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A Study of the Relationship Between Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha and the United Houma Nation

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The University of Southern Mississippi

A STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BLESSED KATERI TEKAKWITHA
AND THE UNITED HOUMA NATION

by

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A Thesis

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ABSTRACT. This thesis offers an investigation of the factors contributing to the devotion of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha among members of the United Houma Nation. Previous religious and ethnographic studies have examined the veneration of holy figures among minority groups and have produced valuable writings that increase the awareness and understanding of the religious participants' social, political, spiritual, and personal motives for devotion. Interviews with members of the United Houma Nation reveal several factors contributing to their veneration of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha including themes such as shared native heritage, emotional religious connection, recognition for American Indian peoples, opportunities to express indigenous spirituality within the context of the Roman Catholic Church, and cross-cultural relationships established and maintained through active devotion to Kateri Tekakwitha. Additionally, interviews present Houma individuals' before and after reflections on the long-awaited announcement of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha's upcoming canonization as the first Native American saint.

KEY WORDS. Kateri Tekakwitha, United Houma Nation, devotion, Native American saint

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Chapter 1

The United Houma Nation, an American Indian tribe currently located on the Louisiana Gulf Coast, has a history of devastation, syncretism, and perseverance. Like most other indigenous peoples, the Houma have suffered through European colonization, forced relocation, and innumerable other cultural disruptions, which came along with the white man's invasion of the Americas (Swanton 1998). As a people who fish, shrimp, and continue to look to the natural treasures of the coast for their subsistence, the Houma Nation watches with concern as coastal erosion causes their revered homelands to sink into the ocean. They battle the effects of violent hurricanes and toxic oil spills, as well as social and political struggles associated with unemployment, a historical lack of opportunities for education, and the failure of the federal government to grant them tribal recognition (Dardar 2008; Dardar-Robichaux 2010). This Creole tribe that, in its modern condition incorporates remnants of a variety of other native and nonnative ethnicities, has had a distinct cultural identity, which many fear is drowning along with the sacred lands of its ancestors (Hobbs 2010; Huus, 2010; Tran 2010). Still, their reverence for nature, their attachment to an American Indian identity, and their acceptance of diversity are made apparent in contemporary cultural events like the annual Kateri Tekakwitha Mass.

Once a year, various members of the United Houma Nation gather together at Holy Family Church to celebrate a unique ceremony of the Catholic Mass. Drum circles, traditional Native American dances, and the burning of holy herbs are incorporated into the "Indian Mass," a celebration open to people of any religious or cultural background (King 2010). The service is held in honor of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, the first American Indian to be beatified by the Roman Catholic Church (Greer 2005).

Known as the “Lily of the Mohawks,” Kateri is a religious figure with a fascinating life story. She is the patroness of ecology and the environment and has been beatified because of a medical miracle attributed to her intervention. Members of the United Houma Nation who gather at the Mass each year have fervently prayed for a second miracle to occur so their beloved Kateri could receive the recognition they feel she deserves (King, 2010). During the process of this research project, the Roman Catholic Church investigated Kateri’s role in a second medical miracle and determined that she is a valid candidate for canonization (sainthood). The miracle occurred in 2006 in Washington State where a young boy cut his lip playing basketball. The injury immediately became infected with “a flesh-eating bacterium called Strep A,” which caused 6-year-old Jake Finkbonner’s face to swell and his temperature to rise overnight. Doctors were convinced the boy was going to die from this rapidly progressing illness, which had distorted his face in only a few short hours. The boy’s Lummi Indian heritage led his family priest to encourage family and friends to pray to Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha for Jake’s recovery. Once word began to spread about the boy’s medical predicament, Kateri devotees from all over the world were praying for Jake and a representative from the Society of Blessed Kateri visited Jake in the hospital. During the representative’s visit, a Kateri pendent was placed on the boy’s pillow. The next day, Jake’s illness ceased to progress and his recovery began. For the next several years, researchers from the Vatican thoroughly investigated the medical miracle to verify that Kateri Tekakwitha’s intercession was the cause of the boy’s miraculous recovery (*Timesunion.com* 2011). On December 19, 2011, the Vatican officially announced Pope Benedict XVI’s decree that Kateri Tekakwitha is cleared for sainthood

(*Indcatholicnews.com* 2011). As of February 19, 2012, her canonization ceremony is scheduled to take place on October 21, 2012 (*Lohud.com* 2012).

Though Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha has been a figure of great pride and devotion for the Catholic members of the Mohawk tribe since before her beatification, the Kateri Mass is a fairly new tradition for the Houma. Their incorporation of this tradition into their community over the past seventeen years is a phenomenon only briefly mentioned in local newspaper articles about the event (Hobbs, 2010; King, 2010). Reasons members of the United Houma Nation connect with this particular holy figure have yet to be investigated in the field of religious studies. By considering the history and heritage of both Kateri Tekakwitha and the United Houma Nation, several notable connections between the holy woman and the tribe are potential factors that contribute to Houma devotion of Kateri Tekakwitha. The Catholic community within the Houma Nation might simply revere Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha because she is a holy person of the Catholic faith, and perhaps the fact that she, too, was an American Indian causes them to express a unique form of devotion for her. Maybe a broader population of the Houma people, who frequently experience environmental tragedies first-hand, identifies with Kateri because she is the patroness of ecology. The unique Mass might serve as a way for Houma members of any faith to continue to express the indigenous religious practices of their ancestors. Or perhaps for some, the political desire for tribal recognition manifests itself as religious devotion to a Native American on her way to becoming a recognized saint. The Kateri Mass' wider implications for the spirituality of at least a portion of the modern United Houma Nation remain unexplored. This research brings greater understanding to the phenomenon of devotion to Kateri Tekakwitha.

From an outsider's perspective, the various possible explanations for the flourishing veneration of Kateri Tekakwitha by members of the Houma tribe are both perplexing and intriguing. My fascination with the syncretism of traditional American Indian practices and Roman Catholic sacramental rites found in the annual Kateri Tekakwitha Mass leads me to pose the following research question: What are the factors contributing to the veneration of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha among members of the United Houma Nation?

Chapter 2

The life of Kateri Tekakwitha has been told from both hagiographical and historical perspectives. Individuals who venerate her as a holy woman, Mohawks who cherish the heritage they share with her, and scholars that question the agenda of the Jesuit priests who felt the calling to advocate that a Native American woman be made a saint have all taken their turn telling Kateri's story in their own way (Bonaparte, 2009; Bunson, 1992; Greer, 2005). I will briefly discuss the politics of beatification and canonization, but for the purpose of my research, I will primarily focus on what this woman means to those who revere her.

The United Houma Nation, an indigenous group located on the Louisiana Gulf Coast, has also been defined and redefined by authorities that hold their own reasons for supporting or not supporting the nation as a federally recognized tribe (Campisi and Starna, 2004; Davis, 2001; Moberg and Moberg, 2005). To avoid straying from the research question at hand, I will refrain from commenting on the justice or injustice involved in the Nation's lack of federal recognition and, instead, acknowledge this

political issue as one that is woven into the modern culture, heartache, and identity of the United Houma Nation.

Further description of both Kateri Tekakwitha and the United Houma Nation will be provided during the rest of this chapter. The stories of these two entities will be compared and possible explanations for their unique relationship, which transcends tribal differences, will be explored. The main purpose of this chapter, however, will be to present similar studies in the field of religion, which seek to explain why certain communities venerate specific holy figures.

Tribal Similarities

Although Kateri Tekakwitha was a member of the Mohawk tribe, a Native American tribe that was located in modern day upstate New York, her upbringing in a syncretistic nation parallels the evolution of the United Houma Nation. Historian Allan Greer (2005) provides an insightful summary of Mohawk history as it pertains to the Jesuit conversion and life of Kateri Tekakwitha.

The Mohawk Tribe, one of the Five Nations of the Iroquois, was made up of a diverse group of native-Mohawks and conquered people. According to Greer, those who assimilated into the Mohawk Nation after being captured often eventually became leaders of the eclectic tribe, but the cultural remnants of individuals' birth tribes often never disappeared (26). In 1656, Kateri was born to a Mohawk father and a Catholic Algonquin mother, who had been captured and integrated into the Mohawk nation. Her birthplace was the easternmost village of the Mohawk settlements, which was the easternmost settlement of the Iroquois League. Her birth village was "probably the most ethnically diverse," explains Greer, because it was "the most exposed to attack from enemies in

New England and Canada, and it was also the first stopping place for Mohawk war parties returning with prisoners” (26-28).

