

The Life of the Good Catherine Tekakwitha
Claude Chauchetière (1695)

Tekakwitha, the daughter of Algonquin and Mohawk parents, grew up in the mid-1600s in Mohawk territory that is now part of upstate New York. She became Catholic under the tutelage of a French Jesuit missionary, who baptized her with the saint's name Catherine (rendered as Kateri in the Mohawk language). Another French missionary who knew her, Claude Chauchetière, wrote her biography after she died.

These selections from her biography recount Tekakwitha's early life, her baptism, and the hostility she faced, as a Christian, from her relatives and others in her village. Not long after the events described here, other indigenous Christians helped Tekakwitha relocate to a missionary-led community near Montreal, which is where Chauchetière met her. She died in her early 20s, in 1680, having worn down her health through strenuous ascetic practices. Three hundred years later, Tekakwitha became the first indigenous person from the United States or Canada to be recognized as a saint by the Catholic Church.

Catherine's mother was a faithful Christian Algonquin who had been captured by the Iroquois at Trois-Rivières during their wars against the Hurons and Algonquins [...] The fate of this poor Algonquin captive was to be married to an Iroquois; and from this marriage between a Christian and a pagan, our Catherine was born. The Algonquin woman, whose baptismal name I do not know, bore a son also and lived with her husband and children in Gandaouagué, a small village of the Mohawks.

Smallpox ravaged the village, carrying away many children and adults, which is perhaps what compelled the savages to make peace with the French. Catherine's mother died, leaving behind her two children [...] Then the boy died, leaving only four-year-old Catherine, who had also been stricken by the smallpox and was expected to die. With the passage of time, however, the smallpox secured for her the blessing of her virginity, because her face, which had been good-looking, was ruined [...] She often thanked our Lord for this blessing—for she called this impediment a blessing—because if she had kept her good looks, she would have been more sought after by young men and would have given herself up to sin, like other Iroquois girls. [...]

Catherine's work was to help her mother^a carry firewood, to add wood to the fire when ordered by her mother, and to fetch water when needed by those in the lodge. When she had no work to do, she would entertain herself with her trinkets, by which I mean that she would dress herself up, like other girls her age, merely to pass the time. She would put beads around her neck and cowrie shell bracelets on her arms, rings on her fingers and ornaments in her ears. She made ribbons and bands as the savages do, out of eel skins, cleaned very well and colored red, to tie into their hair. She would put on very large, beautiful belts, or necklaces as they call them, made of cowrie shells. She wept greatly for all this, twenty years later, as she performed harsh disciplines to chastise her body, which she had loved, she said, more than she should have.

^a Her adoptive mother, who was her aunt on her father's side.

As Catherine innocently passed her childhood in this way, God was preparing to bring her to himself. Peace was made between the savages and the French, and several Jesuit fathers were sent among the savages to preach the faith. The fathers arrived at the Iroquois villages during a time of drunken revelry. Because the people in the main village were in no state to receive the fathers as they were supposed to, the fathers stayed instead in the village of Gandaouagué, where Catherine lived. Catherine's uncle was one of the leading elders of that village; it was he who took in the Jesuit fathers. Catherine, who was living in her uncle's lodge, was ordered to provide small services for the fathers. [...]

The girl's surviving relatives, wanting to see her settled, urged her to marry, but she refused. She came to be regarded like a bad slave, a burden on the lodge; so there was a time when, to be rid of her, she was sent from lodge to lodge. This led some of the savages to say, after the death of this saintly girl, that God had taken her because no one else wanted her. [...]

Fathers Frémin, Bruyas, Pierron, and other Jesuits spent years among the Mohawks without ever coming to know Catherine. This was due in part to the malice of her uncle, who, although he permitted people in that country to pray, was doing all he could to keep them from going to pray to God at Montreal. Timidity on Catherine's part may also explain why she never went to ask the fathers to instruct her.

It was while Father Jacques de Lamberville was living among the Mohawks that God looked with mercy on Catherine's lodge and on her [...] Catherine had lived eighteen years as an infidel when God sent her a malady that cured her of sin and that inspired Father de Lamberville to instruct her for baptism. It being springtime, everyone in the lodge had gone out to cultivate their fields, according to their custom. Catherine [...] had an injury on her foot that forced her to stay in bed for a few days, unable to walk. The missionary father had no reason to enter the lodge, because he knew that no one would be idling their time away there, and especially because Catherine's uncle hated the French in Montreal. But passing through the village and reaching Catherine's lodge, the father felt impelled to enter. There he found Catherine.

