

Sister Genevieve Cuny, O.S.F., of the Sisters of Saint Francis Penance in Denver and former Secretary of NCCE, was published in the March issue of **Religion Teachers Journal**. Her article, "Teaching Native Americans," emphasizes the importance of understanding native American culture and learning styles when trying to help native people grow spiritually.

A native American herself, Sister Genevieve focuses her message around four specific recommendations for those who wish to bring the gospel to native Americans: 1) Know the culture; there is no such thing as a "generic" Indian. 2) Utilize the learning styles associated with observation, artistic and spatial skills and physical activity. 3) Integrate Tribal Stories with Scripture: the stories reveal the genius and portray the values of the native people and, usually, complement the moral lessons of the Gospels. 4) Always involve the family: children, parents and grandparents; revitalizing the community needs to be a primary consideration.

Sister Genevieve is also a major contributor to the book **FAITH AND CULTURE: A Multicultural Catechetical Resource**, published four years ago by the United States Catholic Conference. In that volume, a solid theological foundation for catechetical inculturation is spelled out for the church's efforts to bring the Good News to native American, African American, Asian and Hispanic peoples.

## SPECIAL CONFERENCE NOTE

The importance of knowing, respecting and loving the culture of those being evangelized will be the content of Sr. Maria de la Cruz Aymes's two-hour focus session, **The Role of Culture in Evangelization**, on Friday of our Ninth Annual Conference to be held in Fort Lauderdale, June 10-13, 1992.

Born in Mexico of French parents, Sr. Maria is truly a global citizen. She has been the official U.S. delegate to five International Catechetical Congresses held in various parts of the world.

Sr. Maria has over a hundred textbooks and numerous other books, videos and articles to her credit. Don't miss this opportunity to be inspired!



# NCCE INTERVIEWS

## DEACON DANIEL NEZ MARTIN

*Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament, Fort Defiance, Arizona*

NCCE: Much has been said about the canonization of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha. Do you think that this is really an issue for native American evangelization?

DEACON DANIEL: Canonization of Blessed Kateri is perhaps the single most important factor for awakening the "sleeping giant" of native Catholicism. There is a great need for role models and there is a great starvation for spirituality among native people.

NCCE: Have saints played a role in native spirituality?

DEACON DANIEL: Yes, because it is the native way to respect the wisdom of those who have lived before. Our Lady of Guadalupe has been very important to native people because she is a lady for the Americas. Now we look forward to a native North American role model.



Blessed Kateri

NCCE: Since Blessed Kateri is already admired and respected among native people, will formal canonization really change anything for them?

DEACON DANIEL: I think the change would be a great exhilaration among the people. Here we have a great spiritual energy ready to burst forth. Native people are known for patience, quiet discipline. We are a people "waiting on the Lord" as scripture puts it. We are a prayerful people, following the "beauty way path" or the "pollen way" as we call it. We have a gift to offer; we are waiting for an opening, but no door has been opened. We have a need to be affirmed and empowered to share our great spiritual treasure. In that way canonization is very important. It should not be taken lightly.

NCCE: Do you think there is an element of disappointment in the native community because the cause for canonization has not been promoted with more enthusiasm outside the native community?

DEACON DANIEL: I think it's taking a long time, but native people are used to waiting. We are a very forgiving and reconciling people. Evangelization continues because the hunger for spirituality is so great. It is not so much that something will not happen if the canonization does not come; it is rather that the canonization would be a great catalyst. I think we would see a great acceleration in native ministries, and then we would have the multiplier effect at work. Every effort would be four or five times more effective.

NCCE: What ministries are you currently involved in at Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament?

DEACON DANIEL: I teach the Confirmation classes and help with Marriage instruction. I have the baptismal ministry and preach at regularly scheduled times. I also lead Bible studies.

NCCE: That sounds like quite a bit to do. Do you work outside the church, as well?

DEACON DANIEL: Oh, yes. I am the Public Relations Director for Window Rock Unified School District and serve as the Compliance Officer for the district. I also serve as Signature for the Southwest Indian Foundation, which works for the preservation of culture and language. The Foundation assists with housing, food, heat and water, and works for social justice.

NCCE: In closing, what can we do to further the cause of Blessed Kateri?

DEACON DANIEL: Pray and contact your bishops. Bishops will support what the people truly believe in. Canonization is a long and complex process, but these are two things we all can do.

*Deacon Daniel Nez Martin, a Navajo Indian, can be reached at Box 724, Window Rock, AZ 86515. Deacon Daniel has agreed to contribute an article to a future issue of our NCCE Newsletter; watch for it in the summer or early fall.*