In his research compilation titled *Indian Tribes of the Lower Mississippi Valley and Adjacent Coast of the Gulf of Mexico*, John Reed Swanton (1998) cites early accounts of the Houma that describe them as intimidating warriors who, after capturing members of other tribes, were kind to and inclusive of prisoners. An account of the Houma from 1700 written by a Jesuit priest who accompanied Iberville on his exploration of the Americas states that the Houma have “the reputation of being warriors” but “are not cruel” and are “far from putting to death any slaves whom they may capture, as soon as the latter enter the village the women weep over them, pity them for having been taken, and afterward treat them better than their own children” (298). When Swanton visited them in Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes in 1907, the Houma were a multiethnic people of Indian, black, and white descent. The Biloxi, Atakapa, Choctaw, Cherokee, Alibuma, Chickasaw, Tallapoosa, and Tunica tribes were the American Indian groups that mixed into the Houma Nation of the 20th century, but the Houma affiliation has always been the “dominating element” (292).

Connection to the Environment

The Roman Catholic Church recognizes Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha as patroness of environment, nature, and ecology. Though the miracles attributed to her exclusively involve the curing of illnesses or improvement of health, her indigenous upbringing in a tribe considered to be extremely in tune with nature is, apparently, enough to deem her an official advocate of environmental issues (Greer 2005).

As detailed in work by Dardar et al, the United Houma Nation is known for its experiences with environmental crises (Dardar 2008; D’Oney 2008; Hobbs 2010; Huus 2011; Tran 2010). They are closely linked to the land and water that they inhabit, and while the Houma have gained their subsistence from their natural surroundings for generations, natural disasters, especially hurricanes, have destroyed their homes and structures time and time again. Hurricane stories are incorporated into their folklore and frame much of their culture (D’Oney 2008). At the same time, fishing and shrimping have defined Houma lifestyle for centuries. The water is both their worst enemy and their best friend. The British Petroleum oil spill of 2010 was a different kind of disaster for the nation; it was a human-made calamity that confused their culture, disrupted their ecosystem, and affected them in a way they were not prepared to handle. With erosion quickly dissolving their coasts and the constant threat of another hurricane hovering over their lands, the United Houma Nation clings to the trust they place in nature and makes efforts to protect the land of their ancestors—land that is woven into their cultural identity.

Process of Recognition

Bonaparte (2009) and Greer (2005) describe the canonization process of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, a procedure many members of the Houma Nation are anxious to see completed. The unofficial steps toward the canonization of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha began in 1680 when a Jesuit priest, Father Claude Chauchetiere, cared for her on her deathbed. Dubbing Kateri “a lily among the thorns,” a phrase that comes from the second chapter of the Song of Solomon (Bonaparte, 2009), he felt drawn to her in her weak, sickly state and eventually considered her his spiritual superior (Greer 2005, 5). The only

member of her family to survive small pox, scars disfigured her face for the rest of her life. Father Claude Chauchetiere witnessed the scars disappear from her face immediately after her death—the first miracle attributed to her. Since her deathbed miracle, numerous other phenomena have been credited to the Lily of the Mohawks. Apparitions of Kateri have been reported, and her relics have been known to cure illnesses (Bonaparte 2009).

Pope Pius XII venerated the Native American holy woman on January 3, 1943. Pope John Paul II took the next step of the canonization process by beatifying her on June 2, 1980 (Ibid.). At the start of this research project in January of 2011, only one more miracle needed to be performed in the name of Kateri Tekakwitha in order for the Blessed American Indian to be canonized as a Roman Catholic saint. As mentioned previously, on December 19, 2011, Pope Benedict XVI declared Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha worthy of sainthood, and the canonization ceremony planning is underway. Leading up to these announcements, the Kateri Conference, an annual gathering of Kateri devotees that has met for over 70 years, was growing steadily, and Kateri circles, groups of people who gather to pray for Kateri's final miracle, were sprouting up all over the United States. It is a phenomenon that transcends tribal boundaries as well as Christian denominations (Mitchell 2011). Houma members adopted the practice of the Kateri circle a little over twenty years ago and have incorporated the Kateri Mass into their prayer mission for the past seventeen years.

The United Houma Nation is also in a recognition process of sorts. While it is recognized as an indigenous nation by the state of Louisiana, its request to be federally recognized as a Native American tribe was rejected in 1985. Since it filed its rebuttal in 1996, the nation has been waiting to hear back as to whether or not the federal

government will acknowledge them as a tribe. The lack of federal recognition limits the opportunities the Houma have to restore and protect their land—much of which is now at or below sea level. Members take care of each other after every devastating hurricane and prove themselves to be a determined, strong unit, but when their land is being eroded and polluted by non-natives, federal recognition for the Houma is all the more essential as far as policy change and fair funding are concerned (Dardar-Robichaux 2010).

Further Research Necessary

While the parallels between the life of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha and the history of the United Houma Nation suggest one reason why the members of the tribe may revere the Lily of the Mohawks, research in the field of religion still lacks an explanation of what the veneration of Kateri Tekakwitha means to the Houma people. Similar studies done on the veneration of holy figures by unique Catholic communities in somewhat oppressive social situations have produced results which suggest that Houma veneration of Kateri has more to do with incommensurable social and environmental circumstances than strictly spiritual factors. Examples of such studies include those of Carassai (2007) and Orsi (1985; 1996).

Sebastián Carassai and San La Muerte

In his article *San La Muerte: The Non-Saint Saint*, Sebastián Carassai presents his research findings on the relationship between devotion to the pagan saint of death, San La Muerte, and the doctrine of the official Catholic Church. His study, carried out by in-depth interviews with residents of small villages of Latin America who are members of the San La Muerte cult, but self-identify as Catholic, reveals that the worship of the “non-saint saint” is a mixture of Christian and indigenous religious practice that began after the

Jesuits' conversion of aborigines in Latin America. San La Muerte is an essentially pagan saint revered by a sect of Latin American Catholics, but the religious figure is absolutely rejected as a legitimate saint in the official Catholic Church.

Worship of San La Muerte widely manifests itself in celebrations. Carassai explains that once a year, devotees gather together to “take part in popular festivals where there is plentiful wine, music, dancing and feasting” (78). Devotees have a sincere respect for San La Muerte, recognizing that their devotion, if carried out properly, can effect good in their lives. However, their respect for San La Muerte is widely driven by a fear of the horrid revenge the saint has the power of exacting on those who are irreverent or negligent in their worship.

A factor that makes the worship of the saint so central to its devotees is that it is “an ancestral belief transmitted from generation to generation.” Also worth noting is that devotees “have contributed and still contribute to produce the specific characteristics attributed to the saint” (Carassai 2007, 93).

Carassai finds that the followers of San La Muerte turn to the saint to deal with tangible problems that they face now in this life, while their Catholic faith is concerned with life after death. In his concluding remarks, Carassai states that for Catholic Latin American followers of San La Muerte, devotion to the saint provides “the possibility of making one’s own life compatible with religious faith without the need of undergoing an essential change in everyday practices or in the values that build up those practices” (94). Devotion to the saint keeps their ancestral practices alive even though they now subscribe, at least in identity, to the Catholic faith. The cult is a crucial aspect of the religious identity of the regions in which it exists.

Robert A. Orsi and Our Lady of Mount Carmel

In his book *The Madonna of 115th Street*, Robert A. Orsi (1985) analyzes the devotion of Catholic Italian immigrants in Harlem to Our Lady of Mount Carmel as it is expressed in an annual religious celebration known as the festa. In an effort to discover what the festival and the Madonna mean to Italian Harlem, Orsi spoke to those who participate in the festa and show devotion to the religious figure. He found that the Madonna was integrated into the past and present, poverty, and persecution of Italian immigrants in the United States. The festival was a manifestation of the culture, heritage, values, and popular religion of Italian immigrants in New York. The author explains it best when he states:

The devotion to the Madonna of 115th Street existed in the interstices between anticipation and reality, between the old and the young, the individual and the domus, between the United States and Italy, severed memories and emergent aspirations, the fear of success and the longing for it, between the old moral order and the discovery of the new (162).

Orsi's in-depth study reveals that the devotion of the Italian immigrants developed out of a connection to the Madonna and the Church of Mount Carmel on 115th Street of Harlem where they found peace and shelter during their arrival in the United States in the early 1900s. Their annual celebration of her helps the continuation of tradition to be passed down to younger generations—those who did not experience immigration, but were raised by the Italian immigrants who did. Devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel is a link between generations that expresses the religious and cultural identity of a people.

Robert A. Orsi and St. Jude

Another relevant study carried out by Robert A. Orsi (1996) can be found in his book *Thank You, St. Jude*. This study is about the devotion of American women to the

Roman Catholic patron saint of hopeless causes. The women, who served as Orsi's research subjects, were daughters or granddaughters of European or Irish immigrants and had been raised during the Great Depression, the era in which devotion to St. Jude was established in South Chicago. Though he used various research methods to investigate devotion to St. Jude, one of his prominent methods involved open-ended interviews and lengthy conversations with five women from the Detroit and Chicago areas. He also received hundreds of phone calls and letters from women willing to respond to his interview questions, undertook a content analyses of commentary about St. Jude published in Catholic American magazines from as far back as the 1920s, and spoke with numerous women on site at the National Shrine of St. Jude in Chicago.