There was never a more fortunate meeting—for the girl's part, because she had longed to speak to the father but had not dared to go to him; for the father's part, because where he had expected to find no one, he found a treasure. With the first words she spoke to him, Catherine revealed to the father the feelings of her heart, but she explained that her uncle would impede her being baptized for fear that she would leave the country as others had done. The father encouraged her and invited her at least to attend prayers in the chapel. By God's blessing, this first exhortation produced a great effect; for Catherine, once healed, never failed to come pray to God. From that time forward until her death, she frequented only two places in the world, her lodge and the chapel, so that anyone looking for her had to look in those two places only to find her. [...]

After Catherine had persevered for some time in attending prayers as a catechumen, the father decided to baptize her. As baptizing an adult Iroquois was a matter of great consequence, the father restrained at first his own eagerness to baptize her; but seeing her so fervent and endowed with qualities suited to make an excellent Christian woman, he did not want to delay her baptism too long, for fear of depriving God of a soul so dear to him. [...] Catherine herself was overjoyed when she was informed that she would be baptized. She had learned the necessary prayers with

marvelous speed and eagerness, lest her baptism be postponed on the grounds that she was not yet properly instructed. [...] Her baptism was performed with all the ceremonies of the church; two other persons were baptized with her. She was given the name Catherine. The same saint's name was borne by other savages before and after her, but none lived up to the name like the Good Catherine Tekakwitha. [...]

We have seen savages relapse almost immediately after their baptism—becoming even worse than before they were baptized—because, as is typical among that people, they lacked the courage to disregard the opinions of others. Undoubtedly, too, the devil, ruing the loss of his prey, tempts the newly baptized even more, so that they will fall from grace as soon as they have received it. In sum, it is a miracle to see a Christian persevere in Iroquois country. Yet Catherine's Christian profession, her confessor avers, was such that her initial fervor never diminished. Her extraordinary virtue was remarked upon by all, the infidels as well as the faithful. Christians observed how carefully she adhered to the rules for living that the father prescribed for her: that is, to attend morning and evening prayers every day, to attend mass every Sunday, and (as for what she must avoid) to not attend dream feasts, dances, nor any other savage gatherings that are contrary to purity, nor the drunken debauches that the infidels make.

[...] Her lodge began to persecute her, saying that since she had become a Christian she had become lazy, because she did not go out to work in the fields on Sunday. They berated her for this supposed negligence and mistreated her in various ways. It is common in that country to make people give up the rosary, but Catherine replied that she would rather die than give it up. There are some who do not dare to be open when they are the only Christians in their lodge. Catherine, however, displayed an extraordinary firmness of spirit in the face of others' judgment, as when children pointed the finger at her and, instead of calling her by her savage name, called her "Christian," derisively, the way one would speak to a dog. [...] She endured much mockery from magicians, drunkards, and all the enemies of prayer, among whom was her uncle. One day, as a ruse to make her abandon her resolve, Catherine's uncle enlisted a young man to go into the lodge with a hatchet, as if he were going to split open her head—to terrify her and thus, perhaps, to prevent her from following the others whom the Great Mohawk had taken to live in La Prairie de la Magdelaine.^b [...] When she refused to work in the fields on Sunday, they hid everything there was in the lodge to eat and left nothing for her of what had been prepared for that day, so that hunger would force her into the fields to work. [...]

She would have liked to leave the country, but she did not dare to speak up when the Great Mohawk and other Christians from La Prairie came among the Iroquois. She was greatly comforted to see them but greatly grieved when they returned to La Prairie without her.

^b "The Great Mohawk" was Joseph Togourou, a chief who had become Catholic. La Prairie de la Magdelaine was a community created by Jesuit missionaries just south of Montreal; the missionaries encouraged indigenous converts to resettle there.

Source: Claude Chauchetière, *La vie de la B. Catherine Tegakouiita, dite à présent la Sainte Sauvagesse* (Manate [Manhattan, NY]: Presse Cramoisy de Jean-Marie Shea, 1887), 19-20, 24-26, 42-46, 48-49, 52-53, 55, 57 (chaps. 1-3, 6-9), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/njp.32101063840563>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts translated into English and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Paragraph breaks adjusted for readability. Spelling of names, capitalization, and punctuation modernized. The English word *savages* translates the French *sauvages*, which the source uses to refer to indigenous peoples generically (i.e., when tribe or nation is not identified); in the translation, *savages* is consistently presented in lowercase, which is how *sauvages* usually, though inconsistently, appears in the source. The English word *mass*, referring to the Catholic rite, is presented here in lowercase, replicating the source's use of lowercase for French *messe*. The lowercasing of *father(s)*, referring to priests, likewise replicates the source's lowercasing of *pere(s)*, except that unlike in the French source, the English word is capitalized in this translation when it immediately precedes a name (*pere Jaque Lamberuille* → *Father Jagues de Lamberville*).



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