



Canonization of St. Kateri Tekakwitha

Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan, *People of God*, October 2012

Sunday, October 21, 2012 was a memorable, moving and historic day! That was the day Pope Benedict XVI canonized St. Kateri Tekakwitha. I led a pilgrimage to Rome for the event and the majority of the pilgrims were Native Americans from various pueblos, plus from the Navajo Reservation and Mescalero Apache. We left on Friday, October 19 from Albuquerque and arrived on Saturday morning in Rome. We could feel the excitement and anticipation of many decades of prayer for Kateri's Canonization and it was going to happen in a few hours!

The crowd at St. Peter's square, around 100,000, was overwhelming. I had the advantage of being near the altar along with numerous other archbishops, bishops and cardinals from around the world (there were six other saints being canonized as well). I was informed later my pilgrimage group could not stay together because of the great number in attendance. Although we had tickets to be seated, half of my group ended up standing for the entire Canonization Mass. It was good there were large screens set up so those in the distance could see.

For me, the most moving moment of the canonization was witnessing the young 13-year-old Jake Finkbonner, member of the Lummi Tribe, receive Communion from the Holy Father. Jake received a miraculous cure through the intercession of Kateri Tekakwitha and it was the final miracle needed for her to be canonized. I can't even imagine what Jake must have been feeling. Jake was five years old when he received a cut on his lip which became infected with a flesh eating bacteria. After much prayer by his family members to Kateri he was cured in 2006. Investigations conducted by the Vatican were confirmed and made public in December 2011. Plans for my pilgrimage were started the day the final miracle was announced.

During our final dinner in Rome on Thursday, October 25, I asked the pilgrims to share what they thought of our time together. One stated that the Native Americans finally felt completely accepted by the Catholic Church because now they have one of their own saints to pray to. Another shared that a prayer has finally been answered. Yet another stated no one could have ever prepared her for the emotions that overwhelmed her, to hear the pope announce Kateri as a saint, to see the pope and to visit all the holy sites. A non-Native American said he felt he had connected a missing line in his faith journey and now he would make it a point to go to Mass at one of the pueblos whenever he could. He now felt he found brothers and sisters among the Native Americans he met on this pilgrimage. One non-Native American man shed tears when he expressed his appreciation for two of our Native American women with whom he spent time at San Clemente Church in Rome. They had shared their life stories with him about their lives as children. One Native American woman stated she felt hope – hope that the various pueblos would start to support each other instead of always working against each other.

We flew home on Friday, October 26. Tired, some with blisters on their feet from all of the walking, one with a sprained ankle from a fall, another with bruises from a fall at the Rome airport. But all in all, we all grew in our faith and have returned with stories to tell those who could not join us. And yes, luggage was lost and one of them was mine! St. Kateri, pray for us!