A summary of Orsi's most compelling finding is captured in a single paragraph from his book:

Prayer is not an innocent social or psychological activity. It is always situated in specific and discrepant environments of social power, and it derives its meanings, implications, and consequences in relation to these configurations. Indeed, praying is one of the most implicating social historical practices because it is in and through prayer that the self comes into intimate and extended contact with the contradictions and constraints of the social world. It was to Jude that women brought their frustrations and disappointments as mothers, wives, daughters, patients, or office workers; this is where they came when the complexities of their social circumstances became oppressive. Persons at prayer are working to negotiate—or renegotiate—meaning, purpose, a sense of the possible good, usually in situations in which the givenness of the world has been undermined, and as they work on the world like this, the world is also working on them (187).

The works of Carassai and Orsi suggest that reasons other than devotion for devotion's sake lead Catholic communities to venerate particular holy figures. The three studies reveal that cultural, social, and ancestral factors have played roles in shaping relationships between Catholic cults, the sacred figure they revere, and the environmental

contexts of that reverence. By observing the festivals and listening to the words of devotees, Carassai and Orsi were able to discover the deep-seated values, struggles, and histories of their subjects' communities.

Paula Elizabeth Holmes and Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha

Certainly worth mentioning in this literature review is a study entitled “Narrative Repatriation of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha” by anthropologist Paula Elizabeth Holmes. The research concerns the narratives with which Pueblo women describe the person of Kateri Tekakwitha through counterhagiography—“the folk understandings about the lives, nature and functions of saints” (88). Holmes’ main goal is to investigate how storytelling among Pueblo women creates the significance of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha independently of the Catholic Church. Among Holmes’ main findings are the occurrences of rescripted deathbed statements of Kateri that reformulate the message Jesuit priests claimed she spoke and circulated stories of unofficial miracles attributed to Kateri that suggest the intercession of Kateri for her devotees. Also among Holmes’ findings are repatriations of Kateri Tekakwitha as a Native American first and foremost who strives to unite Catholics of all indigenous tribes. Finally, Holmes identifies a common proclamation of Kateri as “a saint to me” which takes her sainthood out of the hands of the Church and into the hands of indigenous Catholics (100). Regardless of what Jesuit priests wrote about Kateri during and shortly after her lifetime, and in spite of the Church’s official stance on Kateri at the time of Holmes’ research, Holmes finds that for Pueblo women, “Kateri has been translated and transported largely through narrative, from the 17th century to the 21st, from obedient convert, silent, trapped in colonial categories, to powerful intercessor with a clear message to her people of unity,

indigenous identity, ownership and belonging” (100).

Chapter 3

During the academic year 2011-2012, I undertook a qualitative study to answer a research question regarding the factors contributing to the veneration of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha among members of the United Houma Nation. In order to observe one of the most significant external forms of devotion to Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha performed by members of the United Houma Nation, I attended the annual Kateri mass in Dulac, Louisiana, in July of 2011. My participation and observation were helpful in attaining a more holistic understanding of the ways in which Kateri Tekakwitha is venerated. The research methods I followed to gather the most relevant information, however, are found in the following sections.

Sample

The sample for my research consisted of five interviewees (three male and two female) who are self-identified members of the United Houma Nation and who are involved in the Houma Kateri prayer circle. All interviewees had attended more than one annual Kateri Tekakwitha mass and more than one annual Kateri Tekakwitha Conference. The five participants are actively involved in Kateri devotion and, therefore, do not represent the entire United Houma Nation—a nation comprised of a variety of religious traditions. The opinions shared by interviewees more accurately correlate with the views held by the Kateri-venerating subculture of the Houma Nation. Though interviewees refer to the nation as a whole in order to answer interview questions fully, the findings of this thesis are only applicable to the population of the United Houma

Nation that venerates Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha by attending the annual Kateri Mass and the annual Tekakwitha Conference. All interviewees were more than eighteen years of age. In order to present all relevant information disclosed by interviewees while still protecting their identities, all participants are referred to by pseudonyms throughout the research findings and analysis.

Relevant concepts

Indigenous spirituality- My definition of *indigenous spirituality* is influenced by the insights of Judith Hendry (2003) and Ake Hultkranz (1981). The term refers to an all-encompassing, non-anthropocentric worldview focused on kinship, reciprocity, the sentience of nature, and the importance of place. It is a type of religiosity that is widely expressed through formal rituals, sensory symbols, and ancestral folklore. Examples of formal rituals include drumming (along with other forms of percussion), singing, and dancing in a style native to the Houma as well as burning herbs in calumets. Such practices have been utilized by the Houma throughout history during healing ceremonies, peace offerings, and exorcisms. All of these practices appear in the accounts of Iberville written upon meeting the Houma in 1699 or in those of Gravier written shortly after the turn of the 18th century. In accounts written by both Gravier and Iberville, references are made to black, red, yellow, and white body and face paint and ritual clothing worn during dances that is decorated with feathers and noisemaking copper (Swanton 1998). These colors and accessories will constitute evidence of sensory symbols. Any stories shared by members of the United Houma Nation that explain events or express certain values have been passed down through several generations, and are specifically identified as stories of their people's past will qualify as ancestral folklore.

By being able to understand the concept and recognize the indicators of indigenous spirituality, it is possible to explore the question of whether or not veneration of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha among the United Houma Nation serves as a means of expressing the tribe's ancient religious practices in a modern Catholic environment. If the retention of indigenous religiosity among the current and upcoming generations of the United Houma Nation is a contributing factor to the Nation's adoration of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha in the Kateri Mass, it is likely that descriptions of the rituals and symbols incorporated into the mass will be described by participating members in terms of their ancestor's beliefs—not their own. Perhaps, however, the Native American components of the mass will be verbally expressed during interviews as practices that still promote modern Houma spirituality. In either case, *indigenous spirituality* will be considered a contributing factor to the devotion of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha if the type of religiosity described above is expressed in or influences the veneration of the Lily of the Mohawks.

Environment- As quoted by Judith Hendry, "The Native Lands Institute (1995) defines *environment* as 'not only our natural surroundings, but also our existence; our sense of beings as a people; our welfare and health; our lifeblood; our spirituality; our economic security; and our alliances with other peoples'" (8). This definition of the term captures the broad, inclusive understanding of what is affected when environment is altered or injured for Native Americans. It is a definition relevant to this study because of the possibility that devotion to Kateri Tekakwitha is rooted in the Houma Nation's hope for a miraculous restoration of their environment by an indigenous patroness of ecology whose concept of *environment* would have been similar to their own. References made by interviewees concerning the intercession of Kateri Tekakwitha during times of

environmental struggles will qualify *environment* as a contributing factor to Kateri devotion among the Houma Nation. Additionally, any comments of praise or admiration for Kateri because of her connection to nature or right treatment of land will be considered evidence of involvement of *environment* in Kateri veneration. Specific indicators of *environment* will be terms such as land, subsistence, water, natural surroundings, pollution, hurricanes, and erosion.

Recognition- My definition for the term *recognition* is the official observance of a person or a people by an external institution that has the authority to formally title the person or the people in the way they or their supporters already view them. In the case of this study, the Roman Catholic Church and the Federal Government of the United States are the external forces capable of granting the titles “saint” and “tribe” to Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha and the United Houma Nation, respectively. A potential factor influencing the veneration of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha by the United Houma Nation could be the tribe’s ability to identify, at least before Pope Benedict XVI’s announcement of her clearance for canonization, with the holy figure’s pending status of official recognition. Their devotion to prayer for her canonization might have been, in some way, a manifestation of their desire for tribal recognition. Mention of petitions to Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha for the tribe’s federal recognition will qualify the desire for recognition as a factor involved in Kateri veneration among the Houma. Any reference to the once-impending status of Kateri as it relates to the still-impending status of the Houma Nation will also certify *recognition* as a relevant, contributing factor to Kateri devotion.

Procedures

In order to reach potential interviewees, I contacted the organizer of the 16th annual Kateri mass to gather more information on the Kateri circle. I then attended a Kateri circle meeting on December 9, 2011, where I met and interviewed the first three participants. I also gathered contact information from other members of the Kateri Circle who showed interest in participating in interviews. The first five people who volunteered to be interviewed and met the sample criteria explained above were the five interviewees from whom I gathered my information. No monetary incentive was offered in exchange for interviews.

Because I happened to be interviewing proponents of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha during the specific point in history that Pope Benedict XVI cleared her for sainthood, three of my interviews were conducted before the Pope's announcement (December 9, 2011) and two were conducted after the announcement (December 23, 2011). To remain consistent throughout my research project even in the midst of a drastic change in the world of Kateri devotion, I encouraged my last two interviewees to answer my questions and tell me their stories as though they had not yet heard about the Pope's announcement. Also because of the fortunate placement of this research project on the timeline of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha's steps toward sainthood, I took it upon myself, for the benefit of the academic field of religion, to expand my interviews with my fourth and fifth participants to include their responses to the Pope's announcement of Kateri's soon-to-occur canonization. Additionally, I re-interviewed my initial three interviewees after the Pope's announcement in order to gain a holistic understanding of the relationship between members of the United Houma Nation and Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha before

and after the Church announced that the holy woman was worthy of sainthood. My research materials, therefore, include eight semi-guided interviews with five Houma American Indians who actively venerate Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha.

