

# Boy is source of Native American saint's miracle

by [Cathy Lynn Grossman](#)

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(RNS) Jacob "Jake" Finkbonner of Ferndale, Wash., was 5 years old in 2006 when he split his lip playing basketball, developed a deadly flesh-eating strep infection and lay near death for months at Seattle Children's Hospital.

Jake's father, Don, is Native American and a member of the Lummi tribe. The family's priest at the time, the Rev. Timothy Sauer, urged Jake's parents to pray to a 17th-century Mohawk-Algonquin woman to seek God's miracle.

Sauer said he suggested Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha because "I knew Kateri herself had been deeply disfigured by smallpox, so it seemed like she would be a good person to call on for this young boy whose face and head were infected.

"And I knew that Native American Christians have been looking forward to the church's acknowledgment of their contributions in a more public way. Kateri Tekakwitha has always been a rallying point for their faith."

On Monday (Dec. 19), the Vatican announced that Tekakwitha will be canonized as a Catholic saint, the first Native American from North America so proclaimed.

It takes proof of two miracles to certify that a Catholic is clearly in heaven asking God to help people who pray in their name. Now, Jake's miraculous healing has been credited to the intercession of Tekakwitha, who died in 1680 at age 24.

Jake's mother, Elsa Finkbonner, said her son turned the corner toward survival after a visit by a member of the Tekakwitha Conference, based in Great Falls, Mont., which evangelizes to a half-million Native American Catholics.

The woman, also named Kateri, brought a small coin with an image of Tekakwitha and a prayer card, Finkbonner said.

"I pinned that relic to his pillow and I read that prayer to him every single day," his mother said.

Today, Jake is training to be an altar boy at church and still playing basketball.

"I pray to Kateri now myself," Jake said Monday. "Other people have asked about my story and told me their stories, and I pray to her for other people to be healed."

The Vatican scrupulously investigates miracle claims for proof that recovery was not a result of medical or surgical attention. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention told NPR that about 10 to 15 percent of patients with Jake's variation of strep die.

Sister Kateri Mitchell of the Tekakwitha Conference, a Mohawk herself, was among 400 Native Americans who attended the beatification ceremony in 1980, when Tekakwitha's history of miracles was first recognized by the church.

"I think thousands of us will try to go to Rome for the canonization," she said. "We have waited so long for this."

Native American Catholics were once doubly ostracized for their culture and their faith, says church historian Matthew Bunson, co-author of a biography of

Tekakwitha, "Mystic in the Wilderness." The book will be reissued in 2012 under a new name, "Saint Tekakwitha: Glory of Many Nations."

Known as the Lily of the Mohawks, Tekakwitha was born in what is now Upstate New York, the daughter of a Mohawk chief and Algonquin Christian mother.

She was just 4 or 5 when she was scarred in the smallpox epidemic that killed her parents and most of her family. Believers say her scars vanished at her death.

The dates for the canonization will likely be announced by February, Bunson said.