

# Of Councils, Saints, and the National Shrine

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The Year of Faith (11 October 2012 – 24 November 2013) is a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the convening of the Ecumenical Vatican Council II. The convocation of this council was neither a whim nor an impulse but an event that was years in the making. In fact, during the reign of Pope (Venerable) Pius XII, there were whisperings among the colonnades of Bernini that the Church was preparing secretly for a council. It was not until the election of Pope (Blessed) John XXIII however, that anything materialized. On 25 January 1959, three months after his election, Pope John XXIII announced to the world his intention to hold a diocesan synod in Rome and then a universal ecumenical council.

The National Shrine, like the newly proposed council, had also been years in the making; its final stage of construction occurring during the pontificate of Pope Pius XII and the solemn dedication during the first year of the pontificate of Pope John XXIII. In an autograph letter read at the dedication Mass on 20 November 1959, Pope John expressed his “extremely gratifying and enduring joy” when he learned of the completion and dedication of the National Shrine, this national church of pilgrimage that “rises up to heaven...high and massive, wondrously bright...a clearly visible manifestation of...extraordinary piety.”

In 1962, following three years of rigorous preparatory work, an aged and ailing Pope John XXIII opened Vatican Council II on October 11, wearing a hand-made gold stole given to him as a gift on his 80th birthday by Cardinal Spellman of New York. During the interim between sessions, all council preparations came to a halt with the death of Pope John XXIII on 3 June 1963. Vatican City Radio reported that as a “deathbed gift” the Holy Father returned the gold stole to the faithful of the United States as a token of his “esteem and affection.” The Basilica of the National Shrine of the

Immaculate Conception, “America’s Church,” houses this historical vestment, a touchstone of Vatican II and the Pilgrim Church.

As history and Providence would have it, three years before his election as Pope Paul VI, Cardinal Montini paid an unexpected visit to the National Shrine. At that time, the interior of the National Shrine was unadorned. The lateral chapels were still on the “wish list”; the main altar in the Upper Church was awaiting the baldachin; the walls were brick; the galleries were yet to be built, and the windows were plain glass. Its simplicity notwithstanding, the Cardinal

found the church powerful and dynamic: “The strength of this beautiful Shrine is much more than its massive dimensions; to me it represents America’s deep faith in Christ and His Blessed Mother.”

In 1976, Pope Paul VI received a photo album of events held at the National Shrine. With the same keen awareness

demonstrated during his visit in 1960, the Holy Father noted the changes to the interior, the most recent of which were the nave galleries adorned with saints sculptured in relief. Diverse in their ethnicity, nationalities, and generations, these saints represent the Pilgrim Church, “this communion of the whole Mystical Body of Jesus Christ” through which “God shows to us in a vivid way, his presence in the lives of those companions of ours in the human condition who are more perfectly transformed into the image of Christ.” (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November 1964, Ch. VII, The Pilgrim Church, §50.)

## *Kateri Tekakwitha*

Long before the first voyagers “discovered” North America, indigenous peoples lived amid the natural wonders and bounties of the land. Native Americans possessed religious traditions of their own and lived their lives responsive to a spiritual realm. During the 17th century, Catholicism came to the Native Americans primarily through the efforts of the French Jesuits.



In 1656, a Christian Algonquin mother, raised among the French, and a non-Christian Mohawk father gave birth to a little girl: Tekakwitha. The meaning of her name has been interpreted in several ways: “she-pushes-with-her-hands” or “who walks groping for her way” (because of her impaired vision), “hard-working woman,” or “gathering things in order.”

Tekakwitha’s father was a Mohawk war chief, one of the five nations of the Iroquois League that had allied with the Dutch against the French and by extension the Jesuits. The family lived in the village of Ossernenon on the Mohawk River, known today as Auriesville, New York. Fourteen years earlier, this same Mohawk community captured the Jesuit priest Isaac Jogues and his lay missionaries, René Goupil and Jean de le Lande. The three belong to the group of eight known as the Martyrs of North America.

Orphaned during the smallpox epidemic of 1660, Tekakwitha survived but was left partially crippled, her vision severely impaired, and her face pockmarked. We are told that her uncle, an adversary of the French Catholics, raised Tekakwitha in the neighboring village of Ganadawage. When the Jesuits came to Ganadawage, Tekakwitha observed the “Blackrobes” with interest. In time, she began catechetical instructions; she was baptized “Kateri” (Catherine) on Easter Sunday, 1676.

Kateri made every effort to observe the Christian life. Within her extended family however, her Christian practices met with opposition. As a result, Kateri fled the lodge of her uncle in 1677 for the Christian Indian village of Kahnawake or Saint Peter’s Mission, located on the Saint Lawrence River near Montreal.

At Kahnawake, the Native Americans were free to attend religious services. The community maintained its Iroquois traditions by blessing the harvesting of the crops, fishing, and hunting with songs of thanksgiving in their native languages, with melodies and lyrics derived from the practices of the French Jesuit missionaries. In addition, they sang the Ten Commandments,

the Rosary, the Creed, and the Stations of the Cross.

Kateri entered the Christian life of Kahnawake with such great zeal that she became known as an “angel of charity,” caring for the elderly and infirmed, bringing firewood to the needy, and speaking words of kindness to everyone. The sincere and authentic Christian devotion practiced by Kateri enabled her to bypass the customary years of religious instruction that the Jesuits required before one could receive Holy Communion. On Christmas day 1677, one year after her baptism, Kateri made her first confession and received her first communion.

As her spiritual life deepened, Kateri sought a greater identity with the Blessed Virgin Mary. On the feast of the Annunciation (March 25) in 1679, Kateri made a solemn vow of perpetual virginity, a lifestyle which was in strong contrast to her ancestral culture. Zealous in her prayer and penitential practices, she died on April 17, 1680, the Wednesday of Holy Week, at the age of 24. Those who were with her at the time of her death reported that her smallpox scars disappeared and she became radiantly beautiful.

On 21 October 2012, the canonization celebrations in Vatican City began at dawn in Saint Peter’s Square. Native Americans dressed in beaded and feathered headdresses and leather-fringed tunics honored Kateri through the singing of songs and the beating of drums. Later that morning, Pope Benedict XVI spoke in English and French as he reflected on the life of this Algonquin-Mohawk maiden, “Kateri impresses us by the action of grace in her life in

spite of the absence of external help and by the courage of her vocation, so unusual in her culture. In her, faith and culture enrich one another. May her example help us to live where we are; loving Jesus without denying who we are. Saint Kateri, Protectress of Canada, and the first Native American saint, we entrust to you the renewal of the faith in the first nations and in all of North America! May God bless the first nations.”

The marble sculpture of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha (July 14) by Dale Claude Lamphere, located in the Hall of American Saints, is the gift of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions.✠