The semi-structured interviews consisted of guided questions pertaining to the individual's and the tribe's veneration of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha. The following questions led the initial interviews:

- In what ways do you show devotion to Kateri Tekakwitha?
- Do you make regular requests of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, and if so, what do you ask of her?
- What are the meanings of the traditional Native American symbols and practices expressed in the Kateri mass?
- What would Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha's canonization mean to you and to the Houma people?

The post-announcement reaction interviews were led by the following questions:

- What was your reaction to the news that Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha was cleared for canonization?
- What do you think Kateri Tekakwitha's canonization will mean for the annual Tekakwitha Conference?
- What do you think Kateri Tekakwitha's canonization will mean for members of the United Houma Nation?

These questions were helpful in initiating conversation but I allowed the interviews to go in whichever direction they led as long as it was relevant to the research

question. Interview times ranged from a one minute and thirty second response to the Pope's announcement of Kateri's canonization to a thirty-six minute dialogue about Kateri devotion.

I recorded all of the interviews with a voice recorder and transcribed them to have written references to analyze.

Analysis

To examine the interviews, responses were coded according to thematic content in a method similar to that used by Sebastián Carassai in his research on the devotees of San La Muerte. Themes I anticipated encountering are listed below.

- A) Emotional religious connection, which usually has to do with visions or intuitions.
- B) Native American holy figure, making her more relevant to the Houma than other Catholic figures.
- C) Assistance in guiding responses to environmental problems.
- D) Canonization as a means of recognition for Native Americans.
- E) Means of continuing to express indigenous practices in the context of a Catholic mass.

Before starting the interview process, I acknowledged the fact that these are not the only possible explanations for the Houma Nation's veneration of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha; therefore, I also included another section,

- F) Unforeseen, yet relevant and frequently mentioned themes concerning reasons for expressing devotion to Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha.

After transcribing the interviews, I selected all references made to these six topics, categorized them by theme and identified which themes were prevalent to the veneration

of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha as described by members of the United Houma Nation.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The main strength of the methodology described above was the opportunity semi-guided interviews provided for the researcher to enter into open conversation with the participants. The flexibility built into the structure of the interview process allowed room for interviewees to add stories or elaborate on their answers, which offered the researcher more information than a survey or closed interviews could provide.

The weaknesses of the methodology included time restraints and a lack of financial resources. Perhaps with more time to carry out the research project, the researcher would have attended more Kateri prayer circle meetings and would have built up more rapport with the interviewees to acquire more candid responses to interview questions. A monetary benefit for participating in the interview process might have encouraged more than five Kateri circle members to take part in the interviews. More time and a bit of money would strengthen the methodology used in this research project.

Chapter 4

Chapter four of this research project aims to present the findings of the eight interviews described in chapter three. This chapter is organized thematically following the order of anticipated themes outlined in the previous chapter. In addition to references that fall within the six categories outlined above, research findings presented in this chapter also include interviewee reactions to the Vatican's decree concerning Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha's canonization as well as references made to perceived timelines of

Kateri's canonization both before and after the news of her final miracle's validation had been released. Analysis of these findings is located in chapter five.

Multiple references throughout the eight interviews fall under the first anticipated thematic category—emotional religious connection to Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha. Three subcategories of this theme embedded in the Houma participant's narratives are Kateri's intercession or direct assistance in occurrences perceived as miracles, Kateri as a spiritual role model, and Kateri's ability to provide emotional support.

Harold, a Houma American Indian who is an active and prominent member of the Tekakwitha Conference board, describes the types of requests he makes of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha through prayer by using the phrasing “say[ing] the intercessions,” or, “lift[ing] up people.” Harold explains that during the monthly Kateri prayer circles, which he and all of the research participants regularly attend, they “lift up people.” He explains further, “Like one lady lift up her dad. Her dad is in the hospital.” According to Harold, circle member's granddaughters, father-in-laws, aunts, and other friends or family members are lifted up in prayer. “We lifted up a lot of people in prayer through the Blessed Kateri,” he states.

Additionally, Harold describes a miracle that he and several other members of the United Houma Nation attribute to the intercession of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha. A printer in the local community who suffered from foot problems related to diabetes made a plaque depicting Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha. The plaque is located above a medicine wheel garden on the side of the church where the Houma prayer circle gathers each month. According to Harold, doctors had considered amputating the printer's foot because it would not heal. Grateful for the plaque donated by the printer, the Houma

prayer circle lifted the printer up in prayer. When Harold told the printer about the group's prayers for him, the printer responded, "You know, maybe that's why my foot healed." Harold returned to the prayer circle the next month and reported, "I think we had a little miracle."

Henri, one of the two participants who was only interviewed after the Pope's announcement of Kateri's imminent canonization, tells of the three times that he has made requests of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha through prayer. "I went shrimping that morning," he says, "and when I left, on my way out I prayed to her. I said the rosary going down riding in the boat, and when I got there, my boat was full. I couldn't put anymore [shrimp in it]." Henri adds, "I came back and I never told anyone that. Seriously...I did it three times." Henri believes the intercession of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha is the reason he was able to catch an abundance of shrimp.

Emotional religious connection to Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha manifests itself in another set of intercessory miracles described by Olite, an upbeat, active member of the Houma Kateri prayer circle who spends much of her time organizing and assisting with tribal and circle events. During casual conversation, Olite (the other Houma Nation member who, along with Henri, was only interviewed after the news of Kateri's second validated miracle had been released) shares that she believes Kateri's intercession helped cure her husband's prostate cancer and her daughter's leukemia. Both are now cancer-free after medical treatment and many prayers. Olite's daughter, who doctors said would be sterile for the rest of her life after undergoing cancer treatment, gave birth to Olite's grandchild. "Kateri had a lot to do with that," says Olite.

The second subcategory of emotional connection to Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha is revering Kateri as a religious role model. Charles, a fun loving circle member who enjoys making friends and cracking jokes, says that Kateri Tekakwitha was “a loving person. She believed in Jesus a lot... She devoted her whole life to Jesus, and she worshipped him.” He also explains that “she did a lot of good things for people, and she always thought about the other people instead of herself.” He looks up to her as a symbol of what he believes is good and right.

Olite also reveres Kateri as a religious role model whose life set an example for followers of Jesus. “Saints are our people to guide us, to teach us how to live the best we know how,” explains Olite. “Her devotion to Jesus was more than I could ever do, but it also shows that she’s human, and she went through a lot of tragedy in her life, a lot of hardship in her life, but yet she still did it [followed Jesus] regardless of what anybody said.” From Olite’s perspective, Kateri’s religious life set a high standard for Christians but can still serve as guidance for followers of Jesus.

References made to Kateri’s ability to provide emotional support comprise the final subcategory of the first anticipated theme. Adele, a spunky and enthusiastic member of the United Houma Nation and the Houma Kateri prayer circle, prays to Kateri Tekakwitha on her way to work. “Please help me,” she asks, “I know it’s going to be a rough day today. I need your strength.” Adele finds comfort in saying Kateri’s prayer every morning. She explains that when she prays to Kateri, she knows she has someone helpful and encouraging “who’s going to be there to say, ‘Okay, you can do it.’” According to Adele, the emotional support she receives from Kateri through prayer has helped her to grow spiritually.

The second theme investigated as a potential factor contributing to the devotion of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha among members of the United Houma Nation is the notion of Kateri as a Native American holy figure, making her more relevant to the Houma than other Catholic figures. Almost every interviewee spoke directly about the significance of Kateri's American Indian heritage as one of the reasons the holy figure and her canonization are so important. In an interview that took place before the Vatican's announcement of Kateri's future canonization, Harold explains, "One of the reasons that we elaborate on it [her canonization] so much is that we would like to have her as a Native American saint. [She] will be our first Native American saint." Later in the interview, he admits, "It would be an awesome feeling to know that we do have a Native American saint."

Adele remembers learning about saints as a young Catholic. During the sacrament of confirmation, when Catholics are ceremonially recognized as adults in their Catholic faith, it is tradition for confirmants to choose a saint to intercede for them and to serve as their spiritual role model throughout the confirmation process and onward into their adult life. While trying to find a saint to align herself with for the sacrament of confirmation, Adele found out about the venerated Kateri Tekakwitha, a holy person to whom she felt she could relate. "To finally find out that there's a Native American who we're trying to venerate to sainthood was just amazing," Adele reflects, a saint, "like us." Adele speaks for the Houma Kateri prayer circle when she explains, "that's essentially why I think we're so drawn to Kateri—because we've got somebody who we think understands what we've gone through as a people."

