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Culture, faith on display at Mass honoring Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha

Michelle Martin Catholic News Service | Mar. 1, 2012

Johnnie Jimenez holds sage during a Native American "Four Directions" prayer before a Feb. 26 Mass at the Kateri Center in Chicago to celebrate the upcoming canonization of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha. At left is Auxiliary Bishop Francis J. Kane of Chicago. (CNS photo/Karen Callaway, Catholic New World)

CHICAGO -- Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha mixed her own Mohawk and Algonquin culture with the Catholic faith she first inherited from her mother and later learned from Jesuit missionaries.

That blend of culture and faith was on display Feb. 26 as the people and staff of the Kateri Center, the Archdiocese of Chicago's American Indian Ministry, celebrated the announcement earlier in February that Blessed Kateri will be canonized Oct. 21, along with Blessed Marianne Cope of Molokai and five others.

She will be the first Native American saint and is seen as a patron for all Native Americans, said Auxiliary Bishop Francis J. Kane, who celebrated the Mass at the Kateri Center.

Her insistence on remaining faithful in the face of opposition -- even banishment -- from her family and community provides a model for every Christian, he said.

"I believe God has provided a wonderful role model for all of us," Kane said. "She combined her Native American spirituality with a Catholic spirituality, in a way that helps us all grow closer to the Lord. We live in a multiplicity of cultures that all vie for our allegiance. Do not let the culture consume you. Work on your spiritual life and embrace the Catholic faith."

The Mass included Native American rituals such as the burning of sage, a prayer recognizing God in each of the four directions -- north, south, east and west -- as well as in the sky and the earth, and music provided by drums and a wooden flute.

After Communion, Florence Dunham, a Mohawk who was raised on the Six Nations Reservation in southwest Ontario, Canada, shared a hymn in the Mohawk language -- the language Kateri would have spoken.

She learned the hymn on the reservation, where songs were sung in the languages of several of the tribes who lived there, she said.

But Dunham did not become aware of Blessed Kateri until she came to Chicago and came to know what was then called the Anawim Center, the archdiocesan outreach to American Indians. A friend -- an Oneida -- showed her a book about Kateri.

Having a Native American saint does make a difference, Dunham said.

"We now finally have a face that looks like us," she told the *Catholic New World*, newspaper of the Chicago Archdiocese.

"We've prayed for a long time," said Irene Big Eagle, a member of the Little Traverse Bay Bands of the Odawa Indians. "When I was 4 years old, my mother talked about her. Now I'm 82. That tells you how long it's been."

Blessed Kateri, known as "the Lily of the Mohawks," was born to a Christian Algonquin mother and a Mohawk father in 1656 along the Hudson River in what is today upstate New York. She was baptized by a Jesuit missionary in 1676 when she was 20. A year later, she fled to Canada and died there in 1680.

Her sainthood cause was opened in 1932, and she was declared venerable in 1943. In June 1980, she became the first Native American to be beatified.

In December, Pope Benedict XVI advanced her sainthood cause by signing the decrees recognizing the miracles needed for their canonizations. On Feb. 18, the pope announced she would be canonized at the Vatican on Oct. 21 with six others.

Georgina Roy, director of the Kateri Center and an Ojibway from Wisconsin, said the elders at the Kateri Center have been praying for years for the gift of sainthood for Kateri. Roy will travel to Rome for the canonization ceremony with financial help of a sponsor, Susan Pearson.

"We're going to be able to hold our heads up higher because of this gift," Roy said. "She is going to heal our scars. We have such wounded people. She has shown us how to love God who embraces us."

Devotion to her has spread far beyond the tribes of the northeast and eastern Canada, Roy said, noting that the Kateri Center has people from tribes that hail from all over North America.

"She belongs to all tribes, to all the world," Roy added. "Our people have suffered so much. They need to see a loving God."

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