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Prayers for the people who bump into things

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Aug. 23, 2010

A prayer for the canonization of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha appears behind a statue of her inside St. Peter's Chapel on the grounds of the shrine dedicated to her. (CNS /Nancy Wiechec)

I?ve never had much luck with Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha. The first time I ever kept her day, I was in theology graduate school with a bunch of people who should have known better. That some of us didn?t know better became clear when I walked into an empty classroom and found, under an invitation to remember Kateri Tekakwitha in prayer, directions to the ?great oak? chalked on the board.

Though I didn?t know which of the many oaks on campus was the ?great? one, it was fairly easy to pick out the tree with the black boom box at its roots and a bright orange industrial extension cord snaking from the tape player through the grass, up the wall and over the sill into the window of the women?s bathroom.

My classmates appeared, all of us walking toward the tree like freshmen walking into the gym at the homecoming dance, looking for a familiar face and hoping we wouldn?t have to do anything ?weird.? And, like freshmen at the homecoming dance, our hopes would be for naught.

From the boom box came a hesitant woman?s voice, backed by hesitant drums, singing a song about amphibians and holy women and the wind and the cardinal points of the compass.

We joined hands and began a circle dance, doing the ?grapevine? step familiar to anyone who ever attended camp. Cross hands, right over left or left over right, and clasp the hands of the person next to you.

I now think the crossed hands is less an aesthetic choice than a matter of engineering: The crossed hands form a kind of bulwark against the stumbling that usually ensues when people attempt to move in a rhythmic collective.

Then the feet begin moving, crossing over again and again as the circle moves -- at least, in theory -- now left, now right, while a voice sings about the Mohawk Lily of the Sister Turtle Clan. Our dancing slowed and ground to a halt when the tape stopped, unplugged, perhaps, or just badly recorded.

We blessed the north wind -- and the south, east, and west winds. We inhaled burning sage. We heard a reading from Chief Seattle.

We competed, unintentionally I?m sure, with a group of Cub Scouts bivouacked on a nearby field. They were yelling, ?Boom-shocka-locka-locka,? and ?U-G-L-Y, you ain?t got no alibi, you ugly.? And they were singing, to the tune of ?The Battle Hymn of the Republic,? that song beloved of American children for generations, ?Glory, glory, hallelujah/glory, glory, what?s it to ya??

It?s a familiar story, I know, but the Turtle Clan proved to be no match for the Cub Clan.

I have filed this embarrassing ritual incident along with the time I wet my pants just before walking down the aisle in urine-stained taffeta to strew rose petals before Sue Harris at her wedding.

And, just as I have never wet my pants at another wedding, so too have I avoided circle dances and burning sage and Kateri Tekakwitha-themed gatherings.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I arrived in Detroit for this year?s National Pastoral Musicians? Convention and realized Mass would be celebrated with the cardinal archbishop of Detroit on Kateri Tekakwitha?s feast day.

Yes, I thought about hiding out in my hotel room and watching ?Top Chef.? But I didn?t want to miss the chance to sing with so many talented musicians, the chance to stand surrounded by the glorious sound of people praising God in song. That was the delight of the convention. Besides, I had heard the gospel choir from Sacred Heart Parish in downtown Detroit just a few nights before, and that choir makes you want to *sing*.

Dear reader, I went.

And found myself nonplussed when the cantor sang the Kyrie in Lakota. Now, Kateri Tekakwitha wasn?t from a Plains tribe. She wasn?t Sioux. She was a Mohawk-Algonquin woman from the Hudson Valley area of what is now northern New York state.

The Lakota language comes from the Sioux tribes who moved from the Great Lakes region to the plains of what are now the Dakotas. Lakota speakers come from the westernmost regions of the Sioux nation.

It would be, I thought as I stood there, a bit like singing the Kyrie in Urdu for a Dari-speaking Afghani saint. I mean Pakistan and Afghanistan; they?re close, right? They?re both ?stans, after all.

When it comes to the story of the Native Americans and the Christians who came to their shores, our wedding garment as the bride of Christ is stained in embarrassing places. It is good to hold the stains up to the light. It is good to do what we can to cleanse them and restore our garment?s luster. And it is not surprising that we stumble along the way.

I?m told the name ?Tekakwitha? comes from a childhood taunt towards the young Kateri, who had been marked and nearly blinded by smallpox. I?m told Tekakwitha means ?she who bumps into things.?

Heaven knows, ?she who bumps into things? is a good name for a Christian, since stumbling is so often what we do.

The church is right to honor Kateri Tekakwitha. She followed Christ at the cost of everything. Like the first disciples, Kateri Tekakwitha left her family and her tribe, everything she knew and loved, to serve the Lord she loved even more. Her conversion brought neither honor, nor acclaim or power. There must have been times of such loneliness when she left her family?s ways and beliefs. There must have been harsh words from relatives who saw only her abandonment and not her belonging.

Some of the Europeans among whom she settled must have viewed her with suspicion and mistrust, as less than

human because of her dark skin and strange tongue.

Kateri?s pain must have been much like Mary?s, a young girl whose call she alone has heard and whose call confounds those who raised and love her.

The church is right to honor Kateri Tekakwitha and other saints whose names and tribes remain foreign to us. Honoring those we have dishonored is one way to get up when we fall, one way to get back on the way. But we have to be careful, I think, that we don?t slip into ?playing Indians,? that pastime of all of us who grew up on westerns and got the words ?Calvary? and ?cavalry? mixed up in more ways than one.

Is there a Mohawk or Algonquin speaker among us? Is there a written record of either language? If not, perhaps, when we honor Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, we should just stick with the Greek, *Kyrie eleison*. The Greek in the Mass is, some scholars teach, a remnant, some of the few words that remained when the Latin overtook the liturgy. Understood in that way, the Kyrie, just as it is, honors Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha and all those, the faithful remnant, which has been brought low when we stumbled and knocked down when we fell.

[Melissa Nussbaum is coauthor, with Jana Bennett, of *Free to Stay, Free to Leave: Fruits of the Spirit and Church Choice*.]

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