Olite also tells of the excitement the Catholic Houma community experienced when members gradually began to realize that there was a venerated Native American. The Houma Kateri circle was in its first stages of formation, and Olite remembers its first growth period. “It started out with two,” she tells, “then it became five, then it became six, then it became eight, and as the word spread, people were empowered because there was this little Native American girl who did such great things...our people didn’t know.”

Charles and Henri also celebrate Kateri’s heritage as a large part of her holiness. After hearing that Kateri’s second medical miracle was validated by Pope Benedict XVI, Charles admits that he is “very happy” and “very glad” that Kateri will be the “first Native American” saint recognized in the Roman Catholic Church. When discussing his favorite thing about being involved in Kateri devotion, Henri states, “Being Native American, this is going to be the first Native American [saint], and [I’m] ecstatic.”

Kateri Tekakwitha’s assistance in guiding responses to environmental problems is the third category of anticipated themes for reasons detailed in previous chapters. When asked if Kateri was the patroness of environmental issues, Charles responds by saying, “No, not that I know of.” Olite, while articulating why she shows devotion to Kateri Tekakwitha, briefly mentions and then moves beyond Kateri’s involvement in environmental issues by saying, “She’s known for ecology, but to me she’s known for not just that.” Though both Harold and Charles mention hurricane season and the devastating effects of hurricanes Rita and Katrina, neither mention looking to Kateri for guidance or assistance during the storms. The closest Henri gets to connecting Kateri with ecology is the telling of his shrimping story mentioned earlier in this chapter. After hearing about Pope Benedict XVI’s announcement and while discussing the implications of Kateri’s

canonization, Adele makes the most significant connection between Kateri and the environment by saying, “Natives have always fought for the environment, and we’re hoping people will start seeing that we need to take care of Mother Earth... I’m hoping through her intercession... we’ll be able to get that message across.”

References made to the fourth anticipated theme, canonization as means of recognition for Native Americans, can be best organized into two subcategories—federal recognition for the United Houma Nation and general recognition for American Indians. Comments about recognition appear in a wide range of interview responses, and consideration for this theme becomes much more prevalent in conversations taking place after Pope Benedict XVI’s validation of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha’s second miracle. Information relevant to the first subcategory, which deals specifically with Kateri’s canonization’s connection to federal recognition for the Houma, was typically only offered after the interviewee was prompted to talk about the political issue. Before the Pope’s announcement, when asked whether he ever prays to Kateri for federal recognition for the Houma tribe, Charles responds, “No, not really... that would be totally different.” On the opposite end of the spectrum of responses before the announcement, however, Adele discloses, “We’re just praying that we’ll finally get federal recognition. Our people have been working on that for decades, and it looks like every time we think we’re getting close, the rules change on us... I’m hoping as a saint she could, you know, move the powers that be.” Henri states his feelings on the matter by saying Kateri’s canonization “should” make a difference in the Houma’s struggle for recognition, “but I’m not one hundred percent [sure] that it will.”

For Olite, tribal recognition plays a part in her devotion to Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha. “I pray to her for recognition,” Olite admits. Like Adele, she feels that the government keeps “changing the rules” on the Houma’s requirements for recognition, and she hopes that with Kateri’s intercession as saint, “those people in charge, the Bureau of Indian Affairs [would see]...we’ve all been discriminated against.” In reference to the Pope’s announcement of Kateri’s approaching sainthood, Olite states, “I didn’t think I would see it in my lifetime, so that’s why it’s a wonderful thing. Hopefully the recognition would be in my lifetime, which would be huge for everybody.”

Harold had never thought of devotion to Kateri having much to do with Houma federal recognition. When prompted to discuss his thoughts on any possible correlation between the two in an interview before December 19, 2012, Harold says, “It [Kateri’s canonization] would probably help. I’ve never really thought about it that way, but we are having trouble being federally recognized for whatever reason.” In a follow-up interview with Harold after the Pope’s announcement, he expresses his continued interest in the correlation between recognition for the tribe and recognition for Kateri. “I never forgot this question you asked, ‘If Kateri would be a saint, how would it be with the politics’...and I really don’t have an answer to that,” Harold explains, “I thought I would, but I really don’t.” Much like Charles and Henri, Harold does not necessarily see a relationship between the two issues.

The second subcategory within the theme of Kateri’s canonization relating to recognition for Native Americans includes all references of Kateri’s sainthood as important to American Indian causes in general. Comments that comprise this subcategory deal with the social (not political) acknowledgement of native groups that

the canonization of a Native American woman could potentially bring to all indigenous tribes. In an interview with Adele before Kateri's final miracle was validated, Adele expresses her belief that if Kateri were to be canonized, it would "bring awareness to people who aren't native that we're still out here." She feels that society at large has forgotten about American Indians and about the intense segregation and discrimination that natives like herself experienced only a few short years ago. "We were separated in the church," Adele remembers, "to feel like you weren't as good as the person sitting in front of church that you had to sit on your own side...it still upsets [me]."

Olite expressed frustration that the Catholic Church had not already recognized Kateri as a saint. "Here we go again," she sighs, "because she's an Indian, she's gonna have to prove it." Olite goes on to say her devotion to Kateri began out of the frustration she felt upon realizing that there was a Native American whose legacy was still not validated by the broader, non-native culture. Before the Pope's announcement about Kateri's miracle, Harold expressed the idea that Kateri's canonization would be a victory for Native American Catholics. "A lot of people got mistreated through the Catholic Church," he states. Harold also contrasts the Pope's authority with devotee reality by saying, "The Popes says 'yes, she's a saint,' or, 'no, she's not a saint,' but in our hearts, she's already a saint." Further, Harold says, "We've learned as Native Americans never to depend on the other cultures to let us move forward, but...if she could be recognized in the Catholic Church, that would be a plus for us as Native Americans."

The final theme expected to factor into Kateri devotion among the United Houma Nation is celebration of Kateri as a means of expressing elements of indigenous religion in the context of a Catholic Mass. Worth noting within the context of this theme is the

fact that the Kateri Mass at Holy Family Church in Dulac, LA, is celebrated by a Houma priest. When asked about the traditional Native American components of the annual Kateri Mass, almost all interviewees mentioned the significance of smudging, which is the practice of burning symbolic herbs and fanning the herbs' smoke with a feather. According to Charles, smudging is "like cleansing your body...it helps you think better if you believe," he continues, "I am Native American, I do believe in the Indian ways." Olite compares smudging to the broader Catholic tradition of burning incense as an offering during mass. "It's incensing Native American style," she claims. Harold describes smudging as "a form of cleansing" or "a form of blessing" like being sprinkled with Holy Water by a priest. He also explains the practice as an opportunity for people to "get smudged," which involves having the smoke of the herbs waved in the direction of one person who would then simultaneously pray that all of their "troubles would fall along the wayside." Harold adds that it is "like taking in the good spirit and getting rid of the old spirit, the evil spirit."

Henri agrees that smudging "gets away the [evil] spirits." Though Henri does not remember seeing his father practice smudging while he was younger, Henri's father participates in the native ritual during all of the Kateri masses in Dulac, and he even travels to other parts of Louisiana to perform smudging at other Eucharistic celebrations. Henri tells that less than a year ago he asked his father why he does the smudging ritual. His father replied to Henri's question by explaining that one day he picked up a feather and was moved to perform the rite.

In addition to smudging, participants of the Kateri Mass are exposed to traditional Native American drumming, dancing, and décor. Harold describes the elaborate

decorations that fill the church during the mass. “We have dream catchers, we have peace pipes, we have a little flavor of South Louisiana where we have the nets, we have the traps,” he continues, “we have everything that the Native Americans used to make a living on.” Henri, who participates in the mass by bringing the symbolic offertory gifts to the altar, also mentions these decorations. He explains the symbolism of the nets by saying, “the shrimping is basically still going on. [We’re] trying to keep the tradition going.” Henri tried to show his son how to shrimp, “but he didn’t want to.” Conversely, his daughter “picked it up more than [his] son.” Henri’s stepson is also learning the tradition.

Olite values the mass for its incorporation of indigenous practices. She believes the rituals are reviving Houma culture, which she feels has already lost most of its language. “The dancing, oh!” she exclaims, “It’s so beautiful...growing up we didn’t have that, but it’s good to see that it’s coming back.” She tells of the different styles of dancing called the traditional and the fancy, making sure to explain “the men go first, but it’s not because men are superior; it’s just the women are behind to hold them up, you know, to be part of their strength.” Additionally, Olite feels that the “drumming is the heartbeat.” When she hears the drums, she is reminded of a workshop that she attended at one of the annual Tekakwitha Conferences; while the conference members silently prayed, the leader of the workshop would occasionally beat a drum to remind those whose minds had begun to wander to focus on their prayer. According to her, the drumbeat “puts everything into perspective.”

