

Saint Kateri Tekakwitha Mass St James 2024

Bishop Frank Schuster

I have a special connection to Saint Kateri Tekakwitha. My first seven years of my priesthood was spent in Bellingham. I had several assignments, however while I was pastor of Assumption Parish, we had a remarkable young person in our kindergarten class by the name of Jake Finkbonner. Jake's family were parishioners at St. Joseph, Ferndale and so my story is tangential. However, when Jake developed that flesh eating disease after what should have been just a normal scrape kids get, I remember vividly the principal and I having a serious conversation about what to do for the school if Jake passed away. I remember how the conversation became more and more about what to do when Jake passed away. It was so, so very sad.

I was meanwhile one of several priests who visited Jake and anointed him at children's hospital. I asked him years later if he remembered, he didn't, and I don't hold it against him. His hospital room was a revolving door. However, the experience of anointing him was a very special gift for me personally. I told him that everyone at the school was praying for him. I will never forget how he responded. He looked at me and said, "I am praying for you". "I am praying for you". He was five, maybe recently turned 6, and I was amazed at his spiritual maturity. Even with Fr. Sauer, myself, and other priests I am told who visited, who all anointed him, it was the day after Jake's aunt brought Kateri's relic into the hospital room that his flesh-eating disease stopped, and it was just recovery from then on. The doctors had no explanation. Neither did Rome when they investigated, and if you want anyone to disprove a miracle, Rome is very good at it by the way. They do not announce miracles as valid unless it is really and truly the case that a miracle happened. One of the bishops in charge of the investigation called me personally and asked for my input, I told the whole story, how the Finkbonners were connected to the Lummi and how they gained a devotion to Blessed Kateri specifically, of how (by the way) our church at Assumption even had a special shrine with a statue of Blessed Kateri, one of several I believe in Whatcom County.

However, it was Jake's pastor Fr. Sauer who took notice of the similarities between Jake and Kateri. Jake is half Lummi, and so he clearly shared in Native American heritage. They both had diseases that disfigured their faces. Kateri had an awful case of smallpox as a child, that disfigured her. Both were very spiritually precocious. Those are just a few examples; however, for Fr. Sauer, the similarities were so close that he encouraged the Finkbonners to ask for her intercession, and here we are.

Let's talk about the spiritual fruits. When I later heard that Archbishop Sartain was leading a pilgrimage along with the Finkbonners for Kateri's canonization, I arranged it so that my parents and I could tag along a little just for a few of those days in Rome. At one of the masses, I think it was at St. John Lateran, Archbishop Sartain preached about how our Catholic faith is built on the foundation of the Roman martyrs. However, if I recall, he also talked about

what the word “martyr” means. It comes from the Greek word meaning “to witness” and that we are all called to witness.

And this is an important point when it comes to understanding miracles. You see, Jesus does not perform miracles for miracle sakes alone, otherwise we would be asking the question why does one person get a miracle and not another? Miracles are far more than the supernatural healing itself. In fact, in St. John’s Gospel, St. John goes through a lot of effort to make sure the word miracle isn’t used at all. These supernatural moments, that really happened, and happen still today, for St. John, they are best called “signs”. That is what St. John called them because the purpose of a miracle is not for the healing sake alone but rather to be a sign of God’s presence in the world that lead us all to deeper faith in Christ, that points a community that experiences it to deeper heavenly realities, and to shine a light for all of us onto God’s overabundant love and mercy that endures into eternal life. Indeed, miracles can sometimes be exactly what the fig tree in our Gospel reading today needs to bear fruit. That fig tree of course represents Israel who cannot bear fruit without God’s intervention.

You know a miracle by its fruits. In the years I was in Bellingham, I never saw any other event that brought Whatcom County so closer together, Catholics and Non-Catholics, than Jake Finkbonner’s healing through the intercession of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha. Even after all these years, all I can do is take our Blessed Mother’s advice on it, and to simply continue pondering it in my heart. I hope we all continue to do that, lest we forget.

My friends, not all of us can be martyrs in the classical sense. Saint Kateri wasn’t a martyr in the classical sense either. However, like Kateri, every one of us are called to witness. Kateri did so at a young age as a native American who embraced Jesus so tenderly as to be betrothed to him forever in her vow of perpetual virginity, in her deep prayer life, and loving kindness and gentleness to all she met. There were many who criticized her for her profound love of Jesus, accusing her of turning her back on her people. She didn’t see it that way. The cross and resurrection gave her both courage and hope in her infirmity. She saw Jesus as the answer to all her hopes and dreams in the deepest places of her heart.

How was she able to do this? How can we do this? St. Paul explains in our first reading. He says, “Grace is given to each of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” And to paraphrase and expound further, this gift of grace God gives us is meant to foster our spiritual growth, increasing in us an overabundant measure of God’s love that can’t be kept to ourselves. It must be shared for the greater glory of God. My friends, consider that we have all have been given that gift in our baptism. Through the witness of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, may we be better stewards of that gift and find ways to share that amazing grace with others, each and every day, one soul at a time, through Christ our Lord. Amen.