Adele seems to value the smudging, drumming, dancing, and decor for reasons similar to those of Olite. She recalls her youth and explains, “Growing up, [we] didn’t

have as many traditional native rites that they do on reservations because we were so ostracized that we lost a lot of our native cultures.” Adele feels that the spiritual ceremonies of her ancestors had not been practiced during her youth because her parents’ generation was focused on making sure their children received an education and “they knew that the only way [their children] could get that was if [their children] became white.” Enthusiastically, Adele declares, “This [Kateri Mass] is making the people in our area come back to our own culture and take pride in being Native American again...I think that’s the best thing she [Kateri] has done for this community.” Adele continues to discuss the native elements of the mass and explains, “I love that we’ve got our native symbols up. It makes people see that we’re all serving the same God...we are just expressing it in our own native way.” She sums up her thoughts by saying, “I think that’s the most important thing about the Kateri mass—we can incorporate all of our native heritage, our own culture into the mass and still be spirit-filled.”

Though not directly related to the Houma, stories shared by interviewees about other tribes’ styles of devotion to Kateri Tekakwitha reveal that Native American tribes the Houma encounter at the annual Tekakwitha Conferences also incorporate indigenous rites into their reverence. Harold explains that a few of the elements of the Houma Kateri Mass are aspects of other tribes’ masses that the Houma chose to incorporate into their own tradition. When the Conference was held in Phoenix, Arizona, for example, Harold saw devotees of other tribes praying towards the four cardinal directions. He explains that each direction has a corresponding color, which serve as sacred symbols of natural life cycles for Native Americans. After seeing this form of prayer, the Houma began incorporating this style of prayer into their mass in Dulac. Harold describes another form

of spiritual reflection on elements of nature that he saw in Arizona. He explains, “They had a bowl of earth, a bowl of water, and the wind (a lady was standing with a homemade fan) and the fire (they had lit a candle to represent the fire).” Harold plans to add this practice into the Holy Family Church Kateri Mass soon.

Charles also reminisces on encountering other tribe’s traditions while on a reservation during the Kateri Conference one year. He heard bells outside and stepped out of church to see “these four or five people—one of them was dressed something like a buffalo and then a horse and all kinds of things.” According to Charles, the costumed American Indians had come to visit the church during one of the conference’s masses. It is a tribal tradition for these elaborately clad tribal members to visit the church and then visit every house nearby to bring them all blessings and rid them all of evil spirits and bad luck. The costumed American Indians have a parade with feathers, dancing, and drumming, and they eat at every house. When asked whether the people who participate in these rituals identified themselves as Catholics, Harold responds by saying, “They were Catholic, yes,” perceiving no harmful disconnect between the tradition of the tribe and the doctrine of the Catholic Church.

The sixth anticipated theme is reserved for unforeseen factors that contribute to the devotion of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha among members of the United Houma Nation. Three undeniable, yet unforeseen contributing factors surfaced repeatedly during the interviews with all five Kateri devotees. These factors all revolved around the desire for unity among native peoples and the personal significance of the annual Tekakwitha Conference to all five of the interviewees. The factors include the travel opportunities taken because of the annual Tekakwitha Conferences, the meaningful relationships

established at the conferences, and the pan-tribal, pan-religious, pan-racial, unifying encounters Kateri devotion creates through the annual conference and the annual Kateri mass at Holy Family Church.

Charles, the lighthearted jokester of the bunch, mentions his love for travel multiple times throughout the interview process. “That is the one thing I enjoy [most]—the traveling,” Charles explains, “I love to travel and to go other places and just see how the people live.” Seeing other places and other cultures brings joy to Charles’ life, and the annual Tekakwitha Conference allows him to do both. He says he has lived around Dulac, Louisiana, his entire life, and until he was able to travel to other parts of the country with the conference, he did not have enough travel experience to fully understand that life in Dulac is significantly different from life elsewhere. In addition to cultural encounters, Charles is also attracted to the many different landscapes he is exposed to during his conference travels. When talking about his trip to Tucson, Arizona, Charles reminisces, “It was beautiful up there—all the mountains and stuff—I loved it.” He also describes the beautiful street views in Albuquerque, New Mexico, as looking like “the old country” in a western film. Charles looks forward to the upcoming July 2012 conference in Albany, New York, where he plans to celebrate the announcement of Kateri Tekakwitha’s canonization with American Indians from all other parts of the country.

Harold, who has made friends from all over the United States because the annual conference, plans to eventually accept all of his long-distant friends’ invitations to visit their homes. “When I retire,” he says with a smile, “I’ll travel.” Though Harold had no real desire to go to Italy when his wife began to plan a leisurely trip (“Just to go walk

around and eat that old food over there? They ain't got no Cajun food over there," was Harold's excuse), upon hearing the news about Kateri's upcoming canonization, Harold started making plans to go to Rome. "When I find out where the rooms are, I'm booking," Harold exclaims.

More important than the travel opportunities the devotees enjoy because of their connection to Kateri Tekakwitha are the meaningful relationships members of the Houma Kateri prayer circle establish and maintain at their monthly meetings and at the annual conferences. When asked whether he had met many other American Indians at the Tekakwitha Conferences, Charles replies, "Shoooo, yes!" in his thick, Cajun French accent, "I've made a lot of friends from all over the United States." Being the socialite that he is, Charles truly values meeting new people and making new friends because of Kateri Tekakwitha. He also values the monthly prayer meetings in Dulac because he gets "the chance to see everybody again." Charles speaks highly of the people he meets at the conferences and feels that the other native communities he encounters have the same values of hospitality that the Houma native community has. He is welcomed at every conference with "open arms." Charles notes that "At a time, Indians down here [in Dulac] were some of the lowest form on earth," but when he goes to other native communities "its all different."

Harold portrays the conferences as a place where he fits in as a Native American among thousands of other American Indians. Like Charles, Harold feels welcomed in other native communities as though it were his own home. He says that if he ever travels to another state and tells one of his friends from the conference that he will be in their area, "they don't want to hear about [him] going to a hotel room; they'll keep [him] in

their house.” During hurricanes Katrina and Rita, two devastating storms that flooded and destroyed much of Dulac, Louisiana, and the surrounding regions, Harold’s friends were more than ready to offer him and his family shelter in Albuquerque. After three or four weeks of trying to contact Harold after the storms, his friends in New Mexico finally got in touch with him and tried to convince him to move away from South Louisiana where it floods so frequently. One of Harold’s friends offered to let him stay at his home and to get him a job in their reservation’s hotel. Harold appreciated the offer, but told his friend, “Y’all don’t have no place for me to go shrimping.” His friend cleverly replied, “We’ll dig you a hole and buy you a boat,” but Harold still declined because he could not imagine living anywhere other than the place he was “born and raised.” Because of the connections he made through the Tekakwitha Conference, Harold knows he will always have friends looking out for him if ever he needs.

Adele enjoys the Tekakwitha Conferences because she, a social butterfly like Charles, gets “to meet with other natives,” “socialize,” and, “network.” Additionally, she feels that the Kateri prayer circle meetings and trips to the conferences have allowed the Houma community of Kateri devotees to grow together in spirituality. “We all grew up in this area,” Adele explains, “but once we got older we all got married, [and] we all went different ways.” Devotion to Kateri through the circle and through the conferences has brought them all back together again and has helped them maintain their friendships.

Olite compares the annual Tekakwitha Conference to a gathering of relatives. The relationships she has established with other American Indians at the conferences have led her to think of the annual gatherings as “family reunions.” Olite has no doubt that life-long friendship which began at the conferences will be the reason that conference

members will continue meeting annually even after Kateri's canonization. Henri agrees with Olite that the conferences will go on. He cannot wait to go to Albany, New York, to celebrate the news of Kateri's upcoming canonization with all of the other conference members.

Quite possibly the most frequently mentioned factor that plays into Kateri devotion among members of the United Houma Nation is the hope they place in the cross-cultural, unifying power of Kateri veneration. All five interviewees spoke to this in multiple instances as it relates to their own community, to the annual conferences, and to all tribes, races, and faiths. Charles talks about the conference by explaining that it is a gathering of "a whole bunch of Indians and different people who believe in [Kateri]." According to Charles, mostly Native Americans attend the conference, but you "don't have to be Native American to believe in her." He explains that several white people go to the conference each year and that all people at the conference come together because they are "all thinking the same thing and wanting the same thing." Throughout the interview process, Charles continues to mention the boundary-breaking fact that people from all over the United States unite to pray for Kateri and to venerate her as a holy woman. "We've met all kinds of Indians—different tribes and everything—and we all the same, all crazy the same," Charles laughs. Everyone Charles meets at the conferences likes "to have fun and joke around" just like he does. "It's just great being a part of this," he says.

Harold also wholeheartedly enjoys being a part of the pan-tribal devotion for Kateri Tekakwitha. Reflecting on his first conference experience, Harold says, "I felt like I went home. I had tears in my eyes because I could see my relatives in the faces of those

Native Americans.” He, like Charles, repeatedly mentions that Native Americans from all over the states gather at the annual conference and greet each other with open arms. Before hearing about the Vatican’s announcement of Kateri’s second validated miracle, Harold prayed for her canonization partly because he felt that as a saint, Kateri could “build a lot of bridges.” Harold feels that Kateri is another reason for native nations to continue communicating. He also believes the Catholics, Baptists, and Methodists within the United Houma Nation could come together and celebrate “that the Church, not the Catholic Church, but the Church recognizes a Native American saint.” Harold says Kateri’s canonization will let all American Indians know “that there is still hope in the world for Native Americans.” This lasting hope in native nations is one of the reasons Harold is dedicated to sharing the story of Kateri Tekakwitha. Since the Pope’s announcement was made, Harold has renewed hope that all Native Americans will know about Kateri as a saint and that her sainthood will “draw people closer.”

Similar to the pan-religious celebration of Kateri Tekakwitha anticipated by Harold, Adele, prior to the announcement, admits hoping that Kateri would be canonized partly because it would attract her non-Catholic, native family members back to the Catholic Church. Adele also sees Kateri devotion as a unifying force and believes her canonization could draw more American Indians into the Houma Kateri prayer circle and bring more Catholics who have lost touch with their heritage back to their native culture.

Olite feels that the people who gather at the conference, even though they come from different tribes, are united by their similar experiences. By talking with one another Olite says that people from all different native nations are all able to realize that the prejudices they have endured are all the same. They are able to remind each other,

however, that Kateri overcame adversity and they can, too. Additionally, Olite attests to the boundaries Kateri devotion transcends within the Houma community. When speaking about the annual Kateri mass in Dulac, Olite states, “The majority of our dancers are Baptist.” She continues, “It’s amazing that they want to come and worship by their dancing even though they’re not Catholic.” For Olite, the dancers’ performance is proof that it is “not just Catholics who are happy about Kateri’s canonization.”

Henri values the conference so much because it helped him get on “the right track and not drift over.” For Henri, the annual conferences and the annual Kateri masses are all about “people coming together.” Before hearing of the Vatican’s validation of Kateri’s second miracle, Henri prayed for her canonization in hopes that her sainthood “would help everyone come to church.” Henri explains that Hispanics and people of various skin colors gather at the mass in Dulac every year. “It’s not about the race,” he states, “everyone can come together.” According to Henri, when people other than Native Americans attend the mass, mass participants feel that they are “not just Native Americans, [they are] part of basically everyone.” The unity between races that devotion to Kateri brings about is important to Henri.

As promised at the beginning of this chapter, the reactions of the interviewees to the news of Kateri Tekakwitha’s second validated miracle as well as their comments concerning a perceived timeline of Kateri’s canonization and its implications made both before and after the Vatican’s announcement comprise the remainder of chapter four. Though information presented in the following section was not at all foreseen at the start of this research project, the specific point in history during which interviews for this ethnography as well as the announcement of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha’s upcoming

canonization was made has created a rare opportunity to delve deeper into the nature of Kateri devotion and investigate how devotees received the news and plan to adapt to Kateri's changing religious status.

Before the validation of Kateri's second miracle, Charles stated, "Hopefully this year coming she will be canonized." His hope was rooted in the fact that over the past few years, the movement for Kateri's canonization had been rapidly gathering a larger following and attracting a significant amount of attention. "The more you have," Charles explained, "the better chance she has of getting canonized." After hearing of the Vatican's decree, Charles tells about his reaction saying, "I was very happy. I was pleased, like it just lifted off of me." Reflecting on all of the prayers that have been said and will continue to be said for Kateri's cause, he states, "I was grateful that they finally did it. We went through a lot of work to get her there, and we are still doing it." Charles is confident that the annual conference and the monthly meetings that have, up until this point in history, gathered people together to pray for Kateri's canonization will continue just as before. "Just because she's canonized doesn't mean we are losing her," Charles explains. "She's still with us at all times in our hearts and in our minds."

During an interview held before Kateri's miracle was validated, Harold reported that "one miracle about this little boy in Seattle, Washington," was under investigation by the Church. During the same interview, Harold admitted "I mainly pray for her right now because I want her to become a saint." Because of continued prayers for her canonization and the news of a miracle that was under investigation, Harold stated, "It's gonna probably be the year 2012 when she will be a saint." Harold explained that until news is released about the Vatican's investigation, anxious Kateri devotees remain "in the

process of waiting.” As a prominent member of the Tekakwitha Conference board, Harold often wondered what the conference would be like once its prayer goal (Kateri’s canonization) is reached. When Harold finally heard the news that the Vatican had validated Kateri’s second miracle, he was shocked. “I was surprised,” he says, “I got numb for a while. I wanted to cry.” Harold did not believe he heard the priest correctly when he announced the miracle’s validation during mass. When asked whether or not he thought he would see that day that Kateri Tekakwitha is a saint in the Catholic Church, Harold explains, “I never really gave it thought. You know when you expect something to happen or you want something to happen and then it takes so long you kind of push it on the side?... And then it does happen, and it’s like what do I do? What do I say?” Harold describes the emotion he feels as “ecstatic.” He looks forward to helping reformat the Tekakwitha Conference now that the Native American holy woman will finally be deemed a saint.

Before the announcement, Adele said that when Kateri is canonized, her “prayers will have been answered.” Less than two weeks later, Adele learned that Kateri Tekakwitha would be a saint. She reports her reaction to hearing the news: “It was unbelievable. It’s something you pray for and you pray for... You kind of don’t get your hopes up too high because you don’t want to be disappointed.” Adele looks forward to the annual conference and believes “it’s not going to change.” She explains now that Kateri will be a saint, the conference will provide more guidance than before and “will be more of a blessing.” Though Adele did not think Kateri’s canonization would happen in her lifetime, the implications of Kateri’s validated miracle have renewed her hope in

prayer. “Let’s keep praying,” she says, “and maybe now we can change this word around.”

Like Adele, Olite “did not think this would happen in [her] lifetime.” At one point, Olite thought Kateri would be canonized along with several other saints including Katherine Drexel, but when “that didn’t happen,” Olite lost a little bit of hope in the immediacy of Kateri’s cause. When she heard the priest announce the Vatican’s decree during mass, Olite wanted to shout “Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!” but she “kept it in.” Olite says she cried “tears of joy” and huddled up into a “group hug” with her husband and several other Kateri devotees who had been present when the news was announced during a weekday mass at Holy Family Church.

When Henri heard the exciting news for the first time, his mind went straight to the conference. “I couldn’t wait to go,” he explains, confident that the conferences will not stop gathering each year. The night he heard about Kateri’s validated miracle, Henri was moved to say “the rosary for her and for the people” and for himself. Henri did not think Kateri’s canonization would happen in the year 2012 like Charles and Harold predicted, but he also did not think he would be gone before the day Kateri’s second miracle was validated by the church like Olite and Adele thought. “I didn’t think it would be now,” Henri explains, “I thought I’d be older.”

Chapter 5

The purpose of chapter five is to qualitatively analyze the findings presented in chapter four and determine which factors contribute to the veneration of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha among members of the United Houma Nation. In this chapter, all themes and

categories expounded upon in the previous chapter are revisited and evaluated as a definite factor, a factor for some, or not a prevalent factor.

The first explored factor—emotional religious connection to Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha—is a definite factor contributing to Kateri devotion among the Houma people. Every interviewee reported asking for Kateri’s intercession, praying to Kateri for emotional support or miracles, or looking up to Kateri as a spiritual role model. Though no members told stories about having direct, mystical, or prophetic encounters with Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, Harold, Olite, and Henri all believe she played a part in events they consider miraculous, Charles and Olite both venerate her as a spiritual role model, and Adele seeks daily support from her through prayer. An emotional religious connection to Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha directly affects the relationship between the holy woman and members of the United Houma Nation. The first theme is an undeniable, definite contributing factor to veneration of Kateri Tekakwitha among Houma American Indians.

The second examined theme—a shared Native American heritage making Kateri more relevant to the members of the United Houma Nation than other Catholic holy figures—is also an extremely prevalent aspect of Kateri devotion. All five interviewees regularly qualify Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha as “Native American.” Interviews reveal that the research subjects perceive Kateri’s American Indian heritage as fundamental to who she is and what she represents. They prayed fervently for her to become a saint, but more importantly, they prayed for her to become the first *Native American* saint. Harold directly states that the desire to have a Native American saint is one of the many reasons Houma Catholics “elaborate” on Kateri Tekakwitha. Kateri’s heritage is the primary

reason that Adele and Olite were originally attracted to the holy woman and her ethnicity is also a major reason that the two Houma women feel they can identify with her. Henri says that being a Native American is his favorite part of being involved in the veneration of an American Indian holy woman. And while Charles does not explicitly describe being drawn to Kateri because of her heritage, he is ecstatic to celebrate the canonization of the “first Native American saint.” Because all interviewees consider Kateri’s ethnicity essential to her story or to her significance as a saint, Kateri Tekakwitha’s Native American heritage is a definite factor that plays into the veneration of the American Indian woman by members of the United Houma Nation.

Kateri Tekakwitha’s assistance in guiding responses to environmental issues proves to be widely irrelevant to Houma individuals. Charles is unaware that Kateri is the patroness of ecology, and although Olite mentions this official title, she dismisses it as a less important aspect of who Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha is. In the story he shares about hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Harold never connects the patroness of ecology to his tribe’s or his region’s recovery from the environmental disasters. Henri was the only interviewee who reported praying to Kateri for assistance in a somewhat ecological issue, but a shrimper praying to catch more shrimp seems to be more about economic aid than environmental assistance. However, when considering the concept of *environment* as described in chapter three, “economic security” is explicitly encompassed in the term’s definition, making Henri’s shrimping miracle an environmental issue *because* it is an economic issue. Also worth revisiting here is the fact that Henri had never before told anyone about his shrimping miracles until after the Vatican announced that Kateri would soon be a canonized saint. His timing in revealing this story suggests that Kateri’s new

religious status gave his miracle stories more credibility or perhaps gave Henri more confidence in crediting the phenomena to the beatified woman.

Adele did not mention Kateri's connection to ecology until a second interview held after the Vatican's announcement. Adele's vision of a more environmentally friendly future with Kateri Tekakwitha as a saint possibly foreshadows a new focus for the Kateri movement now that its original goal (canonization) has been reached. Though the holy woman's ability to aid in ecological issues is not currently a prevalent factor contributing to the devotion of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha among members of the United Houma Nation, interviews provide reason to believe that this aspect of Kateri Tekakwitha's religious identity will become increasingly significant among devotees post-canonization.

The third investigated theme, which concerns the connection between Kateri's canonization and recognition for Native Americans, is a factor contributing to devotion for some members of the United Houma Nation but not for all. In terms of federal recognition specifically for the United Houma Nation, Charles does not see a correlation between the two forms of recognition. Harold had never before thought about federal recognition for the Houma as related to religious recognition for Kateri but he continues to contemplate the idea of their possible connectedness since hearing that Kateri is going to be canonized. Similarly, Henri feels that Kateri's canonization should affect the Houma's chances of receiving federal recognition but is unsure that it will make any difference at all. Conversely, Adele directly connected the two impending statuses in an interview held before the Vatican's announcement by claiming to hope that Kateri would become a saint and that as a saint, would be able to "move the powers that be" to grant

federal recognition for the tribe. Like Adele, Olite expresses perceiving a connection between Kateri and federal recognition when she states that she prays to Kateri Tekakwitha for federal recognition. Additionally, the announcement of Kateri's canonization renewed Olite's hope in federal recognition for the Houma Nation. Both are feats for Native Americans that Olite did not expect to happen within her lifetime, but now that the former is in progress, she perceives the latter as more possible.

In terms of hopes for general recognition for Native Americans resulting from Kateri's canonization, all interviewed members of the Houma Nation factor this idea into their reasons for believing devotion to the holy woman is important. The fact that every interviewee is excited about the canonization of the "first Native American saint" shows that the Kateri prayer circle members desire official recognition for an American Indian by the Catholic Church. In addition to the significance members of the United Houma Nation see in having a Native American saint, several interviewees (Harold, Adele, and Olite), explicitly state that Kateri's canonization would bring more attention to Native American peoples and causes. It is clear that while federal recognition for the United Houma Nation is not a factor contributing to the devotion of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha for every interviewee, social recognition for Native American peoples is a definite factor for all interviewees.

Interviews reveal that the opportunity to practice indigenous, ancestral rituals in the context of a Catholic Mass is a definite factor playing into the devotion of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha among members of the United Houma Nation. All interviewees discuss the various symbolic actions and items involved in the annual Kateri Mass as they relate to indigenous traditions for the Houma and for American Indians in general. As

described in the relevant concepts section of chapter three, *indigenous spirituality* includes references to dancing, singing, and drumming in a style specific Native Americans, all of which were mentioned in interviews. Additionally, the concept of *indigenous spirituality* involves the burning of sacred herbs used for exorcisms like those performed by the early Houma shortly after European contact. Both Harold and Henri describe the smudging ritual (burning sacred herbs) as a way to get rid of evil spirits; their explanation of the rite is probably very similar to the explanation their ancestors would have provided.

Charles explains the Native American elements of the mass as a way to express native pride and native tradition. Harold compares the indigenous practice of smudging to a Catholic blessing with holy water, and Olite compares the same action to the Catholic practice of burning incense. Adele, Olite, and Henri all speak of the traditional native rites as elements of cultural revival within their community. Adele and Olite explicitly state the importance of being able to incorporate native rites into their religious practices through the Kateri Mass. For all interviewees, Kateri Tekakwitha provides a rationale for expressing aspects of indigenous religion through modern religious ceremonies. Though the adult generation of the modern Houma Nation missed out on the traditional, spiritual rites of smudging, chanting, drumming, and dancing while growing up in a community that was forced to be more concerned about social than cultural survival, they are now able to participate in these rites that keep them connected to their heritage and encourage their community's youth to do the same. The Houma people have taken initiative in finding a way to celebrate both their spiritual heritage and their modern religious beliefs in the same ceremony through Kateri devotion.

For the Houma, Kateri Tekakwitha is the link between native spirituality and modern religion, between the four points of the cardinal directions and the four points of the sign of the cross, and between the smoke of sacred smudging herbs and the smoke of ceremonial incense. Devotion to Kateri does not create a need for a distinction between God and the Great Spirit (the latter is actually the name used to refer to the Christian God during the Kateri Mass in Dulac). Kateri Tekakwitha and her canonization process serve as powerful symbols of Catholic Native Americans and their determination to retain their native heritage while still making a place for themselves within the Catholic Church. The ability to practice indigenous spirituality in the context of Roman Catholic Church is a definite factor contributing to the veneration of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha among members of the Houma Kateri prayer circle.

All unforeseen themes described in the previous chapter are clearly factors that contribute to the devotion of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha among the United Houma Nation or they would not have been added to the research findings. The travel and networking opportunities presented by the Tekakwitha Conferences and the unifying aspects of Kateri devotion are arguably more central to Houma veneration of the holy woman than all of the anticipated themes. Charles and Harold both tell of the enjoyment they find in traveling to other parts of the country for conferences. All five interviewees discuss the significant relationships they establish at the conferences, and they all look forward to attending the conferences each year in order to maintain the relationships they have built.

The most commonly mentioned theme and the factor that is discussed the most passionately by members of the United Houma Nation is the pan-tribal, pan-racial, and

pan-religious aspect of Kateri devotion. The Houma people see how the Kateri Mass unites individuals of various races and Christian denominations within their own community. The Houma Nation also celebrates the cross-tribal unity the Tekakwitha Conferences have created for Native American tribes from all over the country. For the Houma people, Kateri devotion involves actively breaking boundaries to find commonalities between tribes, races, and religions. Perhaps most importantly, Kateri Tekakwitha serves as a symbol of unity.

The responses to Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha's upcoming canonization are unanimously reactions of excitement. After years of praying, finally the members of Houma Kateri prayer circle are able to count down to a date on which their saint will be a saint in the eyes of all Catholics. Though Charles accurately predicted that her canonization would occur in the year 2012, all other interviewees were shocked to hear the Vatican's decree. Though they never grew weary in praying for Kateri's cause, they had all thought of their prayer intention as a practically unreachable goal in the very distant future. All five interviewees are confident that the aspects of Kateri devotion that they love the most will continue post-canonization and they seem to have renewed hopes in other Native American causes because of this long-awaited victory. Olite now looks forward to hopefully seeing federal recognition for her tribe within her lifetime, and with Kateri in route to sainthood, Adele sees a bright future for the environment. No interviewees show signs of toning down their passionate devotion to the Native American holy figure. The members of the Houma Kateri prayer circle look forward to continuing to spread the news of the righteous American Indian and soon-to-be-saint to people of all cultures, faiths, and nations.

After an in-depth investigation of the relationship between Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha and members of the United Houma Nation, it is evident that the factors contributing to the tribe's devotion of the holy woman are the emotional, religious connections tribal members make with Kateri, the native heritage that Kateri (independently from all other Catholic saints) represents, the potential recognition for Native Americans that Kateri's canonization could incite, and the opportunities presented for indigenous spirituality to be practiced in the context of the Roman Catholic Church. Most centrally, however, devotion to Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha among members of the Houma Kateri prayer circle expresses pan-tribal, pan-religious, and pan-racial unity that the annual Tekakwitha Conference and the annual Kateri Mass create through travel and cross-cultural relationship-building opportunities.

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